Of Flesh and Metal (Revised)

by kanonkita

Summary

Megatron angers one God too many and Primus finally deems it time he and his Decepticon followers learnt a cruel lesson. But will they change after seeing life through the eyes of the humans in one of the poorest places on the planet? Eventual Slash. Revised (and eventually finished) with permission from original author Spoon888.

- Inspired by Of Flesh and Metal by Spoon888
Foreword

(Aka that thing your English teacher would always assign you to read and you skipped anyways because it doesn't actually have anything to do with the story.) Edit: But uh... Ahem. I didn't think this needed to be said, but I just checked my view graph and saw that half of the people who saw this skipped the prologue, so uh... Prologues are part of the story. Just uh... Just throwin' that out there.

Uissu! Kanon de~~~su!

(Fun fact: that is actually how Starscream introduces himself sometimes in the Japanese dub of TFP.)

Anyway, the few of you who know me are probably wondering what this fic is doing here instead of an update of one of my own fics. Those of you who know this fic are probably wondering what it's doing on my account. To those of you utterly new to both me and this fic, welcome. You are in for a treat, and you might as well just skip this and get right to it. Bye bye! Have fun!

To the rest of you, explanations: Of Flesh and Metal is a fic originally written by FFnet user the-spoon-of-doom, who now mostly hangs around on Archive of Our Own as Spoon888. She started it many, many years ago (I don't know how many myself, but since it apparently picks up shortly after the end of Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen and that came out in 2009...) and never finished it. I discovered it about... six weeks ago? Something like that? fell in love with almost everything to do with it, and told her so in a review.

Before I knew it, the project had somehow been handed over to me in one messy, squirmy bundle of whiny Decepticon joy. WHHHAAAAATT? I mean, I asked for it, but I really didn't expect her to say yes! I am intensely honored that she has allowed me to have at it with this.

Fans of the original fic are probably hoping that I will be starting right where Spoon left off so that they can get the ending sooner, to which I am afraid I must confess that this will not be the case. One main reason that Spoon never finished it in the first place is because she was dissatisfied with much of the earlier part of the story, and I am doing my best to remedy much of that. The ending won't work as well without it.

While Spoon-sempai has too much else on her plate to take much part in this project, I want to keep things as close as I can to things she might have done with it in her own rewrites. As such, I am going to do my best not to take out any plot elements or scenes that she put in the original. Rather than that, I will mostly be... embellishing things; adding in extra scenes and helping the character progression on a bit as well as fixing up any awkward writing. You might not notice any major differences for the first little bit.

The biggest change will probably be that there is an entire new subplot I'm working into the Patna section of the story that I hope everyone will enjoy. Also, because I'm adding so much, I'm actually splitting it into three separate fics, whose titles will be revealed at a later date (for those familiar with the original, the splits will be at New Delhi and then the spot where Spoon left it off originally). And of course, I will be writing an ending. Based on Spoon's notes as much as possible.

To old readers, I am pretty sure that Spooni is keeping it up on her account, so you can still read it there. To new readers, you're welcome to read it there and compare the versions, but be aware that you will miss massive chunks of the story if you try to cheat and just get all the spoilers by reading
that one. [insert mischievous winky face here]

So, without further ado, please enjoy this hot mess of flesh and metal.

Tee hee.
Prologue

Primus was benevolent. Primus was everywhere. Primus was wise and strong... but so was His brother.

With every Yin came a Yang, and with everything right done in His name, something wrong was accomplished in the name of the Unmaker. Unicron had corrupted His children, turned them against each other, and poisoned their sparks until they no longer believed in His very existence, no longer knew that every shot they fired ate away at His being.

Cybertron had long been dead, His physical embodiment could no longer create life, but His people—His children—still lived on. And after all this time they still fought. He was growing weaker, and history was about to repeat itself; He had already foreseen it. A young planet, Earth, was in grave danger from his creations. A select group of Cybertronians (He knew them very well, as He did all of His children) was on the verge of destroying the planet for the purpose of saving their own—saving him. But Cybertron was dead. It had been for so long now, and everything came to an end in time.

Primus could never interfere in the lives of His children. Forcing them to choose His was was wrong. To watch them struggle was His greatest pain, but they had to learn from their own mistakes in their own way, in their own time. In the meantime, He took comfort in the knowledge that someday they would all return to Him when their sparks were extinguished and there they would be safe in an eternity of peace. His brother would never be able to touch them again.

However, until all were one, there were sentient life forms whose existences were being threatened. It was nowhere near Earth's time of judgment—that planet had many long years yet. It had so much potential and a far greater purpose to play in this universe. Something would need to be done, preferably before His brother claimed yet another of His children's sparks. No, He couldn't force His children to see the errors of their ways, but He could give them a push in the right direction.

It was time, He thought, that Megatron and his Decepticons learned what it was to be human. Maybe then they would understand.
Chapter 1

He tried to think back, concentrate. What had he been doing and where was he now? Cairo... they'd lost and then fled. Yes, that was it. The Autobot scum had offlined half the faction and destroyed the Sun Harvester—their last hope, their only hope.

He remembered regrouping with a small band of Decepticons—all fliers, thank Primus; landing was too dangerous now. They were all that was left of a once proud and mighty faction. However, there was a large gap, an empty, silent hole, in his memory files after that. Nothing. It was frustrating. There was not even a blurred image or disoriented noise—just dark emptiness.

And now he was here. Mind you, he didn't really know where here was at the moment. Only that it was cold... cold and breezy. How very unusual—breezy. Never in what he could recall of his (obviously flawed) memory had he acknowledged a breeze before.

He took a moment to assess the situation. He was on his back staring up at the sky. Many of his senses seemed to be malfunctioning; his vision was poor (optics possibly damaged), and something hard was digging into his back. It had probably managed to slip through his armor plating, but still. He shouldn't be feeling it so... accurately. His olfactories were picking up a highly offensive scent of human, animal, and general rot that he seemed to be smelling with his glossa as well for some reason. Nothing felt right. His own frame seemed foreign to him, like something was missing. His processor was sluggish, working at an unbelievably slow pace, and he was having trouble connecting to the human internet. In fact, he couldn't connect to it at all. The link had disappeared. None of his internal links were there!

Perhaps he was more damaged than he'd previously thought.

He should have moved hours ago. Who knew how long he'd been lying here in broad daylight, out in the open, staring up dazedly at Earth's blue sky? He attempted a systems check, only to find that program wasn't working either. How absurd. Apparently, his processor was not functioning, and yet he was still here, online and thinking.

Finally fed up with lying sprawled out on the lumpy, uncomfortable ground, he began to sit up and lifted a servo to try and rub some sense into his faceplates.

Only to find that it was not a servo.

He lurched away in alarm, and it took Starscream several moments to realize that the white, squishy appendage was, in fact, attached to him. He twitched the fingers—his fingers. Yes, they were definitely his. He let his gaze travel down the offensive, unfamiliar arm to a shoulder, which he flexed in astonishment. Eyes, where optics should have been, then crossed and locked onto the protruding flesh between them. What the slag was that? Raising his servo—or hand, rather—he touched it. It was soft, like the rest of him, but also somewhat hard and pointy. He wiggled and pulled at it, but it was stuck fast to his face. How very peculiar.

He was obviously having some sort of strange dream in recharge, one brought on by all the organic fuels he'd been consuming, no doubt. It had had a similar effect on him the last time he was on this planet; all the impurities had given his delicate tanks cramps and his processor throbbing aches. Another occasional side effect had been bizarre hallucinations (he wondered vaguely if any of the others experienced them), but this one felt a lot more... real.

Painfully real, as a matter of fact, and there was a niggling sensation in in the back of his mind. But
his scientifically brilliant and rational CPU was telling him that none of this was physically possible, so he was content to take the opportunity to explore this dream body until he roused from recharge.

Since he didn't have any of the insulating material the humans called clothes, he could see all of the skin and muscles covering his body. In some areas, the skin was so translucent that he could see the blue veins carrying human blood throughout the body. A sluggish memory file recalled that such grossly pale skin was caused by a lack of something called melanin, the substance that protected humans from their sun's radiation. What a useless species to be burned by their own star.

He took in a deep breath, noting the sensation of the ribs expanding, the air rushing through the holes in the protruding flesh between his eyes (it was called a nose, he now remembered), and caught more of the reek of wherever he was. He crinkled his nose in disgust. The air was full of moisture, which made the stench even worse now that he was a bit more conscious.

Odd for consciousness to be a factor in a dream, he reflected.

In fact, it was remarkable how realistic this dream was. His spark—or heart, he supposed—thumped nervously. Of course, he knew that his fear was impossible. There was no way he could really be human. He was quite certain that no one had ever discovered, or even tried to discover, a way to turn a Cybertronian into an organic. He was being irrational. This was just a dream. A lousy, unpleasant dream, he added as he caught another noseful of the local aroma.

He lifted an arm to rub at his back, and his breath hitched. But of course, he should have expected that. Humans didn't have wings—not even in dreams, apparently. Now that he had adjusted somewhat to the shock of his new body, though, he took the time to properly survey the area as well.

No wonder it stank. He was sitting in the middle of what looked like some colossal human dumping ground. Winged organics flew overhead, squawking and shrieking as they swooped down to scavenge in the filth below. The filth he was sitting in. Humans' ability to revolt never ceased to amaze him—dumping their own waste out in the open and leaving it to rot. How did they cope with the smell? Well, they probably wouldn't notice it if they smelled the same, he supposed.

Other, much tinier, winged organics buzzed about closer to his own level. One landed on his arm and began crawling up it. Starscream's first instinct was to brush it away in revulsion, but the scientist in him made him stop and examine it instead. This was one of the creatures called insects, which were normally too small for him to see. He had looked at them under microscopes, of course, and could only assume that was where he had gotten the image of this one with its reflective, bulbous eyes, strangely hairy body, and many legs. It took off to join its fellows back in the waste and he watched it go, frowning.

Starscream was just wondering why his processor would bother to dream of such a thoroughly disgusting place when a loud groan from somewhere behind him interrupted his thoughts. He whipped around in alarm. So, on top of the poor setting, his processor had managed to throw another human into the mix. This really was a lousy dream.

A large form rose from the debris, human and male. Starscream stared, wide-eyed, as it sat up. It was a strong human, its body much taller and broader than his own, and it was unsettling that a human should appear tall or strong at all. Since it didn't seem to have noticed him yet, he decided to silently observe.

The human was acting flustered, staring and grabbing at its own flesh. It kept making odd noises; Starscream couldn't tell if they were of fear or anger. Then, quite suddenly, the human looked up
and locked gazes with him. For several seconds, they stared at one another before it leaped up with
a roar of fury and lunged for him. To his dismay, Starscream found his processor seized with a
shock that paralyzed his whole body, making it impossible to move out of the way before the
human male's hands clamped around his arms.

The Seeker cried out with a mixture of despair and alarm. It hurt. This human could hurt him—not
the phantom pain of dreams, but actual, sharp, throbbing pain was coursing up his arms. Which
meant that his fears were correct; this was real. As inexplicable as it was, it had to be real. He was
really human.

Well, he wouldn't be for much longer if he just sat here and let this savage rip him apart, the
rational part of his mind reminded him before the panic could set in. He tried to kick his attacker
off and let out another cry, this time in frustration, when he discovered that he wasn't strong
enough. The other human was heavy with muscles, and he was small now—excessively small.

Before he could spend much time lamenting this, the savage human let out another roar and seized
his chin in one massive hand, forcing him to look up at its face.

“What have you done to me!?” it bellowed, spit flying. Some of it hit Starscream's face, and he
winced away, disgusted.

Why was the human yelling at him? Did all human males run around attacking each other out of
the blue? He knew it was common in some species of organic, but he had reliable research telling
him that humans had evolved past that unruly habit.

“Answer me, insect!” the human roared again, and now it slammed its fist into the side of
Starscream's face. Pit, it hurt. It hurt so much that he was momentarily bewildered; his vision
blurred and his breath caught in his throat. When everything came back into focus, he realized
something stunning: this human, the one attacking him, sounded and spoke strikingly similar to...

“Me-Megatron?” he guessed, tugging at the fist now crushing his stupidly delicate windpipe.

The human reared back, grip loosening for a moment, but then returned full force. “Who are you?
What have you done to me!?” he snarled, inches from the Seeker's face.

Starscream decided that it was best to reply with the truth. “I-it's me!” he wheezed desperately. “S-
starscream! Please, my Lord!”

Megatron—it had to be him—slammed him back down into the waste covered ground. “You lie!”

“N-no! Please, it's me! Please, Lord Megatron, believe me! Don't kill me!” he shrieked, closing his
eyes as he cowered under the former warlord. The fist suddenly disappeared from his neck, and he
cracked an eye open to see his leader still knelt over his form, no longer choking him, but still
scowling.

“What have you done?” Megatron hissed through clenched teeth.

Starscream frowned, unsure whether to be offended that Megatron repeatedly pointed the finger of
blame at him without a scrap of evidence, or flattered that he thought his second was capable of
pulling off something of this magnitude. Nevertheless...

“My Lord,” he ground out, doing his best to keep his tone polite. As he was the only one around for
Megatron to take his fury out on, it was best not to aggravate him again. “If I was the cause of this,
do you really think I would have done it to myself as well?”
Megatron grunted. “I don't pretend to understand anything of your twisted mind, Starscream. Now, tell me what has happened.”

“How the Pit should I know!?” the younger man screeched, pushing himself up to stand on his new feet for the first time. He felt very short and defenseless; no thrusters, no wings, no missiles, nothing. Fighting the urge to throw himself back down and wail, he turned to Megatron. “I can't remember what happened. In fact the only thing I do remember is flying after you on another of your crackpot schemes!”

“Starscream,” Megatron growled, “I'd choose your words more carefully if I were you. You are in a very vulnerable position, Seeker.” The last word came out dripping with sarcasm as he looked his second's new form up and down.

Starscream only smirked. “Oh, but you are in the same position, dear Leader,” he said, gesturing at Megatron's own organic body.

Megatron grumbled something incoherent and rose to his own feet to survey the area. Starscream took this opportunity to examine his leader properly and pouted as he realized that the (now former) warlord's human form was a good head taller than his. Despite his new-found organic-ness, the Decepticon leader still managed to project an aura of strength, authority, and influence as he stood tall and straight-backed over the surrounding waste, his dark eyes narrowed in concentration. His skin was close to Starscream's own tone, but dark enough to make the Seeker look even paler than he'd previously thought in comparison. Straight, black hair fell over Megatron's face, which he kept pushing back in annoyance, and his chin and upper lip were covered in dark stubble.

Starscream unconsciously ran a hand over his own cheek, only to find the skin soft and baby smooth. He lifted a wary hand to the top of his head and breathed a sigh of relief when his fingers met with an acceptable amount of silky hair. At least he wasn't bald; he didn't think that the hairless look was likely to flatter him.

“Come,” Megatron's deep voice cut across his musings. “We need to look for the others.”

Starscream was tempted to protest and say that the others could fend for themselves, but quickly realized that without them it would be just himself and Megatron, alone and susceptible. They had become tiny creatures in a vast world, and there was safety in numbers. They needed everyone they could get. So, he dawdled along behind his leader as they began to pick their way through the polluted landscape.

Starscream tread carefully to avoid stepping on anything sharp enough to damage his unthinkingly sensitive feet, which seemed to be just about everything. Once again, he cursed humans' inability to evolve suitably to their own environment. They'd had hundreds of thousands of years and countless generations to get it right, and this was the best they could come up with? These bodies were so weak and useless—everything hurt and they tired so quickly.

He and Megatron had been clambering over the mounds of rubbish for only three or four hours now, and already he had long since run out of breath and his head was starting to ache. He suspected this was in some way related to the vast amount of moisture that seemed to have leaked through his skin and now covered him from head to toe. Humans were made mostly of water, and he didn't think it healthy to lose so much of it. Furthermore, if the change in color on his forearms and the sting on his face and shoulders was anything to go by, he was starting to feel the effects of his low melanin levels already. How did the humans ever get anything done?

“Oh, I give up!” he moaned, throwing himself down onto a somewhat comfortable-looking
embankment of debris. He winced and rubbed at his back as something sharp pinched the skin there.

“We need to keep searching. Get up,” Megatron announced over his shoulder without stopping or even looking back properly at his second.

“We don't even know if they're here. We could just be wasting our time!” Starscream yelled back, crossing his arms over his chest. He was reluctant to move now that he had found a (relatively) acceptable resting place. His legs were aching, his feet hurt, his head was spinning, and he just couldn't be bothered. How his leader wasn't suffering the same effects, he couldn't understand. The other man's skin hadn't even turned red like Starscream's, though he thought it might be a bit darker than it was when they'd first started out. “We don't even know if they're like this! What if we find them and they're still Cybertronian? What do you think they'll do to us then, Lord Megatron?”

The taller man finally stopped and turned to face the Seeker. “I am their leader. They will still obey me,” he replied, and although his voice was calm, Starscream could hear a note of uncertainty. The mighty Megatron, he thought mockingly. Not quite so mighty now. He laughed.

“Not if you're an organic they won't! Tell me, Lord Megatron, what self-respecting Decepticon would take orders from a pathetic little human like you?”

Megatron advanced on the laughing Seeker, losing his composure. “Shut up!” he snarled, reaching out and grasping Starscream's neck once more. The other man didn't even flinch as he squeezed the flesh in his hands. How tempting it was to crush the idiot's windpipe and leave him here for dead... but he couldn't. He needed him. And unfortunately, Starscream knew it.

“I simply speak the truth,” Starscream wheezed, absently noting that his flimsy human neck would be left with an unattractive bruise from all this manhandling.

Megatron shoved the Seeker back into the filth and turned, heatedly kicking a can so that it sailed over the nearest mountain of debris, before carrying on his way. Either Starscream could stay there, sitting on his backside moping, or he could follow his leader. Based on past experience, Megatron was confident he knew what the Seeker would choose. Sure enough, before long, the sound of soft footfalls reached his ears—along with a few bangs and some muttered curses. They carried on.
Chapter Two

After another hour, Starscream was about ready to start a second argument with his leader, just to have something to distract him from his growing exhaustion, when he heard a distant wailing. It was a distinctly human sound, perhaps from a child. From what little he had researched on them, he knew that they spent a good deal of time crying, but it wasn't the high-pitched sniveling of a human young calling out for food or for its mother; it was one of choked pain.

Megatron had stopped in his tracks upon hearing the noise, and now, to his second's horror, he started heading towards it, gesturing for Starscream to follow. The Seeker's jaw dropped. *Megatron* was going to the aid of some worthless *human*?

“Lord Megatron, you can't seriously--”

“This is the first human we have come across since one another,” Megatron cut across him. “Come; we are going to investigate.”

Starscream snorted his disapproval and loitered after the taller man, silently mocking him behind his back. Megatron had already disappeared over an embankment to the left, from behind which the howling was issuing. Clambering over the top, Starscream looked down at the scene below him.

There were three humans—two males and one female. One of the males appeared to be greatly distressed, and the other was shaking him in an effort to calm him down. It didn't seem to be working. The human female, on the other hand, was approaching Megatron, and after a moment of speaking, she led him over to her male companions.

It had to be the others.

Starscream quickly scrambled down the mound, and after tripping twice and stepping on something pointy, he eventually made it to the bottom. The female was watching him and had undoubtedly seen him stumble down the slope. She sent him a disappointed glare.

“Screamer,” she growled coldly. He supposed that was meant to be some sort of greeting and immediately recognized her as Slipstream. Great.

He huffed, shoving past. At least he was still taller than her.

Megatron was scowling down at the two struggling males—Thundercracker and Skywarp. Starscream didn't know how he knew, but he did; almost as if the bond between the brothers was still present in this form, albeit faintly. Both Seekers were similar in appearance to Starscream: young, slim, pale... and short. Dark brown hair hung over their faces, which were fair and smooth like their bodies, except for Skywarp's, which was marred with dampness and blotchy red skin, irritated by the salt water streaming from his eyes.

“What's wrong with him?” Megatron asked without emotion. He wanted everyone to get on their way and out of this dump. They still needed to find Soundwave, and he couldn't do that if one of his Seekers was in hysterics. If Skywarp didn't pull himself together, he was going to become a liability; one that they couldn't afford.

The slightly larger of the two men spoke, and though he'd known it was him, Starscream was still surprised to hear Thundercracker's voice: “He's not taking it well.”
“He needs to get over it. We have to move,” Megatron replied, frowning down at Skywarp.

Thundercracker flexed his jaw and turned back to his brother. “C’mon, Warp. We've gotta get out of here,” he insisted.

Skywarp didn't appear to be listening. “M-my wings!” he choked out. “M-my wings! They... they're gone!”

“We can see that!” Starscream snapped heartlessly, throwing himself down into the waste again, thankful that this time nothing dug into his back. Slipstream sent him the dirtiest look she could muster, but the hair that was falling over most of her face ruined the effect.

“If you can't get him walking right now, we'll have to drag him,” Megatron said frostily and, at Thundercracker's horrified expression, he added, “It's either that or we leave him here for dead.”

Slipstream strode over and fell to Skywarp's side, caressing his cheek and whispering comforting nonsense in his ear. Eventually, his sobbing calmed, and his breathing started to regulate. Slipstream gestured for Thundercracker to loosen his hold.

“T-TC?” the youngest Seeker hiccuped, looking up at his brother. “W-what are we gonna do?”

Thundercracker smiled, doing his best to make it look convincing. “Don't worry about it, Warp. We'll figure it out.”

“We need to move. There is still Soundwave to find,” Megatron said curtly, and he set out once more, gesturing for the others to follow.

Skywarp was a bit slow at first, wobbly on his feet from both the resulting exhaustion of his previous episode and the loss of his wings, but with Thundercracker's and (a reluctant whining) Starscream's help, he managed to keep up.

Megatron was relentless in his search for the remainder of the group. Now that he knew he and Starscream weren't alone in their predicament, he was twice as determined to find his TIC. Unfortunately, he was now “only human” and no longer had an inbuilt guidance system. He had been leading them in circles for some time now in the searing, unsheltered heat. Starscream was the first to be kind enough to point this out.

“RIGHT! That's it!” he squawked, dropping Skywarp's arm from around his stinging shoulders and stamping toward his leader. By now, every part of his body that had been exposed to the sun was bright red and felt like it was on fire, the pain wearing away at what little patience he had ever possessed. “That is the third time we have passed that junk pile! You're leading us in circles!”

“For the love of Primus, Screamer!” cried Slipstream as she came up behind him. She too was sporting a lovely red sheen to her fair skin, and Starscream could only hope that his own face did not look quite so ridiculous. “How the Pit would you know? Everything looks the same!”
“No, that pile was distinctive! I picked it because it has a tire sticking out of the top. Look!”
Starscream shouted in his defense. He knew he was right; this area was all too familiar.

“Alright, Starscream,” Megatron grumbled, running a tired hand down his own slightly sunburned face. He’d had just about enough for today; he couldn't even muster the energy to shout at his second for his insubordination. “You think you know better, then lead us.”

In truth, Megatron had realized that they were going in circles just before the Seeker had started howling at him—he could spot tires as well as the next Decepticon—but he would be slagged if he ever admitted it now.

Predictably, Starscream smirked at the challenge. “Alright, then. This way!” he announced, marching off toward the left with as much exaggerated enthusiasm as his damaged skin would allow. Everyone else followed reluctantly at a much slower pace.

Half an hour later, Starscream spotted a familiar tire again. “Oh for—”

“Hey, Starscream!” Thundercracker called out. “Is it just me, or have we seen that pile of junk before?”

“Frag off, Thundercracker!” Starscream retorted, facing heating up with embarrassment. Slagging human anatomy. He was only mildly comforted in knowing that he was probably already too red for anyone to notice.

A large hand slapped down on his shoulder, and Starscream staggered away from Megatron with a cry of pain. He glared back at his leader, pleased to see that he was finally beginning to turn pink as well, though it was still far from the Autobot red that the four Seekers were all sporting.

There was a sudden clinking of metal behind them, and all five whipped around as one. Someone or something was behind them, coming from the direction they had just passed through. Were they being followed?

“Who's there?” Megatron bellowed, stepping in front of his men—and woman—and taking a defensive stance. Normally, he let his Seekers take care of themselves in such situations, but they had all become so... tiny in their new forms that he couldn't help himself.

A half-crushed can rolled out from behind a heap of rubbish next to them, and they all switched the direction of their gaze as a human stepped out from behind the heap, carrying two children in his arms. He was tall and broad, though not quite as large as Megatron, and Starscream found himself inching further behind his leader as the stern-faced human approached them. He stopped a few feet away and spoke.

“Lord Megatron, are you aware that you have been traveling in circles?”

Everyone but Megatron's jaw dropped open. Was that Soundwave? It had to be, but it was bizarre to hear him sounding so... emotional. His normally monotonous and detached tone of voice was gone, and he sounded exhausted, among other things.

“Soundwave,” Megatron confirmed, stepping towards his most trusted servant. “We have a situation.”

Starscream snorted and muttered something sarcastic before strutting forward. “What took you so long? We've spent all day looking for you!” His annoyance was not helped by the fact that Soundwave also seemed immune to the sun's rays.
Soundwave ignored the Seeker, who was standing hands on hips on the tips of his toes in an immature attempt at making himself seem taller. Megatron nudged him out of the way; Starscream overbalanced and fell back down to the ground at their feet.

“I take it those are Rumble and Frenzy?” Megatron said, casually gesturing to the children in Soundwave's arms.

“Affirmative; younglings could not cope with the stress and fell unconscious,” he confirmed, shifting his hold on one of the twins. Megatron could not tell which. Without their different color schemes, they were almost exact duplicates.

“Suggestion; find clothing before we enter more densely populated human settlements.”

Starscream was brushing himself off after picking himself up out of the rubbish and snorted once more at Soundwave's suggestion. Megatron curled his lip at him; it seemed that all-too-human noise was going to become a habit for his second. If he did it again, Megatron was going to have to slap him.

“Oh, and where do you expect us to find such things in a place like this!?” Starscream shrieked, gesturing to the appalling scenery that surrounded them. “I'm not walking around the humans dressed in a tire!”

Skywarp giggled at the mental image, but quickly fell solemn again, shrinking behind Thundercracker as his trine leader glowered at him.

“Starscream's input; counterproductive,” stated Soundwave.

Megatron was inclined to agree. “Starscream, shut up.”

The former Air Commander was about to suggest Soundwave shove something up his tailpipe, despite not owning one anymore, when Slipstream slapped a hand over his mouth and pulled him away, snickering at his look of indignation.

“Some local humans dispose of and then scavenge for items such as clothes in this area. We will find something; no one will have to wear 'tires.'” Soundwave glanced over at the flustered Seeker as he finished, his emotionless expression not shifting. Then, he knelt down, lowered his creations gently to the ground, and started to rouse them.

One of them, the one on the left, groaned and started to sit up, only to fall back down again, clutching his head in pain. Starscream felt no sympathy for him, but he could identify; his own head felt like someone was both pinching and pounding on every single vein and nerve inside it at once, and it was taking every ounce of his self-control not to let the others notice this glaring weakness in his new physique.

“Urgh, my helm!” the young Decepticon moaned, eyes still squeezed shut. “I had the most slagged up dream!”

“Correction; that was no dream,” Soundwave said, lowering a hand to caress Rumble's sweaty forehead.

The boy jumped up, eyes flying open, and stared at Soundwave in alarm before starting to look down at himself, horror stamped across his face. For a moment, Soundwave was certain that he was going to start fitting again, like both he and his brother had the first time they had woken up, but Rumble just sat slumped, poking at his human flesh.
“Slag...” he whispered, both amazed and disgusted with his new body.

“Language,” his creator scorned gently, but Rumble wasn't paying attention.

“How is this possible, boss?”

Starscream's voice rang out from behind the mass of litter next to them, “That's what I've been asking myself all day!”

“That Screamer?” Rumble asked Soundwave in shock, and the TIC nodded his head in confirmation. “So, who else—”

“Megatron, Starscream, Thundercracker, Skywarp, Slipstream, Frenzy, you and myself,” his creator listed off.

Rumble's next question died on his lips as a loud moan came from the body next to him. Frenzy was awake.

“Urgh, what the frag hit me?” he wailed and, like Rumble, clutched his head in pain. Soundwave didn't bother to scold him for his language, but was starting to grow irritated with it. He hoped they didn't pick up many human curse words; it was unbecoming of sparklings to swear so much.

“Primus, bro!” Rumble laughed. “You make a hideous human!”

Frenzy cracked an eye open to peer at his brother and ask him what the frag he was talking about, but his breath caught in his throat when he was greeted with the sight of two humans staring back at him.

“Aaargh!” he cried out, crawling backwards frantically from them. The larger of the two reached out and grasped his ankle, gently pulling him back against his struggles.

“Frenzy.”

The boy froze; the human spoke with his creator's voice.

“Remain calm,” it ordered him.

Then he remembered what had happened earlier and was bombarded with memories of the warmth and soft dampness; the horrifying sight of himself covered in human flesh. Then there was the nauseating sensation of a human heart beating in his chest when it should have been a Cybertronian spark. And screaming. He remembered screaming. It must have been his own.

He felt his optics—no, not his optics, his eyes—his human eyes began to sting and blur, moisture leaking from them. It was uncontrollable. He was filled with sorrow, no longer what he should be. He was something different... something wrong. Was he still Frenzy, even if he didn't look like him?

Then, he realized what his brother had just said to him.

“Slag off, Rumble!” he shouted at his twin—his human twin now, but still his twin. He wasn't alone. “We're twins; we look exactly the same as humans!”

Soundwave dwelt on what his creation had just said for a moment; they did look exactly the same—to others at least. He could still tell the difference between the two, though. Rumble had a slightly rounder face, and Frenzy had a tiny freckle on his neck behind his jaw. However, aside
from that, the similarities between the two were staggering.

“Come.” Soundwave motioned for them to stand with him. “We must join the others in finding clothes.”

“Others?” Frenzy wondered aloud, walking with his brother.

“Just wait and see,” Rumble snickered, taking off to catch up with Soundwave.
Chapter Three

Chapter Notes

And this chapter is where the edits are really gonna pick up. Mostly rearranging and adding. As little deletion as possible.

Two hours of scrounging later, everyone was clothed—relatively speaking. They had managed to find worn, ratty pieces of clothing resembling T-shirts, despite Slipstream and Starscream ripping one whilst fighting over who had spotted it first, and they all, apart from Skywarp and Slipstream, had found pants or shorts or at least something similar to them to cover their lower bodies. Slipstream said she didn't need any; she claimed she was suitably covered enough as it was. Megatron and Soundwave begged to differ, and Soundwave eventually convinced her to wrap a piece of patterned cloth around her waist as a makeshift skirt. Rumble had even managed to find a pair of dirty, half-eaten shoes that fit him. Of course, he had given one to his brother so that they were each walking around with shoes on only their left feet.

But Skywarp was still naked from the waist down, and was starting to feel rather self-conscious about it.

It was his own fault of course; he'd spent almost the whole time that everyone else was searching fooling around with some sort of human contraption that Soundwave had declared an umbrella. It was apparently designed to protect humans from rain—or more likely sun in this area of the world—but the others couldn't see how. It was just a few pieces of metal radiating out from a central pole with ripped pieces of fabric hanging off in places. The thing was broken, but Skywarp had decided to keep it anyway.

Luckily, Starscream took pity on him and dug out a pair of loosely fitting pants. They had only a few holes in them, but were far filthier than anything else they had found and slightly damp. He tossed them to his brother anyway, and Skywarp reluctantly put them on without a word after glancing at Megatron's darkening face.

Starscream spent the next twenty minutes or so complaining about the clothes being itchy and hot and smelly until Megatron, finally having had enough, smacked him around the back of the head—hard. Skywarp too was far from comfortable; the fabric of the T-shirt was chaffing under his arms and across his sunburned shoulders, and the pants between his legs. He rubbed and pulled at them as he walked, but was not foolish enough to say anything after watching his older brother's example. Thundercracker noticed his discomfort anyway and promised that he'd soon find him some warm, dry, clean, and comfortable clothes to wear. Skywarp cheered slightly at this.

They carried on in silence until it started to get dark, the long, hot day finally approaching its end, and Megatron grew apprehensive. There was no cloud cover; the heat that the planet had absorbed throughout the day would be lost rapidly. They would have a frigid night ahead of them, one that their new and fragile human bodies might not be able to handle without shelter. Just as he was thinking this, none other than his favorite Seeker broke the silence.

“What the slag is that!?” Starscream shrieked, gesturing back toward the pile of rubbish they had just clambered over.
Disinterested, the group glanced in the direction that the former Air Commander was pointing in. There, standing out amongst the waste, was a fairly average-sized mammal, covered in scruffy black fur and standing on four legs.

“Soundwave?” Megatron inquired, not foolhardy enough to remove his gaze from the creature. It was growling at them, and from what little he knew about Earth mammals, that wasn't a good thing. However, for now it seemed to be a defensive gesture more than anything; if they stayed away, it might move on and let them be.

“Species; dog,” Soundwave declared, and then paused. It would take ages to get used to hearing himself sound so... expressive. “Domestic mammal,” he finished.

“Domestic?” snapped Starscream, edging away from the snarling creature and moving behind Megatron's more intimidating bulk. “It doesn't look slagging domestic!”

Skywarp was curious; he thought the... dog looked rather adorable, despite its aggressive stance. Perhaps it just wanted to make friends? Leaving Thundercracker's grasp, he started to move toward it.

“Skywarp!” Starscream screeched, reaching out for his brother, but not daring to move out from behind his leader's form. “What are you doing? That thing's dangerous! Get back here!”

“I just wanna see,” Skywarp called back, already halfway there. Thundercracker was hurrying after him. The younger Seeker tripped over a piece of debris and came to a stop just feet away from the snarling dog.

“Hey, there,” he said softly, holding out an open hand, but came to an abrupt halt as he got a closer look at the creature. It didn't look quite so friendly up close. Patchy fur, missing in places, stood on end down its back; foam dripped from its mouth, and he could see an impressive row of long, sharp teeth—teeth that his pathetic organic flesh wouldn't stand a chance against. The dog suddenly lunged forward, barking and snapping its jaws.

Skywarp jumped back as it advanced on him, and let out a shriek of terror.

“Skywarp!” Thundercracker was there, thank Primus, hauling him to his feet and dragging him away.

He latched onto his older brother as the dog chased them back toward the rest of the group. He heard Starscream shrieking something along the lines of, “Don't bring that thing back over here!” as they broke into a sprint. The dog was crazed, quickly gaining ground on them. He had never wanted so desperately to teleport in his entire life; he willed it to happen, straining himself so hard that a vein throbbed in his forehead, but it was useless.

There was a sudden cracking of wood, followed swiftly by a high-pitched yelp, and the two Seekers halted to turn back to the noise. Megatron stood a ways behind them, holding a large branch—likely snapped off the lifeless tree he stood in front of—and the dog lay twitching and whimpering at his feet. Skywarp looked away as his leader raised the branch once more, and he tried to ignore the sickening sound of crunching bones.

Megatron threw the branch away and strode over to his third in command. “Domestic, Soundwave?” He demanded an explanation.

Soundwave stepped forward, head bowed, and began to examine the creature's remains while taking care not to touch it. “Dog; infected with rabies. Disease; affects the brain. Transmitted
through saliva when bitten by an infected animal.”

“Rabies?” questioned Starscream. The scientist in him got the better of his fear, and he stepped forward a little, turning his nose up at the bloodied, mangled corpse of what may have once been a beautiful creature.

“Many uncare for dogs carry rabies. The disease is fatal. Suggestion; do not get bitten,” Soundwave explained darkly, and then moved away before adding, “Skywarp, do not approach stray dogs.”

Skywarp blushed, looking down at his feet as Starscream and Slipstream scowled at him. He felt stupid and cowardly; he never would have thought that organic creatures could be so dangerous and scary. Eventually, he trawled on after his fellow Decepticons.

“Things seem so... big now,” murmured Thundercracker, staring up at the crooked, lifeless tree looming over him. From this angle, it looked completely different to any Earth tree he had seen in the past. He could see where the trunk split hundreds of times into thousands of different branches, all of them twisting and turning into each other to form a warped entanglement of dead wood. It was beautiful, even without foliage.

“Really?” asked Rumble or Frenzy (Primus, they looked exactly the same). “Cause I don't see much of a difference.”

“That's because you've always been a pathetic little worm, Frenzy!” Starscream snapped, butting into their conversation to scowl at the shorter human.

“I ain't a worm! And I'm Rumble!” he yelled, shaking a fist in offense at being mistaken for his brother. Why wasn't anyone intelligent enough to tell the difference between them? If Soundwave could do it, surely the rest of them could manage. Although, he himself was having difficulty telling the Seekers apart by anything other than their voices, so he shouldn't have complained, really. Humans all looked so similar.

Starscream scoffed and muttered something under his breath about not giving a slag about who was who before moving away to annoy someone else, probably Megatron.

The group had finally reached the end of what had seemed like an infinite labyrinth of human waste. The ground—the real ground, covered in dirt and weeds—was now visible through the layers of filth. There was even the occasional human or animal.

Skywarp stood closer to Slipstream as they passed a group of mangy, skeletal dogs that were scavenging for food, howling and snarling at each other as they fought for scraps. In the distance, they could see the faint outlines of what could have been human dwellings glinting in the sunset, and it was concerning that although they were approaching civilization, the putrid stench only seemed to be growing in strength.
They soon came to a halt in a relatively clear area as Megatron observed a sign of some sort. The metal notice stood lopsided and rusty, and the symbols, or words, were written in a human language that made no sense to the Decepticon leader. Had he still possessed his processor rather than this useless human brain, he could have simply switched the language module. Unfortunately, it was stuck on modern English, a language apparently not widely spoken in this part of the world, as was everyone else's.

“What does it say?” asked Skywarp curiously, poking his head around Slipstream and Thundercracker—his newly appointed human shields.

Whatever Megatron's response would have been, it was cut off by Starscream, who clearly believed that he had not said enough over the past few hours.

“He doesn't know!” the second-in-command sniffed spitefully at Megatron before stepping forward to examine the sign himself.

“And I suppose you do, do you?” called Slipstream's sarcastic voice as she too approached the sign post, shoudering him aside with far more force than necessary.

Megatron ignored the both of them and turned to his TIC. “Soundwave, what language is this?”

“Hindi,” Soundwave rumbled without even looking at it. He glanced around at the scenery and continued. “Based on our trajectory prior to our apparent period of memory loss and the current surroundings, I surmise that we are in the state of Bihar, India. Patna.”

Starscream scowled and moved away, muttering curses under his breath at Soundwave for being an insufferable know-it-all no matter what form he was in.

“Bihar?” Megatron inquired. The more they knew about this place, the better chance they might have of surviving it.

Soundwave then started a long, fact-filled barrage of information, some of which sounded as though he'd been rehearsing it all day in preparation for this moment. “Population size; three million, five hundred seventy thousand, six hundred fifty-one, and growing. Capital city; Patna. Bihar; most uncivilized, illiterate, and unkempt state of India. Holds the highest crime record. City of Patna, surrounded by slums, such as this.” He gestured to the right, where they had noticed the dark shapes of crooked buildings before. “Patna itself is among the richest cities in the country, while slums contain open sewers, no sanitation, and no water via plumbing.”

“No,” said Starscream in a loud voice. “No, I'm not going in there. You heard what he said—open sewers!”

The others were inclined to agree, but could see no alternative aside from the garbage heaps they had been clambering over throughout the day. So, despite Starscream's loud, shrieking protests, they moved forward into the slums, preparing themselves to face the worst human filth they could imagine.
In fact, Soundwave had watered things down for the others; high crime rates and the stench of open sewers were to be the least of their concerns.

Bihar had stood still for the last twenty years, almost untouched by the outside world in which human society was advancing in technology, medicine, and education. These were forgotten people—the ones that the government did not care about enough to sacrifice their money for because they had none to give back. They had been left behind, and the last few years’ progress for other states had only made things worse for Bihar. What little Biharis had as gifts from nature had been taken away by politics. All its erstwhile assets had been transferred to Jharkhand when it was divided from one state to two. One state was left with nothing, and the other everything.

It was like Kaon... only worse.

It was the smell that hit them first. It could only be described as the stench of rotting fish and a hundred human feces baking in the hot Indian summer, which was exactly what it was. The effect was so overpowering that Starscream retched and may have vomited had there been anything in his stomach to bring up.

The slums of Patna; from the first to the last, each house, if they could be called houses, was little more than a cobbled together assortment of scavenged building materials. Every now and then, there would be one whose owner had somehow gotten their hands on enough bricks or cinder blocks to put together something like an actual building, but mostly they were just sticks and boards with everything from tarps to store banners covering them. The Decepticons couldn't help but exchange glances more than a few times as they stepped deftly over the garbage strewn about in the pathways.

There was barely room to walk, even without the garbage. The humans had built into every possible space, squeezing in between gaps in the streets, between other buildings, and often even on top of each other. It was unstable and unsanitary.

How could these humans spend their lives in such mess, stench, poverty, and overall dirtiness?

Diminutive, unclothed children trod barefoot through the tight, narrow streets, hopping back and forth over the open sewer lines that ran on either side of them and spilled over their sides in many places. Starscream had to turn away and retch again as he saw a child crouching over one of the sewers, adding its own waste to the mix. Bin bags of rubbish were piled high against the shacks, and the children played on these too.

Kaon had been a poor and lawless city-state, but this... this was something beyond that. Not only absolute poverty, but absolute filth. Megatron felt an irrational surge of anger rise up at the humans. How could they allow these people, their own species, to live like this? It made no sense—he had only the other day attempted to destroy all of these people by harvesting the energy of their sun, after all—but somehow he couldn't help it.

They walked through the streets in cautious silence, staying close to each other, wary of their surroundings and the people who seemed so interested in them. Megatron led them on, stepping over and on hundreds of discarded items so filthy they were no longer distinguishable from each
Rumble and Frenzy clung tight to their creator's legs, and for once, Soundwave didn't discourage them. Megatron, on the other hand, did mind having a pathetic excuse for a Decepticon in the form of Starscream clinging to him in terror, but after removing him four times only to have the Seeker reattach himself not a moment later, he gave up and let him be.

They quickly realized that they were not of the same race as these people. The locals must have been thinking that they were poorly dressed tourists, and they were beginning to attract a lot of attention, too much for Megatron's liking.

They were approached by a small troop of half-naked, scrawny children, asking for Rupees and food in broken English. Skywarp looked as fearful of them as he had been of the stray dogs, and quickly ducked behind the other Seekers. Starscream couldn't help but think that he may have had the right idea though, as the children proved to be relentless little creatures. Despite indicating that they had nothing to give them (not that they would have given it even if they'd had it), the little pests would not stop hounding them. Even after Thundercracker and Slipstream had struck and kicked out at them, they continued to grovel and whine, their dirt-smeared palms held up in front of them. Megatron was distinctly reminded of Starscream, and he smirked at the thought that the obnoxious former Seeker truly belonged here.

The group decided to split up as they realized that the chances of finding somewhere to stay for the night were growing slim. Every dwelling, sheltered area, and even cardboard box already seemed to be over-occupied. So, Soundwave, his twins, and Slipstream were sent one way, while Megatron, Thundercracker, and a uselessly cowering Skywarp and Starscream stayed to scout their current area out more thoroughly.

Starscream was obviously tired and in pain, as was everyone else, and Megatron prepared himself for the oncoming surge of complaints.

“I still don't see why we can't just kick some weak, grimy humans out of their—” Starscream hesitated, trying to find the right word. 'Homes' couldn't possibly be the correct term to describe these crooked messes of materials mashed and stuck together in an attempt to build shelter. “—slag holes. It's not like we couldn't overpower them.”

“You forget, Starscream,” said Megatron impatiently, “that we are trying not to draw attention to ourselves.”

“Bit late for that, isn't it?” Starscream bit back. “And these Primus-forsaken parasites won't leave us alone!” he added, swatting at a mosquito that had perched on his arm.

Megatron didn't bother to retort; he too had noticed the onslaught of mosquitoes when they reached the slum, and as disgusting and annoying as they were, there wasn't much they could do about them. If Starscream couldn't offer anything productive, he was just going to ignore the imbecile. Thank Primus he had Thundercracker with him. Between the shrieking child that was Starscream and the pathetic, whimpering pile that was Skywarp, the oldest Seeker was the only intelligent conversation Megatron was likely to get.

“I'm starting to agree with Starscream, my Lord,” Thundercracker said apologetically as he once again dragged Skywarp to his feet.

Megatron frowned. So much for intelligent conversation.

“We are exhausted and unaccustomed to these organic forms. Also, the temperature is quickly
dropping. We need a place to rest. I'm sure we would have no complications evicting a few humans from their dwellings.”

Despite Thundercracker's sound reasoning, Megatron simply couldn't stand for any of his subordinates siding with Starscream over himself, not even one of his brothers. They were sticking with his plan, and that was final.

“Lord Megatron! Lord Megatron!” The high, clear voice of a child came ringing out through the darkening street.

Megatron stiffened before realizing that it was Rumble, or Frenzy, rushing toward them. Once the twin (whichever it was) was within arm's reach, Megatron snatched him forward harshly.

“Hey, what the—”

“Are you deliberately trying to draw attention to yourself, or just too stupid to think before you act?” Megatron snarled in his ear, his grip so tight on the child's skinny arm that it was bruising.

The twin struggled against the hold. “Okay, okay! I'm sorry!”

Megatron relinquished his grip without warning and did not attempt to help as he watched the child overbalance into the dirt.

“Now, what is it, Rumble?” he asked.

The child frowned as he picked himself up again. “I'm Frenzy!” he said indignantly.

“No one cares, insect!” Starscream hissed at him spitefully from under Megatron's arm; he was not tall enough to peer over his shoulder.

Frenzy, as they had now established, scowled at the former Air Commander, but refrained from retorting. “Boss said to come get you. He said he'd got a place for us to recharge.”

Trying not to let the overwhelming sense of relief show on his face at the news, Megatron nodded, silently thanking Primus for gracing with them with the gift that was Soundwave. “Good. Take us there, Rumble.”

“Frenzy!”

Megatron ignored him and carried on forward, his former elite trine following closely behind.

The shelter that Soundwave and Slipstream had managed to locate was not far from the initial entrance to the slums. The buildings were not as densely packed nor as crowded, and there was slightly more room to walk and less rubbish on the streets. The downside was that they were close to a railway line where trains passed every hour on the hour. The problem was not so much the noise of the passing trains as the seemingly suicidal human spawn that apparently found playing on the tracks to be prime entertainment.

Soundwave found himself worrying more and more each time he saw a train approaching while children were still darting about in its path. He had already seen some young humans with injuries that had most likely happened as a result of such activity, and it was putting him on edge. He could
not help but glance around for Rumble and Frenzy every few minutes to make sure that they had not wandered over; they were far too curious for their own good.

Of course, being Soundwave, another part of his brain had thought to wonder where the human children injured by the trains might have found medical assistance in a slag hole like this. It would be worth investigating if they ended up stuck here for an extended period of time. Human bodies were so very prone to breaking down, after all.

He saw Frenzy returning with Megatron and the Seekers then, and rose to his feet. Even from such a distance and in the half-light, he could tell that they were not impressed with their new abode.

“Well done, Soundwave,” Megatron praised anyway as he cautiously approached. At least it had corrugated steel for outer walls instead of fabric and tarps like so many of its neighbors.

He was tempted to ask Soundwave how he had acquired the dwelling (he doubted they had just happened upon an empty one), but decided that he did not want the details; it would likely only provoke Starscream into criticisms.

Said Seeker strode past Megatron, apparently fearless of the dangers of entering such an unstable building. He was determined to find the best place to recharge—or was it sleep that organics required?—for the night.

The inside of the shack was already too dark to see properly, and all that Starscream could make out by the little bit of light coming through the window (really just a space left uncovered by the metal sheeting of the walls) and the door was a low table in the center of the room, covered in empty bottles and food bags, and a single bed frame, no mattress, with several blankets strewn over it.

He frowned, not because of the state of the room, but because Slipstream was already sitting on the bed. His bed.

“Get up. I'm sleeping there,” he announced with an air of superiority.

Slipstream flashed him an unimpressed look and swung her legs up on top of the blankets. It was clear that she had no intention of going anywhere anytime soon, and the frame squeaked as she adjusted her position.

In truth, the mattress-less bed was incredibly uncomfortable; even with all of the blankets covering it, metal and wood stuck into her back. She probably would have been more comfortable on the ground, but that would mean letting Screamer get what he wanted, and she could never allow that.

Starscream scowled at her blatant lack of respect to a superior officer. “I order you to—”

“I don't take orders from humans,” Slipstream interrupted him, studying her nails—they could become useful weapons later. Of course, even if Starscream were in his true form, she wouldn't take orders from him. It was too much fun to watch him when he was frustrated.

“Move,” he hissed through gritted teeth, as menacingly as he could manage.

“Make me,” she challenged, smirking back at him.

Outside, the others were having a far more productive conversation.

“We will need fuel,” Megatron was saying to Soundwave. “What is it that sustains organics?”
“Organics are weak; they require regular nutrition,” Soundwave replied, eyes occasionally flickering over to the train line where a group of human children seemed to be having a competition as to who could jump the farthest over the tracks. “Substances such as water and food must be consumed several times daily for our human forms to function. Considerably more recharge time is also required; eight hours out of every 24 is recommended for human adults.”

Megatron pushed long black hair out of his face for what seemed like the hundredth time that day as he considered this. The hair was such a nuisance, uncomfortable and always in the way. He could not wait for an opportunity to cut it off.

“How long can we last without food?” he asked, suddenly aware that none of them had eaten or drunk a single thing that day.

“Three Earth weeks,” his third answered back. Megatron was just thinking that three weeks didn't sound so bad when he continued, “But humans can only last three days without hydrating, and functionality lowers considerably after only one.”

His leader frowned, wondering if this was the explanation for the pounding ache in his head. So, their priority was water, which should not be a problem. Earth was covered in the stuff, after all. Unfortunately, all of the water he had seen around here did not look, or smell, like it was at all suitable for consumption.

Before he could consult Soundwave on the matter though, he was distracted by the sounds of banging, shouting, and the occasional shriek coming from inside the shanty house. He sighed in exasperation, looking around at the men standing in front of him and noticing that a certain Seeker was missing. That explained the shrieking, at least.

Flexing his arm muscles, a habit he had already grown used to in the few hours he had been human, he stepped into the gloom of the dwelling.

Unsurprisingly, he came in to find Starscream pinning Slipstream to the floor, shrieking as he tried to get her to relinquish the tight grip she had on his hair. Megatron strode forward and abruptly tugged Starscream off of Slipstream's slight form. The younger male shrieked with renewed gusto as Slipstream's grip on his hair did not loosen, and a considerable amount of it came away in her hand. Clutching the side of his head and eyes watering in pain, Starscream spluttered curses as he tried to get up and avenge his fallen hairs.

“Enough!” shouted Megatron, shoving his second away again and tactfully ignoring the way Slipstream was waving the tuft of dark brown hair about. “What are you doing?”

“That glitch tore out my hair!” Starscream screeched, gesturing madly at the other Seeker.

“Get over it,” she muttered, flicking the hair to the floor before turning to leave through the hole in the wall that passed for a door in this neighborhood.

Starscream stared between the doorway and the pile of his hair that she had thrown to the floor like so much scrap. His hair! Granted he had only had hair for a little less than a day and didn't plan on maintaining a form that produced it for any longer than he could help, but it was still his for now. This ought to count as assault on a superior officer, in his opinion.

“Megatron!” he whined, looking to his leader for support. He found none.

“I have neither the time nor patience to deal with you today, Starscream,” Megatron growled, inches from the Seeker's face, and this was all too true. He was far more tired than he should be
after such a short period of exertion, his head was throbbing, his disgusting organic skin both itched and burned in more places than he cared to think about, and something in the region of his midriff kept cramping painfully. He was sure that Starscream was acting even more childishly than usual because he was suffering the same effects, but that didn't mean he felt like exercising any sympathy.

“I suggest,” he continued as the Seeker stared wide-eyed back at him, “that you shut up and sit down, because if I hear so much as a single peep out of you between now and tomorrow morning, you will regret ever joining this faction!”

Starscream was tempted to bite back that he had regretted joining this idiotic faction and serving under such a pompous fool of a leader for centuries already, but decided it would be unwise to do so in such close proximity to said pompous fool and nodded his head in agreement instead.

“Good,” the former warlord rumbled before withdrawing and stomping back out into what remained of the daylight.

Starscream released a breath of air he hadn't realized he was holding and followed after him. Maybe he would get a chance to rip out some of Slipstream's hair while Megatron wasn't looking.

Chapter End Notes

Have this picture of Megatron and Starscream that I made.
Night fell soon after, taking the temperature with it. Skywarp never would have believed that a place so hot could become so cold in such a short amount of time, and yet his body still seemed to be radiating a ridiculous amount of heat.

Almost every part of his skin felt strangely stiff and was hot to the touch, and he tried his best not to touch it because it also stung and itched something terrible if he did. On top of that, his head ached, his throat felt strange, there were pains in his stomach... the list went on and on. If he had been brave enough to say anything about it, Soundwave may have informed him that he was likely suffering the effects of prolonged sun exposure, hunger, and dehydration, and he might have found out that everyone else felt exactly the same. As it was, Skywarp was beginning to worry that there was something wrong with his human body. After all, humans couldn't spend their whole lives like this. There was no way he could even recharge with the combined discomfort of the frigid air and the stinging heat in his skin.

He huddled further into the thin blankets they'd distributed amongst themselves, tried to shuffle surreptitiously toward the warmth of Thundercracker's body lying inches from his own, and winced as his sunburned skin dragged along the floor.

“Lie still, Warp!” came his brother's irritated voice from beneath the pile of fabric.

“Sorry,” he whispered back.

They were all lying on the floor, which was really just cardboard and a few threadbare rugs arranged over the earth. Initially, Starscream had jumped at the opportunity to take the bed, smug at the idea that everyone else would be below him on the hard, damp, filthy ground, but no less than an hour later, he had cursed in frustration and thrown himself off the bed frame. Slipstream had snorted quietly from somewhere in the dark mass of bodies; she had told him that the bed was uncomfortable, but he hadn't listened.

Soundwave had blocked the window off with some of the cardboard from the floor and hung a rug over the doorway in an attempt to keep the cold out, but drafts were still leaking into the room from huge gaps in just about every part of the structure. There was warmth to be gained from lying closer to one another, but none of the former Cybertronians were comfortable with the sensation of another human body pressed against theirs—with the exception of Rumble and Frenzy, who had been more than content to drape themselves over their creator as soon as he'd settled onto the floor. Skywarp was beginning to consider the benefits of enduring it as he shivered again. His brother's back seemed so warm...

“Warp,” Thundercracker warned him again, and the younger Seeker realized he'd been inching closer to him without meaning to.

“I'm cold,” he whispered. Maybe if he explained the situation, Thundercracker would let him share blankets. That way, they'd both be warm.

Thundercracker remained silent, though. He had either fallen asleep, or he really did not care about Skywarp's petty issue. Skywarp hoped it was the former; sometimes he thought that Thundercracker was the only one willing to put up with him, and he could not deal with losing that on a day like today.

“TC,” he whispered, shuffling closer still. There was no reply, so he tried again, a little louder,
“TC!”

“For the love of Primus, shut up!” Slipstream’s voice echoed from the other side of the room. Beside her, Starscream sighed in relief—finally, someone had said something. He would have done it himself if Megatron had not threatened him more or less on pain of death to be silent.

Skywarp remained mercifully quiet, shivering away the rest of the night, until he finally managed to fall asleep sometime in the early hours of the morning.

Starscream was not so fortunate—he simply could not bring himself to sleep. In addition to his physical discomforts, there were too many thoughts, worries, and questions running through his head. How and why did this happen? What were they going to do? Were they going to be stuck like this forever? Would they die as humans? And what about the Autobots—had they too been cursed into such a hideous situation?

There had been many times in his life when Starscream had felt scared and helpless—more than he could count, and none that he would ever admit—but this was somehow worse. It could be because he could see no possible explanation for this, let alone a way out, or it could be that he had never felt so small, weak, and outnumbered before. However, he suspected it was more likely because he had seen all the others also fear for their lives at some point over the years he had known them, but never before now had he seen Megatron look unsure, wary, or fearful of what was ahead.

Morning came too soon for most. Tiny specks of light crept through the holes in the building, bright dots littering everyone’s faces. However, it was not the light that woke them so much as the noise. It seemed that in the slums of Patna, India, everyone woke for work early. Not having any job or purpose to get up for, the Decepticons remained sprawled out on the floor, awake, but refusing to drag themselves up to face a second day of the horrors of being human. Eventually, the uncomfortable floor and growing pains in the pits of their stomachs motivated them to begin stirring about.

As Megatron sat up and tried to stretch out some of the stiffness that had settled into his body overnight, he turned toward Starscream, who had been lying a few feet from him, and almost cried out in alarm.

The Seeker was peering around the room with a look of utter misery, and for once, Megatron could understand why—his skin was coming off! The reddened skin on his arms, the back of his neck, and even some parts of his face looked as though it had bubbled up like melting plastic. It was utterly disgusting and horrifically fascinating all at once.

Megatron reached out and grabbed hold of one of his slender arms to examine it properly, and the Seeker shrieked in pain, trying to pull it back. The sound drew the others’ attention, and Megatron let go of Starscream as he saw that all of his Seekers were in similar states.

“Soundwave,” he called, and looked to see that his TIC was already making an examination of Slipstream’s condition.

“It is the effect of prolonged exposure to sunlight on fair skin,” Soundwave explained. “It is advisable that they avoid further exposure until their skin has healed.”

“And how long will that take?” Slipstream snapped, pulling her arm away from him.
“I do not know,” he confessed.

“I am not staying in this broken down slag pit of a hut for the unforeseeable future!” Starscream declared, wincing as he struggled to his feet.

“I don't mind it,” Skywarp moaned from underneath his blankets.

“You'll stay where I tell you to stay,” Megatron growled at his SIC, who sneered back.

“What would happen if we went out in the sun again before it heals?” Thundercracker wanted to know.

“Further damage could result in open wounds, which may become infected and ultimately lead to death as we are in a place where bacteria is plentiful and medical care scarce,” Soundwave explained gravely.

Starscream’s jaw twitched slightly and he sank back down to the floor with the others. “Well, I'm not getting myself killed by some stupid microbe,” he declared. “And what in the Pit are these? Is this—AARGH!” He had been picking at a small bubble of skin on his shoulder, which had suddenly burst, releasing clear fluid. “Why are humans so disgusting!?” he shrieked, trying to wipe the fluid off of himself with a blanket. He succeeded in bursting several more of the blisters in the process, which only made him shriek more in both pain and disgust.

The others looked on in horrified fascination until Megatron drew their attention back to himself. “Soundwave, the twins, and I will go out to obtain water. The four of you are to stay here.” He cast a significant glance in Starscream’s direction, but his SIC was too busy throwing a tantrum of sorts on the ground to notice. Well, he would leave that for Thundercracker to deal with for now; he had better things to do.

Despite the sun's presence in the sky, the morning air was still chilly, and it took Soundwave several attempts to wrestle the blankets from Rumble and Frenzy's grip before he finally got them outside. Today was about finding fuel—or food, as Megatron and Soundwave were calling it. The twins had no idea what this “food” actually was or why they needed it, but were keen to start the hunt for it, running ahead of the other two in the crowded street. Their leaders wondered how they could possibly have so much energy when just moments ago they had been moaning and groaning that they needed more sleep.

At the center of the labyrinth of shanty housing, rubbish, and general human filth, they discovered a pump. It seemed almost all residents of the slum visited this pump for water to drink, wash themselves, and clean their clothes in. Hundreds of men stood nearby “washing” their clothes; they did this by beating the damp rags against systematically arranged stones. It seemed they were enjoying the activity—some were even singing. Megatron found it hard to believe that anyone could be truly happy here.

They found, after Rumble tried, failed, and nearly got his head kicked off for his efforts, that they had to wait their turn to use the pump. Megatron and Soundwave stayed in the line while the twins went out to find some kind of container to carry water back to the others in. Their search produced a couple of small, grubby plastic bins and a clear plastic jug. All would have to be rinsed thoroughly before they could safely hold water.

After what must have been hours, they finally reached the pump and were able to quench their thirst. It was amazing what a difference it made. Megatron thought that he had never had anything so wonderful in his entire life as that water, and he could have stood there with his head under the pump all day if there hadn't been so many natives still waiting their turns behind them. His brain
began to work more efficiently for the extra fluid, and the ache in his throat subsided. It was a relief then that they had thought to grab something to carry water back in. The stuff was clearly more important to organics than he had realized, and he would have dreaded having to make the trip a second or perhaps even third time later that day.

Now, they were free to consider their next obstacle. It was already midday, the sun burning down on them from high in the sky, and they still had no food and no Rupees to buy it with. Megatron remorsefully led them back to their shanty house, everyone's stomachs growling in hunger as they went.

Contrary to popular belief, Starscream was quite capable of being agreeable, reasonable, and even what some might consider pleasant company when it suited him. The problem was that it rarely did, and it always seemed to suit him least at those times when it was of the greatest inconvenience to everyone else (mostly Megatron) for him to be a right stubborn little glitch.

After they had returned to the shanty house, the Seeker had spent nearly half an hour bitching and moaning about the cramping in his stomach, and at one point had even collapsed dramatically to the ground, clutching his midriff in badly acted out pain. Everyone else was hungry too, among other discomforts, and Starscream's incessant wining was only drawing attention to the matter.

Megatron had planned to survey their options more carefully before acquiring any sort of fuel, but ended up giving up on the idea and going out to acquire something to satiate his second far sooner than he would have liked. As much as he would have preferred to just beat the shrieking fool into silence, he didn't know how much Starscream's frail-looking human body could take, and as Soundwave had pointed out, they had no access to medical care.

Stealing, particularly when it was from these disgustingly inferior organics, was not something that pleased Megatron. He had never before lowered his own standards so far as to carry out a crime so petty as theft, but with no human currency and a “famished” Starscream waiting for him, he had no choice.

It had been a challenge to swipe enough for everyone; the stall owner hadn't taken his eyes off the much larger foreign man once, but somehow he had managed it. He returned triumphantly with colorful, soft, organic nutrition—something called fruit that grew on trees and carried seeds. They were safe to eat, he knew, because he had seen other humans consuming them, but that didn't stop them all from hesitating, turning the fruits over in their hands instead of eating them.

Frenzy and Rumble—or was it Rumble and Frenzy?—were daring each other to take a bite each. Eventually, their own aching abdomens led them to take a small bite together, cautiously at first, and then another larger one, and another, until they were no longer biting it so much as cramming the whole thing into their little mouths as fast as they could. Satisfied that the “fruit” had not killed the twins, nor had they spat it out in disgust, the remaining Decepticons took tentative bites.

Taste, like their new ultra sensitive touch, was something completely foreign to all of them. The sensation it caused on their tongues (so, there was more use for the appendage than speaking) was amazing. They savored the sweetness of it, and the taste still lingered long after they had swallowed, making them want more.

But Starscream's obstinacy was relentless, and despite his earlier show, he refused to eat the fruit,
complaining that anything grown from organic soil was too dirty for consumption.

Megatron had decided the previous day that he would be more lenient with his followers for the time being; they were already stressed enough as it was, and he needed to keep them as calm as possible. But Starscream had always had such a knack for testing his resolve, and when the Seeker refused to eat when it was so vital that he did and so rude that he didn't, Megatron swore to Primus that if he didn't shut up in the next ten seconds, he was going to go back on that decision. He had one chance.

Frenzy asked if he could have Screamer's share if he didn't want it, but Megatron wasn't listening. He was not going to deal with the Seeker a few hours later when he started moaning and groaning in discomfort again.

“Eat it.” It was an order, not a request. Starscream was going to eat the “filthy organic slag,” as he called it, whether he liked it or not.

Starscream must not have spotted the crazed spark of fury in his leader's eyes though, as he simply spat a conceited insult and muttered, “I'm not eating that!”

Megatron could have argued with the Seeker that this was the only fuel he would be likely to get for possibly another few days, he could have countered him by asking him what other food he could possibly find that didn't grow from the ground (unless of course he was planning to eat the organics themselves), but what little patience he had to spare for the Seeker today had long since run out.

Reaching out without warning, he snatched Starscream by the front of his frayed and filthy T-shirt and shoved him to the ground, pinning him there by sitting on his chest. He then seized his squealing SIC's jaw in one hand, dodging thrashing limbs in the process, and squeezed until Starscream was forced to open his mouth. The larger man managed to force a good portion of the bright fruit into the Seeker's mouth, suitably muffling his shrieks of outrage, but Starscream continued to thrash about, clawing at his leader's exposed forearms, as Megatron then held his mouth and nose shut so that he had no choice but to either suffocate or swallow. When his need for air got the better of his stubbornness and he finally swallowed, Megatron released him and climbed to his feet once more.

“Next time, eat it,” the former warlord growled at the choking, red-faced young man on the dusty ground behind him.

Starscream, too furious—and admittedly too mortified—for words, could only glare at his leader's retreating back until he caught a glimpse of Slipstream's satisfied smirk. He finally picked himself up, wiped as much of the sticky sweet residue as possible from his chin, and followed after Megatron, snarling curses and kicking up dust. He abruptly fell silent when Megatron sent him a warning look that clearly said, “Shut up now, or I'm going to make you regret the day you were sparked.”

To the others' relief, he stayed silent for the rest of the afternoon, and the next morning when he was presented with another organic fruit, he ate it without a word or even his signature sneer of disdain. Unable to look Megatron in the eye and unwilling to give him another excuse for humiliation, he kept his head down.

But the fruit wasn't all that bad...when it wasn't being forced down his throat.

What was far less pleasant was what they all soon discovered came along with a diet of nothing but fruit and untreated water—the open sewers had gained eight new contributors.
“They’ve vanished completely off the radar, sir.”

Lennox stared at the officer, struggling to comprehend the information. Vanished? His gaze flickered over to the thirty-five foot tall, red-and-blue-flamed Cybertronian standing next to him. Optimus looked as flummoxed as he felt.

“How is that possible?”

“We don't know, sir, but all satellites, radars, and intelligence officers have lost track of them,” the officer elaborated, flicking through numerous files. “It's like they disappeared.

“Skywarp was with them,” Optimus interjected. “It is possible that he teleported off planet.”

The officer merely shook his head, coming to a stop at a particular page, which he pulled out from the rest to read. “We sent operatives to their last-known location from before the disappearance, and they found no trace of the radiation flare that Cybertronian teleportation technology leaves behind, sir,” he said, handing the file to Lennox.

The captain frowned as he read, running a hand through his short hair. He dismissed the officer and turned to Optimus.

“What do you think?” he asked.

Optimus's gaze lowered to the floor, his optics darkening. “He's still on the planet. I can feel it. Where was their last-known location?”

Lennox flicked through the information that the officer had handed him. “Somewhere in India—a place called Bihar. They were flying over it.”

Optimus nodded. “It would be wise to look for evidence ourselves. Wouldn't you agree, Captain?”

Lennox grinned. “You're the boss, sir.”

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After Starscream and Slipstream became so stir crazy that they had nearly killed one another halfway through their second day, Soundwave had finally conceded that the Seekers could safely leave the hut if their skin was properly covered. Megatron was all too eager to find new clothes for them, in part because he was about ready to kill them all himself, but also because he was tired of trying to get everything done with just himself, Soundwave, and the twins. The first task he set them to was assisting in the acquisition of food.

Starscream, for someone so renowned for his sneakiness, proved to be surprisingly useless at the business. This could have been down to a number of reasons, the most prominent of them being his hesitation; he almost always gave up halfway through. The other was his visibility. It wasn't that Starscream didn't know how to stay hidden, but that he simply had a knack for drawing people's
attention. Whether it was his voice, his attitude, or his appearance, human eyes just seemed to naturally gravitate toward this out-of-place resident of the slums, more than even Megatron with his towering bulk.

No matter how much he watched them, he didn't understand how the others did it.

They had all figured out how to blend in. It shouldn't have been that hard; the urban chaos around them made it hard to stand out, and the only problem was their race. It was odd to see Caucasian men wandering these filthy streets, regardless of how close the slum village was to the capital city Patna, and especially when they wore the same rags that most of the natives were also dressed in. However, once they had learned to conceal their faces and move with the crowds, no one seemed to give them a second glance. Slag, even the twins could do it.

So why couldn't he?

It didn't particularly bother him to sit back and watch everyone else do all the work—he had never been one for working on a team anyway. What did bother him was the inability to prove to his leader that he had any worth now that he was human. It seemed he had become nothing more than a burden to everyone else—more so than usual—and he knew the others resented him for it. He had tried—really he had—but so far, all of his half-assed attempts at doing anything of use had backfired spectacularly on not only himself, but everyone else as well. What was even worse was that Megatron seemed to think that he was doing it on purpose.

At one point on the morning of their third day, he had been trying to slip oranges up his sleeve unnoticed when the vendor did notice, was understandably outraged, and proceeded to set his numerous sons on the petty thief.

Starscream didn't care that he had run, screaming like the coward the others had always thought he was, from a group of adolescent humans; there was only one of him and six of them and most of them were bigger than him. He did care, of course, when he had to be rescued—like some pathetic human female in distress—by Soundwave and the twins, and was then scorned by a furious Megatron to add further insult to injury. He had even managed to drop the oranges he was trying to steal, so the whole fiasco ended up being rather pointless.

There had to be something he could do—some way that he could pick up the skills he so obviously lacked in his human form and the others didn't.

Starscream watched as four small humans approached the fruit stand he had been glaring at hatefully for the past hour, trying to figure out a way to get past the vendor's sharp eyes. He continued watching as one of the children, the smallest of the four, ran up and snatched something straight off the stand before taking off running down the street. The vendor saw, of course, and took off after him, shouting in outrage.

The Seeker smirked, ready to enjoy the show; the human spawn had no chance of outrunning the vendor.

But then, he saw the stall owner stop in his tracks and turn around, running back in the direction of the stall he had left, waving his arms and shouting even more frantically than before. While he was chasing the first child, the other three children had swooped down upon the temporarily abandoned stall and stolen as much as they could carry. They split up, running in opposite directions down the street. The vendor saw, of course, and took off after him, shouting in outrage.

The result? All four children escaped without a scratch and with their contraband intact.
Starscream scowled. Slag, even the scummy Earth runts could do it! However, they had worked together, using their numbers and not their sizes against the stall owner, and they had successfully taken a hefty amount of food.

It was then that Starscream had an ingenious plan. Those children could be useful—very useful, indeed. With his brains and their... disposable-ness, they could steal a lot more than a few pieces of fruit.

A devious smile spread across his face as he followed the gang of children down the crowded street.

Money was the fuel that drove humans, as vital to them as energon was to Cybertronians. It was what kept them going. With money came everything: food, water, life... and happiness. They would steal for it, fight for it, even kill each other for it.

And there were those who took it for granted, those who lived lives of decadence in the city, despite the endless sea of poverty right outside their doors. So much like Kaon...

And Slipstream watched them.

There were humans who strode down the streets, covered in soft fabrics and precious metals, so separate from the scum surrounding them, so uncaring of it. She was sure that they had enough money to buy the entire stalls that they stopped at, yet would still bargain enough to cheat the owner out of a fair profit. They always got the price they wanted, too; the vendors couldn't afford for them to take their business elsewhere.

A young woman, dressed in delicately fluttering robes of red and gold, picked her way gracefully through the filthy streets as she followed behind her male companion, her face all meek obedience and humility. He was older than her, his face marred with the lines of age and his small, dark eyes sunken into his skull with the passing of time, giving him a haunted appearance, but he too was dressed in opulent clothes, heavy with embroidery.

They stopped at a stall across the street from where Slipstream was watching them, and he started to pick up and examine the bracelets. His female companion stood off to the side, motionless, her head bowed. The wealthy-looking man bought several of the bracelets, and even from this distance, Slipstream could see the way they glittered as the sun shone off them. She clenched her fists in jealousy as the human turned to his mate and presented her with the jewelry. The woman admired them for a few moments before bowing her head once again and following him off down the street.

Slipstream glanced down at her own arms, bare and ugly with sun damage and mosquito bites. The wealthy woman had numerous pieces of jewelry adorning her body—not just her arms, but everywhere. How Slipstream longed to once again glint with beautiful metal like that.

It wasn't fair.

The Seeker femme stared after the two figures' retreating backs as they disappeared into the crowd. What made that woman so special? Why didn't men by her—Slipstream, who was far more endearing than any of those Earth-grown scum—jewelry? It would look so much better on her, anyway. Not that she expected any of her.... colleagues to go out of their way to buy her anything so unpractical as a piece of metal and stone that couldn’t even be weaponized. They couldn't
anyway, what with being totally broke.

There was always stealing... or cheating, maybe. Organic females had hundreds of ways to get what they wanted without having to pay a single Rupee in this place. Slipstream knew. She had seen them. She watched them.

She envied them.

Not that she didn't have the looks to pull it off herself (at least, she thought she might once the skin on her face stopped flaking off again) or the talent. A fake smile here, a casual touch there, and she would be in business. It wasn't challenging, merely beneath her.

Well, that was how she tried to convince herself anyway: that she was somehow better than some common Bihari thief. But was she? Really, they had already stolen food. What difference was there between a few pieces of fruit and the occasional bracelet or necklace? None of her reasoning mattered, though, because even as she was thinking it, mulling the idea over in her head, she was already tying the ends of an especially charming necklace around her neck.

It was just this once. No one would notice it missing.

It was the same thing she would tell herself each time she walked back to the shanty house, attaching a new piece of jewelry to her body. After all, what crime was it to be fashionable?

Of all the human scum, their spawn were the most disgusting, Starscream had decided. The diminutive creatures ran about in the filth of the slums, often without clothing, contributing far more to the general noise and chaos than should have been possible, given their sizes. They oozed bodily fluids freely from their stupid little noses, eyes, or anywhere else they could think to ooze from, and had even fewer qualms than the other slum residents about ejecting their waste wherever and whenever they felt. Not even the adult humans seemed to like them, as he constantly saw others yelling at or beating the little nasties. He was certain that he would contract some unpleasant disease the instant he came into contact with them, but sometimes, risks had to be taken.

Starscream had spent the better part of the day following the urchins about, watching their operations from a distance, and had discovered that they were surprisingly well organized. There was a definite chain of command with one boy—Starscream would have pegged him at ten or eleven years old, but it was hard to tell with the undernourished bodies of these unwanted spawn—whom he had noticed watching the others from the shadows, and they always seemed to reconvene on him after any operation. This was the leader, the one whose good graces he needed to get into.

He made up his mind to approach them, cautiously.

Unfortunately, they turned out to be all too interested in him.

“Firangi! Firangi! America!” the brats squealed in excitement, dancing around the Seeker and trying to touch some part of his mysteriously pale skin.

He probably would have made a run for it and abandoned the endeavor altogether had they not managed to back him up against the wall of one of the shanties down a tiny alley. The only way to escape was to force his way through them, which would have meant allowing them to rub even more of their filth on him than they were doing now. As it was, he resorted to shrieking at them that they’d best stay back if they didn’t want to get their heads kicked off. For some reason, they
found this hilarious, and he wondered if something had gotten lost in translation.

The in-charge boy stepped forward then, a toothy grin stretched across his dark face as he called something to the other children, and they backed off of the foreigner. Starscream stayed on edge, preparing to make a run for it if any of them showed signs of wanting to attack again. *What if they have rabies?* he suddenly thought. The disease could be transmitted to humans, after all.

But none of the children made moves to rush at or bite him; they just stood there, smiling at him expectantly, as their leader approached.

“You are *firangi* try to steal from Gobind yesterday?” the boy said, and then did what was a surprisingly accurate impression of Starscream running shrieking through the streets, much to the other children’s amusement.

Starscream suppressed the urge to twist the little cretin’s arms off and see how funny he found him then (nevermind the fact that his human form hardly had the strength for it in the first place), and instead pasted what he hoped was a charming smile across his face. It was almost physically painful.

“It’s hard to steal alone. If I had a gang like you, I could get whatever I wanted.” Give them a little subtle praise, debase yourself a bit, and everyone feels at ease. He had schmoozed his fair share of idiots in his day. And fortunately, the boy seemed to have enough English to understand him, as he was now nodding in knowing agreement. It was surprising, really, how many of these uneducated gutter dwellers had managed to pick up the second language.

“But why *firangi* steals? America is rich!”

“I… lost my money,” Starscream invented hurriedly. “My friends, too. We lost all our money.”

The smile on the boy’s face faltered slightly.

“But,” the Seeker continued quickly, “I have a plan for all of us to get money.”

The young gang leader regarded him for a moment, eyes narrowed, and then he turned to speak to his cronies in their native tongue. Some of the children began to filter away out of the alley while a select few settled themselves down on the garbage strewn about it. Their leader took a seat on an overturned number ten can, and motioned for Starscream to take one in the dirt across from him.

He looked, Starscream reflected as he warily sank to the ground, for all the world like one of the slum lords of Kaon that he and Megatron had wooed to their cause back in the early days. Nevermind that he was a filthy little organic youngling, he had all the same misplaced pride and confidence as even the most powerful mechs of Cybertron’s underworld. The can he was sitting on might as well have been a throne, and the other worthless organics crawling over the trash piles behind him a flock of steel-plated enforcers.

“Well, then, *firangi*. Tell Ajit your plan.”

It took some effort to explain things fully with Ajit’s imperfect understanding of English, but after twenty minutes or so of gesticulating and reiterating things in varying degrees of simplicity, the grin had returned to the tiny slum lord’s face.

“Maybe you are not *chutiya*, after all,” he remarked, and after a slightly confused look from Starscream, translated, “Idiot.”

He had to try very hard to remind himself that getting offended by such a worthless creature was
“But,” Ajit continued, suddenly serious, “you make a promise?”

“What?” Starscream asked, warily.

“If we help firangi get money, then firangi teaches English.”

Not what he had expected. “But you already speak English,” he pointed out.

Ajit shook his head. “Better English. I speaks better English, then someday I go to Hollywood and be rich.”

As if, Starscream thought, but what did he care? The worm was willing to trade labor just for talking to him. This looked like a win-win prospect from his perspective.

“Alright, it’s a deal,” he said finally.

Ajit grinned and held out a hand. After a moment, Starscream realized the boy wanted him to shake it, as he had seen other humans doing when they concluded their dealings in the markets. Every nerve in his body bristled in disgust as he looked at the tiny appendage, dirt and grease and who knew what else engrained in every fold of its horrid, organic skin. But the money…

He barely managed to suppress a shudder as he reached out and took the hand as gingerly as he could, wanting to purge at the sensation of the warm, soft flesh touching his, moving against his, rubbing its dirt and dead skin cells onto him…

“Bindaas!” the boy declared, releasing him and climbing to his feet. “When to start?”

“Right now,” Starscream replied, wiping his hand fervently on his shirt. He was going to get some compensation for debasing himself to this extent as soon as humanly possible.
Chapter 7

As Cybertronians, Rumble and Frenzy had never taken much interest in the smaller variety of organics; they posed no threat and were therefore not worth noticing. However, now that they themselves were human children and were trapped in a world full of adults who were all so unbelievably dull… Oh, Soundwave was fine, of course, and it was always fun to get Screamer worked up, and Skywarp wasn’t bad when he wasn’t being a total wimp, but none of them could compete with the vibrant, creative energy that the children of the slums seemed to radiate from every fiber of their tiny beings. It resonated with Rumble and Frenzy in unexpected ways, and drew them in like gravity.

Of course, Soundwave had ordered them to stay away, and so, for the first couple of days, they did because that was how long it took them to fully appreciate that their creator no longer possessed his telepathic abilities. For their entire existences, he had been a constant presence in the backs of their minds, and while it had been a certain source of comfort, he had also used this ability to police their thoughts and actions, preventing them from ever outright obeying his commands. But now... Well, they could do whatever they wanted, and he wouldn't even punish them because he wouldn't know.

It was revolutionary, and they knew exactly what they wanted to do first.

Stay away from the other children, and don't go near the train tracks—two commands that could be so perfectly broken in one move. The twins couldn't help casting nervous glances back over their shoulders as they left the shanty. Soundwave had gone somewhere with Megatron, so there was no way he could know what they were up to, but a lifetime of habit was difficult to break. It wasn't until they'd actually made it to the raised mound of rocks on which the train tracks ran without an angry creator swooping down on them that the excitement that they were disobeying Soundwave started to supersede the unease.

As usual, the place was crawling with other children, anxiously engaged in various chasing games, jumping across the tracks, searching for things that might have fallen from the trains among the rocks, or just sitting in the dirt nearby, watching the others. Rumble and Frenzy found a patch of tall, reedy grass and sank into it to make their own observation. They were not scared of the children, they assured each other. They simply needed to strategize their next move carefully.

“Which one do you think is the boss?” Frenzy hissed to his brother as he parted a few reeds to get a better view.

“They wouldn't have their bosses here with them, dummy,” came the derisive reply. “They probably snuck away from their bosses, just like we did.”

“Then who do we have to talk to if we wanna join 'em?”

“The biggest one?”

Frenzy looked around until he spotted a boy who was considerably larger than the others, sitting by himself and scratching something into the dirt with a stick. No one seemed to be paying him any mind.

“He doesn't look like a boss to me,” he muttered.
Rumble also regarded the boy. “Well... Megatron does stuff on his own sometimes.”

“Not if Screamer can help it.”

“So, are we gonna talk to them?”

“You go first. I'll stay here to cover you.”

“With what?”

Frenzy looked around the ground at his feet until he spotted a small stone that slotted perfectly into his palm. “With this,” he said, hefting it up for his brother to see.

“You couldn't hit them from here in a million years.”

“Wanna bet?”

“Yeah. I bet you three pieces of fruit.”

“I could get that on my own.”

“Okay, fine. If you can hit one of ’em, then I'll... I'll put a beetle up Starscream's nose while he's sleeping.”

“No, Megatron's nose!”

“Are you crazy!?”

“He won't know who did it if he's asleep!”

“Yeah, he will! Who else would do it?”

“Fine. If I hit them, you put a beetle up Screamer's nose. If I miss, I'll put it up Megatron's nose.”

“Deal,” Rumble grinned, and the two of them turned back to the human children, their original objective of befriending them temporarily forgotten.

“Alright, I'm gonna hit that one there.” Frenzy pointed to the boy with the stick that they had noticed before, but Rumble shook his head.

“Too easy. Hit one of those ones over there.” He indicated a group of girls crouched in a circle right by the base of the tracks. Frenzy frowned. They were well over 20 meters away.

“What? You don't think you can do it?” his brother teased.

“No! Just watch me.”

He stood up to get a better angle, drew back the hand holding the rock, and let it fly. It sailed high, high over the other children, a bit of quartz embedded in it catching the light as it reached the zenith of its trajectory before turning back Earthward. Both twins held their breaths as they watched it dropping toward the girls, none of them the wiser. It was really going for them. Frenzy had managed it! Until the last minute, when against all odds, the rock missed every single one of the girls and dropped right down into the center of their circle.

“Ha!” Rumble exclaimed as the girls all jumped and started looking around for the source of the projectile. “Better start looking for that beetle!”
“That one doesn't count! Best two out of three!” Frenzy protested, looking around for another rock.

“Don't be a sore loser!”

“I'm not! I just needed to warm up a bit.”

“You're never gonna hit anyone, and you know it!”

“Then it won't matter to you if I try again, right?”

“But that would be—”

“Hello.”

Both boys stopped short, not daring to move, as a young girl's voice cut through their dispute.

“I say 'hello,'” the voice insisted, and finally they turned to see the child standing behind them.

She was slightly smaller than Rumble and Frenzy and wore a single piece of fabric, which looked like it had once been brightly patterned, wrapped about her chest to make a dress of sorts. Her long hair was not left loose to tangle and knot the way that so many of the other girls' was, but had been pulled back carefully into two tight braids. She had shoes, too—a pair of sandals with fraying straps. Of greatest interest to the twins, though, was the bundle in her lap, wrapped in a blue cloth, which was emanating smells that most distinctly spoke of warm, fresh food.

“What you are names?” she asked.

They exchanged a look, but were still too surprised by the girl's sudden appearance to answer.

“My name Dipti,” she told them, smiling encouragingly.

“Uh... Rumble,” Rumble said after a slight pause.

“And I'm Frenzy,” his brother added quickly, not to be outdone.

“Why you throw rock at Seema and friends?” Dipti wanted to know next.

“Because...” Frenzy searched for an explanation as it occurred to him that launching projectiles at people without just cause was generally frowned upon in most societies.

“Because they stole our food!” Rumble invented wildly.

To their surprise, Dipti smiled and leaned in conspiratorially. “Seema steal from me, too. My hairbrush with blue flower on it,” she hissed. “She say she find her own, but I know is mine. She is naughty girl!”

The twins were not sure what she was getting on about, but could gather at least that she approved of their rock throwing.

“Where you are come from?” the girl asked next.

“Cyber—” Frenzy started, and Rumble nudged him hard. “America,” he finished.

“I know!” Dipti exclaimed, her face lighting up. “I say, they from America, but Mommy say, no American live in this town. America rich, they go to other town. But I know! I know you America!”
“Er... right,” Rumble said, and then both twins perked up considerably as Dipti began untying the cloth of her bundle. Inside was a stack of slightly puffy disks that they had seen the humans piling rice and colorful, savory foods on before. They swallowed thickly as they watched small tendrils of steam waft off these ones.

“You want a naan?” the girl said, holding out a disk to each of them.

In that instant, the twins decided that Dipti was quite possibly the greatest human being ever to walk the planet Earth. They took the food and began shoving it in their mouths with as much gusto as they could. It was soft and chewy, salty with a slight zing to it that they didn't recognize. It was delicious, and they'd finished it in a matter of seconds.

Frenzy remembered then that there was something one was supposed to say when receiving a gift, and he wracked his brain trying to find the words.

“Thank you?” he guessed.

“You are welcome,” Dipti replied, and he congratulated himself on getting it right.

“You come play with us?” the girl asked now, and the twins again exchanged glances. Yes, they had intended to interact with the other children, but... play? It sounded so... childish. On the other hand, they were all too eager to stay close to Dipti and her unparalleled generosity.

So, they pushed themselves up from the reeds and nervously followed her toward the other children.

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Starscream was in a good mood, whistling to himself when he returned to the shack that evening. The obnoxious smirk that had been missing from his face the last few days was now back full force. He was in a very good mood.

Megatron didn't just find it odd, he found it worrying. Whatever put the Seeker in a good mood usually never boded well for anyone else, especially himself. He put his second's uncharacteristically chipper frame of mind to one side for now though, and decided to question him on more pressing matters.

“Where have you been?”

Starscream didn't bother to spare him a glance. “Out.”

“Out where?” Megatron frowned.

This time, the Seeker did turn to look at him, the insufferable smirk still plastered across his face. “Does it matter?”

“You have been gone alone for well over seven hours and have returned in an annoyingly good mood,” Megatron ran a hand over the short, bristly hairs covering his chin as he thought. “What have you been up to, Starscream?”

The younger man held his gaze in silence for a while, as if trying to initiate some sort of staring contest, before turning back around, answering Megatron's question with nothing more than a sniff.
As Starscream turned though, Megatron spotted a wad of pink paper stuck in the back of his tattered belt. He reached out for it and was about to grab it when the Seeker beat him to it.

“That's mine!” Starscream shrieked.

“Where did you get that?” Megatron hissed accusingly as he eyed the crumpled pink paper clutched tightly in his second's lithe hands.

“Where do you think?” the Seeker snapped back venomously.

Megatron stood up and began to advance on him. “You stole it?” It was more a statement than a question, and Starscream treated it as such.

“So?” he demanded.

“I was under the impression that I had given an order to steal only what is absolutely necessary to survive here!” Megatron growled, snatching the Seeker's wrist and reaching to take the money from him.

“This is necessary!” Starscream wrenched his wrist—and the money—away again and took a step back from his leader's imposing form. “We need this!”

“What if you had been caught?” Megatron hissed, following Starscream around the small room, trying to imagine just how much attention his second's antics might have attracted. “What if—”

“Oh, please, my lord,” Starscream sneered mockingly. “It is not I who has to worry about getting caught.”

“You think anyone would ever take the fall for you?” Megatron said darkly.

Starscream ignored him and returned to counting the large wad of money he had somehow gotten away with. There had to be at least four thousand Indian Rupees there. Once he had finished counting, glancing warily at Megatron every few seconds, he tucked the already crumpled money back into his pocket and stepped out of the shanty into the bright Indian day outside, leaving the former warlord to seethe.

It had taken a few days to get permission for the operation, but Optimus had grown all the more certain of the Decepticons' hidden location as the plane flew closer to Patna, India. He could feel Megatron through the damaged but still existing bond between them. The feeling of familiarity in his spark told him Megatron had been here, still was here. But something did not feel quite right.

His brother's spark signature normally felt like... chaos. Churning emotions in turmoil with one another; frustration, hurt, and anger came together to create a formidable, powerful hate. It was a hate so strong that it stung Optimus's own spark whenever he was near, almost like an alarm. It was impossible not to sense it, let alone ignore it once he had.

But now, he felt no stinging, no turmoil, nor even hatred. There was frustration still, but not hatred.

His brother's signature, although close, was faint, foggy, and... fading. Was Megatron damaged perhaps?
They may not have had much time left to find him. Even if by some chance his brother offlined, there were still numerous Decepticons out there who would happily continue to create chaos for the sheer hell of it.

Arriving in India was difficult, to say the least. Never mind all of the political loopholes they'd had to jump through simply to slip through the borders, but to do anything was a challenge; the Autobots were not exactly inconspicuous in a place like Patna. Though it was a wealthy city—far too wealthy to be sitting next to such a massive slum—its occupants were not used to seeing sports cars and trucks with blue flames being escorted around by military personnel.

Once out of the city, satellite guided their small convoy to the precise location beneath which the Decepticons had vanished off the radar. Whatever Optimus had expected, it wasn't a landfill.

What importance could a place like this possibly hold for the Decepticons? Why here? Or was there no significance at all?

The area was still too populated for Optimus, or any of the other Autobots, to transform, so he could only park and wait as Lennox, Epps, and the rest of the team went about securing the area and the intelligence personnel set up the scanning equipment.

And for a while, nothing happened. No Decepticons came bounding out from behind the rubbish piles or flew overhead. Nothing. Lennox's team seemed almost disappointed at the lack of ambush; some of the men had even started to wander about, obviously bored, rather than being on their guard.

There was a crunching of rubbish as Ironhide rolled up to a stop next to Optimus. “Whatever he's up to, Prime, I don't like it. I don't like it at all.”

Optimus would have smiled if he was not in his alt mode. “That would be assuming he was ever here at all.” Ironhide picked up on the slight hint of amusement in his voice.

“But you know he was,” he pointed out, his own voice serious.

Optimus was about to reply when one of the research team jogged over. “Sir!”

The Autobot leader fought to conceal the anticipation in his voice. “What did you find?”

The officer seemed nervous. “The readings all came back negative, sir. The only Cybertronians to have come through here are you.”

Optimus dismissed the officer, not missing the grumble of frustration from Ironhide next to him. His SIC was clearly disappointed that there would be no 'Con bashing today after all. They watched as NEST rechecked the area one more time, packed up their equipment, and called it a day. An atmosphere of disappointment settled over everyone.

What was worse than knowing they were still out there, growing in numbers and armed to the teeth, was not knowing where. If they were not here, then they could be anywhere.

Optimus tried to brush aside the dull thudding sensation that had been growing steadily in his spark since they crossed the Indian border. Megatron was not here; no one was. He had to come to the conclusion that whatever he had sensed, it had not been his brother.

Reluctantly, the Autobots and NEST rolled out of the dump site, out of Patna, Bihar, and then India entirely to fly the long, tiring trip back to America and report that they had found absolutely nothing.
The mission was a failure, and Megatron was still out there somewhere.
Chapter Eight

Chapter Notes

For anyone who missed yesterday's update, no, there are not 12 new chapters all of a sudden. I went through and re-cut all of the old chapters to be shorter, both because they make more sense this way and because shorter chapters means I can get y'all new content more often. The only one that's actually new is Chapter 19.

For once, Rumble and Frenzy had not been trying to cause trouble. Really, they hadn't. They were simply acting out of the goodness of their pathetic human hearts to “help out” their commanding officers. The fact that the repercussions of such “help” had been hilarious was merely a bonus to them.

Some nights were sticky, humid, and unpleasant. Others were icy and harsh. Either way, it was nearly impossible to get a comfortable night's sleep. After a day of heavy breathing, sweat-covered skin, and sticky humidity, the night air seemed to suck a body’s warmth almost as efficiently as the vacuum of space. That night was one of the latter kind—so cold they could see the moisture in their breath curling delicately into the dank air of the shanty as they exhaled. Their only source of comfort was the large, soft human, who was once the formidable Soundwave, acting as both their heater and bed. Rumble had almost felt sorry for the others, who did not have anything so luxurious as a Soundwave to rest upon.

The past couple of nights, the twins had been awake far longer than the others, minds too stimulated to sleep, and it was incredibly boring to lay silently in the dark with nothing to do but count the holes in the roof and play with their misty breath. They dared not speak, of course; hushed whispers in the middle of the night had been rewarded with furious outbursts more than once already. Still, they needed to do something to occupy themselves.

That was when they happened to notice that Starscream, despite having what must have been three times as many blankets as anyone else, was shivering so violently that they could actually hear his teeth chattering. It was a shame, they reflected, that he did not have a Soundwave, but there was only one available, and they were not so generous as to share it with Screamer of all people.

And then, through the remaining echo of their telepathic link, they both came up with the most ingenious idea. It was probably Dipti's influence that brought it about. As wonderful as their new friend was, she did talk an awful lot about things like “character virtues” and “good deeds”—things that she apparently learned about at a place called “school.”

The tricky part of the plan was moving Megatron without waking him, or anyone else, but they eventually worked out a slow, gentle roll and drag technique. Fortunately, they did not have far to move him, because Megatron was heavier than he looked. Frenzy decided that the only logical explanation for it was that their leader was still made of metal under all that squishy flesh. It was a Primus-given miracle that he did not wake up, even when Rumble tripped over him.

They finally managed to maneuver the larger man into place on the floor next to the shivering Seeker and stood back to admire their handiwork. To both their surprise and delight, Megatron
instantly rolled over in his sleep and pressed himself against his second, wrapping the slim body in his thick arms. Starscream seemed to have sensed the heat source in his sleep as he turned into the embrace, pushing his face into Megatron's neck.

The twins would have laughed were it not for the fact that it would have woken everyone else and destroyed their hard work. They regretted not having any sort of image capturing equipment; the moment would have made such perfect blackmailing material. After watching the “new couple” snuggle for a few moments more, the biting cold finally got to them, and they retreated back to their Soundwave, content with the knowledge that they had a “good deed” they could brag to their friend about, even if their Air Commander didn't deserve it.

Skywarp had managed to fall asleep earlier, but something had woken him up and he didn't think he'd be getting back to sleep anytime soon. Even with the extra warmth of Thundercracker's back pressed firmly against his, the cold was beyond his toleration—he couldn't even feel his toes.

The Seeker twisted his head around to observe the other seven occupants of the single-roomed, creaking shanty house and wondered how they all managed to sleep under such conditions. Their slumbering forms were just distinguishable by the faint white moonlight shining through the various gaps in their makeshift home.

In the corner, Slipstream lay as far from the others as she could possibly get, facing the wall with her back to them. Skywarp had not seen much of her lately. It seemed that she preferred to be alone, not joining in their conversations—or more often arguments—and generally only speaking when she was insulting someone.

Closest to her lay the jumbled mess of Soundwave and his twins. Of course, the twins were used to sleeping inside of Soundwave, so it was only natural that they had settled for draping themselves on top of him instead. They all shared one blanket and were breathing in sync. Skywarp smiled at the sight.

Next, he glanced over to the wall on the far side of the room, closest to the door, where Megatron could normally be found propped against the wall, but tonight, as Skywarp squinted through the dimly-lit shack, he only saw a dark, empty space where his leader should have been.

Curious, the Seeker pushed himself up onto his elbows and glanced around the room more thoroughly. He could see the mass of blankets on the floor opposite Soundwave, where he knew Starscream lay, but there was no sign of Megatron.

It was unusual; Megatron would not have just left them here alone... would he? Had he gone out? Perhaps his heavy footfalls were what had woken Skywarp in the first place.

Carefully, so as not to disturb Thundercracker, he lifted the blankets off himself, flinching as the cold night air hit his delicate and still slightly damaged human skin. He rolled to his feet and tiptoed across the room, stepping carefully between the other sleeping inhabitants, to pull back the plastic covering the window hole.

There was no one out there apart from a stray dog sleeping against the wall of another shanty. He quickly dropped the plastic again.

Maybe he should wake someone else? It wasn't like Megatron to go wandering off in the middle of
the night. What if he was in trouble? What if he had gotten hurt? What if the dog had gotten him? As intimidating as he found their leader, Skywarp's stomach lurched at the thought of being left defenseless and completely clueless in the human world without Megatron's steady, seemingly omniscient guidance. How could they survive without him?

Now truly panicked, he stumbled as quietly as he could to Starscream's side. He was about to wake his brother and relay his findings when he stopped short, more than a little surprised at the sight he was met with.

Well, he had found Megatron, so that was one problem solved, but it had brought with it an entirely new problem—one that he doubted he could solve without being blamed for it. He considered waking them anyway, or maybe just separating them. It was such a bizarre sight, especially after the way they had been treating each other lately.

Eventually, he came to the conclusion that it was freezing, he was tired, and problem though it may be, it was not his to deal with. Tiptoeing back to Thundercracker, he threw the blankets back over himself and pressed into his brother's back once more. He felt slightly guilty when he pressed his frozen toes against Thundercracker's warmer legs and his brother shivered in his sleep, but not guilty enough to pull them away.

So, Starscream was left wrapped contently in Megatron's warm, strong arms until morning when, as he woke to find his face pressed against his leader's thick neck, he did what he thought any sensible person would in that moment—sink his teeth into him.

The remaining six occupants of the very small dwelling woke that morning to the sounds of outraged roars and vicious snarls.

"Is that a hickey?"

Megatron's eyes narrowed. He was not sure who or what a "hickey" was, but judging by Slipstream's tone, he was certain it was far from anything good. The distasteful sneer she wore was unbecoming on her beautiful, young face and made her look hauntingly similar to Starscream, which did not help matters. Despite his natural morbid curiosity, he decided that this was one thing he would rather not know and ignored her.

She was still staring at his jaw though, so he glared at her until she went away. This turned out to be the wrong move, as it gave her ample opportunity to scrutinize the other members of their group. The first person she gravitated toward was her least pleasant cousin. She needed no further confirmation than his murderous scowl and the glowing pink slap mark marring the Seeker's face to know that it was he who had taken a chunk out of their leader that morning.

"Hungry, were you?" she remarked casually as she passed by.

Starscream visibly bristled, and Slipstream was sure that if he had still been Cybertronian, his wings would have stiffened in outrage. He sprang forward, as if to launch himself at her, only to fall back on his rump when Soundwave hastily gripped the back of his t-shirt.

Megatron watched, vaguely aware of his subordinates as he absently rubbed at the still-stinging crescent-shaped mark on his jaw. If he had learned anything today, it was that organics were not as defenseless as Optimus had always implied over the years.
Teeth.

Starscream, when he was not gritting them, clenching them, or sinking them into Megatron's flesh, had quite nice teeth. As far as organic bone protruding through organic flesh could look nice, at least.

The former warlord lifted a hand to his tired eyes, rubbing sleep from them.

He refocused his attention on his squabbling subordinates in front of him. Starscream was standing, restrained by both Soundwave and Thundercracker, as Slipstream let loose on him. Soundwave's brats stood off to the side, laughing and pointing childishly at the scene. Skywarp seemed to have fallen asleep... again.

Megatron shook his head, but decided against waking the youngest Seeker. He did not doubt that sleep deprivation had the same effect on organics as lack of recharge did on Cybertronians, and he would rather not be another mech—man—down.

Now he glared back in Starscream's direction. Not a day had passed since he had met the insufferable moron that Starscream had not managed to annoy him in some new, unique manner, and though he did not know how he had ended up wrapped around the Seeker that morning, he was going to find out.

But there were far more pressing matters at the moment, he thought to himself as his stomach growled in protest, like breakfast.

“Cease this ridiculous behavior!” Megatron barked, advancing on his subordinates. He tugged Starscream away from his comrades' hands with far more force than necessary. The Seeker hissed at him, teeth bared. Megatron did not even need to tell him to stop; the murderous look he gave was more than enough to sedate him.

Satisfied, Megatron went about splitting them into groups: Soundwave and the twins in one; Thundercracker, Skywarp, and Slipstream in another; and, of course, he was stuck with Starscream.

Not that he trusted Starscream enough to let him out of his sight in the first place, especially after his escapade with the money the other day. He had become all the more dangerous to everyone in his mortal state. His mood swings were more frequent and erratic, likely the result of an imbalance of chemicals in his now-human mind. It was an increasing concern, one that only he and Soundwave shared—there was no need to stress anyone else with the news.

The only problem was that Starscream seemed to have noticed this attitude and was beginning to get restless. Megatron was sure that this money business was only the start of some greater scheme that the Seeker was concocting. He would have to watch him as much as possible from now on.
Chapter 9

For Skywarp, the human world was an ever-shifting conglomeration of potential dangers and threats. Take the view through the door of the shanty house today, for example.

The first thing he noticed, of course, was the mangy dog sniffing around in the rubbish pile across the street. It was smaller than the one that had attacked him on his first day as a human, but he could still see the pointed teeth as it opened its jaws a bit, letting its tongue loll out the side of its mouth. Danger.

Then there was the woman sitting outside the neighboring hut. He couldn't see her from the angle he was sitting at, but he could smell the food that she was cooking on her little fire. She didn't look frightening—she was no bigger than Slipstream—but he had seen her yelling at the many children who were constantly running in and out of her hut. He had seen her swatting at some of them with that wooden spoon of hers. Danger.

On the other side of the street, a little ways down from the dog, there was a large man with a bicycle. He hadn't done anything in particular. In fact, he was just standing there, holding the bicycle and looking around as though waiting for someone. However, he was larger than Skywarp, and his face was pitted and lined as though he'd spent a lot of time scowling at others. So, once again, danger.

There were other, less obvious dangers out there, too. The hordes of children that seemed to constantly want to accost him, the insects that kept landing on him to suck his blood, and then there was the sun! Skywarp's sunburn from the first day had mostly stopped stinging by now, but it occasionally itched as his clothes caught on the peeling skin, reminding him of the danger that simply walking out into the blinding Indian sun without proper protection would present.

The Seeker likely would have spent all of his time hiding inside the shanty house in a quivering mess of terror if there wasn't something in there on a regular basis that scared him more than anything Earth had managed to cook up—a muscle-clad, 6'5" something called Megatron. So, in general, Skywarp would latch onto Thundercracker at the beginning of each day and allow himself to be dragged into the terrors of humanity, returning each evening exhausted from the stress of not dying the whole day through. Never mind how often his brother assured him that most of his perceived dangers were not actually anything to worry about, he couldn't get rid of that clenching fear in the pit of his stomach.

Today, though, Thundercracker had gone somewhere with Soundwave while Skywarp was still asleep, leaving him to sit alone in the shade of the shanty, feeling more than a little betrayed. Really! Would it have been so hard to wake him up? The only ones left when he had woken were the twins, who had told him what had become of Thundercracker and then gone out to Primus knew where themselves.

Skywarp leaned forward to rest his chin on his knees and sighed. He wondered where his other brother might have gotten to. Lately, Starscream had taken to going off on his own far too often. Of course, Slipstream snuck away plenty, too, but as she wasn't infamous for using her alone time to concoct stupid schemes for overthrowing Megatron that inevitably ended with her doing time in a medbay, Skywarp wasn't so worried about her. He and Starscream hadn't been anything like close since... Well, he wasn't sure, really, but they were still brothers, and Skywarp felt that he had a right to worry about him.
As he thought about it, he found himself edging closer and closer to the doorway until he could poke his head out, just for a second. He knew, of course, that he was unlikely to find Starscream or any of the others in so doing, but it was better than just sitting there and waiting at least. As expected, there was no one he knew out on the street, so he withdrew once more and leaned up against the dank wall of the shanty. He closed his eyes with a sigh, thinking that perhaps he could fall asleep again until everyone came home.

A moment later, something blocked the light from the doorway.

“Hallo. Hallo, boy. Hallo, you come?”

Skywarp's eyes snapped open again. It was the woman from next door, the one who was always cooking. She was standing there in the doorway and... smiling at him?

“Come, come!” she repeated, beckoning to him. “You alone today, you come.”

“Er... no, I can't...” he tried. His heart was thumping in his chest so hard that he couldn't get the words out. What was she doing? She was smiling at him, yes, but what did she want?

“No, no, you come, you eat,” the woman insisted, and this time, she reached out and took Skywarp's hand. “Firangi woman, she never cook. Bad girl! You come eat today.”

“Wait—!” Skywarp tried as she tugged him to his feet. She was smaller than him, but surprisingly strong.

“I am Anoushka,” the woman told him as she dragged him back to her own shanty where three small, grubby children were already clustered around the cook pot, scooping yellowish-green... stuff onto soft, flat discs. He had tried the discs before (he and Thundercracker had managed to snatch a couple off of a food stand a few days ago), so he knew how good they were. The other stuff didn't look particularly pleasant, but it smelled wonderful and Skywarp hadn't eaten all day.

One of the children looked up to see his mother pushing the (considerably less) reluctant Seeker onto one of the overturned boxes around the cookfire and nudged his nearest sibling excitedly. The other boy's eyes went wide as oranges as he saw who had just joined their meal. Skywarp shifted uncomfortably under their gaze.

“Here, here,” Anoushka was saying as she pushed one of the discs at him, a generous dollop of the yellow substance piled in the middle of it.

Skywarp looked down and inspected it more closely. It seemed to be some kind of paste with various brown, white, and orange chunks in it. There were little round, green things thrown in there, too. He swallowed, wondering what to do as all eyes turned to him expectantly. Could he really eat this? It smelled so good, but... Thundercracker's voice suddenly popped into his head, scolding him about the dangers of accepting fuel from enemies and the possibilities of poison.

“Er... I shouldn't,” he said, lowering the food slightly.

Anoushka smiled and pushed it at him again. “You skinny boy,” she said, pinching his cheek. “You eat my food, you grow big like you papa.”

“Papa?” Skywarp blinked. He didn't understand much about human family constructs, but he had at least managed to gather that this was a term for one half of the duo of creators that all humans had. As far as he knew, he didn't have one, and certainly not one that this woman would know about.
“Papa,” she repeated. “Big one, hairy face, always like this.” She pulled as fearsome a scowl as she could manage, and Skywarp laughed out loud.

“You mean... Megatron? You think Megatron is my... Ha!” He wondered what Starscream would say if he found out that people thought Megatron was their creator.

“Eat, eat,” Anoushka continued to insist, either ignoring or not understanding what had amused him.

Skywarp looked down at the food again, and then back up at the little group of humans. Well, they were all eating from the same pot, so it couldn't be a trap of any sort. Hesitantly, he wrapped the disc around the paste and chunks as he'd seen the children doing and took a bite.

It was good. It was better than good; it was a phenomenon in and of itself! There were so many flavors that he couldn't even place, and the textures swept through his mouth perfectly. And it was warm. Even in the heat of India, there was something so soothing about eating warm food—a luxury they had so rarely had since arriving. Not for the first time, Skywarp wondered why Starscream was so repulsed by human food. The stuff was amazing!

“You like?” one of the boys on the other side of the fire asked, and Skywarp nodded enthusiastically.

“How do you make this?” he asked, his mouth still full.

Anoushka shook her head. “No, no. Boy no cook. Cook is for woman.”

“Cook? Like making food? No, I want to learn!” he insisted, forgetting temporarily that he was terrified of humans. Imagine if he could make such satisfying food all the time!

The woman looked taken aback, but then she smiled. She said something to her three sons, who laughed, and then turned back to Skywarp. “Okay, boy. We cook.”

“Where you from, America?”

“Mm?” Starscream hummed, pulling himself out of a fantasy about dismembering Megatron. It had taken him half the day to shake the moron and make his way to his and Ajit's meeting place.

“Where you from?” the boy repeated.

The two of them were now sat in the shadow of one of the shanties, waiting for a potential target to appear. They could not prey upon just anyone, as regular residents of the slum were bound to start recognizing them and become suspicious of where their missing money might be going—not that regular residents of the slum had any money worth stealing to begin with—and so they would wait until someone new walked by. There was no shortage of targets on any given day. This section of the slums extended somewhat into the city, and folks of all types passed through rather than walk all the way around to get from the park on one side to the shops on the other.

“What do you mean? I'm from America. That's why you call me America,” Starscream said, not taking his eyes off the shifting crowd.
Even if the child and his minions were spectacular pickpockets, Starscream found himself regretting his deal to let Ajit practice English on him. The boy talked and talked and talked about anything and everything: his beloved little sister, his plans for getting out of the slum someday, his favorite sports teams, his favorite movies, his parents, games he liked to play when he was little... There was only so much that Starscream could ignore or snap at him without running the risk of losing his misplaced trust, especially on these occasions when the topic of conversation turned to himself.


Starscream frowned, wondering again why the child was so obsessed with the place—it was by far his favorite thing to talk about after his sister. “New York,” he said finally, as it was the only American city he could remember specifically at the moment.

“No Hollywood?” Ajit sounded disappointed.

This time, the word stirred something in Starscream's memories, and the image of stupidly large letters on a hillside surfaced from somewhere.

“I went to Hollywood once,” he said, trying to remember anything else about the place. He had only flown over it, so there wasn't much.

“You meet Captain America?”

“Who's that?” Starscream wanted to know.

He wished he hadn't asked. The boy spent the next five or so minutes recounting a farfetched story about a human who had somehow gained super strength and used it to fight other humans with a magic metal disk. The whole thing was apparently “so amaze,” as Ajit put it, but Starscream couldn't help thinking that the idiot sounded a bit like Prime—he even wore red and blue. It was a relief to realize that this was another film that the boy was talking about, and the humans had not actually managed to spawn their very own version of the Autobot leader.

“Maybe one day America finds magic medicine too and become Captain America,” Ajit finished, nudging the Seeker.

Starscream snorted, pulling away sharply. “Not likely. What kind of dork would purposely crash into an iceberg to save a bunch of humans?”

“But it was New York! New York is America's home, too! You would let home get blown up?” Ajit protested.

Another snort because yes, he would. He already had.

“When I go to Hollywood, I make movie about Captain India,” Ajit was saying now, apparently unconcerned by Starscream's disdain for superheroes. “And my sister, she will be Captain India girlfriend. Both of us so famous. We will live in giant house by the ocean. So beautiful!”

“Sure you will,” the Seeker muttered. He personally felt that Ajit had about as much likelihood of getting out of this slum as he himself did of regaining his original form. Oh, he might nod along with Megatron when the old fool started talking about all his future plans for once their bodies had been restored, but truthfully, Starscream suspected that this was it. This was forever. Or for the next 70 odd years, at least. Humans didn't live that long.
The thought put him in a sour mood, and he stopped answering as Ajit began rambling about what other kinds of films he would like to put his little sister in when they finally moved to America. As usual, the boy didn't seem to mind and continued his one-sided conversation until Starscream tugged his sleeve and pointed to a middle-aged man weaving through the crowd in clothes that were far too rich to belong to a slum dweller.

Ajit stopped talking and gave a quick whistle. The couple of boys who had been squatting in an alley opposite them looked over and caught his eye. He nodded at the man, the boys nodded back, and then they disappeared into the crowd.

“Make magic, Captain America,” Ajit said to Starscream before clambering to his own feet and following them.

Starscream waited another minute or so, hoping that the new nickname didn't stick, and then began pushing his way through the crowd toward the man. He pulled level with the stranger, and walked along just behind him for a few paces, then allowed the momentum of the crowd to carry him right into the stranger, hard.

“Sorry, sorry! So sorry!” Starscream stammered as he and the man tangled and tripped over one another.

The man turned, looking like he was about to begin shouting at the Seeker, but his face softened slightly when he saw the helpless expression on Starscream's face. They always did. It was the magic charm of the lost little foreigner.

“Sorry,” Starscream repeated, trying to look as pathetic as he knew the others thought he was, “but do you maybe speak English?”

“Are you lost?” the man asked, and the Seeker let relief wash over his features.

“Oh, thank God! I thought I would be stuck here forever!” He pulled a crumpled paper from his pocket and held it out for the man to see. “Do you know where this address is?”

The man squinted at the words Starscream had scrawled on the paper. Since he had made it up, it was probable that the address didn't exist, but that never stopped anyone from trying to help him find his way there.

“I do not recognize it, but if you keep going that way down this street, you will come to a main road and you can catch a taxi.”

“No, I lost my wallet. I can't pay for a cab,” Starscream insisted, shaking his head.

“The police will help you, then.”

And while the man was giving him directions to the nearest police station, he didn't notice the tiny hand that slipped into his pocket, relieving him of his wallet. Nor did he notice when said hand returned it to his pocket a moment later with all of its contents missing. Starscream thanked his victim profusely and the two of them parted ways. As the Seeker slipped off through the crowd, he felt a small body press against him in the throng and looked down to see Ajit grinning at him as he tugged the corner of a wad of Rupees into view out of his waistband. It was a surprisingly substantial wad.

“Get off me,” Starscream snapped, repressing a self-satisfied smile of his own. They were just getting started.
It was late in the afternoon when Soundwave and Thundercracker returned to the shanty to find it empty. Thundercracker instantly started spinning in circles in the middle of the hut as though his missing youngest brother would materialize in one of the dark corners if he looked at them all enough times.

“Where'd he go? He never goes anywhere on his own!” he fretted.

“I believe you would have more success in locating him if you left the hut,” Soundwave pointed out, and Thundercracker frowned at him before following his advice.

The former satellite listened to him calling for his brother while he sank down to the damp ground (it always managed to be damp in the hut, despite the fact that it hadn't rained once the whole time they'd been there) and rubbed a hand over his face tiredly. The simple fact was that he was worried, too—more worried than he'd ever been before—and it was starting to show on his stupidly expressive human face.

Rumble and Frenzy weren't young—not by human standards, anyway. They had seen death, they had seen war; there wasn't much they hadn't seen, but Soundwave still couldn't help feeling an overpowering sense of protective instinct over them. It was worse in this organic form.

He worried about them sometimes even more than Thundercracker did about Skywarp. They wandered off and he didn't know where they were, who they were with, or when they'd be back. He'd seen the human children beaten before, many of them even younger and smaller than his own creations, and he knew that if he ever suspected someone of hitting Rumble or Frenzy, he'd kill them with his own hands. He wouldn't be able to stop himself. And it would put all of them in danger.

At least while they were Cybertronian, he'd always known what the twins were doing. He had been in constant communication with them 24/7, even when they were billions of miles away from each other fighting in the war. It was frustrating now, not knowing what they were up to and not having the power to stop the stupid ideas forming in their minds before they acted on them.

He wasn't ignorant of the twins' penchant for misbehavior. He never had been. They were fragged up little glitches with a severely warped sense of humor, but they were his fragged up little glitches and he wouldn't want them any other way. The only problem was that now that he had been cursed with this abominable human state, he no longer possessed his telepathic abilities, and so the twins could be up to Primus knew what without his having the slightest clue.

Thundercracker returned then, dragging a protesting Skywarp behind him.

“But she was nice, T.C.! She was teaching me!” Skywarp was whining at his brother. There was an intriguing, savory smell wafting off of him that painfully reminded Soundwave of just how long it had been since he had eaten.

“We still shouldn't be spending time with the humans. What would Megatron say?” Thundercracker shot back.

“You're not going to tell him, are you?”
“I...”

Soundwave sensed the two Seekers looking in his direction. He glanced over and shrugged. As far as he was concerned, Megatron only needed to know what it would hurt him not to, especially these days, and he doubted that Skywarp had the capacity to cause the kind of trouble that would hurt anyone. He never had been a very good Decepticon, after all.

“No, I'm not going to tell him,” Thundercracker finished. “But all the same, you don't know what might come of spending time with them. It could be—”

He was cut off by a ruckus from outside, and a moment later, the twins came bursting into the shanty.

“Hi, Soundwave!” they called as they rushed past him to the small mound of possessions that they had managed to acquire from somewhere over the last few days.

Soundwave's relief at their reappearance quickly dissipated when they began whispering to one another, their backs turned to him.

They were clearly up to something again, and there was no chance it was any good. Unfortunately, they were not quite within his earshot. He shifted towards them slightly, hoping he could get close enough to hear without them noticing.

They did notice.

Frenzy's eyes flicked in Soundwave's direction, and he quickly nudged his twin into silence. The two of them stared accusingly at their creator until he turned away again. As soon as he did, they resumed their hushed conversation.

Soundwave found it all very suspicious.

Now, there was a rustling noise to his right. The twins were getting up and looked as if they were heading out again.

“Where are you going?” he asked as monotonously as he could manage with a human voice box.


Bullshit, thought Soundwave—vaguely aware of how human the sentiment was—and watched them bounce away happily. They didn't honestly expect him to believe that, did they? It was insulting if they did.

Deciding that no one would care if he were to spend the evening stalking his own creations, Soundwave stood up and started to follow after the twins before they could slip out of sight, ignoring the Seekers' questioning looks as he passed by.

Rumble and Frenzy unwittingly led their creator deep into the slum, passing through parts that he had not encountered yet. Some of the shanties were in better condition than theirs—one or two even had doors, and Soundwave couldn't help but feel a little jealous—but most were worse. Far worse.

Soundwave looked away as he came to the sudden realization that around here, a roof over one's head was a rare privilege that few had the chance to experience.
Soon, the claustrophobic settings of the slum began to thin out as they left the litter-strewn streets and entered a far more open area. Soundwave took a deep breath, preparing to relish the expanse before him, and then quickly wished he hadn't.

A dump!

This was his creations' destination? A dump?!

Soundwave felt an irresponsible trickle of disappointment, having wished deep down that the twins' destination be somewhat more... interesting? Exciting? After all, how much mischief could they get up to in a place like this? It wasn't exactly a prime place to vandalize or steal from.

Ahead of him, Rumble and Frenzy were now climbing up the nearest, upper most pile of rubbish, presumably to survey the area. Soundwave moved around to position himself behind them, ensuring that they wouldn't be able to see him from their vantage point. Looking around, he was intrigued to notice that the twins were not the only beings present in the dump.

Despite their bare feet and the undoubtedly unhygienic and dangerous conditions of the dump, numerous residents of the slum—some as young as two, some as old as eighty—were strolling about in the waste, occasionally kicking around in it as if spending the evening here was some sort of popular leisure activity. One figure broke from the rest and climbed the rubbish pile to join his twins, a girl slightly smaller than the two of them. He couldn't hear their conversation from his vantage point, but it seemed animated and friendly.

Soundwave was now completely flummoxed.

That was, until he noticed a vehicle approaching in the distance.

All of a sudden, Rumble, Frenzy, and the girl threw themselves down their mound, sprinting off at full speed in the direction of the oncoming vehicle—which, now that it was close enough, Soundwave could tell was a truck—as did everyone else.

The former satellite watched from his safe distance as the rubbish truck came to a halt, dumped its load, and began to drive off again. He continued to watch as well over twenty people, including his creations, rushed over to the freshly dumped waste and began to rummage through it with an almost rabid ferocity.

And then he understood.

They were scrounging for things to sell—waste-picking, it was called. Soundwave almost smiled; at least Rumble and Frenzy were trying to make an honest living—unlike Starscream and, he strongly suspected, Slipstream. Never mind that scavenging was still considered illegal in many parts of the country. He would have felt proud of his twins if, at that exact moment, Frenzy had not punched an elderly man in the stomach to gain ownership of a tin can. But at least they were trying.

By the time Starscream got back that evening, the others had long since returned and were all fast asleep—except Megatron, of course. The former warlord was sitting up outside the door, his dark eyes catching the moonlight as they stared accusingly at the errant Seeker.

“What?” Starscream hissed, wrapping his arms around himself in the chill of the night.
“As we've had this conversation already, I'm sure you can guess,” Megatron replied.

“And you know my response. Good night.” He made to step past his leader into the hut, expecting to be stopped. To his immense surprise, Megatron sighed, but did not move. It was so uncanny that he found himself poking his head back out the door a moment later. “You aren't planning to sleep out here, are you?” he demanded.

“If it will prevent you from trying to eat me in the middle of the night, then yes.”

Starscream snorted and retreated, shivering, back into the hut. He cast a jealous glance at his brothers wrapped around each other beneath their blankets as he made his way to his own pile. They looked warm. For a moment, he stood over them, torn between wanting to join them and wanting to kick Thundercracker in the head and wake him up out of spite. In the end, he just sniffed and went about wrapping himself in blankets. It didn't do much good. It never did.

Nothing did much good these days.

And there it was. Starscream bit his lip in frustration as the now-familiar wave of despair and self-pity washed over him, crushing him in its wake. He hated this most of all about being human, hated the way he barely had control over his own emotions. Just a minute ago, he had been almost happy, satisfied with his takings for the day, and full of the warm rice that he and Ajit had shared for their dinner. Now, all of that had been superseded by the fact that he was cold, which had reminded him that he hadn't slept well in days, which in turn reminded him of how painfully human he was.

It was always like this. Several times a day, he would find himself awash in a sea of misery that no amount of scheming or planning could ever pull him out of. The others didn't seem bothered by it so much. They were going about their lives normally, almost as if they were finding pleasure in being made of organic slag that was slowly but surely rotting away every second of every day...

Soft but heavy footfalls interrupted his spiraling thoughts, and Starscream curled himself tighter, burying his face in his blankets, as they approached him. There was no way he was going to give Megatron any sign that he had been on the verge of tears.

The former warlord paused just beside his second, and Starscream stayed stock still, trying to pretend that he was already asleep. What was the old fool doing? What did he want? He continued refusing to move, even as Megatron bent down and...

“What are you doing?” Starscream demanded in a low hiss as his commander stretched out on the ground next to him.

“I cannot sleep with you shivering so loudly.” Megatron replied, tugging at the edge of the blankets.

“I was not—” Starscream began to shriek, but Megatron cut him off by clapping a hand over his mouth.

“I would prefer if you didn't wake the others,” he rumbled. “Now, let me in, and perhaps we can both get a proper sleep for once.”

“As if I could sleep with you so close,” the Seeker hissed once his mouth was free again.

“You managed quite well last night,” Megatron pointed out.

And this was a good point. However the two of them had ended up next to each other, the fact
remained that Starscream had probably had a better sleep last night than any other since becoming human. Perhaps he could use his commander to his advantage for a while. He huffed in irritation and lifted the edge of his blankets.

“You do anything suspicious and I bite,” he declared.

“You bite me again, and I’ll break your face,” Megatron growled back as he slipped under the covers, pressing himself against the Seeker's small frame. “What do you even imagine I would do to you?”

Starscream wasn't sure, now he thought of it, and decided that it didn't matter anyway. Megatron's warmth was already radiating through his whole body, filling him with a relaxed drowsiness that was at once both unfamiliar and wonderfully right. Who'd have thought that the moron could be so useful? It took all of his willpower not to nestle further into that broad chest.

“Just... don't move around too much,” he murmured, closing his eyes.

Megatron grunted in reply and slung an arm over the Seeker, pulling him a little closer. Starscream didn't bother to complain—he was already half-asleep.
Chapter 11

Megatron had decided a while ago that it was far too risky to allow Starscream to continue to do as he pleased, tricking and no doubt infuriating most of the locals in the process.

They didn't need any more enemies, especially in a place like this, and they didn't need any more “friends” either, for that matter. On two occasions now, the little street urchins that Starscream had recently become acquainted with had followed him home, and although they all understood the words “go away” in English, the children seemed to think it was little more than a joke when the Seeker shouted the phrase at them. It was with a sense of morbid fascination that Megatron realized the little rats actually liked his second.

The tiny organics would dance around Starscream, giggling and trying to touch him. This only aggravated him, of course, but no matter how much he yelled or swatted at them, they never left. Perhaps because he wasn't actually trying all that hard to get rid of them. Once, Megatron had even seen his second sitting in the shade, just staring into space, with two of the children on either side of him, almost as though they took comfort in each other's presence. It made him wonder if perhaps he had been more right than he'd known on that first day when he'd thought that Starscream belonged here with the miserable little beggars.

Megatron didn't have anything against them personally; they were disgusting organic spawn, yes, but that was all they were. It was Soundwave who resented their presence, claiming that the more locals to know of them, the more risk that they would be caught. Megatron suspected his true reasons for wanting to keep them away had more to do with the way the twins seemed to gravitate toward other organics of a similar age group to them.

But putting Starscream's inexplicable and somewhat corrupt friendship with the human spawn aside for a moment, there were more concerning reasons to keep a closer eye on the former Seeker.

Megatron watched Starscream more than he did any of the others; they were all of relatively stable mind, after all. His second was not. Starscream had already been close to the breaking point after the loss of the Cube and then the Sun Harvester, but this could be his undoing. Sometimes, he would watch as Starscream stared into blank space for hours on end. Primus only knew what he was thinking about; what he was planning.

Starscream's plans always turned out to be rather self-serving and beneficial to him and him alone—not to mention often doomed to failure. If the Seeker saw any way of making his predicament better for himself, even if it meant sacrificing the rest of the faction, Megatron was sure he would do it without a second's hesitation. Especially as he seemed to be thinking even less clearly than usual.

He couldn't allow him the opportunity to even consider it.

Several times over the past few days, and a few hundred thousand times over the past few million years, Megatron had contemplated the option of simply... dealing with Starscream. Permanently offlineing the slagger would take the thorn out of not just his, but everyone else's sides as well. These days, Starscream seemed intent on making himself nothing but a liability to them all, and at times like these, he just didn't seem worth the effort.

But Starscream had been around for so long, since almost the very beginning of the Decepticons.
He and Megatron had seen them rise as an army from the filth of Kaon back in the days when they were a faction that fought for a cause—for freedom, for rights. Such noble ideals had been lost in time now, and the freedom fighters that used to fight under them had now been replaced by terrorists hell bent on anarchy, not liberty.

Megatron thought back to when he had first recruited the Seeker—back to when his optics were bright and optimistic, his wings held high, and his trademark devious smirk had been an innocent smile. Back when he had been a youngling fit for molding into the perfect soldier, eager to please and ready to serve.

It was an unforeseeable shame that power had not suited Starscream. It had turned him selfish and spiteful, and what was once the most promising member of the Decepticon faction had quickly become the bane of Megatron's existence. Deluded into believing that it was simply a phase that Starscream would grow out of, Megatron had done nothing. He had simply allowed the Seeker to continue stewing in all his spite and venom, believing that he would soon come out as the glory of the Decepticon army once more, only to be faced with someone far from it in the end.

But even after all the failures and all the treasonous acts, he could not bring himself to offline Starscream.

Under that guarded shell of lies and deceit, there was still a miniscule possibility that the Seeker he had once glimpsed at, standing tall and modest on the steps of the Iaconian Flight Academy, was lurking, just out of reach.

There were few things that kept Megatron going after the fall of Cybertron and the destruction of the All-spark. There was little left to believe in, but the reassurance that one day he might have his Seeker, that he would have Starscream, as his final victory pulled him through the war. And it was because of this deluded sense of optimism that he couldn't offline Starscream, not even now when he posed a greater risk than ever to them all.

And so it was, as Megatron woke the next morning with his second's small, sleeping form pressed against him, that he decided to initiate his “Keeping Starscream Busy Every Second of the Day—and Possibly Night if That Was Necessary—Plan” in an attempt to preserve what sanity he suspected the Seeker of still owning, which wasn't a lot, really.

“You what?” Starscream mumbled, blinking sleepily up at his commander. He had slept well for once the previous night, as Megatron had suggested he would, but still felt it was too early to be woken up, especially by a large foot prodding his side.

“I want you to come with me today,” Megatron repeated.

Starscream narrowed his eyes at him now. “Want? You never want me anywhere,” he sneered before pulling the blankets back up over his head.

Megatron suppressed a groan of frustration. It would be so much easier to just hog tie his second and leave him in the hut all day long, but the other humans would notice—they would talk. They would also talk if he dragged the Seeker squealing along behind him the whole day. No, the only way to make this work was if he could convince Starscream to go along with it willingly, and he knew how to do that; it just happened to involve something that he typically avoided at all costs. At
least none of the others were around to witness this.

“I need you,” he said through gritted teeth, and the words were like barbs in his mouth, “because your experience as Air Commander means that you can provide valuable insights that the others cannot.”

There was a beat of silence, and Megatron counted the seconds until Starscream pulled the blankets down off his face again, ever so slowly, to let his eyes peak over the top. They were narrowed in suspicion.

“What kinds of insights?” he demanded.

Now, Megatron wished that he could be absolutely anywhere but here, having this conversation, because he knew this would be the most painful thing he had ever done, including the time when that human boy had used the Cube to burn out his spark. But the issues with Starscream were not going away on their own.

“The Battle of Simfur Pass,” he said. “I wanted to discuss with you where we might have gone wrong with it.”

The briefest moment of shock flashed through those bright blue eyes before the blanket lowered further.

“Are you sure you wouldn't rather have Soundwave's opinions on the matter?” the Seeker hissed.

“Soundwave is not my second-in-command,” Megatron stated simply.

And that seemed to settle the matter. Starscream pushed the blankets back all the way with a dramatic sigh and got to his feet.

“I suppose I could give you some of my time this morning,” he grunted as he reached his arms back over his head, the thin fabric of his t-shirt stretching over far more ribs than Megatron had ever noticed jutting out on any of the others.

“Excellent,” the warlord murmured. “Let us first secure breakfast.”

Starscream made a face at the mention of food, but didn't complain as he strode out of the shanty. Megatron watched him go, torn between triumph and wanting to strangle himself with one of the many necklaces littering Slipstream’s corner of the shanty, and tried to remind himself once again why Starscream was, in fact, worth it.

Skywarp didn't think that Thundercracker would be suspicious in the least if he asked to stay back at the shack for a second day in a row. It was hardly out of the norm, after all—he never wanted to go anywhere. So, it came as a surprise when his brother just gave him a hard look and demanded to know why.

“Because... it's scary out there,” he said quickly, and all-too-truthfully. “And I'm tired, and... and my feet hurt.”

“Why do your feet hurt? You didn't even go anywhere yesterday,” Thundercracker pointed out.
“They're cramps,” Skywarp invented, congratulating himself on remembering the term. “Starscream said that human muscles get cramps sometimes and they just hurt for no reason.” He sighed theatrically and dropped to the ground. “Oh, what a trial this human body is.”

His brother gave him a flat look and grunted in disbelief, but relented in the end. “I wasn't going to take you today, anyway,” he informed him, and then at the hurt look on Skywarp's face, quickly added, “Megatron's orders.”

“Why?” Skywarp demanded, getting to his feet again. “Is it dangerous? Will you be okay?”

“It'll be fine,” Thundercracker reassured him. “It's just... Megatron doesn't want anyone but me and Soundwave to know about it for some reason.”

“What? Not even Starscream? But he's second-in-command!”

“So Megatron claims,” Thundercracker muttered. “Anyway, make sure you don't let anything about it slip to Starscream. He'll just be Starscream about it and get himself into trouble... more trouble.”

Skywarp quickly promised that he would keep quiet on the matter; anything to remove his older brother's attention from the question of why he wanted to stay in the shack today.

“I'll be back when the sun's about there,” Thundercracker promised, pointing to the roof of one of the neighboring shanties, and Skywarp nodded in understanding. “Don't go anywhere else this time.”

“Of course not! It's way too scary out there!” the younger Seeker said, shaking his head emphatically.

“I'll bring food with me when I come back. Are you sure you'll be okay alone?”

“I'm cool,” Skywarp insisted, using a term he'd heard from Starscream the other day.

The corner of Thundercracker's mouth twitched slightly, and he reached out to ruffle his brother's hair. “See you, then.”

It took a few minutes for Thundercracker to disappear into the crowd, and then Skywarp waited a few more to be sure that he wasn't going to come back for anything. As soon as he was convinced that his brother really was gone, the youngest Seeker slipped out of the shanty and moseyed cautiously to the one next to them. He felt guilty about betraying Thundercracker's trust, but so far, Anoushka and her cooking were the closest things he had found to anything good about being human.

The Indian woman was not outside at her fire yet, but he could hear her moving around inside. Skywarp sidled up to the front opening of the hut and called into the gloom.

“Hallo! You come to learn again?” she gushed, but Skywarp couldn't find the words to reply. His whole attention was fixed on the woman's left cheek, which was marred with a large bruise that certainly hadn't been there the previous day. It was dark purple and blue, and it had swollen so that her left eye was smaller than her right. There was a small cut where whatever hit her had broken the skin over her cheekbone.

Skywarp had knocked his knees and shins on things and even fallen flat on his face a few times
while trying to navigate the chaos of the slum, so he knew what bruises felt like. He knew how painful that one must have been.

Anoushka noticed his staring and her smile changed. “It happens,” she shrugged.

“Did you fall?” the Seeker asked. He had never landed hard enough to create such a dark mark, though he had seen them on others around the slums.

“No, no. Is my husband,” she told him. “If I am too smart, he must remind me to stop. India men do not like a smart woman.”

“Ooohh,” Skywarp said, realization dawning. “You tried to overthrow him and he punished you.”

“Maybe,” Anoushka laughed, and then grimaced as the action pulled on her injury. “Now, come; we make rice.”

Skywarp wasn’t quite satisfied with that, but he left it alone. He’d learned not to pry into such things. Even though he could feel Starscream's terror when Megatron punished him, his brother never wanted to talk about it afterward; he always just stood up as straight as he could and carried on much as though nothing had ever happened.

“For rice, first is to make sure right amount of water,” the woman was saying now, gesturing for him to join her.

Skywarp pushed his concerns aside and stepped over to his make-shift teacher. If it was pretending that she wanted, then he was an expert.
Slipstream had made a habit of running a quick comparison between herself and any other woman that she ran into; it was how she decided how much to dislike them. If the woman came up as better than Slipstream in some way—prettier, younger, dressed more stylishly—then she would despise her on principle. If, on the other hand, the woman was lacking in some way, then she was content to merely disdain her. No one was ever free from her judgment, but the worst were the foreign women.

Every now and then, she would see them passing through the slum on foot or by rickshaw or peering out of cars, and it was always enough to put her in a foul mood. Even the ones that were ugly or old or overweight had a cool cleanliness about them that Slipstream could never achieve in this place, try as she might. Their hair hung in soft waves, devoid of grease and dirt; their clothes were new and clean; their makeup smoothed their skin and made their features seem larger than life; and their jewelry, when they wore it, was usually elegant in a simple, understated way that managed to scream, “Real gold!”

So, it was only natural that Slipstream harbored an intense desire to steal from one of them.

Not that it was as easy as that. The foreigners tended to be cautious, keeping their belongings close to them at all times, and Slipstream didn't have friends to teach her how to sneak things from pockets and purses like Starscream did. She would trail along behind them as they made their way through the crowded streets, waiting for her chance to pounce, but on the rare occasions that an opening did arise, one of the other gutter filth would inevitably beat her to it. Which was why the purse came to her as such a surprise.

She wasn't paying as much attention as usual that day, and didn't even notice the couple until the flow of the crowd had nearly pushed her into them. They were trying to haggle with one of the merchants, and their broken Hindi was so bad that Slipstream had to suppress a laugh. There wasn't anything worth noting about them; they were middle-aged and sunburned like so many of the other tourists, and the woman carried a large, black purse and several parcels close to her body. Slipstream was about to let the tide of the crowd carry her away when the woman, clearly getting agitated, shifted her parcels around, and then set her purse on the ground.

For a moment, Slipstream didn't know what to do. No one could be that stupid; it had to be a prank, a trap.

And then she realized that she didn't care.

While the woman was distracted, arguing with her mate, Slipstream bent ever so slightly to catch hold of the handle of the purse and began to walk away. When no one stopped her, she quickened her pace. As soon as she could, she turned into a side alley and broke into a run, her heart pounding harder than she'd known it could as she leaped over piles of trash and puddles of filth, the stolen purse bouncing against her side.

She kept running until her lungs felt like they were going to explode, and then she stopped, doubled over in an empty alley. No one was pursuing her. She heard no shouts. She had done it.

A small laugh escaped Slipstream's mouth between gasps for air, then another, and soon she was throwing her head back and fair cackling in triumph. It took several minutes for her to think to
examine the contents of her prize.

Most of it was boring. The woman apparently had been smart enough at least not to leave valuables in her purse. There were several packages of foreign food, a bottle of water, a bundle of keys, a package of mysteriously moist cloths, a tube of something called “sunscreen,” some strange plastic tubes with cotton inside of them, a plastic bag with small bottles of pills, pens and pencils, a tiny notebook, and a couple of paperback books.

The books made Slipstream pause. She'd seen precious few books in the slums, and those she had were in Hindi. These ones were nothing like any of them. One of them showed a young woman with an awful lot of hair and an awful lot of dress wilting into the arms of a man with an awful lot of muscles and not an awful lot of much else. The title on the cover read, “Highlanders at High Noon.” The other one just had two men on the cover, but one of them was just as wilty as the woman on the cover of the other book. It was called, “Devils in the Diocese.” Underneath that was a smaller caption that read, “Father Engles never thought he would be calling another man 'Daddy' at this age!”

Intrigued and mystified, Slipstream reached for Highlanders at High Noon again and flipped it open to somewhere near the middle.

Slipstream lacked the scientific curiosity about organic lifeforms that her cousin possessed and had never needed to monitor their information systems the way that Soundwave did, so she had less of a notion about what was going on than either of them may have. All the same, something inside her biology was telling her that this was important. The characters in the book certainly seemed to think it was, too:

“'Oh, Liam,' Francine gasped, her bosom heaving beneath his broad chest, jell-o slapping on two steaks. 'Don't stop! Don't ever stop!'”

“'Francine,' he groaned her name in that deep lilt of his, and she felt it vibrate into her very core, awakening nerves she hadn't known she possessed. She moaned, thick and breathless.

“'Francine,' he repeated, thrusting harder. 'I dinna ken if you're the one who set that barn on fire, but ye set my loins aflame since a long ago! Be mine. Promise you'll always be mine, love.'

“'Yes! Yes, I promise!'”

Frowning, Slipstream flipped back to the beginning of the book. Perhaps somewhere earlier on, she could find out what an erection was and why one would thrust it into a “quivering love mound.” She grabbed one of the bags of snacks and pulled it open as she settled back against the wall of the shanty behind her. She clearly had research to do.

It was well after noon now, and Starscream's frustration was mounting; Megatron still wouldn't let him go about his own business. The two of them had walked almost the entire perimeter of their slum, and every time he thought that he would have a chance to escape, his leader would announce some new task for them to accomplish. Since breakfast, they had found new and better jugs for carrying water (which they then had to go fill, and Megatron wore slung by a rope over his shoulders for the rest of the day), searched for any traces of Autobots in the area (an unlikely occurrence, but one which Megatron took frequent precautions against nonetheless), spent some
time glaring at locals from the shade of an alley while they ate lunch (or rather, Megatron ate
lunch, and Starscream pulled his bread into pieces so that Megatron couldn't tell that he hadn't
eaten any of it), and were now on a seemingly endless quest to find a sufficient piece of material to
cover one of the holier sections in their roof.

Of course, Starscream could have snuck away from his leader at any point. Megatron wasn't
paying that much attention to him, but he hadn't yet because Megatron was paying attention to
him. Not just to find things to scold or belittle him about, either. They were talking, having
conversations about the old days. Never mind that the conversations kept devolving into
arguments, they were still having them, and Starscream had wanted this—needed this—to remind
himself that the old days had existed. Their life on Cybertron and all that had happened in the
interim was real, realer than whatever was happening to them right now.

And despite their arguments, Megatron was asking Starscream questions and listening to the replies. Of course, he rarely agreed with the ideas that Starscream expressed, but he wasn't just
dismissing them out of hand, either. That was something that hadn't happened since way back when
Megatron had first taken the Seeker as his second-in-command. Starscream didn't know if it was
because his commander was finally recognizing his worth or that being human had made him soft
or perhaps some other being had somehow slipped into Megatron's body in the middle of the night,
but he was curious to see how long this could last.

At the moment, it was slipping. The two of them had gotten into a particularly heated argument
about whether it was the second or third siege of Simfur when they'd been forced to retreat after
they ran out of fuel and ammo. It was important that Megatron remember it was the third siege
because Starscream had not been in charge of that one; he'd led the second one, when they had to
give up after Optimus Prime himself shot Starscream out of the sky and the Decepticon troops had
panicked. Megatron had apparently rolled the exasperation of finding his SIC in a medbay with
only one wing together with that of losing to poor bureaucratic planning.

Starscream had pushed the argument even farther than he normally would have because he had
realized halfway through that Megatron, for some reason, was trying not to lose his temper at him
—biting back certain replies, taking longer to choose his words, and speaking through gritted teeth
instead of shouting. It was both amusing and intriguing. Why would the warlord bother holding
back his anger now of all times? And how far would his determination hold?

But Megatron had stopped replying to him altogether about half an hour ago now, and the two of
them were occupied rooting through one of the rubbish heaps on the edge of the slum. The silence
left plenty of space for the roar of apathetic misery to creep into Starscream's field of attention
once more.

He didn't want to be doing this; he didn't want to be moving his arms and legs anymore. Every time
he bent down half-heartedly to shift aside some debris, it felt like there was a weight in his chest
trying to topple him over into the rubbish. It wasn't painful, just heavy. He didn't understand how
such a small body could feel so heavy, and this was so stupid, and Megatron was such an idiot, and
he should have been tricking naïve humans with Ajit today, and it would be so much easier to just
lie down and stop moving...

A foot nudged his leg.

“What are you doing?” Megatron's voice cut into the haze of his thoughts.

Starscream grunted and folded his arms under his face. He hadn't really registered lying face down
in the trash; it had just sort of happened. Now that he was here, though, he didn't much feel like
moving.
“Get up; I've found something suitable.”

“Good for you.”

“Do you intend to lie there for the rest of the day?”

“Yes.”

“There are likely organic pests beneath you.”

“Great.”

There was a pause, and then, as he had expected, a large hand closed around his elbow. Starscream squealed and whined in protest as Megatron dragged him up. He set the Seeker on his feet and gruffly brushed away a few clinging bits of paper and other trash.

“Act your age for once,” he growled, cuffing Starscream around the back of the head.

Starscream squealed at that, too, and then watched through watery eyes as Megatron began gathering up the folds of the material that he had found. It was a large sheet of woven blue plastic, frayed in places, and covered in dirt and other filth. It smelled, but no worse than any of the rest of the slum. It would do well for keeping drafts out of their temporary living quarters, at least.

Megatron folded it sloppily and then threw it to Starscream. His second squawked as he got a face-full of dirt along with the armful of moldy tarp, which he quickly let drop back to the ground.

“What are you giving it to me for!?” he demanded, trying to wipe the dirt out of his eyes.

“Carry it,” Megatron said simply before turning and beginning to walk away.

Starscream spent a moment spluttering before shrieking, “It's fragging half my size! You carry it!”

“I am already carrying something,” his commander pointed out, half turning toward him once more and indicating the jugs of water he had strung over each shoulder.

“Well, what is that stupidly huge body of yours for if not carrying things?” the Seeker pouted, folding his arms across his bony chest in an attempt to emphasize his smallness.

It was not a gesture that he normally would have committed in front of Megatron, but one that had become habit during his recent ventures with the human children. Ajit had taught him how the amount of sympathy one could garner from other humans was in direct proportion to how small and vulnerable one was. Megatron just blew air through his nose in that particular, “I have had just about enough of you for one day,” manner of his and started to walk toward the Seeker.

The latter quickly unfolded his arms and stepped back, but all Megatron did was bend down and grab the tarp. For one bewildered moment, Starscream thought that he actually was going to carry it, but instead, he just shook it out and began spreading it as flat as he could on the uneven ground.

“What are you doing?” Starscream asked suspiciously.

“Making it easier to transport things,” Megatron replied.

The Seeker frowned in confusion, but didn't argue. He took a curious step closer to the edge of the tarp and to his leader, who had his back to him at the moment. Megatron gave the tarp a final pat, and then straightened up.
“That should do it,” he said, and then, without warning, he reached out and grabbed hold of Starscream.

The smaller man shrieked in alarm and tried to twist away, but Megatron had long since proven himself more than a match. The warlord seized him by first his wrist, then his elbow, and finally wrapped his arms around Starscream's narrow waist before wrestling him to the ground on the edge of the tarp. Before the Seeker could wriggle away, he found the world suddenly turning about as Megatron rolled him up in the dirt-encrusted material.

“Megatron! You—!” he began, but the thought left him as his commander heaved the roll of Seeker up and slung him over a broad shoulder.

Disoriented, humiliated, and starting to feel more than a little claustrophobic, Starscream shrieked, not caring of the dirt from the tarp that was somehow managing to make its way into his mouth. He kicked, he struggled, he wriggled about with all his strength, but Megatron just grunted and held him tighter as he started to walk. It was the claustrophobia that broke him in the end.

“Oh! Okay, I'll carry it! I'll carry it, so let me go already!” Starscream howled.

There was a pause, and then he felt himself slipping toward the ground. He thought for a moment that Megatron was going to just let him fall the whole way, which would have been unfortunate as his arms had become trapped in such a way that at least one of them was sure to have been crushed, but a large arm caught hold of him at the last moment and lowered the wriggling Seeker back to safety.

After a couple seconds of confused struggling, he managed to extricate himself—red-faced, mussy-haired, and smeared in dirt—from the suffocating material.

“Tatti ander lele, madar chod!” he snarled, utilizing the best of the Hindi slang Ajit had taught him.

Megatron didn't need to know what it meant to know it was demeaning, and began to advance on his second again. The smaller man blanched, tried to stand too quickly, and ended up falling over backward when his feet caught in the tarp, arms flailing comically. This combined with his look of surprise just before toppling was enough to stop Megatron's irritation in its tracks.

“Come on,” he growled, turning to leave before Starscream could see the laughter that he was suppressing.

Starscream just sat on the ground, glaring at his retreating back. It would serve the great aft right if he were to get up and make a run for it. He didn't deserve this kind of treatment. He could go away, far away, and survive on his own. He didn't need Megatron.

The warlord paused suddenly and turned back to him.

“You were right, by the way; it was the third siege of Simfur.”

The first half of the sentence shocked the Seeker so much that he almost didn't hear the rest of it. He was right. He was right. Of course, he usually was, but to hear the words from Megatron himself...

As he began to fold the tarp and gather it up, Starscream didn't think to consider the possibility that his leader might have had other motivations for making such an admission at that moment.
Rumble and Frenzy would have liked to spend the whole of their days with Dipti, but she went to the mysterious school place at least three days a week with a gaggle of other children in stained white shirts and blue shorts or skirts.

Rumble and Frenzy knew about school—there were schools on Cybertron too, once upon a time—and though they had never been, they didn't think the place that Dipti referred to as such really counted. It was just a single room in a building made of cinder blocks that they had to shoo the rats and vagrants out of every morning. The lessons were conducted in English, explaining Dipti's proficiency in the language, but little occurred that was of any interest to the twins. They knew because they had followed her there one day and sat outside the door to listen for a while.

Neither of them understood why she would abandon them for such a dull activity, but she assured them that school was of vital importance for humans and necessary for the insidious goal of “going to America” that all the children in the slums seemed to share.

Dipti's fondness for learning aside, the human girl had proven a surprising fit for the two Cybertronians. She approved of their pranks, and even suggested some rather ingenious ones of her own; it was she who taught them about the many uses of chili peppers (which they would have weaponized against Starscream by now if only the Seeker wasn't so suspicious of everything he ate). Plus, she always shared her food with them, claiming that her mother packed her far too much. The twins could have snatched food from any of the many stalls in the slum, but there was something strangely satisfying about sharing it with someone who had given it willingly.

Today, they expected that they would be bound on a scavenging trip—yet another merit that Dipti had contributed to their cause (just wait until Soundwave saw how much money they were earning!)—and so were surprised when she met them a little ways from their shanty still dressed in her school clothes.

“Second Wednesday is clinic day,” she said by way of explanation.

“Isn't a clinic a place with doctors?” Frenzy asked suspiciously.

“Yup!” Dipti chirped.

“Don't like doctors,” he mumbled.

“Why would you go there?” Rumble demanded, wrinkling his nose. “You're not malfunctioning are you?”

“Malfu... I don't know,” the girl confessed with that musical little laugh of hers. “They listen your heart and look your ears and mouth and then they give candy.”

“Candy?”

“What's that?”

“Is it like medicine?”

“I hate medicine!”
“No, is sweet. Come on; you see,” Dipti reassured them.

The twins were still apt to be suspicious of anything involving doctors, but their friend had yet to steer them wrong. So, they followed her through the slum, hopping over the trash heaps and slipping mostly unnoticed through the crowds as always. Dipti led them toward the border area between the slum and the actual city of Patna, which was marked by a slight widening of the streets, a couple pieces of legitimate architecture, and markedly less trash.

Somewhere along the way, they got distracted by a man with a cardboard box full of puppies that he was selling for 150 Rupees each. Unlike Skywarp, the twins had long since gotten over any inhibitions about dogs, and found the whining balls of fur strangely endearing.

“Where did they come from?” Rumble asked as one of the pups licked obsessively at his fingers with its tiny, pink tongue.

“Always dogs in Patna,” Dipti supplied. “We go soon or no more candy.”

The boys pulled themselves away from the dogs with some reluctance and continued after her, musing through their frayed link whether or not they might ever be allowed to have one of the creatures for themselves.

Their destination became apparent not long after when they caught sight of a crowd of children milling about a ways up. Upon closer inspection, the object of their excitement revealed itself to be a beige building with a sign over the door reading, “St. Augustine’s Emergency and Day Clinic.” It wasn't a large building by most standards, but seemed positively palatial to the twins after the past few weeks they had spent in the slum. They hoped that they might have a chance to go inside and investigate what sorts of mayhem might be wrought upon such a place, and so were disappointed to see that the other children were all lining up at a bunch of folding tables arranged in front of the building. There were several adults in white coats at the head of each line—or clump, really—of children, brandishing mysterious instruments and clipboards.

“Those are the doctors?” Frenzy wanted to know.

“Doctor Krishna and Doctor Sodisetti are the best,” Dipti informed him, indicating a plump woman with a sharp look about her and a young man who was currently demonstrating his skill in balancing clipboards on his chin to an awed audience.

“The woman reminds me of—”

“—Soundwave,” Rumble finished his brother's sentence.

“Yes.”

Neither of them could put into words just what it was about Dr. Krishna that put them in mind of their creator, but it was almost as though every emotion Soundwave had ever prevented his face from displaying was being etched in perfect detail on hers. Both of them elected to wait in Dr. Sodisetti's line instead, even though it was nearly twice as long.

They probably would have given up halfway through the wait if they hadn't seen how much the other children were enjoying their candy. Dipti finished first and came to wait with them, sucking noisily on something hard and green stuck on the end of a thin stick.

“Did it hurt?” Frenzy wanted to know.

“No tiny bit,” she replied around her prize.
When they finally reached the front, Dr. Sodisetti turned to them and a look of surprise flashed across his face, which was replaced almost instantly with a broad grin.

“Well, hello! And who might you be?” he asked, flipping to a new page on his clipboard.

“My friends!” Dipti announced proudly.

“You don't say! And do your friends have names?”

Rumble and Frenzy were so surprised by the doctor's almost flawless English that they forgot how to speak for a moment. Luckily, Dipti was never short of words.

“This Rumble, this Frenzy,” she explained, indicating each.

“Other way around,” Rumble said automatically.

“Don't trick me,” Dipti warned, jabbing her candy at him. And there was another thing about her—apart from Soundwave, she was the only one they couldn't fool with that.

“Yeah, okay. I'm Rumble,” the boy confessed.

“And you're brothers?” the doctor wanted to know.

“We're twins!” Frenzy announced unnecessarily.

“You know I'm a twin, too,” Dr. Sodisetti said conspiratorially, and the boys' eyes widened slightly. They had yet to meet any other human twins.

“Where's your brother?” they demanded.

“My twin is a sister. She lives in Calcutta. Where do you two live?”

Dipti gave him a detailed description of where the twins' shanty was located in the slum while the two of them wondered over the possibility of having a female twin. Humans certainly were mysterious creatures, they concluded.

Doctor Sodisetti asked them a few more questions after that—how many other people they lived with, were any of them children, was Slipstream pregnant (it took them a while to understand that one), did any of them shiver a lot when it wasn't cold—and they found themselves answering all of them without giving it much thought. It didn't even occur to them that they may have just committed a hideous betrayal of Decepticon intelligence until the doctor was pushing the strange metal circle to their chests to listen to their hearts.

Soundwave would have been appalled, but then, what Soundwave didn't know other people knew wouldn't hurt him. Probably.

After he had poked and prodded them with several other instruments whose purposes were mysteries to the twins, Dr. Sodisetti finally dabbed a spot of paint on each of the twins' cheeks (“So we know you already got checked.) and handed them candies like Dipti's.

“Human doctors are great!” Rumble said in a reverent voice as they walked off, sucking on the treats. They were unlike anything the boys had experienced yet—much sweeter than fruit, and the way they caught the light in their crystalline structures was wonderfully fetching.

“Human doctor?” Dipti wondered. “What doctor you go to?”
“Alien doctor!” Frenzy told her. They had, as a matter of fact, already told her that they were not human, but were pretty sure she thought they were just having her on as always.

This time, she once again leveled them with her, “Do I look stupid to you?” look.

“Well, we do,” Frenzy mumbled.

“What are we gonna get for dinner tonight?” Rumble asked, and all at once, every other thought was banished from the childrens’ minds.

Skywarp couldn't decide what was more amazing—the way the little grains of rice had turned into a fluffy, white mass of steaming goodness when he lifted the lid of the pot, or the fact that he was the one who had done it. Either way, it was nothing to the amazement he felt a moment later when Anoushka showed him the spices.

She kept them in a wooden box with a little metal tin for each one. The box and the tins had been part of her dowry, she said, and then had to explain the concept of dowry to the mesmerized young man. They were one of the most wonderful things he had ever experienced, and so completely human. They had deep, rich colors, and each one had its own beautifully unique fragrance.

Anoushka showed him how she mixed them and tested the blend by scent.

“It will take a long time to learn it right,” she told him.

They made stewed vegetables in a tangy sauce for lunch, and Anoushka's sons showed up to eat it with them. They boys found great amusement in the fact that Skywarp really was learning cooking from their mother. He was embarrassed at first, thinking perhaps he had made a mistake on how to be human, but Anoushka assured him that many of the world's greatest chefs were men.

After they’d cleaned up from lunch, they started making bread for dinner. Skywarp wasn't a fan of the way the dough stuck between his fingers while he was mixing it, but he did enjoy slamming it onto the flour-covered cloth that Anoushka used for kneading her dough.

“When I lived in country, I have big oven to cook many, many bread,” she told him as they worked. “Mama, she say to me, ‘Anoushka, you marry city man, you have big house with electric oven. So fast to cook!’ So, I go to school to study so that city man will love me. City man does no want a girl who cannot read, Mama tells me. So, I read books—so many books! Treasure Island, Frankenstein, Jungle Book, Pride and Prejudice ... so many. But, you know, city man, he see my pretty face and he taste my food. He does not care about the books. He just say, ‘Come to be my wife and live in city house as beautiful as you.’”

Skywarp gave the shanty they were parked in front of a critical eye.

“Was he insulting you?” he wondered.

“No, no,” Anoushka laughed. “We had house. Not big, but beautiful with such a fine kitchen. All day, I read the books and I cook food, and life is good.”

“So, what happened?” Skywarp wanted to know.
“Men make mistakes,” she replied with a sad smile.

Skywarp’s eyes instantly flicked to the bruise on her face. He couldn’t imagine striking someone he was bonded to. You would feel it; not just the phantom physical sensation, either. Human bonds worked differently than Cybertronian, he knew, but still... The sadness in Anoushka’s eyes when she talked about what her mate had lost for herself and her children, the hideousness of that bruise on her lovely face—who would inflict such things on the person he was supposed to be sharing his life with?

Skywarp decided that he did not like Anoushka’s mate and hoped that he never ran into him.

As they did not have the electric oven anymore, they baked the bread in a box lined with metallic foil, which they placed close to the fire so that the heat could reflect around inside. Human ingenuity was greater than Skywarp had ever begun to imagine.

The little round loaves were just starting to brown when Skywarp looked up to find Slipstream staring down at him like she couldn’t believe what she was seeing. The younger Seeker quickly scrambled to his feet, almost stepping in the fire as he did so, and began stammering out some sort of excuse that went a bit like:

“I... food... we... researching humans.... mfuffummbledon'ttellanyoneplease.”

“You’re cooking?” Slipstream asked, because she felt sure she was misreading the situation.

“He is good at it,” Anoushka cut in. She was in the middle of chopping a massive amount of potatoes.

“Who are you?” the Cybertronian demanded, turning on her fellow female with her nose in the air.

“I am Anoushka,” the woman replied with only the briefest glance in her direction.

Slipstream sniffed haughtily and grabbed her cousin by the elbow. “Come on, Warp. You know better than to spend time with humans.”

“I... but....!”

“What you reading?”

Slipstream stopped tugging on Skywarp and turned back to the Indian woman, a mixture of confusion and offense that the human would dare speak to her stamped all over her face.

“That book. What you reading?” Anoushka repeated, pointing with her knife at the book in Slipstream’s hand, which Skywarp hadn’t noticed before. He had, however, noticed the large purse slung over her shoulder, which most certainly hadn’t been there that morning.

“It’s none of your...” Slipstream began, but then trailed off, her face turning oddly pensive as she studied Anoushka. Her hand slowly dropped from her cousin’s arm.

“Anoushka likes books,” Skywarp mumbled, his brain coming up blank on anything more useful to say.

Slipstream narrowed her eyes, pursed her lips, and then strode over to Anoushka. She opened the book and flipped through it, searching for a specific passage, before thrusting it into the other woman’s face.
“This,” she said, jabbing her finger at the page. “What is this all about?”

Anoushka blinked a couple of times, and then took the book so that she could read it properly. As she did, a smile began to creep across her face that almost reminded Skywarp of the look that the twins got when they were planning something particularly devious.

“You do not know this?” Anoushka asked, her eyebrows shooting up as she turned her gaze back to Slipstream.

“Of course I know it,” the younger woman insisted haughtily. “I just... I thought I’d give you a chance to prove that you do know about books.”

“This—” Anoushka waved the book pointedly, “—has nothing to do with books.”

Getting back to the shanty proved more difficult than Megatron would have liked. In order to prevent Starscream from slipping away, he had him walk in front, but this meant that their pace was limited by the Seeker’s shorter legs and significantly lesser ability to breach the crowds. When they finally did make it back, it was to find Skywarp sitting outside the neighbor’s shack, chopping onions.

“The frag are you doing?” Starscream demanded, depositing the tarp in front of their own doorway before stomping over to his brother.

“Making curry,” Skywarp replied, wiping tears from his eyes.

“Are you crying?” Starscream demanded. “Did you let the humans talk you into being their slave, or something? Primus, Warp! Why are you so pathetic?”

“It’s these things!” the younger Seeker protested, gesturing to the onions in front of him. “They make your eyes all watery! And I’m not being a slave, I’m learning how to cook!”

“Utterly unnecessary. Right, Megatron?” Starscream sniffed, turning to his commander for confirmation.

“Who is teaching you how to cook?” Megatron asked wearily.

“Um... that's... she's... Her name is Anoushka. She's inside with Slipstream right now,” Skywarp muttered, avoiding eye contact.

“I specified that there should be no interactions—” his leader began, but Starscream cut him off, naturally.

“Slipstream's here, too!” the Seeker demanded.

“They're talking about 'women's business.' I dunno what that means,” Skywarp shrugged. “Anoushka said it was important, though; stuff that all grown up women have to know, or something.”

Starscream would have seized on the opportunity to harass his younger brother further, but a flicker of oddly familiar movement in the corner of his eye caught his attention. He turned quickly toward the narrow space between the shanties on the other side of the street, and was just in time to see a
small, brown face peaking from around a loose sheet of corrugated steel—Ajit.

“Your disobedience on this matter is worrying, Skywarp. I expect this kind of behavior from your brother, but not from you,” Megatron was saying now.

The younger Seeker was hanging his head in shame, making occasional snuffling noises as he continued to battle the onions. Starscream studied his leader again. Megatron had gone into lecture mode—the lecture mode he used with those of his subordinates who were not Starscream.

Starscream took a small step away from him.

When Megatron only continued to list reasons that fraternizing with humans was a bad idea, Starscream took another step. No one said anything, and he was effectively out of Megatron's line of sight now. He ducked behind a passerby and made a dash across the street, diving breathlessly behind the piece of metal that Ajit was using for cover.

“What's the matter!” the boy demanded. “I wait all day for you!”

“Baand me jhaao! (Fuck off)” Starscream snapped, sitting up a little to peek over the top of their cover. Megatron hadn't noticed he was gone yet. “My idiot commander was hassling me all day; I couldn't get away.”

“Hassle? What is hassle?” Ajit wanted to know.

“It means they keep bugging you because they don't know how to live without you.” Starscream turned around again. “Where are the others?”

“Everyone else go to clinic today or else doctors get suspicious. Why is Captain America covered in dirt?”

“None of what you just said made any sense.”

Ajit reached a hand toward Starscream's face, which the Seeker swatted away before it could make contact.

“Don't touch me!” he hissed.

“Dirt on Captain America's face,” the boy explained, and then got to his feet. “We go now we still get many money.”

“Lots of money,” Starscream corrected, wiping furiously at his face. Slagging Megatron and his slagging tarp. “If we go now, we can still get lots of money.”

The wiping didn't help much because his hands were just as dirty as his face, but he reflected that at least the dirt smears would help him blend in a bit better with the other residents. For today's scheme, that would be a good thing.

“Let's get going, then.”
Chapter 14

At first, Slipstream thought that perhaps she had eaten something toxic. It felt like her insides had tied themselves in knots, and everything—everything—between her ribs and her knees ached. She had been shot, stabbed, burned, crushed, and generally suffered in almost every way imaginable over the course of the war, but this was something else. This was like she was exploding in slow motion; like someone had placed a grenade in her lower abdomen, and then put a containment field around her body at the exact moment that it detonated. This was agony.

She shifted beneath her blankets and stifled a moan. She was pretty sure that the others were all still asleep, but didn't want to risk it. A few tears leaked from the corners of her eyes, and she did her best to stop those, too. It wasn't just that she didn't want anyone to see her crying, but also that when her body tried to sob, it tensed her abdominal muscles and made the pain worse.

A particular, familiar pressure caught her attention amidst the confusion of other pains, and she wondered if maybe, just maybe, a trip to the toilet might ease some of her discomfort. If she had eaten something toxic, then surely getting it out one way or the other was the best course of action. If only the human body had more elegant ways of removing unwanted substances from its systems.

Summoning what little energy she had, Slipstream pushed herself up. When her blankets slid off of her, the cold was like a calculated attack on her midriff. She hissed and pulled one of them back around herself as she forced herself onto shaky legs, grabbing a newspaper from the stack she kept in her corner.

It was even more difficult than usual to pick her way through her sleeping comrades with no strength in her thighs and the pain in her middle forcing her to stay hunched over, clutching at herself. She nearly tripped over Starscream, who was sleeping with Megatron once again, she noticed. For some reason, the sight of her cousin's peaceful face pressed against their leader's chest made her...jealous? Not that she would have traded places with him for all the jewelry in Patna, but she felt that it could be lovely to sleep pressed against something warm and male like that. Especially after her conversation with Anoushka the previous day.

Once she'd made it outside, she could lean against the wall of the hut to stabilize herself a bit, which made things marginally easier. It was still early enough that there weren't many other people about. For once, there was no line for the ramshackle outhouse that they frequented. It was just a box that someone had erected over a large metal drum that drained into the open sewers, but it was better than squatting in a back alley like so many people did around here.

There wasn't much light inside, but it was enough for Slipstream to see the blood.

Well, that's it; I'm dying, she thought to herself as she stared at the dark stain on her fingers. Her stupid human body had given out, and she was going to die in this Primus-forsaken place.

The tears finally started to flow as she went about doing her business (there was no point being any more uncomfortable than necessary while she was dying, after all) and pulled her blood-stained garments back up herself. What should she do on this, her last day alive, she wondered as she made her way back to the shack.
It wasn't until she was passing between their own dwelling and Anoushka's once more that she suddenly remembered: the woman had said something about this. Human women bled as part of their reproductive cycle. Anoushka had been surprised that Slipstream didn't know about it. What was it that she had called it? Demonstration?

Slipstream sank to the ground with her back to the shack and almost laughed out loud in relief. She was not dying. She was just... Well, she wasn't actually sure what was happening. Anoushka hadn't gone into much detail, but at least she knew it was normal. For women, at least.

Did all women really go through this once every single month? Was she going to have to go through this every single month? How long was an Earth month? And how long would this last? What was she supposed to do about the blood in the meantime? She couldn't very well walk around in blood-stained clothes all the time. Perhaps she could put some extra cloth in her underwear to absorb it for now. She would have to hide the evidence well, though. There was no way she was going to explain where the blood had come from to the others.

It was the first time Slipstream had really felt the difference between herself and her comrades, and the first time it occurred to her that there could be some benefits to keeping company with other females. Maybe. In extreme circumstances.

It was becoming a habit; one that both parties had come to conclude was for the best.

For Starscream's part, it was simply too cold at night to sleep alone, and he had been forced to admit that body heat would need to be shared. On Megatron's side, it was the best way to keep the Seeker from slipping away in the middle of the night or early morning. All the same, it would take a while to get used to.

It was another freezing morning, and Starscream lurched back in shock when he woke to find Megatron's face mere inches from his own, his leader's hot breath tickling his nose. He was still asleep.

The former warlord looked almost peaceful in his sleep, the usual worry and stress lines that marred his face during consciousness were gone, leaving his expression smooth and relaxed. Starscream drew his hand out from beneath the blankets and allowed it to hover over Megatron's cheek, wondering if the other man would wake up if he were to touch it. Making up his mind, he pressed his cold fingertips against his leader's flushed cheek, stroking down. The skin was smooth, but the short black hair covering the lower half of his face was stubbly and tickled his fingers.

He quickly snatched his hand back as Megatron shifted in his sleep, and waited a few moments, unsure of whether Megatron was still asleep or not. When he was finally confident enough to continue, he replaced his hand carefully. This time, he went so far as to run his thumb across his commander's lips, and couldn't help but think that they were far too soft to have belonged to someone as tough as Megatron.

He had become so distracted with his inspection of his leader's face that he had not noticed the gradual change in Megatron's breathing as he started to slip back into consciousness. It was only when his wrist was suddenly snatched and he was shoved onto his back that he realized Megatron had woken up and was now straddling him.
“Can I help you, Starscream?” Megatron asked groggily, eyes half-lidded and still hazy from sleep.

Starscream smirked up at him, pulling slightly on the wrist still held captive. “It's a good thing you woke up when you did, my lord. I was just contemplating clawing your eyes out.”

Megatron stared down at the Seeker between his legs expressionlessly before releasing his slender wrist. He lowered his own rougher hand to Starscream's face and gently caressed the smooth skin of his cheek before suddenly pulling back and slapping it.

“Grow up,” he snarled, pushing himself off his second's stomach and exiting swiftly from the shack.

Starscream propped himself up on his elbows, rubbing his stinging cheek, and tried to ignore the increasingly nauseating sensation of fluttering in the pit of his stomach as he watched his leader's retreating back.

Megatron had underestimated both how good Starscream had gotten at sneaking about in the last couple of weeks and how determined the Seeker was to continue his money-making schemes. No matter how closely he tried to watch his second or how much he stoked the younger man's ego, there came a time every day when he would turn around and Starscream would be gone. Sometimes, he would manage to find him again, usually with that one little minion of his, and Starscream would act like nothing had happened.

“Oh, you were looking for me? I was here the whole time; you're the one that wandered off.”

Or some other cock and bull excuse.

Now, Megatron watched out of the corner of his eye as Starscream sat on the far side of the room, counting a pink wad of Rupees—which had somehow managed to triple just in the last few days since Megatron had enacted his Keeping Starscream Busy Plan. As infuriating as it was, the warlord couldn't help feeling some small bit of pride in his second. How was he getting away with it?

He quickly turned his head, feigning ignorance, as Starscream looked around the room to make sure no one was watching him, and then stashed the money in a decent-sized hole in the dirt beneath one of the rugs in the corner. His commander fought to keep the smirk off his face as the Seeker strutted from the shanty, none the wiser.

After waiting just a few seconds to be sure Starscream wasn't going to come back and catch him red-handed, Megatron rose from his position on the floor and strode to where the Seeker had been sitting moments ago. He knelt down and lifted the frayed carpet to smile down at the prize beneath it. There had to be at least 10,000 Rupees in there. He quickly snatched it up and stashed it in his own pocket.

He didn't approve of Starscream using the human spawn to steal money from their fellow insignificant beings, but that didn't mean he couldn't put the spoils to good use.
If even possible, the sole female Decepticon was acting even more aggressively than usual. Of course, one such as Slipstream would need to be assertive when dealing with such a mismatched group of self-centered, glitched-up mechs-turned-men, but her behavior as of late was unsettling. And because they had all been blessed with brains, they were smart enough not to mention it. They just kept their heads down and tuned her out as she ranted and raved at whatever poor imbecile had gotten in her way that day. All except Skywarp, of course; the naïve young man, who had apparently been behind the door when Primus was handing out common sense, actually dared to ask her if she was feeling okay.

The bright red, painful-looking hand mark had taken at least an hour to fade from the side of his face. Skywarp's tears, on the other hand, had lingered for well over three. He retreated to the neighbor's for consolation (Megatron had given up forbidding him from interacting with the cooking woman outright; they got food out of it, after all).

Even more disconcerting than her touchiness was the way Slipstream kept locking herself away in their shack (as much as that was possible in a place without doors, let alone locks), becoming increasingly defensive of everything she did and snapping at anyone who questioned her, including Megatron.

Thundercracker was starting to fear for her sanity, and occasionally his own.

Starscream seemed unconcerned, but then, when was he ever concerned with anyone aside from himself? He was under the personal impression that Slipstream had contracted a bad case of “woman” whilst here on Earth, which Thundercracker thought was rich coming from the one who came home every evening with more Earth phrases and mannerisms that he had picked up from his pick-pocketing scum friends. The Seeker didn't even seem to be aware that he was doing it.

As none of the others seemed to hold any concern for his cousin, Thundercracker took it upon himself to go snooping about in her personal possessions in hopes of finding a clue.

Of course, he had to wait until a day when she had gone out again, and it took a while even then. Slipstream had amassed an impressive hoard of unidentifiable crap that littered the corner of the shack she had claimed as her own, which ranged from clothes to footwear to cheap jewelry that she had pilfered from the local mens' stands while their backs were turned. She claimed they were gifts, and Thundercracker couldn't fathom why she would bother to lie when it was so obvious that they weren't.

Eventually, he caught a glimpse of colored fabric sticking out from beneath Slipstream's lumpy pile of blankets and pulled on it to find it was an item of clothing. It was clearly hers, as no one else in the group would wear pink underwear, but it was covered in blood.

Thundercracker was now thoroughly alarmed. Why hadn't Slipstream mentioned this injury? He understood that she was uncomfortable and self-conscious in her organic body because he was too, but if her well-being was at risk...

So, like the concerned distant relative that he was, he consulted his leader. Starscream was there too, as nowadays whenever the Seeker wasn't with the human brats he was trailing Megatron. It was the closest he had ever come to actually “following” his commander, and it was just a shame that he was still so bad at “listening.” Thundercracker didn't particularly mind his presence at the moment, though; Starscream had spent far more time around the humans than Thundercracker had, and knew more about them even before this incident than Thundercracker had learned in the last
unpleasant two weeks or so of being one. It was possible that, for once, his brother would have some useful insight.

When he presented his findings to his commanders, he expected the two of them to react with concern or confusion. He most certainly did not expect Starscream to leap across the room shrieking with a look of utter disgust on his face.

No one in the faction knew more about the technical aspects of human biology than Starscream. His scientific curiosity had inevitably led to him researching the organics that dominated this planet, and one of the most interesting features of organic biology was reproduction; it had been a completely new concept to him. It was amazing that these creatures could multiply without the need for a deity or sacred artifact, such as their Cube. Since he had only researched it enough to sate his interest in the scientific mechanics of the matter, he was still ignorant on much of the fine print of the process, but he knew where that blood had come from, and he shrieked at his brother to put that revolting thing down.

Thundercracker was bewildered at his brother's reaction—as was, it seemed, Megatron. Why did he find it necessary to stand so far away? It was as if he expected the clothing to fly out of Thundercracker's hand and soar across the room to attack him.

“But this is Slipstream's,” he protested, holding the stained piece of clothing up once more. “She must be injured.”

“Anyone would think this was the first time you'd ever seen human blood,” Megatron added.

Starscream slapped a hand to his forehead, trying to rub away the oncoming headache. Why was the rest of his faction so incredibly dim? And why hadn't Thundercracker gotten rid of that thing!?

“Look,” he sighed. “You know how human females grow their young inside of them?”

“Yes,” Thundercracker agreed. He had been fascinated the first time he realized that was why some of the women were waddling around the slums with such bizarrely swollen bellies—fascinated and disgusted. Imagine having your young feeding off your life force and deforming you in such a way? He'd been relieved then to realize that, as a male, he didn't have to worry about it.

“Alright, well, their bodies don't know when exactly they'll get pregnant, so they prepare for it every month by lining their gestation chamber with tissue to cushion the little parasite, just in case,” his brother explained.

“Starscream, if you are suggesting that Slipstream has become infected with a human spawn—” Megatron cut in darkly, and Starscream flapped a hand at him in irritation.

“No, no! The blood is proof that she hasn't,” he assured them. “If they don't manage to get pregnant, then they shed the tissue at the end of the month. It breaks down and leaves the body as blood.”

“Oh,” Thundercracker remarked, holding the underwear a little farther from himself and staring at it in wonder. “How does it leave their bodies?”

Starscream told him.

“Erggh!” Thundercracker flung the offending object away from himself, wiping the hand that had touched it on the front of his shirt. That blood had come out of Slipstream's...

Megatron deftly dodged the airborne material as it sailed past his head and hit the wall behind him,
then backed away from it for good measure.

Thundercracker was still disgusted. No wonder Starscream hadn't wanted to be anywhere near it, and no wonder Slipstream had been in such a foul mood lately. He would be too if he were leaking vital fluids from such a place. He shivered at the thought, though he wasn't sure why it disgusted him so much. The past couple weeks had been full of appalling and mortifying revelations about human biology, but none of them had made him feel quite this awkward. After everything he had learned about this planet, it just didn't seem... natural.

Suddenly, he was thankful more than ever that he was male; he couldn't imagine going through something like that. And every month! Primus, he never thought he'd feel sorry for that—forgive the human term—bitch, but...

Poor Slipstream.

Starscream gave his brother one last condescending sniff and stalked out of the hut, apparently not yet content with the amount of space he had put between himself and Slipstream's lost body fluids. Thundercracker expected Megatron to follow him, as he had done so often of late, but instead, his commander edged closer to him.

“While he's out of the way, I have another task for you,” Megatron murmured.

One of Thundercracker's eyebrows raised as the other man reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a thick wad of money.

“Isn't that—” the Seeker began, but Megatron cut him off.

“I will deal with the fallout when it comes; don't worry,” he said, pressing the money into Thundercracker's hands. “I'll be the usual place. Soundwave says that this time it will be a dark green hoodie and yellow shoes. Take Skywarp with you, too, why don't you? He's been over with the human woman long enough for one day.”

Thundercracker looked down at the stack of bills in his hand for a moment, and then pushed them into his own pocket. It was for a better cause than whatever Starscream would have used them for, anyway. He just hoped that he really wouldn't have to deal with it when the shit hit the fan later.
Soundwave would have felt a little more guilty about following his creations again if it hadn't yielded such promising results.

And he had no idea why they were going to a clinic, or how they had found it in the first place, but he wasn't about to complain. He'd been looking for something like this since they first arrived. There were the larger hospitals in the city, of course, but if human society was even remotely like Cybertronian, then there was no way penniless slum-dwellers such as themselves could utilize any of them. He wondered if the same girl they went scavenging with had shown the twins this place.

Soundwave watched from a distance for a while as his creations spoke with a woman in a long, white coat. He could tell from their body language that they were trying their hardest to convince her of something, and that she was having none of it. He was mildly impressed with the woman. The twins were using their best charms, and her businesslike facial expression had yet to waver.

He wondered what she was doing here—what the whole clinic was doing here, really. It was rundown, yes, but it was still a clinic. Soundwave knew all too well how difficult it was to get medical facilities this close to any sort of slum. The problem was the doctors; educated people knew too well that they had options outside the insanity of a slum hospital.

Eventually, the doctor shooed his twins away—an impressive feat in and of itself—and Soundwave stepped out of his hiding place to approach her.

She looked surprised at his appearance, but only for a moment. She scrutinized him up and down, and he noted that there was none of the distaste in her gaze that he'd become accustomed to receiving from people dressed in clean clothes.

“You're those twins' father, aren't you?” she said flatly.

Well, he supposed that from a human perspective he was, though he was a bit concerned about how she had known that.

“Oh, we knew about you lot long before those two showed up here,” she said at the questioning look on his face. “All the town gossip passes through here.”

Now he was more than a bit concerned, both at this news and at her ability to read what he had thought were carefully guarded facial expressions.

“Is there much gossip about us?” he wanted to know.

“A group of Americans living in the slums is bound to get talk going,” she told him. “Yourself and the other tall one got quite a lot of attention at first; we don't specialize in tall here, you may have noticed. And then, I heard about some of the younger ones from your neighbor. She is concerned that they are not getting enough to eat. And Dipti speaks of the twins when she comes with her class to volunteer once a week.”

Soundwave felt a sinking dread as he realized that he would have to tell Megatron about all of this. Their leader would undoubtedly want to escalate his plans, and they weren't ready for it yet.

“We've been hearing tell that one of you is running around with Dipti's brother, too. He's one of the problem children,” the doctor continued. “In fact, Sodisetti was saying that he wanted to talk to one of you about that if you ever stopped by.”
Before Soundwave could react to this information, she was calling into the clinic, and a moment later, a young man came out, smiling broadly.

“This is the American twins' father,” she told the newcomer by way of explanation, and his face immediately took on a look of understanding.

“Nice to meet you, sir. I'm Doctor Sodisetti,” he said, extending a hand, which Soundwave took. “I've heard quite a bit about you.”

“So I've come to understand,” Soundwave remarked.

“Yes, well, that's what happens with small communities in big cities,” the doctor said. “We've been worrying about you lot, though. Do you have time to come in for a moment, by any chance?”

The former satellite hesitated a second before agreeing to follow him into the clinic. The doctors had been worried about them? Why? What sway could their well-being possibly hold over them?

Inside was a small waiting room, which seemed packed fair bursting to Soundwave's eyes, but Doctor Sodisetti commented that he was in luck; they were not so busy today. The doctor called greetings to a couple of the patients and assured them that he would be there in just a minute before leading Soundwave into a small examination room down the hall. It was dingy and old, but looked like someone went to great lengths to keep it as clean as was possible in this place.

Doctor Sodisetti motioned for Soundwave to have a seat while he himself leaned back against the counter that ran down one side of the room. “Everyone is curious about what the American strangers are doing here, you know.”

“I...” Soundwave wracked his brain for some kind of explanation for their predicament that wouldn't make him sound either crazy or criminal, and cursed the ineptitude of the slacking lump of bio-matter inside his skull when it drew a complete blank. This human was a valuable asset that they couldn't afford to lose, and the longer he hesitated to answer, the more suspicious he was making them look.

Fortunately, before the silence could drag on too long, Doctor Sodisetti smiled at him and raised his hands.

“It's okay; we treat many patients who cannot tell us how they came to be where they are,” he said. “So long as you are not here to harm any of the other residents, it is none of my business. However, most of your comrades are very young, including your own children, yes?”

Soundwave agreed.

“Where do you get food?”

A delicate subject. “We have some small means,” he lied.

“One of the young ones has been running with a local gang of children. Did you know?”

“He is an idiot,” Soundwave said.

“Idiots get themselves killed around here,” Doctor Sodisetti said, darkly. “You may want to keep a closer eye on him. There are others—real gangs—who do not mind the children snagging food and the occasional wallet, but if they think that their own business is in jeopardy...”

“We are already taking measures to keep him in line.”
“I hope you are aware of just how serious this is,” the young man pressed. “I’m not talking about a slap on the wrist. Ajit and his friends were not a threat to them before the American boy joined. These men will identify him as the problem, and they will not hesitate to set an example of him to the others.”

“What are their typical methods?” Soundwave wanted to know. All things considered, there could be some benefits to letting the human slum lords teach Starscream a lesson. Megatron's threats had long since ceased to affect him, after all.

“The last time I had someone in here that they had punished, he was about your friend's age,” Doctor Sodisetti told him. “They had beaten him, broken both his legs, cut their gang symbol into his face, and then raped him. We did our best, but he died of infection two days later.”

Soundwave felt his jaw twitch slightly. The beating and maybe even the cutting he thought Megatron might have accepted as fair turnaround, but the rest of it...

“We will start taking more extreme measures,” he assured the doctor.

“Please do,” said Sodisetti. “I have no wish to watch anymore young people die for a few Rupees.”

And then he clapped his hands together and smiled, as though chasing away a specter that had been hanging in the air between them.

“Aside from that, is there anything you need medically that you haven't been able to get, like basic medicines or bandages? We're a charity clinic, so we don't have much, but we're willing to share whatever we do.”

Soundwave was about to say that no, they were doing surprisingly well, when a sudden thought occurred to him.

“Actually, there might be one thing...”

Slipstream had always been a solitary creature by programming, and even more so by nature. She didn't care for companionship. She could entertain herself, and having someone else tag along behind her all day would be both distraction and annoyance.

She had been in too much pain the last few days to leave the shack, and had thought that it would only be a matter of time before she ended up strangling one of her cousins or stomping a twin to death. They were all such insufferable morons, and it seemed to have become worse ever since the Demonstration started.

A few times, she had thought about going next door and talking to Anoushka again—perhaps the woman knew tips and tricks for dealing with the Demonstration—but Skywarp was always over there, and she didn't feel like looking at him right now. He was still nervous around her after she'd lashed out at him, and there was something about Skywarp's particular brand of idiocy that made her insides twist a little every time he flinched away from her. No, she would have to wait until he had forgotten their last altercation before she could go near him again.

So, when she woke on the fourth day of her Demonstration to find that, though she was still bleeding, she no longer ached half so bad, Slipstream immediately jumped up out of her blankets
and fair fled the hut.

When she wasn't stealing from them, Slipstream spent her time studying the humans, far more than she suspected any of the others bothered. Oh, Starscream spent plenty of time with the human spawn, but he wasn't studying them. Not like she was.

At first, she had thought that their strange customs and garbled sounds would never make sense to her, but gradually, the words were starting to come together; their interactions becoming more than random. Piece by piece, she began to make connections between them.

She had recognized more than the others that language could be their greatest asset in this place. Of course, they managed to communicate with most of the humans well enough using broken English and hand gestures, but she had come to recognize that this was a place where belonging mattered. And for humans, a huge part of belonging was language.

She had already seen the difference it made when she spoke to one of the men and women at the stalls in Hindi instead of English. They were delighted; over the moon. Sometimes, they really did give her stuff. If the Decepticons were truly to survive in this place, it would behoove them to learn the language.

She doubted anyone other than perhaps Thundercracker or Skywarp noticed her absence when she wandered off. To Megatron, she was little more than background noise, she was sure, and it suited her just fine. It would have been too difficult to carry out her research—or her raids—with her commander glaring over her shoulder on one side and Starscream whining on the other.

However, she had noticed that when she was wandering alone, local men occasionally tried to grab her as she passed. Sometimes, they went for her hair and sometimes her clothes, but a lot of the time, they tried to touch her in places that she didn't think anyone had a right to. It wasn't anything to worry about, really. A good, hard shove, and they backed off. The real thing was to make sure you didn't let them corner or outnumber you.

On this particular day, Slipstream was perhaps a bit more tired than usual, a bit less focused, and she didn't notice the pack of men slowly closing in on her until they already had her surrounded down a back alley.

For the first time since becoming human, real fear flooded her senses. The way that the men were looking at her made her skin crawl, and all of the things that Anoushka had told her about human bodies were rushing through her brain—all of the things that she did not want these men to do to her.

But she was a warrior—a Decepticon—and she would not be intimidated by a bunch of dirty humans. She lifted her chin and glared at them.

"Gaand chaat mera," she spat, striding forward. She didn't know what it meant, but had gathered it was a rude way of dismissing someone, at least.

The men didn't move. Someone laughed.

"Where are you going, pretty lady?" the man just in front of her said, spreading his arms wide as though to embrace her.

Slipstream turned around quickly, only to find that the men behind her had closed in as well. She licked her lips, her heart thumping so hard she thought she might throw up. They were just leering at her for now, but she knew it was only a matter of time before—
Several of the men shouted in their native tongue as a large hand closed around Slipstream's arm and tugged her out of their circle. Someone was pulling her close, and she fought tooth and nail for a second before looking up to see Soundwave's stern, unwavering glare focused on the men who had entrapped her.

Never in her life had Slipstream thought that she might be glad to see that obnoxious stick of a mech, but now, as the men started slipping away into the shadows and out of the alley, she wanted to shout his praises from the rooftops.

“Are you alright?” he asked her, once the last of her would-be attackers had disappeared.

“Fine! I'm fine,” she muttered, trying to hide the trembling in her hands.

Soundwave watched her in silence for a moment, and then held out a small box. “I was searching for you to give you this,” he informed her. “I think you will find that they make things more comfortable.”

The Seeker stared at the box. Most of the writing on it was in Hindi, but there was some English. “Sanitary Napkins,” it said. She took it, turned it over to see the pictures on the back, and realized what it was.

Slipstream remembered then that not everyone she resided with was a complete imbecile, and decided that although solitary had become a well-needed privilege for her, company might not be so bad after all. Provided it was the right company.
“Come on, Skywarp,” Thundercracker called wearily over his shoulder. “We haven't got all day.”

Skywarp quickened his pace, unsuccessfully trying to navigate his way through the crowd of people who were all either very rude and pushy, or extremely rude and pushy. Either way, he was getting pushed around, and it was making him feel dizzy and nauseated. Actually, he'd been feeling dizzy and nauseated earlier, too, but this wasn't helping.

“Thundercracker!” he called out desperately. “Wait!”

Thundercracker sighed to himself. They'd never get there at this rate. It had been a mistake to bring Skywarp along, but Megatron was right; he was spending far too much time with that human woman. He was grateful for the improvement in their diet that it had brought, but his brother was so very prone to getting attached to people.

Finally, Skywarp caught up with him, panting hard. “Sorry, I got pushed and there—”

“Later,” Thundercracker cut him off impatiently. “Hurry up; we're already late.”

“Late for—” Skywarp began, but was cut off when his brother seized his T-shirt and began dragging him forward.

A moment later, Thundercracker came to a halt, pressing a hand against Skywarp's chest to stop him. “You wait here. I'll be right back.”

“B-but—” Skywarp stuttered nervously. Thundercracker wasn't seriously considering leaving him here, was he?

“Don't move,” his brother said just before he walked away, disappearing into the growing crowd.

Skywarp looked around from his position on the side of the street, avoiding the gazes of as many people as he possibly could. His nausea worsened, and when he looked around for a relatively clean spot to sit down on, he became suddenly aware of a woman staring at him from across the street. He looked behind him to see if there was any chance her attention had been caught by something or someone else, but the only notable object anywhere near him was a cow.

She smiled at him.

Timidly, and trying to quell his churning stomach, Skywarp smiled back.

Smiling was a good thing, right?

His smile faltered, however, as he saw the woman had started making her way across the street toward him. Oh, Primus. He got on fine with Anoushka and her three sons, yes, but that didn't mean he wanted to go making friends with other random humans that he met on the street.

He searched desperately for some sort of escape route, but where would he go without getting himself lost? And besides, Thundercracker had told him not to move! Where was Thundercracker, anyway?

He took a step back as the human woman sauntered over. Up close, her smile didn't look quite as friendly as it had before. The way she was looking at him almost reminded him of the way
Starscream looked sometimes when he had just thought up a particularly devious plot.

“Er, I...” Skywarp muttered under his breath, unsure of how to address the intimidating woman.

She leaned forward, still smiling, and whispered, “You look for fun, American boy?”

“I-I don't—” he tried, shaking his head desperately.

The human didn't seem to be getting the hint though, and if anything, started taking his stammering as an incentive.

“American boy, I love you,” she murmured, pressing her body against his, running a finger down his chest.

The ability to speak—and breathe—suddenly left Skywarp, and he found himself standing, unable to move, mouth opening and closing like a fish. He was about to turn and flee, regardless of Thundercracker's orders, when a hand suddenly grabbed the back of his T-shirt and wrenched him free of the woman's grasp.

“What the slag is wrong with you!!” his brother hissed into his ear, as he pulled him further away from the scary woman.

Skywarp tried to explain. “I wasn't... she... she...”

“I don't want to hear it, come on,” Thundercracker snapped, taking him by the hand.

Skywarp shrank away from his brother, who sounded irritated, angry even. “I'm sorry,” he muttered quietly, eyes downcast. He felt really sick now and wished that they could just go back. He wanted to lie down and sleep off the shock he'd had.

Thundercracker stopped, turning slightly to regard him, before shaking his head. “Doesn't matter.”

“Where did you go?” Skywarp asked before he could stop himself.

“I was just checking something,” Thundercracker replied curtly, tugging on his hand as he started to lag behind again.

Skywarp's eyes widened. “Check what?” he demanded, wracking his brain for what could possibly warrant Thundercracker leaving him alone in the middle of a busy street to check on. Then, he stopped so abruptly that his hand was pulled free from his brother's grip. “Was it a dog!?”

“No!” Thundercracker snatched his hand back, reluctant to lose physical contact with his smaller brother in such a crowded area. “I just had to double-check that we're going the right way. It's a little more dangerous around here, so I don't want to take any wrong turns.”

That was, of course, the absolute worst thing he could have said. The younger Seeker dug his heels into the soft dirt beneath him and refused to go any further.

“Skywarp!” Thundercracker hissed, pulling on the front of his brother's t-shirt so hard that it started to tear. “I need get this done, and I can't leave you here!”

“Let's just go back, please!” Skywarp pleaded, his eyes wide and terrified as he fought against his brother's grip. “I don't feel good! I wanna go back!”

“We can't; Megatron's orders! What will he say if I tell him that we had to turn back because you were scared !?” his brother snapped, more spitefully than he had intended.
Skywarp hesitated. “But... but I'm not even supposed to know about this mission!” he cried, and he almost really was crying now.

“That'll change soon enough,” Thundercracker said, his tone softening. “Just, please, Skywarp. I'll be right here. Nothing will happen; I promise.”

Reluctantly, Skywarp nodded and allowed his brother to lead him forward again through the streets, swiping at his nose as they went. He didn't want to cry (it was embarrassing and it was making his head hurt), but with the stress of the thronging crowds, the shock of meeting that scary lady, his aching stomach, and now his brother yelling at him, he couldn't hold it back anymore.

Thundercracker tried to ignore the snuffling sounds behind him as they pressed on, and started to scan the streets ahead for the human man with the specific description Megatron had given him.

After a while, he caught sight of a slumped, hooded figure in yellow tennis shoes and wrinkled his nose; the man was even less color-coordinated than he sounded. He was thankful to have found him, though, because Skywarp was starting to look like he just might wet himself—something he'd managed quite well at not doing since their first couple of days as humans.

His brother would have to stay here while the transaction happened—there was no way Thundercracker was letting him come into contact with such unsavory people—and he wasn't going to take the news well.

“Skywarp,” Thundercracker began, laying a hand on the boy's shoulder.

“Please don't say you're going to leave me here again!” Skywarp gasped desperately, turning his tear-stained face upward.

Thundercracker groaned inwardly.

“You see that human over there?” he said quietly, pointing toward the slumped figure. When his brother had nodded, he continued. “I just need to go and talk to him. Just for a minute, and then I'll be right back.”

Skywarp sniffed. “Please don't—”

“I'll be right back,” he repeated slowly, pressing his forehead to his brother's. “I promise.”

Then, before Skywarp had the chance to protest any further, he had pried their hands apart and—for the second time that afternoon—disappeared into the crowd.

Skywarp released a shaky breath, wrapped his arms around himself, and closed his eyes, trying to count the seconds until his brother returned. There was something other than tears attempting to rise out of him now, and he breathed slow and deep as he tried to hold it in. It wasn't working very well. The pain in his stomach just got worse and worse. His legs and back ached, too. And the back of his neck. And his head. He sank down to the ground and buried his face in his knees, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet.

At second three hundred eighty-two, there was a light tap on his shoulder. Skywarp nearly jumped out of his skin. His eyes flew open and he lurched away in terror only to find—

“Hey, hey! It's me!” Thundercracker cried, gripping his forearm and pulling him steady.

Skywarp looked up at him, opened his mouth to express his relief, and suddenly something hot and acrid was spewing out of him. Several people walking by made noises of disgust and gave them a
wider berth as Skywarp's stomach clenched again and more of the horrible stuff came surging out of him. He tried to cry out and nearly choked.

Thundercracker just stared transfixed, too shocked to even move out of the way.

“Tee-Ceee!” Skywarp wailed when he had finally finished. His small body was heaving with sobs now. “TC, w-w-what's happening? I-it hurts!”

“It's okay! You'll be okay,” Thundercracker assured him, trying to pull Skywarp up to his feet. In truth, he had no idea what was wrong with his brother or if he would be okay, but he knew that Soundwave or possibly even Starscream might have the answer. He needed to get him back to the hut now.

“I... I c-can't g-g-get up!” the boy sobbed. “M-my legs... won't move!”

“Okay, okay,” his brother murmured soothingly. “I'll carry you.”

It took some maneuvering, but Thundercracker eventually managed to get his smaller brother settled somewhat securely on his back. Skywarp felt far warmer than usual pressed against him, and reeked of whatever it was that had just come out of him. Despite his warmth, he kept shivering, and his grip on Thundercracker's shoulders and waist was weak and half-hearted.

“Just... just hang in there,” Thundercracker told him as he started for the closest thing they had to home.

Between the business with Slipstream that morning and now this, today had not been a good day to be human.

“He has most likely contracted a virus,” Soundwave declared before Thundercracker had even finished explaining what had happened.

“But.. the spewing?” the Seeker wanted to know.

“The human body purges itself through the mouth to prevent the eventuality of contaminated food being digested and furthering infection,” the TIC explained. “Shivering is caused by fever; elevated body temperatures are used to create an environment hostile to invading microbes. It is an effective strategy, but can be detrimental to the body if prolonged. I understand that it is most uncomfortable.”

Thundercracker looked over to his little brother, who was shivering beneath his blankets at the moment. He'd been stripped of his reeking clothes, and Thundercracker had grabbed a few extra blankets from Starscream's pile to make up for it.

“So, what do we do?” he asked.

“The human body is adept at fighting off such infections, though the process is unpleasant,” Soundwave informed him. “He will need to rest and consume extra fluids. Fever reducing medications may aid in the recovery if we can find them.”

“I think I have some,” Slipstream announced unexpectedly from the corner where she'd been
reading one of her books and pretending not to listen.

“Why do you...” Thundercracker started, but she just shrugged and started digging through her things.

“I happened to find them the other day,” she said, tossing him a small bottle.

Thundercracker turned it over in his hands and read the words, “Tylenol Extra Strength. Fast relief from: headache, pain, fever.”

“I forgot about it until you mentioned fever, and then I thought, 'Haven't I seen that word somewhere recently? Wish I'd remembered about it sooner,” she muttered.

“Thank you,” Thundercracker said, blinking slightly.

“Don't mention it,” she shrugged again and returned to her book.

“Viral infections are also highly contagious,” Soundwave mused. “It is best to avoid contact with bodily fluids.”

“Too late for that,” Thundercracker sighed, turning the bottle over again to read the directions on the back now.

“What the frag is that smell!?”

“Hi, Starscream,” Thundercracker said, without turning around.

“Primus, you reek!” Starscream declared, holding his nose as he glared suspiciously at his older brother.

“Skywarp is sick,” Thundercracker informed him. “He threw up.”

For the second time that day, Starscream backed away from him in horror. This time, he didn't make it far because Megatron had just walked in the door behind him.

“What's going on?” their commander demanded, and Starscream jumped nearly a foot in the air before scrambling to the other side of the hut. Thundercracker frowned at this reaction and glanced between the two of them. Had Megatron hurt him again somehow?

“They're contaminated! They'll bring us all down with them!” Starscream was shrieking now, jabbing an accusing finger at his brothers.

Megatron just blinked at him.

“Skywarp has contracted a virus. Starscream is concerned that it will spread to the rest of us,” Soundwave translated.

“Is this likely?” Megatron asked, turning to his intelligence officer.

“With stomach flu, the most likely cause of infection is contact with contaminated body fluids. If care is taken to avoid this eventuality, then only Thundercracker has reason to fear,” came the reply.

“I'm not taking my chances,” Starscream insisted, trying to dart around Megatron and out the door.

Megatron made an irritated noise and pulled him back into the hut by the wrist.
“You will stay here,” he growled, “and we will sleep in the far corner tonight, if you must.”

Starscream opened his mouth to protest, but shut it quickly at a look from his commander.

The Seeker went about moving their blankets over to their new sleeping location. Megatron watched him for a moment before stepping out of the hut. He leaned back against the door frame, which creaked under his weight, and let his head fall back, his eyes closed. He stayed that way for a moment until he heard soft footsteps beside him.

“My Lord?”

“What is it, Soundwave?” he asked, his eyes still closed.

“There is something of importance that I must relate to you,” Soundwave murmured, and Megatron felt him press a little closer. “It is regarding Starscream.”

Megatron's eyes shot open.

“What has he done now?” he demanded. He had been with the Seeker almost the whole day, but there was about a 40-minute span that afternoon when he had lost him. What had Starscream managed during that time?

“It's more of what he has been doing all along.” Soundwave relayed Doctor Sodisetti's warning to his leader, watching the warlord's face darken progressively all the while. He wasn't sure that Megatron had any understanding of the word “rape” beyond its use for an act of general defilement, but his leader growled deep when he mentioned it all the same.

“He is determined to make my life as difficult as possible,” Megatron grumbled when his third had finished. “Although, I am glad to hear that you have found a medical facility. I cannot tell you what comfort it is to have your help through all this madness.”

He absently laid a hand on his TIC's shoulder and left it there while he thought. Soundwave watched in silent expectation.

“I suppose there is nothing for it but to speed up our plans as much as possible,” the warlord sighed at last. “And in the meantime, I will put a leash on that Seeker, if need be.”

The ghost of a smile flickered across Soundwave's face, and he opened his mouth, about to comment further, when a horrendous retching noise came from the inside of the shanty, followed by Starscream's voice raised in unholy cries of offense and disgust and then Thundercracker's and Slipstream's shouting at him to shut up.

Megatron closed his eyes again and let out a groan.

“Can't we just leave them all here?” he asked Soundwave in a low voice.

“That,” his TIC said, an eyebrow quirking slightly, “has always been an option.”

Megatron just grunted and disappeared back through the dark opening of the doorway, and Soundwave knew full well that it was an option he would never seriously consider.
Starscream was beginning to suspect that he might be ill himself. He wasn't sure exactly when it was that he started having these... symptoms, but they were getting out of hand.

They had started out gradually, he supposed, growing in strength steadily with each passing day, and now that he had noticed it, he couldn't stop himself from thinking about them.

Being touched had always made him feel awkward. It was like he could still feel them on his skin long after they had removed themselves from his personal space. Most of the time, it just made him feel dirty and uncomfortable.

It was different with Megatron.

The first time he could recall any noticeable change in how he felt around Megatron had been a few days ago while they were eating. He'd been on edge anyway, worried that Megatron might notice he was just pushing his food around his plate instead of eating it, when his leader's knee had casually brushed up against his leg. It was the lightest of touches, barely even there, yet the tingle it sent up his leg and then throughout the rest of his body caused Starscream to jolt with shock and momentarily lose control of his own limbs, resulting in his accidentally flinging his dinner up into the air.

No one had been impressed (least of all Soundwave, who had been unfortunate enough to be the person the food landed on as it descended once more), and he had quickly retreated to sleep early. When Megatron had come in and tried to curl up around him a while later, Starscream had hissed at him to keep his hands to himself.

And then the staring had started.

On more than one occasion over the next few days, Starscream had caught himself staring for prolonged periods of time at various sections of Megatron's body, often wondering about nonsensical things like what they would feel like if he were to run his hands over them, before suddenly becoming aware of what he was thinking and wondering why?

That morning had been the first time he'd dared to try acting on any of those thoughts, and it had been... nice. And that just confused him even more. Why should he enjoy the sensation of running his thumb across Megatron's lips?

He had decided quite early on that he liked Megatron's face, mostly because it was still him. Even covered in flesh and hair, he could see Megatron's trademark scowl, his stern expression, his hard optics; he could look at the human and still see his leader. It was the sense of familiarity that he had liked more than anything, but why should his leader's face elicit any feelings in him beyond that? He could find no logical or scientific explanation for it.

Until then, he had been putting it all down to a few freak occurrences, pushing it to the back of his mind as one of the lesser of many concerning glitches that his human body seemed to be developing, but this day had been nigh-on torturous. He couldn't get the smoothness of Megatron's skin out of his mind, and that jolting sensation from the other night plagued him every single time his leader came anywhere near him. He was not looking forward to spending another night pressed against the great lug, and had hoped that Skywarp's illness would serve as a suitable excuse to go and find other sleeping arrangements—possibly at Ajit's home, wherever that was.
It was not to be, it seemed.

It took longer than usual for everyone to settle down, what with the excitement of Skywarp's third puking episode. The twins had returned by then, and they were fascinated beyond all reason by the sight of the youngest Seeker vomiting his guts into a basin that Thundercracker had found for him. They'd gotten rid of the rug and blankets that he'd thrown up on before, but the smell still lingered in the hut.

Starscream said that he couldn't sleep with that suffocating stench in the air.

Megatron had said that perhaps he should spend the night right next to Skywarp, and then his nose would grow accustomed to it.

Starscream had then said that he couldn't sleep while missing the blankets that Skywarp had borrowed from him and subsequently contaminated.

Slipstream said that, in that case, he could have hers; she would sleep with Soundwave.

Soundwave said he was fine with that, and Starscream was so astounded that he couldn't think of anything else to say for once.

Now, he was pouting in the darkness beneath Slipstream's blankets as he listened to everyone else's quiet breathing, interspersed with an occasional whimper from Skywarp. He wasn't sure if his younger brother was actually awake or not, but at least he wasn't throwing up anymore.

In a way, Skywarp's illness was a blessing; it gave Starscream something to think about that wasn't the large, warm back beside him. He was just thinking that maybe he would get through this night without incident when Megatron suddenly rolled over in his sleep and threw an arm over him.

His leader's giant palm rested heavily just below Starscream's navel, the heat from his body radiating through the Seeker's clothes to recreate the very same tingling feeling that he had been experiencing throughout the day; only this time, it was a hundred times worse.

Added onto the “tingling feeling”—which seemed to be growing in strength the longer Megatron's hand stayed there and the more Starscream thought about it—was a gnawing, fluttering feeling in the pit of his stomach. It was almost like an intense hunger, mixed with the kind of thrill that he felt when he was pulling off a new scheme against the gullible humans. His heart had begun to pound in his chest, and his breath caught in his throat.

Deciding that he would never be able to sleep whilst so uncomfortable, he shifted around onto his side, in hopes that he could remove his leader's hand. He only succeeded in making it worse.

Megatron, who was now spooning against his back, was roused the tiniest bit by his second's motion, and shifted to bury his face into the gap between Starscream's neck and shoulder. He exhaled heavily and settled back into sleep. Starscream bit his lip as the warm, moist sensation of Megatron's breath spread across his neck to create yet more “tingling feelings.”

It was... terrifyingly nice.

He tried to pull away, just to gain some distance between their tightly compacted bodies, and the movement shifted Megatron's hand on his waist. Starscream froze as it moved lower, and lower, and...

“Ah hhh,” Starscream half-cried, half-gasped, biting his lip to refrain from making too much noise and waking Megatron. His toes curled as a thrill swept from his groin out through all of his
extremities. The fluttering in the pit of his stomach morphed into a throbbing ache, and now a sudden, intense pressure was starting to grow between his legs, just below where Megatron's hand lay.

Starscream suddenly felt very warm, far too warm for such a cold night, even with the majority of Megatron's bulk and body heat pressing into his back. As his breath quickened and his head started to swim, he wondered if perhaps he had already managed to contract Skywarp's flu, but a virus whose symptoms were brought on by contact with one specific person seemed absurd even for organics.

Sucking in several deep breaths to calm himself, he tried to work out what in the pit was wrong with his body, and gradually started to edge away again—more carefully this time. He sacrificed the warmth of both Megatron's body and the blankets for the sake of his sanity and physical well-being, opting instead to lay prone on the cold floor as he slowly felt his heart rate and breathing return to normal. When the pressure between his legs and the heat in his face had also dissipated, he breathed a sigh of relief.

He laid awake for the remainder of the night, staring endlessly at Megatron's sleeping form as his commander shifted and stirred occasionally in his sleep, and wondered if it would really be that much of a risk to go back over there. In the end, his paranoia and terror wouldn't allow him to find out, and he resolved to keep away from the larger man as much as physically possible for the rest of his stay in this disgustingly unpredictable, squishy form.

So it was rather unfortunate that Megatron seemed determined to do the exact opposite.

Starscream rose early that next morning in hopes of escaping before his commander could resume his recent trend of hassling, only to feel Megatron's hand clamp around his ankle. He toppled over with a squeal of surprise and indignation that woke the most of the rest of the shack.

"Wait," Megatron growled sleepily at him. "I will come with you."

There was no point in Starscream telling him that his company was exactly what he had been trying to avoid, so he just had to try his utmost to walk as far away as possible as they made their daily trip to the pump. Every time he moved a little farther away, though, Megatron would close the distance again so that by the time they got there, they were practically racing each other.

They gathered their water (more than usual for Skywarp's sake), and would have made their way back in the same manner if Megatron had not slowed Starscream down by making him carry half the water.

The rest of the day went the same way.

At first, Starscream thought that perhaps Megatron was "on to him," before realizing that there was nothing to be "on to him" about. He wasn't planning anything, hadn't been planning anything, and hadn't been planning on planning anything. So, what possible reason did his self-righteous aft of a leader have for tailing him so ruthlessly?

Everywhere he turned, everywhere he looked... there was Megatron. Granted, there wasn't much else around here that he wanted to look at.

Not that he wanted to look at Megatron, either; he was just better than the alternative of human filth.

When that evening rolled around, Starscream knew that he would have to do something about the
situation. He was exhausted, and he knew that he wasn't going to get any sleep tonight if he had to spend it pressed up against Megatron again; his hot breath tickling the back of his neck, his warm hands wrapped around him, his...

The mere thought of it was starting to make Starscream feel that uncomfortable pressure, something he had been experiencing constantly that day, every time his thoughts drifted back to...

He *had* to do something!
“You want to what?” Thundercracker asked, blinking wearily down at his little brother. He had spent the entire day taking care of a very miserable Skywarp and really just wanted some rest of his own. His other brother was still vomiting every couple hours, and his fever didn't seem to have gone down at all—probably because he kept throwing up any medicine they gave him.

Anoushka had stopped by for a little bit and given Thundercracker instructions to keep his brother warm and make sure he kept drinking water even if he was throwing it up. She couldn't stay long, though—two of her own children were sick. Soundwave surmised this was the most likely source of Skywarp's own illness.

There had been a time around noon when Skywarp had suddenly perked up and they'd almost thought that he was recovered, only to have him collapse outside the hut with his fever in full force again several hours later. Even Soundwave was baffled, saying that he didn't think illness was supposed to work like that.

And now Starscream was being Starscream.

“Switch,” the younger Seeker repeated. “You sleep with Megatron and I'll sleep with Warp.”

“Warp is sick,” Thundercracker reminded him. “You didn't even want to sleep in the same hut as him last night.”

“Yes, well. I changed my mind,” Starscream shrugged. And in truth, he had decided that whatever Skywarp was suffering from couldn't be half so bad as the madness that kept infecting him every time he got near Megatron.

“Why?” Thundercracker wanted to know.

“It is not your place to question my motives, Thundercracker!” Starscream answered in his best Air Commander voice.

Thundercracker frowned at him suspiciously, but chose not to answer. Like Megatron, he had realized a while ago that it was best to allow Starscream to think that he still held some sort of control over his life; he was far easier to deal with that way. And normally, he would be fine with Starscream changing around the sleeping arrangements, but right now he needed to be with Skywarp. He knew all too well that Starscream wouldn't have the first idea what to do with him, and would likely make his condition worse.

“Has Lord Megatron approved this?” he said carefully, thinking that leaving it to Megatron would at least continue the illusion that Starscream was Thundercracker's superior.

“Approved?” Starscream snapped, clearly offended. “I make my own decisions! Why would I need permission from that senile, old—”

“I would choose my next words carefully if I was you, Seeker,” a deep, menacing voice interrupted from behind him.

Starscream threw the dirtiest look he could muster at his brother—who, from his position in front of Starscream, would have clearly seen Megatron approaching from behind—before whipping
around to face his commander.

“I wasn't talking about you,” he defended childishly, sticking his nose up in the air.

Megatron decided not to dignify that with a response, and turned instead to Thundercracker, one eyebrow raised in question.

“He wants to swap sleeping partners,” the other Seeker explained. “You for Skywarp.”

Megatron turned back to Starscream, just in time to see the murderous look that his second sent in his brother's direction before quickly schooling his features back into indifference.

“Leave us,” Megatron commanded, eyes set fixedly on Starscream, though clearly speaking to Thundercracker. The older Seeker left hurriedly, retreating to the relative safety of the shanty house.

Megatron frowned down at Starscream, hard eyes piercing straight through him. The silence stretched uncomfortably between them for several minutes, and the smaller man began to fidget.

“Well?” Megatron finally demanded, just as Starscream was opening his mouth to say something himself.

“Well what?” the Seeker snapped back.

Megatron took an angry step forward, and Starscream frantically leaped away before he could stop himself.

The warlord stopped in his tracks, expression unreadable.

Starscream didn't like it.

“Stop it!” he hissed.

Megatron's expression flickered back to his familiar scowl. “What's this all about, Starscream?” he asked in the tired tone of voice that one would normally reserve for addressing an unruly sparkling.

Starscream bristled. “You! You are what this is all about!” he shrieked at an unholy pitch, waving his arms for emphasis.

His commander exhaled heavily, but seemed otherwise unperturbed. “And what heinous crime have I committed against you this time?”

He wondered momentarily if this was about the missing Rupees, but no; Starscream wasn't nearly angry enough for that.

The Seeker quickly looked down, suddenly very interested in his own feet, and didn't answer. Megatron did not fail to notice the faint red blush that appeared along his cheeks, though. This was getting ridiculous, and Megatron's head was starting to pound like it had on the first few days when he hadn't been drinking enough water; he just wanted to finish this and get to bed already.

He stepped forward again and extended a hand, forgetting the effect that the action had caused previously. “Starscream?” he said, trying to keep his voice calm.

“Don't touch me!” the younger man howled, leaping away.

“Starscream,” Megatron repeated, even more carefully now. It was late, and it was getting dark.
The last thing he wanted was for Starscream to go running off into the night, especially after what Soundwave had relayed to him of the doctor's warnings. “I'm not going to hurt you.”

Starscream froze, eyes widening to a comical size, before he threw his head back and laughed, loud and humorless.

“You think I'm scared?” he hissed mockingly. “Of you? ” His gaze traveled up and down Megatron's figure, as though sizing him up. “You're nothing but an insignificant little bug now! No one fears you anymore! Just give Skywarp a little time, and you'll see!”

Megatron clenched his fists, but made no further move to advance on his former Air Commander. Starscream was trying to provoke him, and he wasn't going to give him the satisfaction—not this time.

“I don't have to listen to you anymore,” the Seeker continued spitefully. “I could do whatever I wanted, and you couldn't stop me! Could you?”

“Then why don't you leave?” Megatron suggested carefully, watching him intently, contemplating the best way to go about restraining him, should the need arise. “You say that you can survive on your own, so go.”

Starscream stared at him for a moment, clearly not agreeing with the non-aggressive manner in which Megatron was responding. He wanted a fight—needed a fight. Even if Megatron beat him senseless, as he knew he could, at least things would be back to normal.

“Maybe I will,” he finally hissed, turning away to head into the shanty. “Then you'll be sorry!” he called over his shoulder. “You'll wish that you had appreciated me more!”

There was a frantic scuffling noise as everyone inside the shack rushed about to make it seem as if they had not just been eavesdropping on the entire conversation. Starscream screeched at a few of them for effect, and in the silence that followed, Megatron counted down the seconds, waiting for the inevitable.

The furious shriek that echoed from the shanty drew the attention of everyone left on the street at this hour. Megatron glared at them until they went back to their own business, and then rubbed a hand across the stubble on his cheek as he waited for Starscream to reappear.

“YOU!” the Seeker howled at him before he had even gotten to the doorway. “YOU STOLE MY MONEY! YOU SLAGGING—!!”

“You mean the money that you stole in the first place, Starscream?” Megatron cut across him, quirking a brow.

Glancing past his second, he noticed Soundwave had also appeared at the entrance to the shack, and subtly shook his head at him as the furious Seeker advanced. Soundwave disappeared back into the shanty.

“It was mine!”

“It was necessary!” Megatron snapped back, holding his ground.

And then Starscream swung a punch.

And Megatron had told himself that he wouldn't—had decided back at the beginning that it was not wise in their current forms—but Starscream was being so unreasonable, and Megatron had been
trying so hard to treat him more carefully the last few days regardless, and the Seeker had no gratitude for the fact that Megatron was doing this for his sake, had no understanding of the fact that his actions had endangered his own life, and Megatron's head was pounding so hard.

Before Starscream's fist could connect, Megatron's much larger one swung round and met his face. It wasn't a heavy blow when compared to the kinds of blows that he had lain on his second in the past—his intent was to stun the Seeker and remind him of his place more than anything.

It had not been to send the smaller man sprawling on the ground, howling in pain now as blood streamed freely from his nose.

Megatron blinked down at him for a moment, an unfamiliar sense of unease settling over him. It had been so easy—just one blow—and he had been holding back, at that. What would have happened if he had been angry enough to lose control and hit Starscream with his full strength? What would happen if he kicked him? A split-second imagining of the little Seeker crushing beneath his feet the way other humans had in the past flashed through his mind, and he found himself stepping back unconsciously.

He didn't have long to dwell on it, though; Starscream was stumbling to his feet, shrieking muffled insults at his commander. He had given up on trying to stem the flow of blood in favor of rushing Megatron, both hands flailing wildly.

A somewhat stunned Megatron caught hold of his wrists and swung him around so that the Seeker's bony back hit his chest. He then wrapped his arms around Starscream's own chest, securing his arms to his sides to prevent him causing further injury to either of them.

Starscream shrieked so loudly that he thought his throat might tear, relishing the pain both there and in his damaged nose. This was how it went, how it always went—him and Megatron taking out their frustrations on each other. This was what a touch from his leader was supposed to be.

But there was something different this time, something wrong. He'd seen the look of almost-fear in Megatron's eye after hitting him, and now the warlord was just restraining him, making no further effort to punish him or remind him who he was. It was frustrating—it was infuriating. What gave him the right to flip the script now of all times, now when Starscream actually wanted it to stay the same? If this too changed, then where did that leave him?

He screamed and thrashed and kicked, but Megatron would not let him go. His grip around the Seeker's arms remained as vice-like and unbreakable as when he had first restrained him, and it wasn't right, it wasn't fair!

There were tears running down Starscream's face now along with the blood from his nose. He knew that he was being pathetic, but he couldn't stop—it felt almost as though someone else had taken control of his body and he was watching from above as he broke down.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, his thrashing finally calmed and he sagged against Megatron, still sobbing feebly.

Megatron cautiously relaxed the grip he had on his second and, once he was satisfied that Starscream had thoroughly worn himself out, released him altogether, only to have the smaller man slump back against him.

He hesitated a moment, and then wrapped an arm around Starscream's slim waist (registering on some level that it was a bit too slim, even for a Seeker), helping him over to the side of the shanty and lowering him to the ground.
The Seeker's breathing was deep and labored, still hitching every now and then. His eyes were closed, his face flushed and smeared with tears and blood. The area around his nose and under his left eye had gone a mottled reddish purple and was starting to swell. There was a gash across the bridge of his nose, which looked slightly crooked.

Megatron glanced down at his right hand, the knuckles of which had gone red and were stinging where they had made contact with the Seeker's face.

The idea that the mighty Lord Megatron was a stranger to emotions such as remorse or guilt was an illusion that he had taken pains to encourage over the millennia. They were sentiments that a warlord could not afford to show, and feeling them made him awkward and irritable.

He felt particularly irritated now because he didn't understand why the sight of Starscream's injury was twisting his insides so badly—why the sight of it had shocked him so much. He had inflicted worse on him any number of times in the past, so why now? Was it just because he had failed in his own resolve? Was it because Starscream looked so oddly vulnerable in his human form?

Megatron moved to get up and find something to wash the blood from Starscream's face, but a hand shot out and seized his wrist, keeping him in place.

Starscream's eyes were open now, red and puffy from his crying spell. Once his gaze met his leader's, they started to well over once more, a tear trickling down his cheek before he squeezed them shut again. A whispered, “Sorry,” passed his lips as he turned his head away, grip on Megatron's wrist going slack.

Something inside the old warlord's chest went ping, and he settled back on the ground, shifting around to sit beside Starscream. It was the first time he had ever heard that word pass his second's lips, and really he was the one who should be saying it this time. Megatron still didn't understand what it was that was making him care so about the Seeker's current mental state, but was at least willing to acknowledge and take responsibility for the part he had played in putting him there.

“I c-can't do it,” Starscream stuttered, voice nasally and muffled as he pressed his blood-stained face into the fabric of his leader's t-shirt. “I can't ta-ake... this!”

Megatron remained silent and unmoving as he stared at the wall of Anoushka's hut in front of them, vaguely listening to Starscream's stammered words, absently aware of a sharp pain as his second's nails dug into the skin on his arm. He didn't want to hear what he had to say; he suspected the Seeker's fears wouldn't differ much from his own, and didn't want to hear them finally spoken aloud.

“Every moment I'm forced to spend co-covered in this... this human slime is worse than the last.” He shuddered, mouth pulling into a grimace. “Spending every moment feeling so... so vulnerable!” he spat the word out as if it had a nasty taste, and sniffed again. “These... things we're confined to, they... There is no control! It just d-does things on its own without any consent, and I don't understand it, and it just... I can't...”

He broke off again, choking back a sob and pressing himself closer still to Megatron. The warlord shuffled awkwardly back. Regardless of how distressed Starscream was, he wasn't about to let the smaller man crawl into his lap.

“Don't you understand? Can't you see?” Starscream cried desperately once his voice had returned. He shuffled forward, tugging on Megatron's collar in a vain attempt to gain more of his attention. “There is no way out! We're stuck like this forever!”
It was at this point that Megatron had had enough; he couldn't listen anymore.

“Stop it!” he snapped, pulling Starscream's grip free from his t-shirt.

“What's the p-point?” Starscream continued, choking on the words as tears now flowed rapidly from his eyes. He either hadn't noticed, or no longer had the dignity to care. “What can we possibly —”

Megatron cut him off, his large hand reaching out to seize Starscream's jaw. “Talking like *that* isn't going to achieve anything either,” he said callously. “You think I don't know how you feel? We all do! But no one else is acting like you are! You need to get a grip and try *harder* .”

“I c-can't—!”

“Yes. You. Can,” Megatron insisted, looking him intently in the eyes for a split second before freeing his jaw.

Starscream stared at him for a moment in solemn silence before a creeping flush filled his face, and he hurriedly turned away. He wiped the back of his hand across his eyes and nose, shuffling back to remove all previous physical contact he had allowed with his leader.

“Or else,” Megatron added as an afterthought; he couldn't have Starscream thinking that he was getting sentimental now, could he?

As he had anticipated, Starscream turned and narrowed eyes that were still red and puffy—though now considerably dryer—from his earlier distress before sniffing again.

“And you're not swapping with Thundercracker; he needs to take care of Skywarp,” Megatron added one more time, lips quirking slightly as he heard Starscream growl in displeasure.

He leaned back against the uneven (and in no way comfortable) shanty house and glanced up at the orangey pink sky. He supposed that in some ways, especially at times like these before the sun rose above or set beneath the horizon, Earth was almost beautiful. Not beautiful enough to prevent him wanting to harvest its sun for energon, but beautiful all the same.

He was broken from his contemplations a moment later when Starscream's voice, once again proud, high-pitched, and intensely annoying, whined, “So, what *did* you do with my money?”

Megatron scowled. If only they could harvest *Starscream* for energon! His ego was surely the size of a sun by now.
“Ow! Owww! You're doing that on purpose, aren't you, you great lug!?” Starscream squealed, pulling away from Soundwave yet again.

The intelligence officer huffed slightly and shot what would have been a pleading look on anyone else over the Seeker's head to Megatron. His commander shrugged as if to say, “What do you want me to do about it?” and went back to eating the bread he'd gotten from Primus-knew-where at this hour of night. Soundwave frowned; if Megatron insisted on damaging his SIC, the least he could do was be the one to patch him up and deal with his whining afterward.

“Hold still,” the TIC ordered yet again, grabbing Starscream's face in one hand and resuming his cleaning efforts with the damp rag he held in the other.

Quite a lot of blood had dried onto the Seeker's face in the time it had taken them to pilfer a smoldering log from Anoushka's fire, stoke up their own from it, fetch some water, and boil it. Megatron had dithered around and muttered about it being unnecessary, that Starscream was just fine, that regular water would work just as well, until Soundwave had given him a long lecture about germs and infections. And then they had gotten the fire going properly and could finally see how much the bruising and swelling had spread across Starscream's face in the time since the sunlight had properly disappeared. Megatron was silent after that.

Soundwave suspected that the cartilage in Starscream's nose was broken, and was wondering if it was worth it to take him to the clinic the next day. It looked like he would have trouble breathing if his nose swelled much more. It could have been worse, though; just a few weeks ago, it would have been much, much worse.

“You look a hell of a lot better like that, Screamer,” Slipstream commented as she passed by them.

Soundwave prepared himself to stop the Seeker launching himself at his cousin, but Starscream just made a sound of annoyance and rolled his eyes. Slipstream was visibly taken aback by this lack of reaction.

“I mean,” she continued, hands on hips, “I've been forgetting lately that you're just Megatron's bitch, but this look really shows it.”

Starscream's jaw twitched slightly, but he still said nothing.

“That is to say—”

“Slipstream,” Soundwave interrupted her. “Go tell the twins that I expect them to be in bed by now, please.”

The femme hesitated just a moment before turning on her heel, hair whipping out in a curtain
behind her, and retreating into the hut from whence the sounds of overly excited twins were emanating.

Soundwave watched Starscream more carefully as he dabbed the last bits of more stubborn blood from his face. As much as Starscream had complained about his rough treatment for the duration of the operation, it was nothing to his usual attitude. He hadn't tried to hit Soundwave in retaliation, for one thing, and neither had he screamed nor really raised his voice much at all. Either the talk he'd had with Megatron had been more effective than Soundwave had expected, or...

“What are you doing now?” Starscream demanded, jerking back from the hand that Soundwave had placed on his forehead.

“Your temperature is elevated,” the intelligence officer informed him.

A few feet away, Megatron's head snapped around to face them.

“Of course it is!” Starscream griped at his fellow officers. “All that stress in that infernal heat... Anyone's temperature would go up!”

“Wasn't an elevated temperature a symptom of the illness that Skywarp is suffering from?” Megatron asked, ignoring his second.

“I'm feeling fine,” the Seeker insisted. “Other than this nice trophy you gave me.”

Megatron frowned at him. “You should rest,” he said.

“No, really?” Starscream retorted, eyes widening in mock amazement before turning back to Soundwave. “Am I done yet?”

“Yes,” his makeshift nurse replied. “Tomorrow, I think it would be wise to visit the doctors.”

Starscream grumbled something under his breath as he climbed to his feet and disappeared back into the shack. When he had gone, Megatron shuffled a little closer to the former satellite.

“I thought you said the illness was transmitted through body fluids,” he murmured.

“Influenza usually is,” Soundwave replied. “It is possible that this is not, in fact, influenza.”

Megatron groaned and rubbed his temples wearily. “At least he can't whine while he's busy throwing up.”

Thundercracker had felt a wave of guilt when he'd heard the first blow—Megatron had been so much gentler with his brother lately that he'd thought it would be okay to leave him. He'd waited, poised to run out and create some kind of distraction if need be, listening for more blows, but none had come. His brother had wailed and shrieked for a good long while, and then it was just over. He hadn't even heard Megatron yelling at all. It was the strangest disciplining he'd ever witnessed.

Not that he was complaining. When the two of them came back into the hut, Starscream's face covered in blood and tears, they had seemed more relaxed around each other than Thundercracker had seen them in hundreds of millennia, and that could only be a good thing.
Thundercracker didn't need anything else to worry about with Skywarp being in the state that he was, and Starscream hated his older brother worrying about or fussing over him anyway. Still, he couldn't fully suppress the fraternal guilt he felt at not even thinking to find out how Starscream was doing with all of this.

Slipstream was arguing with the twins about getting into their mound of blankets when Starscream finally came back inside. The two boys were currently engaged in seeing who could run around the room the fastest, and one of them bowled straight into their Air Commander just as he crossed the threshold, sending the light-weight Seeker tumbling to the ground with a twin on top of him. The other twin tripped over the both of them a moment later.

“What the frag are you doing!?” Starscream shrieked, bringing his arms up to protect his injured face as both twins tried to disentangle themselves from him in the dark of the hut.

“Sorry, Screamer!” an amused voice called out from somewhere.

Thundercracker heaved himself up from his position at Skywarp's side to rescue his other brother.

“Alright, alright!” he called over the din, grabbing hold of a twin and tossing him to the side. Whichever of them it was, he giggled in delight as he flew several feet through the air and then came running straight back for more.

“No!” Thundercracker told him sternly, and he disappeared into the darkness with a huff. “Go to bed already, you two!”

“Like I've been saying this whole time!” Slipstream added.

Thundercracker rolled his eyes at the whines of protest that rose up before turning to help Starscream back to his feet. To his surprise, Starscream did not shove him away, but rather leaned into him slightly once he was standing again.

“How do you deal with it?” Starscream asked suddenly.

“With what?” Thundercracker wanted to know.

“This,” his brother clarified, and in the little bit of light inside the hut, Thundercracker saw his hand gesturing to the whole of him. “Being human.”

Thundercracker hesitated a moment before deciding that, yes, he was serious and not just trying to change the subject. He wasn't sure that he could answer the question, though. He had been wondering the same thing for a while now—why did he find being human so much easier than
some of the others? He didn't want to stay this way, that was for sure, but he didn't feel like his whole world was falling apart the way that Starscream apparently did.

“Well,” the older Seeker began, trying to put his thoughts into some sort of logical order. “I guess I just keep reminding myself that it's not forever. Every time something new and horrible comes up, I just tell myself that I can stand anything for a few weeks or months or even a couple of years. We've already dealt with some pretty horrendous slag, after all.”

Starscream gave a snort, followed by a quick, “ouch!”

“So, what if we can't turn back? What then?” he demanded.

Thundercracker paused a lot longer this time. He wasn't about to confide his deepest fears in Starscream of all people, but if there was any advice he could give that might help his little brother regulate a bit better, then that would be beneficial to everyone.

“I've started compiling lists in my head of things I could enjoy about being human,” he said eventually.

“Like what?” Starscream snapped, and Thundercracker heard him shifting a bit, as though he were reeling back from him in disgust.

“Like being part of a species whose planet isn't totally slagged?” Thundercracker suggested, and for once, it seemed that Starscream had nothing to say to that. The other Seeker continued: “Having a chance to start over in a place where no one has a reason to hate us yet, not having to fight Autobots anymore, maybe having a relatively normal life...”

“You really hated being a Decepticon so much you'd rather be human?” Starscream asked.

“I wouldn't say that,” Thundercracker shrugged. “I certainly wouldn't have chosen it if someone had offered it to me before, but... Now that it's happened, I think it could be a good thing. I mean, did you like how our lives were going before this?”

“I'm not too fond of how they're going now,” his brother bit back.

“No, but we can do something about this. There are all kinds of opportunities to improve our situation as humans. When we were Cybertronians, there wasn't much we could have done other than winning the war. Did you really want to spend the rest of your life fighting for a victory we might never see?”

“Those are some seditious thoughts, Thundercracker.” There was a note of warning in his voice.

“Look who's talking,” Thundercracker snorted. “Anyway, the shortened lifespan is a bummer, and I sure miss flying, but the food's not bad, and—”

“The food is disgusting!” Starscream burst out. “How do you stand choking down that organic slag every day? It used to be alive for crying out loud!”

“Yeah, but it tastes good,” Thundercracker shrugged.

“Eurgh! Just thinking about it makes my insides turn! All of you constantly stuff your faces... And Megatron is the worst!”

Thundercracker opened his mouth to reply to that when Skywarp's miserably weak voice called out for him.
“I'll be back in just a sec,” he sighed.

“Don't bother,” Starscream grumbled. “Our darling baby brother needs you more than I do.”

Thundercracker hesitated just a moment before shaking his head and moving back to Skywarp's side. Starscream would get plenty of attention without him; Skywarp would not. As proof, no sooner had Thundercracker reached his youngest brother's side than Megatron had returned and was curling himself around his other brother. The sound of their low voices drifted across the room as Thundercracker tried his best to soothe Skywarp back to sleep.

It was just late enough that the first fingers of dawn were shining across the graying sky when the twins woke yet again to the sound of Megatron's bellows. Rumble popped up as fast as he could to glance over Soundwave and Slipstream to the other side of the hut where he could just make out Megatron rising to his feet and apparently shaking something off of himself. Meanwhile, Starscream was trying to get to his feet while spewing vomit despite the hand clamped over his mouth. He slipped in the puddle of what he'd already ejected and landed on his butt with an amusing splat. The Seeker sat still for a moment, and then he let out an ear-splitting shriek, his hands held out from himself as if he was disgusted by them.

Both twins burst out laughing, fully expecting Soundwave to sit up and tell them to stop any second now, and not minding in the least when he didn't.

“Stop that racket!” Megatron snapped at both Starscream and the twins.

“I don't wanna be human anymore!” Starscream wailed as Megatron sank back to the ground beside him, clutching his head in his hands.

“Shut up already!” Slipstream whined, rolling over to cover her ears with her blankets.

Thundercracker was sitting up now, too, trying to assess what was going on.

“Soundwave?” Megatron called from the other side of the room. He was sitting hunched over with his head still held tight in his hands, and his voice sounded strangely weak and shaky. “Soundwave!” he repeated more urgently when his third didn't respond.

“Hey, Soundwave!” Rumble turned to his creator and shook his shoulder. Soundwave's response was to reach out and grab hold of the boy's arm in one large, sweaty hand.

“Soundwave?”

Rumble and Frenzy both leaned in now to examine their creator. His eyes were screwed shut tight almost as if he was in pain, and his breathing was quick and shallow.

“Slipstream?” Frenzy called, all amusement suddenly draining out of his face. “I think Soundwave is...”

He didn't finish because that was when Soundwave started vomiting.
Skywarp, Starscream, and Soundwave were all too sick to move. Megatron really was too sick to be up and about, too, but insisted on trying anyway. He was stumbling around with his eyes half shut and leaning on walls every couple of steps. So far, he had managed not to throw up, at least.

Perhaps it was the shock of seeing even Megatron and Soundwave affected by the illness, but even Slipstream had shut her mouth and gotten to work clearing out the soiled blankets and floor coverings. Thundercracker and the twins had gone to get water, which Thundercracker was now using to wash congealed vomit from his brother. The bony little Seeker was shivering even in the bright sunshine. Soundwave attempted to clean himself with shaking hands until Slipstream took the rag from him and swatted his hands away with a hissing sound when he tried to take it back.

They didn't have enough clean blankets left for everyone, so they grouped the three invalids together on what was left of their flooring materials and tried to spread the remaining blankets evenly over them. Thundercracker draped the last blanket over Megatron, who had propped himself in a sitting position by the door. His leader grunted in acknowledgment and pulled the blanket tight around himself.

Slipstream sidled up to her cousin as he was started collecting the water containers to be filled yet again.

“What now?” she asked in a low voice.

“I don't know,” Thundercracker confessed, trying to ignore the aching in his own head.

Once, as a Cybertronian, Starscream had accidentally gotten a virus downloaded to his processor. It had left him sluggish and unfocused for several days, almost as if he'd been watching the world through a thick screen. Eventually, Thundercracker had dragged him to a medic, who removed the glitch in an instant, and he was off on his way as if nothing had happened.

Nothing of the experience had prepared him for the misery of a human illness.

Sometimes, he was so hot that he couldn't stand it, and he would kick his blankets off, whining for Thundercracker to bring him water. Then, all of a sudden, he would be cold—as cold as the coldest nights he'd suffered so far—and roll himself shivering up to his younger brother's side. At first, Skywarp would whimper or moan indistinct thoughts at him, but after a while, he just shivered back.

He would feel Thundercracker's hands on him, wiping hair away from his sweaty forehead or tucking the blankets around him more tightly, and his fingers would leave trails of fire or ice in their wake every time. The twins ran in and out of the hut every hour or so with deliveries of fresh water, and Megatron was always sitting up by the door, sometimes wrapped in a blanket of his own.

Starscream never really slept, but he wasn't really awake either. He would dream—horrible, confused dreams where he would fly through rough, stormy skies, only to remember that he was human now and fall down, down, down through the clouds. Or he would return to the shanty house to find that Prime had squashed the whole thing with his brothers inside.
After one especially terrifying dream, he woke shaking and crying and reached out for Thundercracker only to feel a much larger hand close around his.

“It's alright. I've got you,” Megatron's voice murmured, and another hand trembled slightly as it stroked through Starscream's hair.

But perhaps it was just another dream, because the next thing Starscream knew, Thundercracker was back, pushing water at him. His brother's hand shook now, too, and some of the water sloshed down onto the blankets.

“You need to rest, TC. You're burning up,” he heard Slipstream saying somewhere in the fog.

“I'm still better than any of them,” Thundercracker's hoarse reply came.

Starscream wasn't very aware of anything happening on Skywarp's other side, but he vaguely noticed one of the twins being tucked in beside Soundwave at some point, the other one hovering anxiously over him.

The world seemed to be humming very far away, growing and shrinking in waves. The sounds around him would be an unbearable rush echoing around his head one moment, only to fade away into near-silence the next. He had no idea if he'd been lying there by Skywarp for hours or days. It seemed there had been at least one nighttime, but the memories were too out of focus to be sure.

Slipstream finally came to lie next to him at some point, and Starscream whined as the young woman's unnatural heat radiated through him.

“Don't. Please, don't, Star,” she moaned back at him, and he complied because it was too much effort to complain.

There were snippets and flashes: Thundercracker peering down at him with fear in his eyes, more nightmares, the unbearable cold, the unbearable heat, Soundwave trying to reassure a sobbing twin, Megatron crawling across the floor to get them more water...

At some point, Starscream woke to a strange stillness. On one side, Skywarp's breathing was so slow and deep that it was almost as if he wasn't breathing at all. On the other side, Slipstream was lying half out of the blankets, her limbs in disarray and her hair strung across her sweat-slick neck like a noose. Beyond her profile, Starscream could see Megatron lying face down, halfway through the door of the shanty.

There was an oppressive quality to the air in the hut; it was thick and dusty and settled over them like an extra blanket. Starscream felt like it was impossible to pull enough of it into his lungs.

“TC?” he called, weakly. There was no reply, so he mustered the energy to call a bit louder. Still nothing.

After a few more minutes of deliberation, Starscream pushed himself up just enough to look around the whole shanty. His older brother was nowhere to be seen.

Across Skywarp, Soundwave was lying still as snow and twice as white with a twin pressed against him.


Frenzy just shook his head slightly and closed his eye again. He didn't respond when his Air Commander tried to get his attention again. Eventually, Starscream laid back down and tried to fall
asleep again, but for some reason, he couldn't get the image of Megatron splayed helplessly in the doorway out of his head. He didn't like the idea of his commander—who was supposed to be the most mighty and indestructible of them all—lying there where any of the humans could see.

He pushed the blanket off and started wriggling his way out from between his brother and cousin. Neither made any sign that they were aware of him. Standing was out of the question, so he crawled, shivering the whole way, to Megatron's fallen form.

“Get up,” he rasped when he got there, collapsing heavily on top of his leader for lack of a better way to get his attention.

Megatron groaned at him.

“Get up, you great clod,” Starscream insisted, pinching at the warlord's arm. “You're embarrassing me.”

“Heavy,” Megatron mumbled back, shifting ever-so-slightly beneath him. Starscream got the hint and rolled off of him.

With an awful lot of grunting, Megatron got all the way inside and sat himself, propped against the wall, beside his second's limp form. Starscream shivered, and Megatron reached for the blanket he'd wrapped around himself earlier to drape over the smaller man.

“It'll be okay,” he murmured, so quietly that Starscream wasn't sure which of them he was talking to. One of Megatron's hands found the Seeker's hair again, but this time he simply left it there rather than stroking. The sensation was oddly comforting. “Keep you safe... Keep you all safe...” he continued, his voice barely more than a whisper.

Starscream closed his eyes, too worn out even to sigh. Dreams in delirium made nice hopes.
On the North edge of the slum, where the train tracks bent round to cross the river before it flowed into the tangled mess of the Patna streets, stood a collection of small shacks all built from the same dank boards and rusty corrugated steel. The words “East Patna Train Depot” were still barely visible in peeling paint on some of the larger boards for anyone who cared to look closely enough. Despite the unfavorable location, what with the constant rumble of trains and the putrid scents of the river, these huts may have been just the slightest bit nicer than some of the others in the area. Their boards had less gaps between them, many had doors, and one even had warped, dusty glass in its windows. The children running around between them were cleaner and slightly better fed than most others in the neighborhood as well.

In front of one of the huts, one such child—a girl of eight or nine years old—was crouched in front of a cook fire with an aluminum pot suspended over it. Starchy water bubbled up, pushing at the lid of the pot as it escaped, and the girl scowled at it before poking at the fire with a bit of stick she held in her hand. It was mid-afternoon, and the sun was starting to angle over the river and straight into her eyes so that she had to use the other hand to shield them as she used the stick next to life the pot lid slightly and check on the rice inside.

“Dipti!” a voice called out, and the girl nearly dropped the lid in the dirt and ash around the cook fire.

“Ajit!” she whined, pouting at the boy who was running toward her down the river bank. “Where have you been?”

“Why aren't you at school?” her brother demanded when he finally came level with her.

“We had half day,” Dipti explained. “And it's collection day.”

“Why are you cooking? Movie stars don't cook! Mama!” he called into the house. “You can't make Dipti cook! Do you think that Amy Addams cooks?”

A tall, slender woman appeared in the doorway of the hut, a makeshift broom of twigs in her hand. “Who is Amy Addams?” she demanded.

Ajit rolled his eyes.

“Lois Lane! Supermans' girlfriend!” he reminded her.

“When your sister is Superman's girlfriend, then she can do what she wants, but for now, she is my daughter and she will do what I want!” his mother scolded. “Get your head out of the clouds, Ajit!”

“Are, Mama! You will ruin her image!” Ajit despaired, gesturing to his sister, who was starting to
“She's nine years old, Ajit. She doesn't need an image,” his mother countered as she disappeared back into their home.

Ajit muttered something under his breath in English, from which Dipti caught the words “Captain America” among others.

“And have you seen him today?” she asked, and her mother turned his attention back to her.

“No,” he confessed. “I went by their house, but there was no one around except the big stupid one.”

“Rumble and Frenzy said he's not that stupid,” Dipti put in.

“Well, Captain doesn't have much to say about them, either,” Ajit muttered, planting his hands on his hips and staring out over the river.

“His real name is Starscream, you know,” his sister informed him. “It sounds funny. And you're the only one who likes him.”

“He's a misunderstood genius,” the boy sniffed. “Like me.”

“Did you look inside?”

“Where?”

“When you went to their house, did you look inside?”

“Why would I?”

“They could have been home and you just didn't see them.”

Ajit turned to frown at her.

“Rumble and Frenzy are supposed to help with collection day, but they weren't waiting outside the school like usual,” she continued. “When the rice is done, I'm going to go and see if they're there. I can get a lot more stuff when they're with me.”

Her brother studied her for a minute, and then plunked down on the dirt beside her.

“I'll finish the rice; you can go.”

“Why?” she asked suspiciously.

“Because I wanna eat this rice,” he said, prodding at her impatiently. “If you see Captain America, tell him that I've been looking for him.”

“You're scared of the big one, aren't you?”

“I'm not scared of anybody!”

“So good to hear that, Ajit!”

Both children jumped as a man's voice joined in their conversation, and Ajit scrambled to his feet to face the newcomer. He was tall for an Indian man and wore a shirt that was far too white for this part of town. He wasn't old—not much older than Starscream looked—but there was something
about his face that spoke of more experience in unpleasantness than men twice his age could boast. Though, when he smiled, you could almost believe it wasn't true.

“Johar,” Ajit acknowledged him with a glare.

“Oh, come now, Ajit! We're family, are we not?” the man called Johar chuckled. “Is your mama home? You should call her out so I can say hello.”

“She doesn't want to talk to you,” the boy spat.

“Not to her own baby brother? She's a real piece of work, your mama.”

“What do you want?” Ajit demanded, shifting to stand int front of Dipti.

Johar suffed his foot in the dust and turned to look out over the river before answering. “I've been hearing some interesting stories lately,” he said. “Stories about an American boy who's been stirring up trouble in my slum.”

Ajit felt his stomach drop, but didn't let it show on his face.

“Why would an American bother with our town?” he asked. “They have plenty of money where they come from.”

“I was hoping you could tell me,” his uncle said, facing him once more. “Seeing as you spend so much of your time with him these days.”

Ajit said nothing as he felt Dipti's hands curl in his shirt.

“Oh, Ajit, Ajit, Ajit,” Johar sighed, shaking his head as he walked toward them. “You had so much freedom all because I vouched for you. I said, 'That is my sister's boy. He will not cause us trouble, so let's leave him be.' And now you make a fool of me? How could you treat your own family this way?”

“I don't have murderers for family,” Ajit hissed at the man, who was now within arm's reach.

“Someady, Ajit, you will understand that I am the most important family you have,” his uncle said in a soft voice.

Then, all at once, his hand shot out and grabbed hold of the hair on the top of Ajit's head, dragging him forward so that it took all of the skills the boy had developed running through slum streets his whole life not to fall in the fire. Dipti gave a little scream and moved as if to help him, only to be shoved back into the wall of the hut by her uncle's foot.

“This is your warning,” Johar growled in the boy's ear. “Because you are my family. You tell the Americans to go back where they belong. Tell them if they don't, I will kill every last one of them, starting with your skinny little friend!”

He shoved his nephew away from himself and the boy sprawled in front of the shanty door just as it flung open to reveal his mother once more. She froze in place as she took in the scene before her.

“Rohana, sissy!” Johar exclaimed, spreading his arms wide. “It has been too long.”

“Of course, of course. Just catching up with my niece and nephew! They're growing up nicely; you
make an excellent other, sissy.” He started back down the narrow road once more. “Don't forget, Ajit! They'll take it better from a friend than from me!” he called before speeding up and disappearing around a corner.

As soon as he was gone, Rohana dropped to the ground by her son and started looking him over for injuries.

“I'm fine, Mama!” Ajit protested, trying to push her off. “He kicked Dipti, though!”

His mother made a keening noise and left him to pull her daughter into a tight embrace.

“What did he want?” she demanded, looking between the two of them.

“Nothing,” Ajit muttered, wiping dirt from his face. “He just came to be nasty as usual.”

His eyes met Dipti's over their mother's shoulder, though, and he knew that they were in agreement—they needed to make a visit to their friends, and soon.

“I really don't think anyone's home,” Ajit murmured as they stared at the dark opening of the shanty.

They were hiding behind the same sheet of metal that he had been waiting behind for Starscream several days ago. It was a surprise that someone hadn't snagged it up for their house yet.

“Well, let's get closer and make sure,” Dipti suggested, straightening up and starting across the narrow street.

“Dipti!” her brother hissed at her, looking around furtively. Her boldness never ceased to amaze him.

“I'm not waiting here all day until they come out!” she shot back. “It's collection day; I have things to do.”

Ajit gave a sigh of frustration and rolled his eyes as hard as he could, but eventually got up and followed his sister across the street. He couldn't be outdone by a little girl, after all.

“You see?” Dipti was calling back now. “There is someone home! They're...” She slowed and then stopped just outside the doorway. “Oh.”

“What? Who is it?” Ajit demanded as he pulled up beside her, and then he understood.

It was the smell that hit him first. Anyone who grew up in the slums knew that smell—the cocktail of vomit, sweat, and something dank that altogether spelled out “illness.” Then, the shapes in the gloom of the hut resolved themselves, and he found himself looking at what very well could have been a splay of corpses littered about the room. Nearest was the one that Starscream always just referred to as “The Idiot,” slumped against a wall with Starscream himself laid across his lap. Ajit didn't bother to look at the jumble of bodies farther into the room. He stepped back unconsciously.

“They're breathing,” Dipti said quietly, and the dizziness that had been building in both of them suddenly fled.
Dipti moved first, which Ajit supposed was natural with the amount of time she spent around doctors. She entered the hut and pressed a hand to Starscream's forehead, sticking her tongue out in concentration like she actually knew what she was doing. The young man made a noise of complaint and winced away from her, but didn't open his eyes.

“See if he will wake up,” she ordered her brother before darting across the room to the others.

Ajit hesitated and eyed The Idiot carefully before stepping forward. He took one of Starscream's shoulders and shook it lightly.

“Hey. Captain, hey,” he murmured.

Starscream whined again, and this time his eyes opened a crack.

“Not today,” he moaned, his voice barely more than a hoarse whisper. “Don't feel good.”

Ajit patted his head awkwardly, trying to think of the best way to phrase what he wanted to say in English. “How you sick?” he settled for.

Starscream mumbled something back that was full of words he either didn't or couldn't understand and pulled the blanket up over his head.

“Two of them are missing!” Dipti called from the other side of the room.

“Do you think they're...” Ajit trailed off as he turned to her, unable to finish the sentence.

“One of them is Rumble,” his sister told him in a low voice. There were tears threatening to spill out of her eyes. Sickness and death were normal things in the slums of Patna. They'd already watched countless friends and family succumb to it, including their father. It never got easier.

“Money,” Ajit said quickly. “They have to have money somewhere. Look for it!”

“You're going to steal from them!?” Dipti's eyes went huge with disbelief.

“No!” he snapped. “I'm not Johar! We need money to pay the doctors.”

Comprehension dawnd on the girl's face.

“Rumble and Frenzy save their money in the back,” she said, darting out the door.

Ajit set to work searching the cracks and crannies of the hut. There was a hole in the floor that looked promising, but it just had an empty cigar case in it.

“Come on, Captain,” he muttered as he rifled through a massive pile of clothes and jewelry in one corner. “What did you do with it all?”

“What are you doing?”

Ajit jumped at the sound of a rasping voice and looked up to see the other tall one propping himself up on one elbow to stare at him blearily. What was it Starscream had called him? The Other Idiot? No, he was The Nosy One.

“Doctor,” Ajit said quickly, his English failing him once again. “I find doctor for you. First I find money for doctor. Where?”

The Nosy One shook his head slightly and laid back down.
“Money's gone,” he murmured. “Spent it all.”

Ajit gaped. He knew how much Starscream had collected, because he had the same amount stashed in his secret America fund back home. It had been the greatest trial of his young life to leave it untouched in its hiding place instead of buying all the clothes and gadgets he wanted with it. Even if he had dipped into it, there would have been a substantial amount left still. How did anyone spend 15,000 rupees in a week!?

Dipti came back then with a damp, dirt-encrusted shoe box in hand.

“Is this enough?” she asked, lifting the lid to show her brother the contents. They were small bills —100s, 500s, only a couple of 1000s—but there was a good amount; maybe 5 or 6,000 rupees and one crumpled $20 bill.

“If it's not enough for the hospital, it might be enough to buy medicine from Salar,” Ajit said, taking the box from his sister's hands.

“Salar's medicine doesn't work,” Dipti protested.

“Sometimes it does.”

“And sometimes it kills you faster!”

“We have to try something!”

Dipti scowled at him for a moment, and then she looked around at the incumbent forms surrounding them. The Nosy One was watching them still, and both children shuffled awkwardly under his gaze.

“Really no money?” Ajit asked him.

The man sighed and started extricating something from the waistband of his pants. Beside him, Frenzy whined and curled into a tighter ball.

“That's all of it,” he grunted, holding out a wad of cash in a shaking hand. “Doctor Sodisetti. Please.”

Ajit took the money, nodding. It was another couple hundred rupees. They definitely had money for something here. No one would be dying today if Ajit Singh had anything to say about it.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Hey, y'all! Just realized I forgot to ever put Spoon on this as co-creator, which she technically is, so better go fix that....

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was a seam in the handle of the water jug from where the receptacle had been poured into the mold in its earliest days, and no matter how Rumble tried to arrange his fingers on the handle, the uneven bits of plastic would rub against them. It wasn't so bad on normal days, but today, when they had already been to the pump and back four times, his fingers were rubbed raw, red, and bleeding slightly in one or two places. There was no helping it, though; his brother and creator were waiting for more water.

And doubtless someone would have thrown up again. They could only hope that whoever it was, they'd made it to the bucket first.

Beside Rumble, Thundercracker stumbled silent and determined under the weight of his own water jugs. Normally, he would have tied five or six together by their necks and slung them over his shoulders so that they didn't have to make so many trips, but today he was shaking under the effort of carrying just the two.

At first, Rumble had grilled Thundercracker with question after question—what was wrong with everyone, would they be okay, how long would it take for them to get better, why was he the only one who wasn't sick—but it had gradually become clear that the young man had no answers for him. Furthermore, Thundercracker himself was rapidly becoming too ill to be much of a conversation partner.

What would Rumble do if he was the only one left? What if he couldn't steal enough food by himself? What if one of the others got worse?

*What if one of them died?*

The boy swallowed back something that felt suspiciously like tears and took a deep breath. They wouldn't die. They couldn't. Not here. Not like this. But no matter how many times he told himself, he couldn't shake his unease. For the first time in his life, he had no creator and no sibling either by his side or thrumming in the back of his mind and spark, and he had never felt so lost.

Thundercracker stopped walking suddenly, and Rumble paused, turning to him for explanation. The Seeker was squinting suspiciously at something near their hut, which was still a few more huts down from them. Rumble craned through the crowd to see what he was squinting at, and caught a glimpse of a car that seemed to be parked in front of their hut.

“What's that?” he asked automatically. He'd never seen a car on their street before. In fact, he hadn't even thought a car would be able to fit on their street, and he squinted hard to try and see who was in it.

“I don't...” Thundercracker began, and then suddenly his eyes flew open wide. “NO!” he cried,
dropping his water jugs and taking off down the street at a stumbling run. He shoved several other humans out of the way in his desperation.

Rumble ran after him, trying his best not to drop his own water jug (he'd put a lot of effort into lugging it all this way!). He didn't know what the Seeker was so upset about, but he looked like he was ready for a fight, and Rumble was always down for that. Then, he squeezed his way around a particularly tall man who had been blocking his view and he saw it—a strange man was in the middle of pushing his half-conscious creator into the back of the car. Another one was walking out of the hut with Frenzy in his arms.

Two and two came together in his head, and Rumble finally dropped his water so that he could run to the rescue—whatever rescue he could give, at any rate. It seemed that the day they'd feared had come; the Autobots had found them.

With his longer legs and his head start, Thundercracker reached the scene of the crime first, and punched the stranger who'd been manhandling Soundwave across the face before he could properly register the imminent danger to his person. The man stumbled backward, shouting in Hindi as he tried to defend himself from the angry Seeker's assault. His comrade started back and looked about to find some way to assist when Rumble barreled straight into his legs.

“Give him back! You can't have him!” the boy howled as the man toppled over. The humans and Autobots had taken so much of his family from him already; there was no way on Earth or Cybertron that he was letting them have his twin, too.

He continued to rage and shriek at the man, swinging his small fists at any part of him that he could reach, but something was off. The man was making no effort to fight back, and seemed simply to be trying to catch hold of the boy's flailing arms, saying something to him. Rumble didn't have time to worry about it, though; Frenzy was still just lying there on the ground beside the man.

“Frenzy, go! Get out of here! I'll hold him!” he called, clawing now at the man's face.

His brother still didn't move, and then...

“Rumble! Rumble, stop!”

And the boy did stop because he knew that voice. Dipti was coming out of the hut, running toward him with Doctor Sodisetti just behind her.

“What... Dipti!? They're stealing my brother!” he exclaimed, pointing accusingly at the spluttering man whose chest he was sitting on.

“Is okay!” Dipti told him. “They doctors! All doctors!”

“Calm down, kiddo!” Doctor Sodisetti added as he ran over to pull Thundercracker off of his other colleague. “We're just taking them to the clinic!”

“You're... what?” Thundercracker paused halfway through punching the newcomer in the face and blinked between him and Rumble. “But... You mean... Who are you people!?”

“They're... they're doctors,” Rumble said, still trying to wrap his head around the concept himself.

“Dipti and her brother came and told us there were some people dying, so I brought my car around to see what we can do,” Dr. Sodisetti explained.

Thundercracker started to relax.
“You're really a doctor?” he asked.

“Yeah, he took my blood pressure once, and then he gave me candy!” Rumble announced, and then he turned to the man he'd just been attacking. “Wait, you were there, too!”

The man grumbled something in Hindi and pushed at the boy to get off of him.

_Uh-oh_, Rumble thought as he flopped over onto the dusty ground beside his twin. He knew from experience that medics didn't take kindly to getting attacked by their patients. What was it you said in this situation? He had a feeling that Soundwave had taught him eons ago, but it was something he almost never used.

“Sorry,” he finally remembered.

“Not the first time it's happened,” the man said, a bit gruffly, as he got to his feet, nursing a couple of scratches on his arm where Rumble had managed to draw blood with his small nails.

“Um, but don't we need money for... I don't now, for medicine or something?” Thundercracker wanted to know.

“We got it covered,” Dr. Sodisetti told him.

“Sorry, Rumble, I took your money!” Dipti burst out, wringing her hands as her eyes filled with tears. “We took your money and... and Doctor Krishna say is enough for medicine but not other things so Ajit go for more and...” She suddenly burst into tears and fell on him, wrapping her arms around his neck and babbling in Hindi. “I thought you dead! I thought you dead like Papa!” she finally wailed at the dumbstruck boy.

“I'm not dead,” he said in a flat voice. “And it's okay about the money.” He wished that he had thought of spending his money on doctors for his brother and creator. He also wished he knew what to do about the human girl now crying on his shoulder.

“So... will they all be okay?” Thundercracker asked, looking around between everyone, and Rumble saw now that he was swaying back and forth slightly on the spot. “My brothers and our cousin and... Everyone will be okay?”

“They should be,” Dr. Sodisetti assured him with a smile. “The smaller ones seem to have lost an awful lot of fluids for their size, but... Yeah, they should all be okay.”

A small smile flickered across the Seeker's face. He took a deep, shuddering breath, closed his eyes, and collapsed on top of the doctor.

Starscream woke slowly, his senses coming back to him in bits and pieces. He had a vague memory of someone carrying him and of riding in the back seat of what had looked suspiciously like a potential Autobot. The rest of it was a haze of inexplicable images and sensations, rather like what he was waking up to now, as a matter of fact.

Someone was talking nearby in a long, dull drone. His first thought was of Soundwave, until he realized it was a woman's voice. He could hear a general thrum of conversation throughout the rest of wherever he was, but didn't understand any of it. A baby was crying somewhere, and he winced
There was someone pressed up against his side, but it felt too small to be Megatron. Whatever he was lying on, it was not the floor of the shanty, either. It was lumpy in all the wrong ways and marginally squishier. He shifted his legs and felt his bed mate move too, a slender arm wrapping around his middle and a nose and forehead pressing into his neck. Starscream groaned and tried to roll away, but found himself coming to the edge of the bed before he could get enough distance.

“Starscream?” Thundercracker's voice drifted to him through the haze of half-sleep, and he felt a cool hand press against his forehead. “Hey, are you finally awake?”

Finally? How long had he been sleeping?

He opened his eyes and his vision was quickly filled with his brother's anxious face. Around him, Starscream could see something that was clearly not the ceiling of their hut. It was too large, for one thing, and it was an actual ceiling with lights set in it, for another.

“Where are we?” he tried to ask, but his voice caught in his throat.

“Take it easy,” his brother murmured, now caressing his hair back from his forehead. Starscream gave him a vague scowl—this felt an awful lot like mollycoddling. “The doctors said you and Warp had it the worst.”

Had what the worst? And wait. Doctors?

He blinked a couple of times to bring his vision into as clear of focus as was possible, and then turned his head to examine the room more closely. It was long and low and full of rickety old beds like the one he was lying in with... Skywarp, he confirmed with another slight turn of the head. The other beds were all occupied by native Indians, except for the couple on the other side of his brother. He could see what looked like Megatron's bulky form in the one nearest, and Slipstream was sitting up on the one beyond that, talking to a short, squat woman in a long, white coat. He guessed that Soundwave and his Pit-spawned creations were somewhere beyond that.

So, they were all here, but where exactly was here?

“Starscream?”

He turned his attention back to his older brother.

“How are you feeling?” Thundercracker wanted to know.

He didn't answer at first, taking a moment to take stock of himself. Compared to his clearer memories of recent events and all things considered, he felt pretty good. His guts didn't feel like they wanted to heave themselves all over the floor, and his head wasn't full of fire anymore.

“Like slag,” he said anyway with as much disdain as he could muster. “Where the hell are we?”

For some reason, Thundercracker smiled. “In a hospital.”

“Poorest excuse for one that I've ever seen,” Starscream sniffed.

The doctor left off talking to Slipstream then and made her way over.

“So, you've decided to join us in the land of the living, have you?” she remarked, her face a blank slate of middle-aged humanity as she pulled a small contraption with a cone on the end out of a
coat pocket. She also tugged a flimsy-looking square of white cloth from a container on a rolling metal cart at the foot of Starscream and Skywarp's bed, which she wiped the cone with. “I'm Dr. Krishna, by the way. I'm just gonna stick this in your ear for a sec.”

“What for?” the Seeker demanded, drawing closer to Skywarp. His younger brother moaned and shifted against him once more.

“It's a thermometer,” Thundercracker explained. “For reading body temperature, you know?”

Starscream still just watched the device suspiciously.

“Look, I'll do it first,” Thundercracker sighed, turning his head so that Dr. Krishna could put the cone in his ear and giving his brother a “nothing to worry about” face. The contraption beeped and the doctor pulled it out.

“Hmm... 37.8,” she hummed. “You're still running a little high.”

“Well, you're not putting it in my ear now you've put it in his! Just how many people's ears has that thing been in!?” Starscream shrieked.

Skywarp gave another, louder moan and tightened his grip around his middle. Starscream shoved at him, and he fell right off the bed with a thump and a yelp.

“Starscream!” Thundercracker cried in exasperation as he moved around to check that his other brother was okay. On the bed next to them, Megatron jolted awake with a grunt and started looking around for the commotion. Starscream paid no attention to any of this, though, because when he'd pushed Skywarp off the bed, he had finally noticed the long, plastic tube attached to his arm, pumping a clear fluid directly into his veins.

If his earlier actions hadn't woken his leader, the scream he let out now would have for sure. Several of the other occupants of the room looked over to see what the commotion was. One or two even got out of their beds to come and see.

Starscream seized the tube and wrenched it from his arm, his screams only growing louder as blood started pumping merrily out of the small hole that had been left behind. Thundercracker was trying to calm him down and the doctor was trying to get hold of his bleeding arm, but he was having none of it—shrieking at the top of his lungs about traitors and freaks and hurling invective in both English and Hindi until—

“STARSCREAM!” Megatron's voice cut across his own, temporarily silencing him. Their leader was sitting up on the edge of his bed, looking thunderous, and Starscream's eyes widened as he saw that there was a tube protruding from his arm as well.

“NO!” he howled, lunging toward him and clearly determined to claw Megatron's IV out next. Thundercracker caught him mid-lunge and held him back. “How could you let them do this to you!? They're pumping us full of their poisons! They're... they're...” the Seeker screeched as he flailed against his brother. His erratic motions were sending droplets of blood flying about, and Thundercracker looked like he might be sick again when some of it hit him in the face.

“It's saline, Starscream!” Megatron shouted, now getting off his own bed to assist Thundercracker in holding his second down. He put one massive hand on each of the Seeker's bony shoulders and shoved him back into the limp pillow.

Starscream blinked up at him, stopping for a moment as his commander's face came within inches of his own. Memories of their days of illness flashed through his mind... of Megatron's comforting
hand in his hair after his nightmares, of his commander's promise to keep all of them safe, of those last few hours lying across the larger man's lap and thinking that he really might be dying... He felt his face go red and turned his gaze away from Megatron's dark eyes.

“It's saline and nutrients, and you most of all will let them pump it into you!” Megatron told him.

“Wha... why me!?” Starscream demanded, starting to fight again as his eyes snapped back to the other man's.

“Because it was your continuous refusal to consume food on a normal basis that has made you the slowest of all of us to recover from this blasted parasite!”

Starscream gaped at him, finally stilling. What did him not eating have to do with anything? He'd thought he was eating a perfectly normal amount for someone his size; he'd yet to pass out from hunger or anything, at least. Dr. Krishna took advantage of the moment to fall on his arm and start taping a piece of gauze down over the bleeding vein. Thundercracker, apparently deciding that Starscream was now sufficiently restrained, moved away to help Skywarp up onto the edge of Megatron's bed.

That was when the whole of what Megatron had said caught up with the Seeker.

“Parasite!?" he shrieked. “You get those from food, chutiya!"

“Actually,” the doctor spoke up. “Malaria is a parasite transmitted to humans by mosquitoes.”

“I... You... What? What!?" Starscream looked frantically between his leader and the doctor's faces, searching for any sign that they were joking and finding none. “You have parasites that give you more parasites!?! What is fragging wrong with this planet!?"

“Rumble said they look like purple bananas,” Skywarp put in.

“Oh, good. Great! If Rumble says it, then it must be reliable,” Starscream sneered at him over Megatron's arm. “Shut up, Warp!”

“Leave him alone,” Thundercracker scolded, rubbing a hand up and down the youngest Seeker's back.

Starscream rolled his eyes, but felt himself calming despite himself. Somehow, it was difficult not to feel secure when he was feeling so much better than he had for the last few days and his brothers and Megatron were so close. Which was odd because Megatron's hulking mass hovering over him should have made him feel less safe, but when he tried to think about why it didn't, that now-familiar and frustratingly warm pressure started building in his guts again.

He scowled up at his leader, searching for some kind of emotional weakness he might be able to exploit in retribution for the man making him feel so... weird all the time.

“You almost got killed by a non-sentient microbe,” he settled on.

“You came closer,” the warlord reminded him.

Starscream sneered back and started to squirm beneath him.

“Will you get off me already?” he demanded.

“Will you let the doctor put the IV back in?” his commander wanted to know.
Starscream turned to glare at Dr. Krishna as haughtily as was possible for someone being restrained in a hospital bed. She stared back with that blank face of hers.

“That depends,” the Seeker sniffed. “I’m not sure I can trust a female medic.”

“Just hold his arm for me, please,” the doctor sighed, moving around to Starscream's other side. “I'll have to use the other one this time.”

“Wait... No, I'll let you!” Starscream protested hastily, mortified at the idea of being restrained for his medical procedures like some Newspark. Megatron just grunted and shifted to hold his arm down at the shoulder and wrist. “Megatron! Megatron, let go! I won't fight, so let go already!”

He pushed at the larger man's arm, but may as well have been shoving at a mountain for all the good it did him. He was starting to get tired, too, his body unaccustomed to and not ready for this level of stress after being ill for so long. A minute or two of struggling and he had to give up, slumping breathlessly back against his pillow once more.

Dr. Krishna had gathered and prepped the necessary materials in the meantime.

“You will feel a pinch,” she told him as she wiped the crook of his arm with a moist cloth.

“Wait, what?” Starscream asked, but then she was already digging the needle into him. He gave a yelp of pain, and then it was over. The doctor taped the new tube in place and then stuck the cone-shaped thermometer in his ear before he had time to get over the IV.

“38.2... I suppose it is time for your next dose of ibuprofen...” she mused, starting to wander away.

Starscream barely heard her as his attention was still consumed with the tube in his arm. He could understand the scientific reasoning behind it—if he couldn't keep fluids in his stomach, it made sense to pump them directly into his veins—but he still didn't like it. The idea of something sticking into one of his body and filling him with foreign substances almost made him want to throw up again. He wasn't about to rip it out again though, because then Megatron would no doubt lay right on top of him for however long the rest of their stay in this slaghole of a hospital ended up being.

“I won't mess with it, so will you get off me already?” he snapped at his leader. The larger man grunted and finally complied, nudging Skywarp off of his own bed so that he could lay back down on it with a heavy sigh. Starscream huffed and started shifting himself around to find the most comfortable position possible.

“Can I come back over now?” Skywarp asked tentatively, his legs wobbling with the effort of holding himself up.

“No!” Starscream griped, shifting himself down into the center of the narrow bed.

“Starscream,” Megatron growled threateningly. “Either share the bed with your brother or share it with me.”

Starscream groaned in frustration and shunted over to make room for Skywarp, too tired to bother arguing anymore.

“What kind of hospital doesn't even have enough beds for everyone?” he grumbled as Skywarp climbed eagerly into the bed and started rearranging himself around his older brother.

“The kind that's run privately out of the goodness of our hearts,” Dr. Krishna told him, returning
with a syringe of clear liquid. “Would you rather we spend our limited resources on sanitary tools so you don't get infections, or more beds?”

“I'd rather not be in this hell hole at all,” he muttered, trying to extricate himself from Skywarp's blind affections.

“Good gracious. Is he always like this?” the doctor asked, turning to Thundercracker and Megatron.

“Yes,” they said in chorus.

“Well, that's a relief. I thought perhaps he'd taken neurological damage.”

Starscream just gaped at her.

Chapter End Notes

It’s been a while since someone said it, so "chutiya" is Hindi for "idiot." Also, obviously temperatures are in celsius, being in India and all.
Megatron quickly discovered just how impossible it was to keep Seekers in bed when they did not want to be there—almost as impossible as keeping Cassetticons there. Long before Starscream was really well enough to be walking around, he was staggering down the length of their ward to the door.

The first time, Megatron managed to chase him down and drag him back before he got very far. The second time, Thundercracker stood in the doorway and argued with him until he fell over on his own. The third time, Megatron woke from a somewhat fitful slumber to find no sign of his second—or either of his brothers—anywhere in their ward.

The warlord rolled over with a groan, only to find that Slipstream was also gone. And the twins.

“Soundwave?” he moaned, and his TIC woke with a sharp inhale.

“Yes, Lord Megatron?” he mumbled, rubbing sleep from his face and sitting up.

“Any idea where the rest of our faction may have gotten to?” Megatron asked, gesturing to the empty beds around them.

Soundwave took in the damage and buried his face in his hands with a groan of his own.

“Apologies, my lord,” he muttered. “I was careless.”

“Clearly, you are still unwell,” Megatron sighed, pushing himself up. “Get some more rest; I will collect them.”

It was a testament to just how badly he needed the rest that Soundwave didn't protest to that at all. Megatron unhooked his IV bag from the wall and slung it over his shoulder before heading out of the ward. He passed Dr. Krishna on his way out, who stopped to give him an accusing look.

“I told you to sedate them,” he growled at her. “It's not my fault you didn't listen.”

Starscream had regretted leaving his room almost immediately, but far be it for him to admit that something he'd done might have been a bad idea. He was secretly glad that Skywarp had tagged along because his younger brother had recovered more than he and was proving useful as a crutch. His IV pole wasn't bad either, but the wheels on the bottom made it less than ideal.

Like the rest of the building, the hallway they were stumbling down was old, dingy, noisy, and
poorly lit. Both sides were lined with folding cots housing patients who had overflowed from various wards. Children, nurses, and doctors kept jostling past them, and both Seekers were starting to get more than a little claustrophobic and light-headed. Regardless, Starscream was determined to case the entire building from top to bottom, claiming that he couldn't get better if he couldn't feel secure in his environment. Skywarp didn't bother pointing out that Starscream never felt secure anywhere.

“We should go back,” the younger Seeker suggested after the fifth or sixth time that his brother's trembling legs nearly gave way beneath him.

“And risk getting tied to the bed, or something?” Starscream snapped at him. “Who knows when there'll be another time when they're all asleep at once?”

“The doctor said we're only going to be here until tomorrow morning. Why can't you just wait and get better?”

“I'm perfectly fine already,” Starscream insisted as he clutched Skywarp's arm with a shaking hand.

“Well, I'm getting tired. Can we at least sit down for a second?”

Starscream looked around and sneered at the recumbent patients in the nearest beds. He didn't fancy going to sit near someone who might be contagious with something even worse than what he already had, but he was starting to feel like he might throw up again if he didn't take a break.

“We can sit in the stairwell,” he finally conceded, pointing at the open doorway up ahead. “Only because you're clearly past your limits.”

Skywarp didn't bother arguing or pointing out that Starscream looked like he was on the verge of passing out himself; he was just pleased that his brother had spent the last ten minutes or so in his company without insulting, shoving, or otherwise belittling him in any way. It was a rare and momentous occasion, and when they had gotten themselves settled on the stairs, Skywarp even felt bold enough to ask Starscream if his face hurt at all.

“Why would you think that?” Starscream demanded, his hand flying self-consciously to his bruised and swollen nose.

“Um...it looks...” Skywarp caught himself before using something damning like 'horrible' and instead finished up with, “...painful.”

Starscream frowned and felt gingerly at his face.

“Is it crooked?” he asked. “It feels crooked.”

“I'm sure it'll heal,” Skywarp assured him.

The other Seeker groaned and leaned his head over to rest against the wall, making a face at a mysterious stain nearby. At one time, he might have disdained to put his head in such close proximity to such filth, but the hospital as a whole was really quite clean compared to their hovel of a home. Even some field hospitals he’d been treated in back on Cybertron had been worse, if he was willing to be honest, which he rarely was.

“Stupid, slagging Megatron and his big, fat arms,” Starscream griped.

“His arms aren't fat, Star,” Skywarp assured him. “They're muscular.”
“I am painfully aware,” Starscream snapped back.

Then, he suddenly sat up, and an expression of realization dawned across his face. He turned to his little brother with an appraising look.

“What?” Skywarp asked cautiously, leaning away from him just a bit. That was the kind of look that Starscream got when he had just realized that someone might be a perfect accessory to one of his plots.

“You know what your best quality is, Warp?” Starscream began, a smile quirking his lips now.

“I'm nice?” Skywarp guessed.

“No, you're trustworthy,” Starscream contradicted. “Come to think of it, you've never broken my confidence before, have you?”

“Well, duh. That's what confidence is all about, Star,” the younger Seeker laughed.

“See, that's what I mean. In a faction whose very name means deception, you would never think of betraying your brother's trust, would you?”

Skywarp may have been young and naïve at times, but he had been Starscream's little brother for a very, very long time, and he knew manipulation when he saw it.

“Starscream, please don't tell me about a plot again,” he pleaded. “You know it just makes me worry about you, and sure, Megatron is weak right now, but so are you and—”

“I'm not plotting anything!” Starscream cut him off, voice echoing shrilly around the empty stairwell. “I'm not stupid enough to try to overthrow the oaf right now when we need every ounce of help we can get!”

This was unusually sound reasoning from Starscream, and Skywarp leaned in a little, despite the yelling, because he was eager to find out what a level-headed Starscream might want to confide in him.

“So what is it, then?” he asked, his voice low and conspiratorial.

“I just wanted to ask...” Starscream shifted slightly, looking almost embarrassed all of a sudden. “You sleep with TC every night, right?”

“Yeah,” Skywarp shrugged. “You already know that.”

“Right, so... when he touches you, or when you're lying together at night, have you ever... Do you...” He was shuffling more now, and those parts of his face that were not bruised had flushed bright red.

“What?” Skywarp wanted to know, leaning even closer. “Do I what?”

Starscream looked around before closing the distance between himself and his brother, his lips now practically brushing the other's jaw as he began to tell him in explicit detail about the insanity that plagued his human body every time he found himself in close proximity to Megatron.

“From your gaping maw, I'm guessing you have no idea what I'm talking about,” he sighed when he had finished. “Whatever. I must just be sick...er than we thought.”

“Do you think it's serious?” Skywarp asked in a hushed voice. “I mean, that sounds really
uncomfortable. And it only happens when Megatron is around?"

“When he touches me,” Starscream clarified. “I dunno. Maybe it's an allergy, or something.”

A shrill laugh behind them made both brothers jump, and they turned to find that Slipstream had appeared in the doorway of the stairwell.

“Where the slag did you come from?” Starscream demanded.

“Sorry,” she said, though she looked anything but. “I couldn't help but overhear—Screamer’s volume control issues and all—and, darling, trust me; that is not an allergy.”

“What would you know about it?” Starscream sniffed, shoving his swollen nose as high in the air as he could. “You don't even have those parts.”

A devious smile spread across the femme's face as she started toward them.

“What would I know?” she repeated, her voice lowering as she dropped down between the two of them. “I know that you're not telling the whole truth. It's freaking you out, isn't it? But at the same time...” Her devious smile widened. “At the same time, it feels good, doesn't it? You want more of it, but you're scared to admit it. But sometimes, when no one else is looking...” She leaned in and whispered something in Starscream's ear that Skywarp couldn't hear, but Starscream's eyes suddenly shot open so wide that they looked like they would fall straight out of his head.

“But you're right,” the femme finished, sitting back again. “I'm a girl. I don't have those parts. I don't know anything about it...or do I?”

Starscream narrowed his eyes at her, considering.

“Skywarp,” he said finally, gaze still fixed on their cousin. “Leave us. Slipstream and I have things to talk about.”

“But—” Skywarp started, and Starscream's gaze locked onto him instead.

“Are you disobeying a direct order?” the former Air Commander demanded.

“Oh, don't worry, Warp,” Slipstream laughed airily, giving him a playful swat. “I'll tell you the important stuff some other time, but this is more of a one-on-one kind of conversation.”

“You really will?” Skywarp confirmed, still hesitating.

“Primus! Yes, she will! Just go already, dumb-aft!” Starscream snapped at him, shoving his brother so that he nearly toppled down the stairs.

Skywarp gave him a hurt look, which Starscream responded to with a sneer. The younger Seeker finally got up and walked away, bottom lip quivering slightly.

“Why is he such a fragging wimp all the time?” he heard Starscream mutter to Slipstream as he turned the corner.

Skywarp tilted his face up to the ceiling as he walked back down the hallway to prevent the tears welling in his eyes from spilling down his face. He was well used to his brother's shifting moods and general—for lack of a better word—bitchiness, but somehow it still hurt. He should have stayed in their ward with Thundercracker and just let Starscream pass out somewhere.

But vindictiveness had never been Skywarp's strong suit, and he felt a surge of panicked concern
the moment the thought of Starscream lying helpless in some hallway full of strange humans entered his mind—a panic that became very real as it occurred to him that he himself was now strolling down just such a hallway.

Skywarp paused and looked around, torn between having to push his way alone through all these busy, impatient humans or going back to face his brother, who would in no way sympathize with his reasons for interrupting his conversation.

He took a step backward, more out of reflex than anything, and glanced into the room that this had lined up with. It looked much like the one that he and Starscream had come from earlier, though there seemed to be a higher ratio of children to adults.

He was just about to scurry away before anyone could notice him when a familiar profile happened to catch his eye on the far side of the room—Anoushka was sitting in a folding chair by one of the beds.

Skywarp didn't even bother thinking about why his neighbor might be here; he was just thrilled to find a third option to his predicament.

"Anoushka!" he called, making his way through the rows of beds toward her.

The woman looked up sharply, and Skywarp drew to a halt a couple of beds away when he caught sight of her face, blotchy and tear-stained. His gaze drifted to the bed in front of her, on which two of her three sons were lying. The third was nowhere to be seen.

A dark thought started niggling at the back of his mind as he struggled to remember the name of the missing child.

"Was it... Did they get malaria, too?" he wanted to know.

Anoushka nodded, swiping at her eyes with one hand and holding the other one out to the boy.

"You are okay?" she asked. "You and your brothers—you are all okay?"

"Um...yeah. We all..." Skywarp trailed off. He was thinking of when they had first gotten to the hospital and the concerned way the doctors had looked at himself and Starscream. They had spoken to Thundercracker in hushed voices while they thought Skywarp was asleep, telling him how close the younger two Seekers had come to dying, telling him how many humans succumbed to the illness every year.

"Is your other son... Is he still at the house?" he asked eventually, out of denial more than hope.

Tears welled up again in Anoushka's large, brown eyes as she stared up at him for an endless moment, and then she was pulling him down into her arms and sobbing and wailing like her very heart had been ripped out. And Skywarp knew that, as a Decepticon, he shouldn't care about the death of a human child, let alone one that he had barely known a week, nor the pain of its mother, but Anoushka had been nicer to him than anyone except Thundercracker had ever been in millions of years.

It wasn't fair.

It wasn't fair, and Skywarp felt he had the right to cry about it if he wanted to.
Megatron had assumed that he would find his missing Seekers in the most chaotic area of the hospital, but that turned out to be the maternity ward. There was nothing much there but a bunch of wailing organic spawn that seemed to garner far more attention and affection from the adult humans than Megatron thought proper. He was just turning away in disgust when he discovered that there actually was a Seeker there, though not necessarily the one he had been looking for.

Thundercracker was standing some ways away, staring fixedly at one of the babies in particular as if it had hypnotized him. He was standing so still that Megatron had mistaken him for a coat rack at first glance.

“Thundercracker,” he snapped now, and the young man started from his revery. “Where have your idiot brothers gotten to?”

“My apologies, Lord Megatron,” Thundercracker said, straightening up. “I dozed off for a moment earlier and they disappeared.”

Megatron grunted in annoyance—not at Thundercracker, but the Seeker seemed to take it that way.

“I...I'll find them straightaway, sir!” he stammered. “And I'll be more diligent in the future!”

His commander frowned down at him. Although several inches taller and a bit broader (probably because he actually ate food) than Starscream, Thundercracker bore a striking resemblance to his younger brother even in this form. How two people could look so similar but be so different, Megatron would never understand. The look of penitent concern twisting Thundercracker's face now was one that he would never see on his second's in a million years.

“Continue down this hallway and keep an eye out for the twins, too,” Megatron finally growled, turning away. “I'll go back the other way.”

Thundercracker acknowledged the command and headed off around the corner while Megatron began retracing his steps. He thought he might remember there having been a stairway on the far end of the hall by their ward, and he would in no way put it past Starscream to have snuck off down it.

People stared as he breached the hallway crowds, likely wondering what this American man was doing in their hospital, but Megatron didn't notice them. He had a Seeker to track down.

When he finally reached the stairwell and passed through to find Starscream and his cousin huddled conspiratorially together on the top step, there was some part of him that registered there was more than annoyance flooding his veins.

“Starscream!” he barked, and the Seeker jumped so violently that Megatron was surprised he didn't topple straight down the stairs.

“What!” Starscream shrieked at him, his face a violent shade of red as he stared wide-eyed at his commander. Beside him, Slipstream broke into gales of hysterical laughter for no apparent reason. Megatron scowled at the both of them.

“You know what!” he growled, wondering why his second's eyes seemed to keep wandering to somewhere around his waistline. Perhaps he had something on his pants? Whatever it was, it would have to wait. “Where is Skywarp?”

“How should I know?” Starscream sniffed. “He went off to sulk somewhere. I'm not in charge of
Megatron was about to point out that, as Air Commander and second-in-command, Starscream was in charge of him, but decided that was one thing he didn't need the conceited glitch remembering just now.

“Both of you get back to your beds this second or I will carry you there myself and tie you in place!” he threatened instead.

To his confusion, this elicited only even more raucous laughter from Slipstream and, even more surprisingly, had Starscream scrambling to obey before he could even take a step toward him. The Seeker gave him a wide berth as he passed, as if afraid that Megatron would try to pick him up anyway, and almost tripped over his IV pole when he tried to throw a frantic glance back over his shoulder. Slipstream went staggering after him a moment later, gasping for breath through her uncontrollable amusement. Megatron stared after them, mouth slightly agape, for several seconds before shaking himself and following; he still had one more Seeker and two Cassetticons to locate.

Chapter End Notes

Spoon and I are in disagreement over whether or not she deserves to be credited as a co-author on this. She says no. I say yes. We are at an impasse. Tell her that she's being silly, guys.

Love you, Spoony!
Chapter 23

Thundercracker and the twins were back in their ward by the time Megatron returned there with his own batch of miscreants. The Seeker had apparently found them giving their all to break into a vending machine on the first floor. Megatron didn't bother asking how Thundercracker had gotten them back upstairs, but there was a suspiciously sticky quality to their hands and faces.

Skywarp surfaced on his own shortly afterward, his face puffy and wet from crying. He did nothing but shake his head when Thundercracker asked what had happened, but Megatron could tell from the leery glances that the oldest Seeker was throwing in Starscream's direction that they had the same idea about the culprit's identity. However, Starscream had passed out just seconds after getting back into his bed, and Megatron made it painfully clear what would happen to anyone who woke him up before the doctors discharged them the next morning.

And so the Decepticons managed to pass the rest of the evening in relative peace and quiet.

The list of instructions that the doctors gave them the next morning was endless. Megatron tuned it out halfway through (there was only so much space in his aching head for new information still), so it was fortunate that Soundwave had the sense to write it all down. The general gist that Megatron picked up was: take these pills every day for the rest of forever, don’t get bitten by mosquitoes anymore, and the pills might make you sick but not as sick as you were so that’s good, right? Oh, and make sure that Starscream eats something.

And then they were released into the wild once more.

The walk back to their hovel of a home was exhausting to say the least. What normally would have taken some 40 minutes ended up taking three hours with all the rest stops they had to take. At one point, Starscream laid down by the side of the road—practically in one of the sewer ditches—and declared that he couldn’t move another step. Megatron would have picked him up and carried him just to have done with it, but he didn’t trust his own legs to carry both their weights. It took 30 minutes of Megatron threatening, Thundercracker negotiating, and Slipstream mocking before they managed to get the little twerp going again.

They found a couple of squatters in their shanty when they finally reached it—two drunken old men who had taken advantage of their temporary absence. A few blustering shouts and threatened blows from Megatron had both of them scrambling for the door in moments, but what was not so easily gotten rid of was Slipstream’s frenzied rage at realizing that almost all of the clothes, jewelry and other trinkets that she’d amassed over the past few weeks were now gone.

Megatron could hear Soundwave speaking to her in a low voice just outside the shack for what felt like hours while she raved and raged about untrustworthy humans and the calamities she would visit upon the whole of the deplorable slum as soon as she regained her Cybertronian glory.

No one seemed to have the energy to point out that she had stolen all of it to begin with.

As a matter of fact, it looked as though most of Megatron's remaining troops were too tired to do anything much besides crawl into their remaining blankets and go to sleep. Even Starscream had apparently lost his interest in rebellion now that the relief of his initial recovery had worn off.

Megatron wasn't sure why, but it had been strange sleeping alone while they were in the hospital, and he felt a strangely wistful tingling sensation every time he glanced over at the lump of blankets in the corner that was his second. Unfortunately, he had other things to worry about, like where
their next meal was coming from. Having spent every last bit of money they had on their hospital stay and medicine, they were going to have to steal again, and it was a daunting task with most of them still compromised in their coordination.

“I can help!” Rumble offered when Megatron finally voiced this to Soundwave.

His TIC also offered his efforts, but Megatron took one look at the way his legs shook when he stood and pushed him back down.

“I need you in top shape again as soon as possible,” he rumbled. “Thundercracker, how are you feeling?”

The Seeker looked up from where he had been rubbing a comforting hand over Skywarp’s back and considered.

“Well enough, sir,” he eventually replied.

“I may need to send you out…” Megatron stopped as a small voice called out from the doorway.

“Hello…?”

Dipti was hovering uncertainly at the entrance to their hut, a cloth-wrapped bundle balanced on her head. Rumble and Frenzy immediately ran to greet her, tugging her into their home and speaking rapidly.

“Lord Megatron, this is Dipti,” Frenzy announced. “She’s the human that saved the Decepticon cause!”

“Not only me,” the girl protested, going bright red under the adults’ scrutiny. “Ajit use his money, too.”

“What!? Starscream shrieked, suddenly sitting up.

Megatron also looked to Soundwave for explanation; this was the first he had heard of any of this. The intelligence officer sighed and rubbed a hand across his face wearily.

“The girl and her brother are the ones who summoned the doctors for us,” he explained. “I believe that the boy used some of the money that he obtained during his and Starscream’s ventures to pay for our medical fees.”

“WHAT THE HELL!?” Starscream demanded. “Why would he do that? What does he want!?”

“Nothing,” another voice spoke up from the doorway, and there stood Ajit himself, a pout fixed on his face and a large pot clutched in his hands.

Most of the focus in the room instantly shifted to him as fragrant smells began wafting from said pot.

“Friend help friend,” the boy stated simply, setting down the heavy dish. “Mama say to bring food because you come out of clinic today.”

“Your mother sent this?” Megatron verified, and then when Ajit nodded: “But she doesn’t even know us.”

“Because Captain… er… Starscream? He help me find money, sir,” Ajit explained.
“Your mother is proud that you steal from others to make a living?” the warlord wondered.

The boy looked down at his feet. “Nossir,” he mumbled. “She… she does not know where from, sir.”

Starscream made a derisive noise and flopped back down amongst his blankets. Megatron sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“We cannot accept…” he began, but then felt Soundwave’s hand on his arm.

“My lord,” his lieutenant murmured. “At this point, it feels that survival may be more important than pride.”

“What I’ve been saying this whole time,” came Starscream’s resentful mutter from the other side of the room.

A fierce struggle began within Megatron—one that could have rivaled some of his more glorious battles with Prime—as Soundwave’s logic came head-to-head with Megatron’s deep-seated, and admittedly rather petty, need never to let Starscream win. His jaw worked back and forth in the only outward sign of the conflict, as he considered the pros and cons of accepting the food. Pros: he wouldn’t have to organize a raiding party to get them food, and he himself would also be able to get some more rest. Cons: it showed weakness, and Starscream might take this as a cue that he was allowed to do whatever he liked.

Which he already did anyway, Megatron realized.

“Very well,” he said finally. “We will accept your offer, but know this: Lord Megatron always pays back his debts.”

Ajit nodded and gave a “Yessir!” before the twins hooted with joy and fell upon the food. Dipti produced several rounds of naan bread from the bundle she’d been carrying on her head, and the children started dipping it eagerly into the thick, gloopy substance in the pot. After a while, Thundercracker also moved forward to get first a portion for Skywarp, and then for himself. Megatron motioned Ajit toward him.

The boy hesitated, looking like he’d rather run straight back out the door, but eventually edged closer.

“Remind me of your name, boy,” the warlord asked.

“Ajit, sir. Ajit Singh,” he replied in a small voice, eyes fixed on the ground at his feet.

Megatron was intrigued. He had seen the boy running around with his second several times in the past, and never had he displayed this level of timidity before. The warlord had assumed that anyone who got along with Starscream must needs have the same kind of personality, but Ajit clearly possessed an understanding of authority and respect that Starscream never had.

“What do you know of us, Ajit Singh?” Megatron asked, and the boy shrugged.

“From New York, you no like police… but better than the others,” he said.

“What others?” Megatron wanted to know.

Ajit licked his lips and fidgeted slightly.
“The others… the gang,” he said finally. “They hurt and they kill…”

This sounded a bit like another group that Megatron could think of, but he didn't mind that Ajit had a skewed conception of them if it had bought them their lives.

“They say…” Ajit continued, and he finally looked up, his eyes flitting to the lump in the corner that was Starscream. “They say they will kill **him**. Because of stealing.”

Megatron stiffened and looked around at the others. They were all occupied with the food that the Singh had brought, and didn’t seem to have heard any of what was just said.

“Who told you this, and what exactly did they say?” the warlord demanded, his voice low.

“I…” Ajit looked even more uncomfortable now. “Leader for this area. He come to say to warn you. Last warning, he say. Go home or they kill all of you, but.. Captain first.”

‘Captain’ being Starscream, Megatron remembered. A familiarly inexplicable burst of anger surged up within the warlord at the thought.

It was frustrating to be threatened by a bunch of pathetic little humans, yes, but even more frustrating was to realize that he couldn’t actually do anything about their threats in this form. They were outmanned, outgunned, and their opponents would have the home field advantage.

“Thank you for telling us,” he grunted, giving a nod to show that this conversation was over.

Ajit bowed slightly and then scampered away to say something to his sister. Megatron let out a heavy sigh and turned to Soundwave, who had been listening to the whole conversation.

“This is ridiculous,” he declared.

“We do not have the resources to advance our plans at this point,” Soundwave murmured back.

“Yet, we will have to figure out something; fast.” Megatron's gaze traveled across the room to his second once more, but this time there was no wistful tingle. Why did the little glitchmouse have to be so much work?

Skywarp enjoyed the food, though not as much as Anoushka's cooking, and the Singh siblings brought an energy into the shack that was much needed after the events of the last few days.

Dipti went out with the twins for a while and helped them find and fill some new water jugs. Ajit sat with Skywarp while Thundercracker and Megatron went in search of any more blankets they might be able to find; the youngest Seeker was soon laughing so hard he started snorting at the boy's stories.

Rumble and Frenzy got in on the action when they returned, and then Ajit started recruiting the lot of them into acting out his idea for a film he would make someday. “Captain India,” he called it. There were a lot of explosions and a couple of decapitations. It was fun stuff. Skywarp would have expected one of the officers or Slipstream to tell them to stop, but Slipstream was still busy monopolizing Soundwave’s attention and Megatron was focused on trying to get Starscream to eat.

Skywarp wasn’t sure what the big deal was there. Starscream was skinny, yes, but there were
plenty of people far skinnier in the slums. At any rate, Megatron seemed to be fighting a losing battle, but of course that was nothing new to the leader of the Decepticons. Skywarp stayed only vaguely aware of them throughout the afternoon and into the evening when Ajit and Dipti finally went home.

Skywarp stayed awake later than the others that night, curled against Thundercracker's warmth as he listened to the sound of gentle breathing fill the shanty. Someone was snoring slightly, probably either Starscream or Slipstream. Skywarp let out a contented sigh of his own and was just starting to drift off to sleep when the sound of shouting jolted him back to consciousness.

It didn't take long for him to figure out that it was coming from next door. There were two voices, one of them Anoushka's, the other a man's—her mate's, he realized. The Seeker lay very still, hardly breathing, as he listened to the two of them going back and forth and over each other. He had never heard Anoushka shout like that. It sounded almost like when his brother fought with Megatron.

And then, suddenly, Anoushka's voice cut off with the distinct sound of a blow, and her shout turned into a scream. There were several more blows, and then crying and the man yelling.

Anger burned at Skywarp's insides. His friend didn't deserve this. She had lost a child just yesterday; she didn't deserve to have her mate treat her like this now. He imagined running into the hut next door and shielding her, maybe pushing her mate away, telling the bastard what he thought of him... But then he also thought of what would happen if her mate then turned his blows on him, and the anger turned to fear and doubt.

What could he do? He wasn't Megatron or Soundwave who could easily intimidate another man with a single look. He didn't have Thundercracker's courage or Starscream's determination. Tomorrow, he told himself. Tomorrow, he could do something to help his friend, but he just wasn't strong enough to do anything now except wrap the blanket around his head and pretend that he couldn't hear it.
Human children bounced back faster than adults, it seemed, and Frenzy had regained his usual energy days before the others had moved past lying around 80% of the time, much to his twin's delight. With their creator still too tired to monitor them, they could get up to just about anything so long as they allowed him to smear the foul-smelling insect repellent they'd gotten from the doctors over all their exposed skin a couple of times a day. Of course, they ended up spending a good amount of time snatching food to bring back to the others and collecting trash to sell with Dipti, but they managed to find some time for their own endeavors as well.

Like this morning, when they found themselves perched atop a neighbor's shanty roof while they entertained themselves by throwing rocks at passersby. Dipti was hovering just behind them where she kept saying that they should stop before someone tried to get back at them, but she also couldn't seem to stop herself giggling along with them as their victims shouted in a garbled mix of English and Hindi at them, shaking their fists threateningly.

None of the locals could make good on any of their threats, anyway; they were all too short, too unfit, or too uncoordinated to climb up after them. The children's own path had involved clambering over trash piles that proved too flimsy to bear the weight of adults. So, they were having the time of their lives up in their new-found sanctuary, tormenting the dim-witted squishies with their far more pleasant squishy friend.

That was, until Frenzy made the mistake of throwing a rock at a rather tall passerby, who—when he turned around to locate his assailant—turned out to be Soundwave.

“Oops,” Frenzy whispered, his and Rumble's stomachs both dropping straight through the roof they were sat upon as they made eye contact with their creator. Even from this distance, they could see the irritated expression on his face—never a good sign on someone who could normally model for a catalogue of emotionally-challenged mannequins.

“What will he do?” Dipti squeaked, shrinking behind the twins.

“Don't worry; he can't reach us,” Rumble assured her in a low voice.

Wrongly, as it turned out.

Had the children's brains been working fast enough, they would have had time to get a decent head start before Soundwave had run, jumped, caught the edge of the shanty roof, and pulled himself up. As it was, the twins barely had time to shout, “Run, Dipti! We'll hold him off!” before their vengeful creator had snared the both of them and was dragging them back to Earth.

“You shouldn't let them influence you,” he intoned when he saw Dipti peering over the edge of the roof at them.

“Sorry, sir,” she murmured.

“Remember us!” Frenzy shouted before his creator snared him in a headlock.

Soundwave just sniffed and began dragging his wayward creations away from the scene, Rumble caught securely by the forearm and Frenzy still trapped beneath his creator's own thick arm, as it had been he who had launched the offending projectile.

Both twins struggled fiercely, not knowing what fate might await them back at the shanty, but
Soundwave was undeterred.

“Urgh! I can't breathe!” Frenzy cried in a last ditch effort at freedom.

His creator either didn't buy it or didn't care because he simply tightened his grip.

Several agonizingly painful minutes later and Soundwave was dragging the both of them into their own shanty and dumping them on the uncomfortable, disused bed in the corner. On the other side of the room, Starscream sat up from among his nest of blankets, where he'd been napping, to watch the drama unfold.

“What's going on? What did they do?” he demanded.

Soundwave ignored him and continued to glare at his creations until one of them worked up the courage to speak.

“Sorry,” Frenzy grumbled under his breath, keeping his gaze fixed on the floor like there were weights in his eyeballs.


Soundwave shot him a similar look to the one he was giving his creations and turned to Rumble expectantly.

“Wha-att?” Rumble complained loudly. It was the greatest injustice how he was always getting blamed for things his brother had done. Never mind that it happened the other way around just as often. “I didn't chuck that rock at you!”

Starscream burst into laughter. “Oh, dear Primus! How stupid can you get!?”

“Shut up, Screamer!” Frenzy snapped. “It's not like I knew it was him!”

“I am not angry with you for throwing stones at me,” Soundwave told them as long-sufferingly as possibly while Starscream continued snorting with laughter behind him.

“You're not?” the twins chorused.

“I am angry with you for throwing stones at people in the first place.”

The twins looked confused, and Starscream suddenly sobered up.

“Why?” Rumble ventured after a while.

“You would do well not to make enemies out of people you may one day need to rely on,” Soundwave explained.

Starscream scoffed. “Like we need those fleshy—”

“There is no telling what the future holds for us,” Soundwave cut him off loudly, “and our lives have already been saved once by the good will of humans.”

“Yeah, but those were humans we know,” Frenzy objected. “It's not like we have to be nice to all the humans... is it?”

“There was a time when you did not know Dipti, was there not?” Soundwave pointed out. “What if
you had thrown rocks at her?"

The twins fell quiet again. Of course, their creator couldn't know that the two of them had become friends with Dipti in the first place by throwing rocks at someone else, but it did raise a good point. What if they had thrown that rock at the wrong person that day? Would the other girl have had a brother who was so generous with his resources? Would she have been so well-acquainted with the doctors that she could have convinced them to go so far as to bring a car to transport them when they couldn't get to the clinic on their own? The careless throw of a stone very well may have cost them their lives as easily as it had saved them.

“We're sorry,” Rumble muttered.

“Soft-sparked glitches,” Starscream muttered, clearly disappointed that things had resolved without any shouting. Frenzy stuck his tongue out at the Seeker, who returned in kind.

“I trust you have not been spending all your free time hurling stones at helpless organics?” Soundwave said, grabbing Frenzy's face and turning it back to himself.

“Oh, yeah!” Rumble exclaimed, jumping off the bed to grasp his creator's other hand. “Wanna see? But not you, Screamer. You're not good enough.”

“Pff! More like too good,” Starscream snorted. “I'm not interested in your chump change projects.”

Soundwave had to fight back a smile despite himself as his two creations led him out and around the back of the shanty house to a somewhat conspicuous pile of rocks whose existence and purpose he had been aware of for a while.

“Is this it?” he wondered aloud for effect.

“No, boss! Look!” Frenzy shouted enthusiastically as he knelt to shift some of the rocks away. An old, battered shoe box started to emerge. When it was mostly exposed, Rumble grabbed hold of it and shook it loose the rest of the way.

“See?” he declared, opening the top to reveal—

“Rupees?” Soundwave verified, kneeling down to see it better.

Rumble smiled. “We had more before the malaria, but we've been saving up again.”

Soundwave reached out to count the money. There wasn't much there, maybe 600 rupees (which, after he did a rough calculation with his embarrassingly slow and imprecise human brain, was only about 10 USD).

“What are you saving up for?” he asked, curious.

“Ya know,” Frenzy shrugged, taking the money back and bending to hide it beneath the rocks again. “Just in case.”

“Of course,” Soundwave agreed, and this time, he did smile. “Just in case.”
Frenzy straightened up, wiping dirtied hands on his equally filthy shirt, and both twins' faces split into far more innocent grins than Soundwave had ever thought them capable of. All at once, he felt an urge to do something he had never done before.

“Come here,” he said, extending his arms toward them.

After a moment's hesitation, they stepped forward. Soundwave wrapped an arm around each twin and pulled them close against his chest as he had seen other parents do. Two small heartbeats joined his own as his creations nestled unexpectedly into the touch. They were warm and soft and fragile against him, and despite all their flaws, he was just glad that they were still alive, whether Cybertronian or not. He wondered if this was what all human parents felt for their children.

“Um... Boss?”

Frenzy's voice brought him back to his senses and he released the two of them.

“I, uh... I appreciate the both of you,” he announced with an awkward cough as he got to his feet. “Continue your endeavors.”

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Despite his rebellious streak at the clinic, Starscream had done little but sleep since their return. It wasn't that he didn't have anything else he'd rather be doing—he was actually feeling more clear-headed and emotionally stable than he had in weeks—but that was exactly why he was resting. He owed Ajit a massive debt, and he intended to regain his strength as quickly as possible so that he could repay it. The boy said he wanted nothing in return, but Starscream wasn’t willing to gamble on that being true.

Soundwave's conversation with the twins was bothering him, though. It was all too true that their survival in this world could well depend on cooperation with the other humans, but he didn't like the idea. Just thinking about making nice with anyone he didn't want to had always made him feel rather like his throat was being drawn up through his mouth with a pair of soddering irons, but making nice with inferior lifeforms? All the inferior lifeforms?? That was just ridiculous!

“You would do well to exercise more congeniality to those who have shown it to you, at least,” Megatron told him when the Seeker had found the courage to broach the subject that night. “But I hardly expect you to ever be capable of something so drastic as learning manners.”

Starscream gaped and nearly threw his unwanted dinner at his commander before realizing that this would only prove his point. The two of them were seated outside the hut, eating some perfectly good rice with veggies in it that Thundercracker and Skywarp had found in a dumpster behind a restaurant. Or rather, Megatron was eating and Starscream was trying to avoid eating.

“I'd have you remember that I was a member of the Vossian high caste before you dragged me down to your pits!” he screeched.

“No, you were a member of the Vossian high caste until they kicked you out for your reprobate behavior, and you came crawling down to my pits because no one else would take you,” Megatron reminded him. “Eat some more rice.”

Starscream grimaced at the plate in his lap and pushed it aside.
“Starscream,” Megatron growled warningly.

“I’ve had enough,” the Seeker protested. He wasn’t going to eat any more regardless of what his leader wanted to threaten him with tonight. The thought of what he was putting in his body made his insides churn, and then the feel of it stretching his stomach, weighing on his guts, moving through him ... He would rather be hungry.

“Fine,” Megatron relented, apparently sensing that he had pushed his second as far as he could on the subject of food tonight. “At least drink some more water.”

He reached around the smaller man and grabbed the unfinished plate before starting to shovel the leftovers down his gullet with all the finesse of one of the many stray dogs wandering the streets of the slum.

“And you have the nerve to lecture me about etiquette,” Starscream sneered.

“As a former member of the high caste, you should know Starscream; etiquette is a tool to wield when needed,” Megatron replied through a mouthful of rice. “You are someone I have never needed that tool on, nor who has ever done anything to deserve it.”

Starscream watched him eating a moment longer, and then quickly looked away as his and Slipstream's conversation at the clinic suddenly came back to mind.

Knowing what his body was doing—what it wanted from his leader—made things both simpler and more complicated. For one thing, he found it easier to calm himself down when he had his... reactions now that the element of fear and enigma had mostly been removed. On the other hand, he was now beset by an almost ever-present roar of disgust and shame and something else that he couldn't name in the back of his mind that fluctuated in volume depending on the circumstance. Right now, it was getting louder.

“I could be,” he muttered.

“Could be what?” Megatron wanted to know, putting the finished plate of food aside.

“Someone who deserves your etiquette,” the Seeker sniffed.

Megatron gave him a long, unidentifiable look, and Starscream felt his face warm. After a moment, his leader reached out a hand. The smaller man flinched, but Megatron just clasped his warm, strong hand around the back of his neck in what Starscream might have called an affectionate manner from anyone else.

“Starscream, I would love nothing more than for you to put in the effort to become that kind of person,” Megatron declared. He stroked his thumb up and down through the short hairs on the back of his second's neck a couple of times before giving him a little smirk and pulling away.

Starscream continued to stare at him for a while without really seeing him as the heat in his face started spreading throughout his body, and with it the roar in the back of his mind became almost deafening.

Disgusting.

Repulsive.

Shameful.
And a hundred other things Megatron would say if he ever knew what Starscream wanted from him swirled round and round in his head, until he shook himself and got to his feet.

“I’m going to bed,” he announced, heading back into the hut without waiting for any sort of reply.

He could handle being sexually attracted to Megatron; it was just human hormones playing games with his brain, after all. Not to mention, he was used to wishing things on Megatron’s person, either secretly or not-so-secretly, that his leader tended to object to when he found out. Granted, they tended to be substantially more violent than what he would like to do with his leader this time around (although, according to Slipstream, this could be surprisingly violent if the involved parties were so inclined), but that shouldn’t make a difference. He just had to suppress these urges the same way he’d suppressed the urge to strangle Megatron in his sleep so many times in the past. He needn’t worry about Megatron finding out unless he was stupid enough to act on them.

And even if Megatron did find out somehow, it wasn’t as if the slagger thought especially well of him to begin with. What did Starscream care if his opinion sank lower? Who cared what Megatron thought about anything?

Why did he care what Megatron thought?

The question burned in his mind as he burrowed into his blankets—blankets that he had never before noticed reeked so strongly of his leader.
“It's just... weird.”

“And what would that be?” Soundwave asked, inclining his head indifferently.

Slipstream arched one of her fine, dark eyebrows, scrutinizing him with an incredulous gaze. She had thought it would be obvious what she was referring to, and couldn't tell if Soundwave was being ignorant on purpose.

“Starscream,” she clarified, deciding to give him the benefit of the doubt. “The way he's...”

“It is really not any of your business, now is it, Slipstream?” the intelligence officer interrupted her sternly.

She laughed, short, airy and feminine; so different from the snide cackle she reserved for everyone else. “That's rich, coming from you.”

Soundwave did his equivalent of an eye roll, which was to blink once and turn his attention away from her.

As strange as it was, Starscream did indeed seem to be “turning over a new leaf” of sorts, and it wasn't so much in what he was doing as what he was not doing. He hadn't snapped at Skywarp when his brother had asked how he was feeling that morning; he hadn't flinched away from Megatron as if the mere touch would burn his organic flesh when the former warlord had brushed against him whilst reaching for the water; and, most impressively and to Slipstream's disappointment, he hadn't been provoked into an argument with his cousin when she had—with cruelty surpassing even most of her comrades' low expectations of her—hissed degrading comments regarding his position as a Deception, as a Seeker, and a second-in-command softly into his ear when she thought that no one else could hear.

She had realized her mistake when she'd straightened up to see Soundwave scowling at her. No matter, though; she didn't mind an excuse to monopolize his attention.

Now they sat together, watching as Skywarp, emboldened by his brother's docile behavior that day, took Starscream's hand and invited him on his and Thundercracker's trip to the Dhobi Ghat. Slipstream snorted, expecting that Starscream would never agree to a trip that was bound to take at least two hours of walking in the hot sun only to arrive at a place even more teeming with humans than the slum. She was surprised that Skywarp was even willing to go, but then he probably didn't know what he was getting himself into.

Yet, against all odds, Starscream actually agreed to accompany his brothers, and—somewhat unnervingly—smiled as he rose to his feet and followed after them to collect food and water for their trip.

“Uncanny,” Slipstream breathed, shaking her head in disbelief. “Maybe there's something in those pills the doctors gave us...”

She trailed off as she felt a large hand close around her wrist. Soundwave was pulling her arm up to examine an intricate silver bracelet that she had procured just the day before. She smiled coyly at him.

“Nice, isn't it?” she said.
“I wish you wouldn't,” he replied, letting go of her arm with a disapproving scowl.

“Oh, like it matters,” Slipstream sniffed. “We're not going to be here much longer anyway, are we?”

“What makes you say that?” Soundwave asked, and he was such a bad liar as a human that Slipstream couldn't help but let out another of those little laughs.

“Come now, Soundwave,” she said, trailing a sly finger along the underside of his jaw. He leaned away from the touch like she'd had chili oil on her finger. “Did you really think you and Mister Testosterone over there could keep a secret from me?”

“Do not speak of Lord Megatron with such disrespect,” Soundwave scolded, swatting away her attempts to resume her stroking of his person.

She giggled, but relented. “Honestly, I think Starscream is the only one who doesn't know at this point,” she told him. “You men can't whisper to save your lives. The only reason he hasn't found out is because he's too busy staring at Lord Megatron's...”

“Slipstream!” a deep voice barked from above her, and she smirked to herself. Speak of the devil.

“Why, Lord Megatron,” she drawled in a sarcastic and distinctly Starscream-like tone as she got to her feet, Soundwave following suit. “To what do I owe the honor of—”

“Keeping talking like your cousin, Slipstream,” Megatron interrupted menacingly, “and I will start treating you like him.”

Despite the threatening tone, Slipstream had to make a considerable effort to keep her expression solemn. It was like his threat to tie Starscream to the hospital bed all over again, and she was pretty sure that Megatron still had no idea.

“How much do you know?” Megatron continued, voice low and guarded.

“Well, I know about the little courier trips you've been sending Thundercracker on, and what you did with Starscream's money,” she replied. “The rest wasn't too difficult to piece together.”

Megatron scowled, turning to Soundwave to demand an explanation. “This was to be kept quiet! Now that she knows—”

“I did not tell her,” Soundwave said confidently, cutting his leader off before he could become entrenched in what would have surely been a classic Megatron rant full of multitudes of death threats and general doom and destruction.

Slipstream couldn't quite suppress her smirk this time at the momentary look of surprise on Megatron's face at having his always respectful third-in-command interrupting him. He got over it quickly, though, and his expression had already returned to one of anger when he brought his attention back to Slipstream.

“How did you find out?” he demanded.

“Apparently, we are lacking in our covert communication skills,” Soundwave answered for her.

“Deep voices carry farther,” Slipstream shrugged. “Men just aren't made for sneaking around.”

“Have you told—”
“No,” she said forcefully, getting tired of all these stupid questions. What did it matter if Starscream knew that Megatron had plans to move them?

Megatron stooped down to her level, dark human eyes boring straight into hers. She leaned back; Cybertronian or human, their leader was an intimidating creature in any form.

“You will not speak to anyone about this,” he growled, voice lowering to his typical almost-whisper as he added, “Especially Starscream.”

“Tell me what?”

Had he not thought it far beneath his dignity, Slipstream was sure that Megatron would have slapped a hand to his forehead in frustration. He whirled around to face his second, changing the subject quickly.

“Aren’t you going to the Dhobi Ghat with your brothers?”

Starscream gave him a curious stare for a moment before saying slowly, “Yes... but...”

Megatron seized his narrow shoulders, spun him around, and nudged him back in the direction of the other two Seekers. “Then go.”

Starscream’s response was to send him one of the dirtiest looks he could muster. “What aren't you telling me?” he snapped, apparently unwilling to let the subject drop.

Slipstream smirked and folded her arms across her chest, ready to watch the show.

“Nothing that concerns you,” Megatron growled, replacing his hands on the younger man’s shoulders with the apparent intent to steer him away again.

“I have a right to know,” Starscream insisted, shrugging him off. His frustration was clearly mounting, and Slipstream wondered why Megatron hadn't thought to just make something up. It would have been so much easier, although then she wouldn't get the show.

“You have no right to anything,” Megatron bit back, and Slipstream pursed her lips together in a delighted wince. It was truly amazing how skilled they were at winding each other up.

“What will it take to prove to you that I'm not a useless failure!??” Starscream burst out, stamping his foot childishly.

Oh, yeah, Screamy, Slipstream couldn't help but think to herself sarcastically. That'll make him want you.

Megatron just rubbed a hand down his face and sounded weary more than anything when he spoke next. “Starscream, I don't think...”

“I can help! I can,” Starscream continued. “You used my money before. I can get Ajit and we can go into Patna and—”

“No!” Megatron interrupted sharply. “No one goes into Patna, not alone, and you are never to carry out any underhanded schemes with that boy again! Do you understand?”

Starscream was clearly unwilling to take no for an answer. “But I wouldn't even be alone, and—”

“I SAID DO YOU UNDERSTAND!?” Megatron bellowed, and Starscream was apparently so shocked by the sudden change in tone that he just stared at his leader, wide-eyed and rigid, for
several long seconds.

And then he turned away with a hiss of defeat and stomped off to return to his brothers’ sides without further protest.

Megatron rolled his eyes and turned back to Slipstream with a sigh. “Now, back to our earlier conversation...”

But Slipstream was too busy watching her cousins to focus on him. That was far too anticlimactic for one of Starscream's tantrums, and she was willing to bet an awful lot that this wasn't over. Odds on, Starscream would be gone the second his brothers had turned their backs, and wouldn't the shit be hitting the fan then?

She couldn't wait.

What exactly it was that drew Ajit to Starscream, the boy wasn’t sure. He was in no way ignorant of the fact that the young American was an underhanded prick—he’d seen him interacting with the rest of the people he lived with, even if just from a distance—but it was almost as if he became a different person when he was around Ajit's gang instead of his own. Suddenly the whiny, self-obsessed child disappeared to be replaced with someone staggeringly intelligent, patient, and driven. Solo Starscream was someone Ajit looked up to—a leader—and somehow he couldn’t help but want to be part of whatever grand plan he had for himself. Provided said plan was not suicidal.

When he saw the young man strolling down the street to their gang’s usual meeting spot with an obviously-pilfered duffle bag slung over his shoulder and a smug grin plastered across his face, he had a feeling that things were definitely moving in the suicidal direction.

“No,” he said automatically before Starscream could even finish explaining his latest idea. “We no work with you anymore. Too dangerous.”

“Dangerous?” Starscream demanded with a disappointed frown. “What do you mean, dangerous?”

“Other gang!” Ajit reminded him incredulously. “They say they kill you if you no leave because of steal. I told your leader man.”

“So that’s what they weren’t telling me,” Starscream muttered, looking slightly taken aback. He recovered quickly, though, as he always did. “I can handle them,” he shrugged.

“How you handle gang, Captain? You are tiny. You can no even can handle one big man,” the boy countered, gesturing to Starscream's face, where the bruises were just starting to fade from blue to green.

“I let him do this so he would think he was winning,” the young man scoffed.

Ajit didn't buy that for a second.

“I tell you, Captain; is too dangerous!” he protested. “You not understand! I see him! I see him and his men kill before! They are no joke!”

“So?” Starscream sniffed, folding his arms defensively. “I've killed people before. It's not such a
big deal.”

There was a brief pause as Ajit struggled to wrap his mind around this new information. It couldn't possibly be true, he decided; Starscream was just fooling with him as usual. There was no way this scrawny little American who was barely old enough to be considered a man had killed anyone unless he had talked them to death.

“Come on, we won't even be in their territory, anyway,” Starscream broke the silence. “I had this great idea: what if we go all the way into the city and hit up one of the tourist districts? It'll be the jackpot! I was thinking, like, the main train terminal. There's gotta be one, and we can—”

“No!” Ajit protested. “They not care where you steal, they not like you!”

“Come on, Ajit! How else am I supposed to pay you back?” Starscream demanded.

“How you pay me back if dead?” Ajit returned.

The American made a face at him.

“Go home, Captain,” Ajit told him. “Your leader worry about you.”

Starscream's face darkened faster than a changing traffic signal.

“What would you know about him?” he demanded.

Ajit wasn't sure how to answer that. He had heard Starscream complaining about his leader plenty of times over the past few weeks, and he knew that Megatron was the one who had broken his friend's nose. However, he'd also seen Starscream splayed across the older man's lap when they were sick with malaria, seen the expression on Megatron's face when Ajit told him that someone was threatening to kill Starscream, and watched him spend hours trying to convince the young man to eat with the same kind of patience that Ajit's own mother used when coercing her son to bathe.

“He care about you,” Ajit finally settled for.

“The only thing he cares about is defeating Optimus Prime, but of course I hardly expect a miserable fleshling like you to understand that,” Starscream snarled, and Ajit stepped back in alarm. He couldn't understand all of what the American had said, but one thing was clear: he had touched a nerve,

“Captain, I—” he tried, but Starscream was already hitching up his shoulder bag and starting to back away.

“I can see you're not interested in joining me. Sorry to have wasted your time,” he sniffed, suddenly sounding far more formal than Ajit had ever heard him. Then, he turned on his heel and strode away.

Ajit gaped after him. He had thought, rather naively, that he was somehow immune to those mercurial moods which he had seen Starscream exhibit around everyone else in his life, but apparently their friendship was not as important to the young man as Ajit had led himself to believe.

Hurt and resentment welled up in the boy like a bitter volcano. He had spent so much money and invested so much energy into saving Starscream's life just a few days ago, and this was the thanks he got? Well, the stupid foreigner could get himself thrown in the river for all he cared. It wasn't going to be his problem anymore! He was going to find his gang and... collect garbage or
Ajit heaved a sigh. Life had certainly been more interesting with Starscream around. He turned for one more glance at the American’s retreating back, and saw something that made him feel rather like the time that he had been stupid enough to eat the fish from Crazy Raghav's kiosk down by the river.

There was a man in a striped brown shirt making his way through the crowds, just far enough behind Starscream that there would have been no reason for Ajit to think he had anything to do with his friend if it weren’t for the fact that he had seen that same man with his uncle any number of times. If he was following Starscream now, then it could only mean that Johar’s gang had decided it was taking too long for the Americans to get out of their slum and it was time to take action.

An intense conflict sprang up inside of Ajit. On the one hand, he had already made sacrifices to save Starscream's life, and look where that had gotten him; he had apparently given up on his own dreams for the sake of a self-centered maniac. On the other hand… did it matter? Wasn't saving a life the honorable thing to do whether the person in question deserved it or not? He was quite certain that both his mother and sister would agree.

Starscream had brothers, too, who seemed like nice people. Surely, they would mourn his loss, however annoying he was. Ajit knew that his mother feared for Johar's well-being, even though he was a murdering slime. Could Ajit live with the likes of Skywarp being devastated because of his own inaction?

But what was he supposed to do? It wasn't like he was any better-equipped to handle Johar's gang than Starscream was. What would the real Captain America do?

Captain America would storm down to Johar's headquarters with his shield and his teammates and blow the whole place sky high, and that wasn't really an option for Ajit right now. He needed someone more relatable. Someone who always had the answers and managed to do the right thing. Someone good at solving problems...

What would Dipti do?

“WHAT!?”

The sounds of Megatron's raised voice jolted Soundwave awake from a much-needed afternoon nap. He resisted the urge to groan as his leader's indistinct bellows came drifting in from the front of the hut. It was probably Starscream—it always was, after all. It was just such a pity when the Seeker had been doing so well of late.

Soundwave heaved himself up, wiping away the customary sweat that had accumulated on his neck and collar while sleeping, and made his way out to see what the errant Air Commander had done to get Megatron so riled up this time, only to discover that Starscream was not present. Instead, his human lackey—Ajit, Soundwave remembered him being called—was cowering before the warlord as he ranted and raved and generally spouted all the most creative threats he could possibly imagine regarding what would happen to his second when he finally resurfaced.
A snort of laughter to his right caught Soundwave's attention, and he glanced over to see Slipstream leaning casually against the wall of the hut, watching the drama unfold.

“What is going on?” he asked, voice muddy from sleep as he edged over to her.

“Sounds like Screamer went off stealing again after Megatron told him not to,” she explained. Her smug grin slid off her face when she saw the look on the former satellite's.

“What? It's hardly the first time he's disobeyed orders,” she scoffed.

Soundwave was about to scold her for discounting her cousin's life so easily when he remembered that this was one thing that she very well may not know about. Explanations would have to wait, though.

“Where did he go!?” Megatron was shouting as he grabbed the Indian boy by the shirt front and hoisted him up so that they were nose-to-nose. “Answer me, you worthless—”

“Lord Megatron,” Soundwave interrupted loudly; it would do them no good at all to scare away the only hope they had of finding the Seeker before someone else did.

The warlord turned his way, apparently not having noticed him before, and dropped Ajit back to the ground. The boy picked himself up and scurried a way a little while Megatron advanced toward his third-in-command, breathing heavily.

“He's gone into the city, Soundwave!” he roared like his intelligence officer wasn’t five feet in front of him. “He's gone into the city and we don't know where, and there was a man following him from that gang of... of... of reprobates!”

Oh, dear. This was worse than Soundwave had expected. Megatron only used old-fashioned insults when he was getting close to hysterics.

“We will find him!” Soundwave practically had to shout himself to gain his leader's attention while simultaneously grasping hold of the other man's shoulders. “If we stay focused, we can find him.”

Megatron blinked, some of the mania going out of his eyes, and then nodded in agreement.

“Yes. Find him. We can find him,” he grunted. Then, all at once, his gaze seemed to snap razor sharp, and it was the leader of the Decepticons standing before Soundwave once more. He brushed the hands from his shoulders and straightened up. “Soundwave, stay here. When his brothers notice him missing, they will most likely rendezvous this location.”

“Yes, sir,” Soundwave nodded.

“Slipstream!”

The femme straightened up, looking somewhat surprised to hear Megatron's military commander voice again after so long. She even answered with a, “Sir?”

“You come with me and the boy.”

Ajit's face blanched as he realized that he wasn't free of this mess yet.

“I come?” he verified in a squeaky voice.

“Yes, you come, too,” Megatron growled, pulling him to his feet. “My Air Commander's life may very well depend on you again, Ajit Singh, so forgive the previous outburst if you will.”
“His life?” Slipstream wanted to know.

Megatron ignored her, instead taking a moment to brush some of the dirt off of Ajit and straighten his oversized clothes a bit—both if which proved futile efforts.

“Now, show me where he went, as best as you can guess,” he ordered.

The boy nodded, eyes still wide with fear, and then beckoned for Megatron to follow him down the street. Slipstream shot one mystified glance back at Soundwave before following.

The former satellite sighed heavily and sank back to the ground in front of their hut. Patna was a big city and Starscream had a decent head start. He would never say it in front of Megatron, but it would be very lucky indeed if they managed to find the Seeker before anyone else did. There was a strong chance that he was about to have to explain to two Seekers that their brother was not coming back, and that was a task that was going to require a lot of preparation, even for him.
Starscream had seen the locals “riding the rails” any number of times in the past, and Ajit had even tried to convince him to do it once or twice, but he'd never quite had the nerve. The locomotives' massive wheels looked heavy, and he didn't care to think what would happen if he were to slip and miss his target while jumping for a handhold. But today, he was determined. Today, he was going to show Megatron once and for all that he was more than a liability, whether the old codger wanted him to or not. He was Starscream, Air Commander and future leader of the Decepticons. He wasn't afraid of any human gangs, or trains, and he certainly wasn't afraid of Megatron.

Getting onto the train, while nerve-wracking, turned out to be easier than he'd feared, and, once in biard, no one questioned him—one of the privileges of being Caucasian, he supposed. All he had to do then was ride until they got to a station that looked big enough to have some kind of worth.

The winner was a bustling platform with the words “Patna Junction” printed on a lurid yellow sign. Starscream slipped off the train with the rest of the crowd and tried to take stock of his surroundings before he was buffeted too far along with the press of humans. He went in the way that fewer of the people were going, thinking that it would be best if he went through a low-traffic area without as much surveillance or security, and then... He had done it. He was in Patna.

At first, Starscream felt mildly intimidated by the busyness of it all; the slums were crowded, yes, but they weren't half so full of cars. Their beeping seemed inescapable no matter how far from the road he was, and he had to keep reminding himself that the likelihood of any car in a place like this being an Autobot was about as slim as the odds that Slipstream would ever learn tact.

And then there were the buildings, which were so... tall. The Seeker stared up at them, in awe for a few stunned moments. They were no taller than the ones he had helped blast to rubble in Mission City, but now that he was so much smaller... He recalled Thundercracker's comment about the trees on their very first day as humans and found that he was finally inclined to agree.

Once he got over his initial anxieties though, he was able to appreciate Patna for what it was—a potential gold mine.

There was a different kind of crowd in a place like this: businessmen, vacationers, foreigners. They came into the slums at times, but never in these numbers and never so naively relaxed. It was still easy to pick them out of the crowds from a distance, even without the obvious tell of different skin tones; they practically advertised their foreignness with their branded holiday clothing, their cameras, their sunglasses, their sweat stains... It was like they were begging Starscream to come up alongside them and surreptitiously slip their belongings from their possession to his.

Furthermore, rubbish was to a minimum here, as was mud. There were no open sewers, and therefore none of the sickening stench that Starscream had come to more or less accept over the past few weeks as just another part of being human. It was a first-class squishy hunting experience.

There was an unprecedented abundance of police officers in Patna, but Starscream wasn't too concerned about them. They were only stupid organics, after all, and he'd had plenty of experience evading law enforcement over the millennia. Plus, the Indian police didn't even carry guns. The batons they carried instead looked like they could hurt, but they would have to get close enough to use them first. Just to be on the safe side anyway, Starscream made sure to stay on the move, starting at the train station and moving in the direction that seemed to have the most foreigners.
About an hour in and maybe two blocks over, things were going perfectly—far better than the Seeker had initially expected. Both the police and the tourists were completely ignorant as he slipped and wove through the crowds, deftly plucking wallets, money, phones, and jewelry from jackets, bags, and pockets. Starscream was ecstatic.

But then he started to get the distinct impression that someone was watching him.

At first, he pushed the thought aside, telling himself that it must be a simple malfunction of his delicate human brain (of course he was being watched; there were people everywhere), but as it persisted, he began to wonder if maybe there was something to those rumors of humans having some kind of sixth sense.

And then he noticed the man.

He was native, like so many others of the passersby, and therefore not much of a target. Starscream wouldn't have given him a second glance if it weren't for the fact that he'd seen that same man back in the slum; he remembered that shirt and its horrible shade of rust brown. A lesser mech might have passed it off as paranoia (two people could go to the same place, after all), but Starscream hadn't survived 4 million years in the Decepticon high command by ignoring his paranoia. And Ajit's warning about the rival gang was still fresh in his mind.

The second he had registered that the man was likely a threat, Starscream felt his heart rate skyrocket suddenly to the point that he had to stop for a second while the rush of blood made his head swim.

It was okay, he told himself, trying to will his useless, fleshy body back to normal. He would be okay. He had a plan for this, and there was only one so far. He could handle one.

A couple seconds later, he regained control of his limbs and forced his body to continue walking. He paid as much attention to the man as possible without being obvious, pausing here and there to look at things in the windows of the shops he was walking past. Sure enough, every time he stopped, the man in the brown shirt would stop too, only to continue on when Starscream did.

There was a side street coming up—narrow, dark, and hopefully perfect for throwing off a tail—and Starscream tried to stay as nonchalant as possible as he approached it. He hugged the fronts of the buildings as closely as possible and hitched his substantially weighty duffel bag higher up his shoulder, clutching at the strap to stop his hands from shaking. The second he got to the corner, he slipped around into the alleyway and broke into a run.

As he had hoped, there was another alleyway branching off a little ways down. Starscream ran past it and ducked into a doorway just beyond instead. He pressed himself into the shadows of the alcove, trying to steady his breathing and listening for his pursuer. A moment later, hurried footsteps rang out through the alley, getting closer. They paused briefly at the intersection, and then continued down the other alley.

Starscream stayed where he was, heart thumping painfully in his chest as he counted the seconds, waiting to see if the other man would come back. Several agonizing minutes stretched on without any returning footsteps, and he finally started to relax.

Those idiots had thought they could outsmart him, had they? He smiled smugly to himself, thinking that would show Megatron better than to think he could be hurt by a bunch of dim-witted squishies.

He stepped out of his alcove with a quiet little whistle of victory...
Patna Junction was a mess—all hideous concrete walls and faded red plaster detailing—but it was also one of the oldest train stations in the world and therefore exactly the sort of tourist pit stop that Starscream was likely to have started his operations at. Megatron disembarked from the train there, Ajit darting ahead of him into the crowd and Slipstream following after with reluctant curiosity. She had gathered that something dramatic was going on, but Megatron hadn't had the patience to explain anything to her on the way over.

“How will we find him in all this?” she wanted to know as they pushed their way through the crowded station toward the back exit.

“Someone will have seen him,” Megatron growled in reply. “Someone always sees him.”

It was true; Megatron had no idea how his second had managed to become such an accomplished thief when he somehow had a knack for drawing the attention of almost everyone in any space simply by existing in it, but he was hoping that same knack might save his life this time around.

Outside the station exit, there was a woman with a tarp covered in various curios and trinkets that she was trying to hawk at anyone who passed. Ajit went straight for her and began conversing in rapid Hindi. Megatron waited impatiently for them to finish. He hadn't the slightest idea what the woman was gesticulating about so wildly, but reflected that it had better be a detailed explanation of where his Seeker had gone, or else he was going to let Slipstream have her way with every single one of the fancy hair ornaments that the Seeker femme was eying so greedily. Every moment they wasted here was one that Starscream was getting farther and farther away.

And closer to what would doubtless be a painful and undignified death.

Not that Megatron had never fantasized about inflicting such a death on the Seeker himself any number of times in the past, but... Not now. Not like this, and definitely not at the hands of humans.

Something else was different now, though. He was angry with Starscream, yes—more angry than he'd ever been with him any time other than when he'd returned to his ship to find that Starscream had taken control of the faction in his absence and very nearly left him behind to die on this rock—but the thought of Starscream beaten and broken and pleading for mercy brought none of the pleasure or stress relief that it usually did. The strangeness of it was frustrating him and putting him even further on edge.

Ajit finally turned around from the woman, and Megatron raised his eyebrows expectantly.

“He go that way,” the boy announced, pointing off down one direction of the street.
Megatron gritted his teeth, resisting the urge to shout at the boy for taking so long to get such simple information (who else would he use for a translator?) and nodded at the woman instead before heading off. At least they knew they were in the right place.

He said nothing, though, when he caught Slipstream out of the corner of his eye snagging a pair of earrings off the woman's tarp. If they didn't find his second in time, then he was going to do his best to raze this whole city to the ground anyway.

If anyone had tried to tell Starscream a little over a month ago that there was a very real chance he would someday be murdered down some back alley by a bunch of humans, he would have jettisoned them out an airlock for fear that their insanity might be contagious.

Yet, here he was: backed down an alleyway and surrounded by at least six human men who were all taller and broader than himself. They had him cornered against a wall and he had yet to see any solid way of escape.

There was no doubt in his mind that they were planning to kill him because that was what he would have done if their roles were reversed. All he could do was try his best not to let them see how terrified he was and keep looking for a way to make an opening. He was fast and agile even as a human; surely, he could escape them and... what? He couldn't go back to the shanty; they knew where it was.

And then, another terrifying thought shot through his mind: he wasn't the only one at risk here. He had put all of them at risk. And they might be all that was left of the Decepticons.

The Autobots would win the war, and it would be all his, Starscream's, fault. All because he couldn't follow orders—because he just had to listen to that urge to rebel against Megatron. Why was it that his need to one-up his commander was always just that little bit stronger than his desire to impress him? If he had just followed orders and stayed with his brothers... His brothers.

He was never going to see his brothers again if he didn't get out of this.

Starscream shook himself from his self-loathing and swallowed down the lump of fear in his aching throat. Show no fear, he reminded himself; it was always the first rule of engaging any opponents when the odds were staggeringly out of one's favor. Unless begging was likely to work, in which case dropping to one's knees and debasing oneself as much of possible was the first rule, but Starscream didn't think that was going to work against these people. They weren't Megatron, after all.

“So, Captain America,” the one in the purple shirt was saying. He was definitely the leader here, Starscream had decided. The question was if he liked to do his own dirty work or if he would leave it to the hulking mass of a man standing slightly behind his left shoulder. Or maybe he would have the tall one hold their prey down while he or one of the others did the work?

“So you know who I am?” Purple Shirt continued, and Starscream shook his head, only half paying attention.

If he went around the right side of the group, he just might make it; the goon posted on Purple's right side was thick, but Starscream was pretty sure he would still go down with a good kick to the groin. Human males really were stupidly vulnerable. The Seeker shifted a little himself just
thinking about it.

A pair of fingers snapped several times under his nose, and he wrenched his attention back to the leader and his self-important monologue.

“I said, do you know how frustrating it is, America?” the other man repeated. “How frustrating to try to impress your boss, but always losing business to a little foreign boy?”

Starscream frowned, reflecting that this actually sounded oddly relatable, and then realized what the man had just called him.

“Boy?! How old do you think I am?!” he demanded, escape plans temporarily forgotten.

The man shrugged, apparently feeling he had plenty of time for this detour of thought.

“Seventeen? Eighteen?” he guessed. “No beard, so still a boy.”

Starscream gaped. Did he really look that young as a human? He honestly didn't know, but was certain that it couldn't be right.

“I'm 35!” he squawked, picking an age in the midrange of a human's lifespan, but not too high.

His intimidators just laughed. Or, rather, their leader and one or two others laughed before translating Starscream's claim to the others, who then joined them. The Seeker was outraged.

“If you think you can win by humiliating me like this, then—!!”

He stopped abruptly when the purple shirt man pulled out a folded knife and flicked the blade out with a snk sound that seemed to fill the whole alleyway.

“Enough talk,” he said, still smiling. “We have work to do. Fully honest, Captain America, I'm going to make this hurt as much as I can before I kill you.”

Without another moment's hesitation, Starscream flung his bag of loot at the man. He then took advantage of the distraction to dart around the leader, already aiming a knee at the first henchman's groin. A flash of metal caught his attention in his peripheral, and he managed to reroute himself into a roll just in time. The knife caught him across the side, but it was only a superficial cut.

Starscream came out of his roll slower and more off-balanced than expected—the results of his illness-ravaged human body, no doubt—and was just in time to see the foot that was aiming for his stomach.

This time, he did not manage to get out of the way, and the kick hit him full force just below the ribs.

He felt the air rush out of his body as he sprawled over backward, and terror finally overcame cockiness as he realized that he couldn't breathe. The former Seeker scrambled frantically at the dirty pavement in an effort to get back to his feet before another foot hit him in the stomach again. He choked, head spinning, and suddenly found that he was vomiting. Someone laughed, something hit his face, something else landed on his back...

Starscream did his best to curl into a ball and protect his vitals as blow after blow came down on him. There was no relenting, and he knew that any second now, one of those blows would break something important.
He was going to die. He would die here in a ditch in some dirty Earth city, and then they would go for the others, and he couldn't even scream his objections to the situation, and...

There was a scream, but it wasn't coming from his own mouth. The blows came to an abrupt stop, but the young man stayed curled in on himself for a moment as he became aware that the sounds of blows and shouting had continued even though no one was hitting him anymore. The shouts sounded angry now instead of gleeful or malicious.

After another moment or two, the noise of the brawl subsided, and Starscream was just considering moving his arms away from his face to see what was going on when a pair of large, rough hands reached out and did it for him.

The Seeker cried out in pain and alarm and tried to pull away before realizing who it was that was holding him.

Megatron.

The Decepticon warlord loomed over his second, breathing heavily, face slightly splattered in blood, and looking far angrier than Starscream could ever remember seeing him.
Chapters really coming hard and fast right now because I'm mostly just adapting Spoony's stuff for the next little while. Yay! I was thinking about holding onto them and still only posting one a week, but then I remembered that some of y'all have already been waiting, like, SEVEN YEARS for the conclusion of this story, sooooo..... Yeah. Lol

As soon as the last of the thugs was on the ground either out cold or moaning pitifully, Megatron went straight for the trembling ball of Seeker in the corner of the dusty alley, leaving Slipstream to give the men a few more well-placed kicks. When he got closer and started to see the bruises, the vomit, the blood on his shirt, there was a moment when every vengeful, furious thought left his mind and was replaced with the simple, terrified question: “Is he okay?”

And then he shoved that thought out of his mind as forcefully as he could, his anger rekindled anew; he was sick of worrying about Starscream. He shouldn't have to. The little bastard was a fully grown mech who had been through millions of years of war. He had no right to go around making other people worry about him!

No, he decided, he was not worried about Starscream; he was angry with him. A small part of Megatron tried to remind him that this could in part be his fault as he had not deemed it necessary to tell Starscream what the risks associated with this particular action would be, but he squashed that part down hard because it shouldn't have mattered. Time and time again the Seeker had failed him, disappointed him, and just generally been useless, but this? This was just childish. This was nothing short of some idiotic compulsion to rebel and act out against him that Starscream had developed, and the warlord had no doubt he still would have done it whether he knew the risks or not.

Megatron dropped down and wrenched the Seeker's arms away from where he'd been holding them protectively in front of his face. Starscream squealed and struggled a bit, and then froze as his eyes locked onto his leader's. The warlord felt a twist of some small satisfaction as his second's blue eyes widened and the color drained out of his face. It wasn't enough, though.

“HAVE YOU COMPLETELY LOST YOUR MIND!?” he roared, shaking the smaller man violently.

Starscream, predictably, began to cry.

“I didn't—” he tried, and then wisely chose to shut his mouth so that he didn't bite his own tongue off.

“I told you not to steal anymore! I told you not to go into the city! I TOLD YOU!!”

“I'm sorry!” Starscream sobbed as soon as Megatron stopped shaking him. “I'm sorry, please! It hurts!”
“I hope it does!” the warlord snarled viciously, but he let go of the Seeker with a rough shove anyway so that he could start assessing if he was too injured to walk or not.

The cut on his side was bleeding a good amount, but didn't look deep enough to have done any real damage. More worrying were the bruises already starting to form on his chest and stomach. If they'd broken a rib or ruptured any of his organs, Megatron had a feeling they would need more help than what the local clinic could provide.

For now, he deemed the most efficient course of action would be to just carry the brat back to the others. It would draw more attention to them, but they were past worrying about that at this point. They needed to get back to the others as quickly as humanly possible and leave the slum before anymore of these men could find them.

“Lord Megatron? We should go,” Slipstream called, stomping one of her sandalled feet into the face of a man who had been starting to move a bit more.

“I know!” Megatron growled back. “Grab that bag there,” he added, nodding at a discarded duffel bag that he was pretty sure had belonged to Starscream. Either way, it was liable to have something useful in it.

He himself went to the nearest unconscious man and ripped his shirt off—a terrible, slightly shiny purple thing—which he then tied tight around Starscream's waist to soak up the blood. The Seeker whimpered at the rough treatment, but said nothing.

It took a minute of maneuvering to get the smaller man slung over one of his shoulders, but Starscream didn't protest, doubtless afraid that any resistance would compound into more and more punishment when they finally got back to the shanty. He just clung to his leader's back, making little wet spots on the other man's shirt where he pressed his teary face into it.

They left the alley as quickly as they could and rejoined with Ajit, who had stowed himself at the alley mouth rather than get tangled in the fighting—a wise choice, Megatron had reflected; if only Starscream had such foresight to see when he would be more burden than blessing in a given situation.

“How quickly can we get back to our home base on foot from here?” Megatron asked the boy.

“Maybe one hour?” he guessed. His eyes kept flicking to Starscream's form flung over the warlord's shoulder. “He okay?”

Megatron just grunted and hitched the Seeker up into a better hold. Behind him, he heard Slipstream snicker, and he just knew she was opening her mouth to say something cruel to her cousin.

“Slipstream,” he warned, turning to see her stop mid-breath.

“What?” she demanded indignantly.

“He's already ruining my only shirt. I don't need you provoking him any further,” Megatron told her, and felt Starscream's small hands grip said shirt tighter. “I will need you as guide again, Ajit Singh,” he said, turning back to the boy.

Ajit nodded, and started off through the crowd.

When they finally figured out how to turn themselves Cybertronian again, Megatron was going to see if they couldn't take that boy with them; even as a human, he was more useful than 5/7 of his
Skywarp didn't think he'd ever been more nervous in his entire life. It had been nearly two hours since he and Thundercracker had returned to the shanty, only to find that Starscream had not gotten tired and returned there as they had naively hoped he might have. They had soon after learned from Soundwave that their brother had instead gone out into the city and that Megatron was attempting to find him before a gang of humans killed him.

“We should be helping,” Skywarp moaned for probably the thousandth time, and Thundercracker just shook his head, having grown tired of arguing with him long ago. They had been ordered to stay at the hut, and whether Megatron came back with or without Starscream, Thundercracker didn't like to think what he might be angry enough to do to anyone who had disobeyed his orders in the meantime.

Even the twins seemed to have picked up on the seriousness of the situation and had been sitting silent by their creator's side ever since they'd returned from wherever it was the twins disappeared to all day.

Skywarp whimpered and pulled into himself. His fear was resting in his stomach like a hard knot of writhing snakes, and he hated it. He wanted it to go away, but knew that wasn't going to happen until he saw Megatron come stomping down the street with his brother and cousin in tow, and even then, he would doubtless have to suffer through listening to Starscream's squeals and shrieks while Megatron beat him into submission for being an idiot—again.

Without really thinking about it, Skywarp put a hand in his mouth and bit down on it. More than pain, he felt a strange sense of relief, like the snakes in his stomach had calmed down; he sank his teeth in further.

“Warp!” Thundercracker's voice drew his attention a second before his brother wrenched his hand out of his mouth. “What are you doing?!!”

Skywarp looked down at his hand, which was now oozing blood from a crescent-shaped set of tooth-marks.

“I... I don't know,” he confessed, blinking at his hand. What had he been doing? How was chewing his hand off going to help with anything?

Thundercracker gave him an odd look and released him.

“It'll be okay,” he said in that Thundercracker way that made it difficult not to believe him. “It's Megatron; he'll find him in time.”

Skywarp nodded and wiped his hand on his shirt. The snakes were writhing in his stomach again.

He couldn't shake the feeling that this was partly his fault. He knew his brother well enough to have known he wouldn't just quietly follow them along on a day trip when Megatron had strictly ordered him not to do something much more entertaining. He should have kept a better eye on him, he should have said something to Thundercracker sooner when he'd noticed him missing, he should have...
“I should've put him on a leash,” Thundercracker muttered, and Skywarp looked up at him. “Or just not let him come, or something.”

“It’s not your fault,” Skywarp assured him, because really it wasn’t. Thundercracker couldn't possibly be to blame here because Thundercracker always got things right. No, if there was blame to assign, it belonged to him, Skywarp.

“Yes it is,” his brother countered with a bitter laugh. “And not just this. He's my little brother too, and I've been neglecting him this whole time to focus on you because I knew Megatron would deal with Starscream if I just left him be. But it's not Megatron's job to take care of him, it's mine!”

The younger Seeker swallowed as Thundercracker's voice started to rise. So it really was his—Skywarp’s—fault, after all. Thundercracker would have been able to spend more time with Starscream if only he weren't so timid and needy all the time, and he was Starscream's brother, too. Just because Starscream was difficult and prickly didn't mean that he didn't need them there.

They all needed each other right now.

The three of them had grown apart during the war, especially during Megatron's disappearance, when Starscream had started to distance himself from them—from everyone—more intentionally than before. This experience should have been a chance for them to pull closer and reaffirm their relationship through their hardships, but instead, he had been monopolizing Thundercracker and alienating Starscream, leaving him to get up to Primus knew what and not bothering to care because it was just so much easier not to.

“I'm never letting him out of my sight again,” Thundercracker muttered, and Skywarp looked over to see his oldest brother staring at the opposite side of the street with a determination he normally associated with epic last stands and heroic self-sacrifices.

The younger Seeker nodded and was about to bury his chin in his knees again when a familiar-sounding wail broke out in the early evening calm—Starscream!

Thundercracker was on his feet in seconds and running to see down the street. Skywarp followed suit, tripping over his feet a little in his haste. A frantic sense of relief flooded his insides as a set of familiar figures appeared in the thinning crowd.

Megatron was in the front, half-dragging, half-carrying Starscream, who was sobbing dramatically and looked like he couldn't decide whether he wanted to pry his leader's fingers off himself or grab onto the larger man's arm all the tighter for support. Behind them were Slipstream and Ajit, both of whom looked unusually solemn, but Skywarp barely paid them mind because Starscream was covered in blood!

Again, Thundercracker rushed forward first, looking intent on taking his brother off of Megatron's hands, but their leader just snarled at him to back off.

“He's hurt!” the Seeker protested, and Starscream gave him a pleading look as Megatron dragged him past his brothers and into the darkness of the hut.

There was a loud thudding noise, which sounded rather as if Megatron had thrown Starscream onto the old, wooden bed, and the Seeker fell silent. Skywarp held his breath as he waited for the rest: blows, screams, shouting, more blows, his brother sobbing, more and more blows until his brother lost consciousness and Megatron finally stopped...

“JUST HOW STUPID ARE YOU!?” Megatron's furious voice split the anticipatory silence.
“M-my Lord, please—”

“Why do you push me, Starscream? Why!?"

“OW! Ow, please!”

Starscream was howling in pain, but Skywarp had heard no blows. He edged forward just enough to see in through the shanty window and saw Megatron lifting his brother up off the bed by his hair, Starscream pushing down on his fist in an effort to alleviate the strain.

“Just when I thought that maybe we were past this—that maybe you were finally starting to grow up—you have to go and do this!”

“I wasn't trying to... I'm sorry! I'm sorry, please!” Starscream sniffed.

“If you ever try to pull something like this again—!!”

“I won't! I p-p-promise!” Starscream hiccuped.

“Good! Because next time, I will leave you there to die!”

He flung the Seeker back down onto the bed and watched him lay there sobbing for a moment before coming back out. Skywarp hastened to appear as though he hadn't been eavesdropping on the whole sequence of events and looked around to see the entire rest of the faction doing the same, including Ajit.

Megatron looked around at them and gave a grunt before nodding to Slipstream. “Go through that bag and take anything useful. Soundwave, make sure it's actually useful and not just trinkets. We want cash and cards, nothing else.”

“But this is—” Slipstream started in an awed voice, pulling a heavy gold watch out of the bag that Skywarp hadn't noticed slung over her shoulder before.

“No!” Megatron barked, and she leveled a pout at him. “Only things that we can use now.”

Soundwave stepped up to claim the watch from her, and Skywarp watched their silent struggle over it for a moment.

“The rest of you—” The others' gaze snapped to their leader. “—start gathering anything that you need. You may take only what you can carry yourself. We leave in ten minutes.”

“Where are we going?” Rumble wanted to know.

Megatron ignored him and turned back into the hut.

Skywarp turned to Thundercracker, the same question in his eyes. His brother sighed and put a comforting hand on top of his head.

“I don't know,” he answered, “but away from here.”

The snakes started writhing in Skywarp's stomach again, despite Thundercracker's hand on his head. Away? They were going away somewhere unknown!? In ten minutes!?!! But if they did that...

“I'll be right back!” he choked, darting away to the neighboring shanty.
“Warp!” Thundercracker called, sounding annoyed, but Skywarp ignored him.

“Anoushka!” he called, skidding to a halt in the doorway. The inside of the hut was dark and empty, and it suddenly occurred to Skywarp that he couldn't remember seeing his friend at all that day. She must have gone across the town to the good market like she sometimes did.

“Warp, we have to get ready to go!” Thundercracker scolded, coming up beside him.

“But... but...”

“She's not here.”

“But I have to say goodbye,” Skywarp insisted, tears starting to well up in his eyes. “What if she thinks that I died, or... or...”

“She's just a human,” his brother reminded him, stroking the backs of his fingers down the younger Seeker's cheek. “It's fine. We need to go.”

“But she was my friend,” Skywarp insisted. “We can come back, right? We could come see her again?”

“No,” Thundercracker said, as emphatically as possible. “We can't have any ties to this place anymore; it's too dangerous.”

Skywarp nodded, his gaze turning down to his feet. He never had managed to do anything to help the human woman who had been so nice to him, and now she would think that he had run away or something and didn't even care enough to say goodbye.

His earlier worries and charitable feelings toward Starscream started to ebb slightly as he reflected that none of this would have happened if his brother had just done what Megatron told him and kept a low profile. They could have stayed here as long as they wanted, learning more human cooking from Anoushka and inventing movies with Ajit and Dipti. Maybe they could have been just a little bit happy, even if they were humans, but no. Starscream had to ruin everything good, didn't he?

“I'm sorry, Warp,” Thundercracker murmured, pulling the boy into a tight embrace. “We still have each other; that's the important part, right?”

“Yeah,” Skywarp conceded after a moment. “Yeah, it is.”

Because as much as Starscream might ruin things, he was still their brother, and Skywarp would rather have him.

When Megatron stepped back into the shanty, he found Starscream huddled in a ball on the bed, right where he'd left him. The Seeker whined pathetically and pulled his knees even closer to his chest when he saw his commander return, and the pitiful display only served to annoy Megatron further.

“Get up,” he snapped.

Starscream just stared at him.
“Now!”

The Seeker made it to his feet somewhat shakily, bracing himself against the wall of the shanty as if he were physically incapable of standing on his own. Megatron found that his anger had cooled just enough to make room for a bit of worry that he very well may not be.

“What’s wrong?”

“Shut up,” Megatron snarled, curling his hands into fists at his sides, and Starscream immediately fell silent.

He wanted so badly to strike his second, but the bruises from the last time were still there, reminding the warlord of how quickly his anger had turned to horror when the blood started streaming from the Seeker’s face. No, he wouldn't hit him—couldn't. He didn't know what exactly had changed, but he knew that hitting Starscream would not bring the satisfaction he wanted it to right now.

“This,” he began, keeping his voice as deeply quiet and menacing as he could, “is your last warning.”

Starscream opened his mouth like he was going to try to say something, and Megatron reached out to seize the front of his shirt, dragging the smaller man closer so that their chests were touching. For some reason, this caused his second's face to turn bright red, which Megatron had not thought was a typical human reaction to fear or intimidation.

“One more slip up,” he assured the Seeker, “one more careless failure, and that is it! You will be punished regardless of your delicate organic state, and if you dare disobey me again, I will break every bone in your body! Do you understand?”

Starscream nodded vigorously, apparently unable to summon any breath to speak with.

Megatron released his crumpled, blood-stained t-shirt and shoved the Seeker away from himself, hoping very much that he would not call his bluff.

“We are leaving,” he said. “Find a shirt without blood on it and grab any essentials. You have five minutes.”

Under normal circumstances, Starscream surely would have questioned such an order—would have wanted to know where and why, may even have argued against it and refused to leave—but it seemed that Megatron's warning had worked for now as he kept his mouth shut and went about following the order with his head bowed. Megatron just had to deal with the twins instead, who were waiting for him the second he stepped out of the hut.

“Are we leaving now?”

“How far is it?”

“Do we have to walk?”

“Are we ever coming back?”

“Can I bring my rock?”

And, most importantly:
'Where are we going?'

Megatron ignored them temporarily and turned to Ajit, who was still hanging awkwardly on the fringes.

“Come here, boy,” he sighed, beckoning him over.

Ajit approached him, and Megatron stepped over to the piles of cash that Soundwave and Slipstream had sorted out. He reached in and grabbed a sizable-looking wad, which he pressed into the boy's hands.

“You saved us twice now,” he explained as the boy gave him a look of questioning wonder. “Leave before anyone finds out you helped us escape, and remember what I told you before: Lord Megatron always repays his debts.”

The Indian boy shot a look toward the shanty, from whence the sounds of Starscream's snifflies and half-started sobs still emanated, and ran his tongue over his lips uncertainly before turning back to Megatron. He gave a little bow, the money held between both hands in front of himself, before disappearing into the growing twilight as if he'd never been there.

Megatron finally turned back to the twins and the rest of his faction.

The other, less important questions he left unanswered, and simply stated: “Patna. We are going back into Patna.”

Chapter End Notes

If anyone's keeping track, we just hit the end of Chapter 6 in the original story. :P
Starscream felt no victory or excitement upon entering Patna for the second time that day. He was exhausted and in so much pain that he was having a hard time walking in a straight line anymore. His every thought had been consumed with a roar of self-loathing and shame the whole way over, and, to add insult to injury, upon reaching their apparent destination, Megatron had turned to Slipstream with the command to “watch Starscream” and then wandered off.

*Watch Starscream.*

The Seeker didn't even know where to begin with the indignity of it. He knew that he was in disgrace, but how could Megatron have the nerve to assign him a babysitter? And Slipstream!? Maybe if it had been Soundwave, or even Thundercracker, who at least had some small excuse of authority over him as his older brother, but no. It was Slipstream.

He had to bite down on his tongue so hard it started to bleed to prevent himself reacting to the order because Megatron was watching him, as if daring him to object to his decision. And the *smirk* on Slipstream's face when it was decided... Starscream didn't know whether to be more angry at Megatron for trusting Slipstream more than his own second-in-command, at Slipstream for being so smug about the whole thing, or at himself for being the one who had created the whole mess in the first place.

He continued mauling his own tongue in indecision until after Megatron, Soundwave, and Thundercracker (*Thundercracker! Why the frag did he get to go!?*) disappeared around the corner toward the cash machines they had passed a while back to see if they could get any money from the cards that he had gone to all the work to steal. If Megatron was going to disapprove of his criminal activities so much, he could at least stop reaping the benefits of them! His leader hadn't even taken the time to praise him for managing to get the pin numbers for so many of them.

As soon as the other three were gone, Slipstream wandered over to one of the many shop windows lining the street they were on and began gormlessly drooling over something in the window. The twins meanwhile convinced Skywarp to join them in a game of tag, to the annoyance of most of the other people trying to use the sidewalk. Starscream found a building with suitably clean front steps and sank down onto them.

His stomach hurt, both from the cut on his side and the thorough pummeling he'd gotten, and there was a large bruise on his left thigh that had made every step of their hurried walk over here nigh-on excruciating. His face also ached, and his head, and he really just wanted to lie down and sleep somewhere, but Primus knew how they were going to find any shelter tonight, and it was all his fault. For the time being, he settled for pulling his knees up to his chest and resting his forehead against them.

That grossly familiar sense of hopelessness, unease, and just... *general unhappiness* was creeping...
over him again, weighing on his chest and making movement sound next to impossible. Why did he do it? Why did he have to be so... so... stupid? Not to mention selfish. Self-preservation had always been the highest thing on Starscream's list of priorities, but he was not ignorant to the fact that this was a large part of why he had no tenable relationships with anyone, including his own brothers.

After all, it wasn't Thundercracker who had come to rescue him that afternoon, was it? No, it was Megatron, there to offer only scorn and fury instead of sympathy and comfort.

Starscream hugged his knees tighter, and felt something wet sting his eyes.

“Starscream!”

His head shot up so quickly he grabbed at his neck with a gasp of pain as someone shrieked his name not a foot away from his ear. Skywarp jumped back from him, cackling merrily at a prank well-played, and Starscream surged to his feet.

“Skywarp, what—!?” he started, and then he stopped and stared at his brother. Skywarp's lips, and teeth, were an unholy blue color, and his eyes and smile were wider than Starscream would have thought physically possible.

“Look at these!” the boy squealed, shoving a brown paper bag of something at Starscream's face.

The other Seeker timidly reached out to take it, as if he was handling a live bomb, and noticed that Skywarp's hand was shaking with barely contained energy against his. What the frag was wrong with him? It was like he was running on circuit speeders! When Starscream tentatively peeled back the paper bag and peered in, he found that it was filled with a plethora of small, bright blue balls. He sniffed them. They didn't smell like any human food he'd encountered so far.

“Skywarp, where did this come from?” he demanded, plucking one of the offending objects from the bag to examine it more closely. “You haven't been eating it, have you?”

The second question wasn't really necessary as the blue tinge to his brother's mouth was answer enough, but he still couldn't quite believe it. The balls looked and smelled like they were full of chemicals the likes of which humans were not supposed to have inside of them. Surely, Skywarp wasn't that stupid.

As if determined to prove that he was that stupid, Skywarp snatched the bag back, dug out a handful of the mysterious orbs, and shoved them into his mouth.

“Twy it!” he said through his mouthful of blue gunk, some of it spitting out and hitting Starscream on the cheek.

The other Seeker sneered in disgust and ripped the paper bag out of his brother's hands again; Thundercracker would never forgive him if he allowed their youngest brother to poison himself.

“Do you even know what this is?” he demanded, waving the bag in front of Skywarp's face.

“Hey!” another overly excited voice sounded from behind Starscream before Skywarp had a chance to reply.

Starscream turned to the source of the noise and groaned as he caught sight of Rumble and, not too far behind, Frenzy, both with the same blue tinge to their mouths as Skywarp and fair vibrating on the spot.
“That's ours!” Rumble declared, leaping forward to retrieve the bag. Starscream held it up above his head where the child couldn't reach it, determined not to allow anyone else to consume the Pit-spawned substance until he'd had a chance to find out what it was.

“Where did you get this?” he snapped at the scrawny little brat.

“A shop!” Frenzy told him, as though this should have been obvious.

“You stole it?” Starscream wondered if he couldn't possibly get some of the heat that had been on him all day aimed in the twins' direction when the others returned.

“No! We bought it!” Frenzy insisted.

“You don't have any money!”

“Shows what you know!”

Both twins were now jumping up at him, hands clutching and pulling on his loose clothing, trying to pull him down with their weight so as to retrieve the paper bag. One of them dragged surprisingly sharp little nails across the cut on his side and Starscream lunged back from them with a shriek of pain. Skywarp just watched from the sidelines, still chewing his mouthful of scrap.

Frenzy managed to get around behind Starscream and leaped up onto the Seeker's back, wrapping small arms around his neck and shouting, “Give them back!” at the top of his lungs. Starscream hissed as Rumble kicked him in the shin, but couldn't do much about it as he was too busy trying to prevent Frenzy from choking him to death.

“Slipstream!” Starscream howled, looking to his cousin for backup. She still hadn't moved from the window display, where she seemed to be examining some pointless white dress that didn't even have any sleeves. Useless femme.

“Get off me, moderchod! That hurts!!” he shrieked, reaching a hand behind himself to grab at the twin now pulling on his hair. In his momentary distraction, Skywarp rushed forward and snatched the bag right out of his flailing hand.

“Traitor!” Starscream yowled at his brother, before running backward into a shop wall and crushing Frenzy against the brick. The grip on his neck and hair began to loosen.

Rumble, seeing that it was now Skywarp in possession of the bag rather than Starscream, ran forward to attack him instead. Much to Starscream's surprise, the younger Seeker did not cower in submission when he saw the twin coming for him, but rather threw out an arm with a cry of “Mine!” catching Rumble across the face and sending him tumbling to the ground. Had Starscream not been so busy trying to slag Frenzy, he would have praised his younger brother.

“Stop,” a very calm, but loud, voice rang out and froze all four of them in their tracks. Frenzy immediately dropped from Starscream's back.

It was Soundwave, and he didn't look the least bit impressed. Skywarp automatically shoved the paper bag behind his back.

“Explain,” Soundwave intoned, stepping forward into the streetlight.

Rumble and Frenzy then launched into a heavily edited version of events, waving their arms about enthusiastically and speaking over the top of one another so rapidly that it was impossible to decipher much of what they were actually saying.
Soundwave nodded slowly, took in the sight of Skywarp's slightly manic expression and Slipstream drooling at the dress a few shops down, and seemed to come to the conclusion that Starscream was his best bet for an accurate account of events.

“Explain,” he repeated to his fellow officer.

“They attacked me!” Starscream burst out, thrusting a finger furiously at the twins.

“He stole our candy!” Rumble countered, jumping up and down in frustration.

Soundwave just stared at him. “Candy?”

“Yeah, yeah!” Frenzy chimed in, also starting to bounce up and down on the spot. “Here, look!”

He ran around behind Skywarp and tore the bag of 'candy' from his loosened grip before returning to his creator's side and thrusting them up into his face.

Soundwave looked into the bag before saying quite simply, “They are blue.”

“They're so good!” Frenzy shouted again, seemingly unaware of how loud he was being. He reached out to take the bag back, but Soundwave held it away, similar to how Starscream had, only the Seeker noted that the little minions didn't attack him.

“No,” Soundwave declared.

Frenzy pulled a face. “Bo-oossst!” he whined.

“What!?” Rumble's equally whiny voice joined his twin's.

“Please!”

“C'mon!”

Soundwave stared at them, then the bag of sweets in his hand, and then back at them before seeming to make up his mind. “No,” he said, far more forcefully this time.

Rumble and Frenzy immediately broke into a tirade of obnoxious whining and wailing noises.

“Stop it,” Soundwave ordered, and if Starscream had been feeling better, he would have laughed at the expression on his usually-blank face when they ignored him. The spectacle was made even better when, a moment later, Megatron came up behind his third-in-command with Thundercracker in tow.

“What are those glitching malfunctions of yours doing, Soundwave?” their leader grumbled, and the former satellite looked as close to horrified as Starscream had ever seen him.

The twins apparently decided that this was their cue to start complaining to someone with more authority, and flung themselves at Megatron instead.

“Make him give them back!” Rumble cried childishly, tugging rather boldly on the leg of his leader's pants.

“Give what back?” Megatron snapped angrily, brushing the child away.

Soundwave held out the paper bag, which Megatron snatched impatiently and glanced into. His eyes widened slightly when he saw the contents.
“They're blue,” he said.

“We know they're blue!” Frenzy grumbled, crossing his arms.

Megatron scowled at him before scrunching up the bag and tossing it into a nearby trash can. Skywarp gasped in horror, his hands flying up to cover his bright blue mouth, and the twins stared at their commander as if he had just kicked a turbo puppy. Megatron ignored the lot of them except to nudge the twins with his foot.

“Get off the ground; we're going.”

Both boys scrambled to their feet, distress at the lost sweets quickly replaced by curiosity. “Where are we going?”

Much to Starscream's annoyance, their leader ignored them, and he daren't ask himself. He elected instead to limp over to Thundercracker, who was busy fussing over Skywarp's blue face.

“Did you get anything?” he asked, and Thundercracker turned to him with a far more indulgent smile than he'd used on Starscream in hundreds of millennia.

“Got you some medical supplies,” he said, holding up a shopping bag. “I'll help you get fixed up when we get to the hotel.”

“We're going to a hotel?” Starscream asked, too surprised by this information to react to the rest of the sentence. “How do we have money for that!?”

“Two of the cards you swiped worked,” Thundercracker explained. “Altogether, we have about a thousand US dollars.”

“Really?” Starscream felt some of the apprehension that had been plaguing him all evening lift from his chest; even Megatron couldn't stay angry at him for too long when his actions had brought about such a fortuitous change of circumstance for them in the end.

“Yeah,” Thundercracker replied absently, momentarily distracted by the sight of Soundwave wrestling Slipstream away from the shop window before snapping his focus back to his younger brothers. “Come on; you'll feel better after a good wash.”

Wash. Just the word was like music to Starscream's ears, and he wholeheartedly agreed. He started moving after Megatron and the others, pushing a hand against his side to relieve the throbbing ache there. He could stand anything if it meant he might be able to properly wash himself for the first time since becoming human.

Behind him, he heard Thundercracker saying to Skywarp, “What in the Pit have you been eating?” Skywarp simply giggled in reply.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Our friends are moving up in the world.

“Vibrant Guest House” was located in a four-story building of brown and salmon-colored brick that Starscream couldn’t help but sneer at when they reached it—vibrant, indeed! There was altogether too much pink showing on the balconies and in those windows that still had lights on.

Still, it was already infinitely better than where they’d come from.

The human running the front desk seemed to think so too, as he took one look at the lot of them and threw up his hands, declaring, “No vacancy,” before Megatron could finish drawing breath to ask him. Starscream managed to resist the urge to snigger at the look that crossed his leader’s face.

“We have money,” the warlord explained, pulling a wad of colorful paper from his pocket.

The desk clerk's face instantly changed, and he busied himself looking something up on his computer.

“Maybe new vacancy. Just open. So lucky!” he declared.

Starscream turned his attention away from the proceedings at the desk then, and instead watched Skywarp and the twins as they whizzed around the horrid brown lobby, giggling and shrieking at the tops of their lungs to the annoyance of everyone in the vicinity. Soundwave and Thundercracker were attempting to corral them without much luck. Starscream watched as one of the twins ran straight into an end table, and his creator scrambled to catch the vase that was about to topple off of it. If he wasn’t so tired and ill he would have laughed.

There seemed to be an argument happening at the reception desk again, so Starscream turned his attention back there. From what he could gather, the receptionist was insisting in his limited English that Megatron show him some form of identification before checking into a room, and that Megatron in turn was trying to find some explanation for why he had none. Starscream reflected that this was a task that would have been better left to the more diplomatic Soundwave, but their third-in-command was preoccupied.

When Megatron snapped the receptionist’s pen in half out of spite, Starscream began to suspect he may not manage to get that wash tonight after all, but then Slipstream of all people stepped in to save the situation. A flip of her dark hair, a cock of the hip, lean over the counter just a little bit further, and a killer smile to seal the deal, and the receptionist was eating out of her hand. Then, as if that wasn’t surprise enough, she proceeded to speak in Hindi. It was slow and slightly stammered, but it was definitely Hindi.

For the second time in so many minutes, Starscream reflected that he would have laughed under normal circumstances as he caught sight of his commander's expression. It looked like Megatron wasn’t sure whether to be morbidly appalled or disgustingly proud of his sole female soldier as she twirled around a moment later, key dangling from her finger with no questions asked, no identification needed, room number four-one-two for their exclusive use as long as they liked.
“Since when did you know Hindi?” the warlord asked as she dropped the keys into his open hand.

“I’ve been making good use of my time here,” she sniffed.

Starscream couldn’t help but feel a stab of jealousy as Megatron grunted in what sounded almost like appraisal and whistled across the lobby to Soundwave. The other man seized one twin in each hand and began dragging them toward the elevator, leaving Thundercracker to wrangle Skywarp.

It very quickly became clear that they would not be using said elevator. Although Starscream, Skywarp, Slipstream and Thundercracker were no longer Seekers physically, they still were in mental state, and their now-human minds were still telling them that the cramped, enclosed space would not accommodate the wings they no longer had, nor allow for a quick flight escape should the need arise. No amount of shouting, threatening, pushing and even bribing would convince them otherwise.

Megatron elected to take the stairs with them in the end, doubtless because he didn’t trust his second to make it up even three flights of intervalled platforms without incident, Starscream was sure, and Soundwave joined them, doubtless because he had no desire to spend any length of time in an enclosed space with the twins in their current mood.

Starscream realized upon reaching the first landing that he may have made a mistake; his body still hurt everywhere and his head was starting to pound more and more with every step. He was starting to feel like he would throw up if he went any further, but Megatron was liable to hit him or yell at him or something else unpleasant if he refused to move.

By the time they reached the halfway point between the second and third floors, his useless human legs finally betrayed him, crumpling from beneath him and depositing him face-first on the steps. His chin hit the edge of one and he tasted blood for the third time that day. Fear turned him frantic as he realized Megatron was surely going to get angry at him again, and he started scrambling to get up, only to slip and fall a second time.

This time, a firm hand caught him by the elbow, and he looked up into Thundercracker's concerned face.

“You okay?” his brother asked as he helped him to his feet.

“‘M fine,” Starscream muttered back, turning away so the other Seeker wouldn't see the tears of exhaustion, frustration, and embarrassment that were trying to well up in his eyes.

Thundercracker heaved a small sigh and slipped an arm around his brother's narrow back. “Lean on me,” he offered, and Starscream hesitated only a moment before accepting.

It was the first time he'd had any real physical contact with Thundercracker since they had become human, he realized as they climbed the rest of the way. It was completely different to being in close quarters with Megatron; rather than the swooping thrill in the pit of his stomach that he had come to expect from physical contact, there was just warmth and comfort and a small reassurance that the fraternal bond between them still existed in this form, however faintly. He was almost reluctant to let go when they got to the door of their room.

It took a minute to get the door open, either because it was stuck or—more likely—Megatron didn't actually know how to use keys, but finally it swung open and they received their first glimpse of their home for the unforeseeable future.

To any well-traveled tourist, it would have been an acceptably modest accommodation for a night
or two, but to the Decepticons, it was like stepping into paradise.

There were walls—real walls—and never mind that they were a shade of pink that made Starscream's stomach churn slightly, *they were real walls*. And a floor that wasn't made of dirt. And the beds! There were two of them—a double and a twin—and both were complete with pillows, sheets, blankets, and actual mattresses. Starscream couldn't wait to sink into one of them tonight after he got that wash he'd been promised.

There was also a ratty-looking burgundy loveseat against the far wall, a ghastly brown wardrobe that took up most of the other wall, and a large window whose curtains were made of the same tasteless brown and green fabric as the bed runners and pillow cases. At least they weren't pink.

No one seemed concerned with the smaller details, though—like the dust bunnies in the corners or the suspect yellow stain on one of the bed spreads—as the appearance of the beds themselves seemed to have sent most of them into shock, and there was an awed silence amongst them for a moment.

Until...

“Pillow fight!” squealed an excited Rumble, already running towards the beds, intent on being the first to snatch one of the cushions to whack his brother over the head with. Frenzy was quick to follow, joining his twin in bouncing up and down on the delightfully springy mattress, pillows whizzing back and forth through the air. Not wanting to be left out, Skywarp skipped to the side of the bed and shoved Rumble off before climbing up and proceeding to wallop the both of them relentlessly, using his height to his advantage.

Soundwave stood back and watched them, lips quirking slightly as the twins turned and called for him to back them up, which only resulted in Skywarp taking them by surprise and knocking both of them off the bed with one blow.

Starscream glared hatefully at them as the others started filing into the small space. They were doing nothing for his throbbing headache. On top of that, the car horns and shouting from the street outside that should have been muffled by the walls separating them only seemed to be amplified in the room. He reveled at least in the fact that if the horrid blue stuff really was anything like circuit speeders, they were all going to pass out soon and wake up tomorrow morning with headaches to rival his own.

It wasn't until Thundercracker took his wrist and gently tugged that he finally set foot in the room.

“Oh!” he exclaimed when he did, lifting his bare foot in surprise. “It's cold!”

The floor of the room, unlike the carpeted lobby and halls, was covered in some kind of plastic.

“Then good job we don't have to sleep on it, right?” his brother pointed out, closing the door behind them.

It was a fair point, but did nothing to alleviate the ache that the cold was currently sending through Starscream's tired feet.

The room smelled like human—not the unbearable stench of the slums, where the entire five mile radius reeked of rotting human waste of one kind or another, but the more subtle, nonetheless annoying, smell of a living fleshbag. It reminded Starscream of his days on Earth before locating Megatron and the All-spark, when secrecy had been of the utmost importance, and he had no choice but to allow the meat bags access to his cockpit. His olfactory sensors had been filled with
nothing but the unbearable stench of human, and he'd never quite gotten used to it. Now, his olfactory sensors were less sensitive and he'd been covered in the smell himself so long that it was not quite so dreadful, but the memories it evoked were still a disappointing damper on the excitement of gaining better accommodations.

He turned to find something to take his mind off of it and discovered that there was another door next to the one they had come in through.

Curiosity piqued, he risked a glance behind him to see if he was being paid any attention. Megatron and Soundwave were currently engaged in trying to get the twins and Skywarp to stop abusing their new sleeping furniture while Thundercracker and Slipstream were apparently enthralled by the view from the window. None of them seemed inclined to notice little old Starscream sneaking through a door they had yet to notice.

It was a bathroom—a small room covered in white tile from floor to ceiling—and Starscream was in love with it at first sight. Thundercracker had mentioned getting a wash, yes, but Starscream hadn't dared dream that wash could happen right here in their own room! With a door to shut out the rest of them, to boot!

There was a toilet in the corner and a sink and mirror a bit closer. A toilet. An actual toilet. Starscream stepped over and lifted the lid to see the pristine water inside. He pulled the handle on the side and watched it swirl down. No fuss, no mess, no pit full of thousands of messes that other humans had left before him. He would have hugged it if he hadn't known other humans' rear ends had been on it.

Next to the toilet was a small hose with a nozzle on the end, which the Seeker picked up curiously. The nozzle had a trigger on it, almost like a gun. He aimed it away from himself and pulled. Cold water sprayed out. Starscream was just reflecting on the marvel of being able to wash himself with it later when he saw the other, much longer hose, between the toilet and sink with a far larger nozzle on the end and what was unmistakably a temperature dial affixed to the wall beneath it.

Without thinking it over another second, Starscream shucked off his dirty, ragged rags and turned the dial underneath the nozzle. He let out a surprised yet also somewhat delighted shriek as icy water rained down on him. He would have been content to wash in the cold water (he'd been washing in dirty cold water in a basin or the river for weeks, so clean cold water from a shower was luxury enough), but then the water started getting warm. He didn't care that it stung like the pit when it hit his injuries, he was determined to spend the rest of the night under this shower until all the grime and stink and muss of the slums had washed away.

Unfortunately, his comrades seemed to have different ideas on the matter.

The door to the bathroom banged open to reveal a frowning Thundercracker, flanked by the still-energetic-looking twins and Skywarp, all of whom seemed far too eager to get a closer look at their new ablutory.

“...share!” Thundercracker was trying to shout over the sound of the running water.

Starscream scowled at him and reached up to detach the shower head from the wall, holding it close to his chest. “I found it first! I get first turn!” he whined.

The twins immediately began to protest that there was plenty of room for them in the bathroom as well, but Thundercracker miraculously seemed to accept Starscream's argument and started herding them away. The door closed again, and Starscream smiled to himself as he turned his back to it and began gingerly scrubbing at the blood that had congealed over much of his side. He knew as well
as Soundwave about the dangers of not caring for wounds, and hoped that Thundercracker's bag of medical supplies had some kind of disinfectant in it.

He was trying to work the dirt out of his hair when he felt a touch on his shoulder and jumped violently, spinning around to see his brother had returned.

“*What?!*” he shrieked, and Thundercracker stepped back, clearly hearing the unspoken, “...*are you doing in my personal space!?*” in his brother's tone.

“Megatron wants to speak to you.”

Starscream visibly jolted once more. Under normal circumstances, he would have snapped that the old fool would just have to come to *him* if he wanted to speak with him, as he, *Starscream*, would not answer his hails like some kind of trained drone, but after that afternoon's debacles, he knew better than to push his luck.

Taking the flimsy gray towel that Thundercracker had procured from somewhere (the wardrobe, he later discovered), Starscream turned off the shower and stepped out of the bathroom. He was almost bowled over in the doorway by Skywarp and the twins, who were eager to get their turn at the shower, it seemed.

“Watch it!” he snapped, slamming the door shut behind himself. Loathe as he was to hand the precious shower over to the three of them, it was nice to have a separate room to shut them into.

Starscream used the towel to squeeze as much of the water as he could out of his dripping hair before wrapping it around his waist; he wasn't about to put those filthy rags back on now that he had gotten his body into some proper semblance of cleanliness. This left most of his body exposed, though, and he shivered as he looked around the room for a place to sit down.

Slipstream and Thundercracker had settled on the couch while Megatron and Soundwave were sat on the end of the closest bed, surrounded by discarded pillows and rumpled covers left over from the pillow fight. The warlord was running his hand through his growing stubble and giving Starscream an odd look that sent a shiver down the Seeker's spine.

“What?” he said, folding his arms self-consciously across his bony chest.

“There is something we need to discuss,” the older man replied, seeming to shake himself out of another thought.

He beckoned Starscream closer, but the Seeker stayed where he was, looking around at the others. Everyone else seemed to know what was going on already, and he couldn't help but think that meant it was some kind of... *intervention*, and really *how dare they*?

“You've all been talking about me again, haven't you?” he demanded, drawing back closer to the door as anger and hurt started welling up inside him.

“Starscream, no,” Megatron sighed, sounding more like he was tired and just done with it all than angry. “Just come sit down; you look like you're about to pass out.”

“You look like you're about to pass out!” the Seeker retorted petulantly.

Before he had the chance to say anything more, Thundercracker was suddenly at his side, one hand on his elbow and the other on his back.
“Star, really, this has nothing to do with you,” he murmured in his brother's ear, reaching up to stroke his wet hair a bit. “Just come hear what he has to say.”

Starscream sniffed, but allowed the other Seeker to guide him over to the couch and settle him down between himself and Slipstream. It had been a while since Thundercracker had treated him with the same kind of affection that he afforded Skywarp, and Starscream found that he was enjoying it a bit despite himself.

“Now,” Megatron began once his second had settled, “as most of you already know—” Starscream's scowl deepened; they had been keeping more from him than the fact that someone wanted to kill him, had they? “—we will be leaving this place soon and traveling to America.”

“What?!”
“I will thank you not to blast our eardrums, Starscream,” Megatron growled, leveling his enraged second with a warning look.

“But...you can't be serious!!” the Seeker protested, surging to his feet despite his brother's best efforts to keep him on the couch. “You want to get closer to the people who want to kill us? While we're still in these forms!?”

“It is getting out of these forms that will be our objective in going to America in the first place,” his commander told him, voice starting to get dangerous, “which I would have explained in greater detail if you had not so rudely interrupted!”

Starscream took the hint, but flared his nostrils in annoyance before sitting back down.

“As I was saying,” Megatron growled, “we will go to America, where we will set up fake identities, all so that we may find and capture the boy.”

Starscream's jaw dropped and his hair flicked water over both Slipstream and Thundercracker as he looked back and forth between them, wondering that no one else seemed in any way phased by his plan.

“I can see that you wish to protest, Starscream, so why don't you go ahead and just get it over with?” Megatron sighed.

“Uh, yeah,” the Seeker scoffed. “Putting the whole ‘set up fake identities' shit aside for a second, you realize that the brat will be under guard twenty-four-seven in a safe house somewhere, surrounded by Autobot guards and those NEST scum—”

“He will not,” his commander interrupted. “He will still be at...”

He paused, apparently searching for a word.

“College,” Soundwave supplied, and Megatron nodded in acknowledgment.

“But the All-spark...”

“Prime is too soft to impede the freedom of a being even as pathetic as the boy over something as 'simple' as the very source of our kind,” Megatron countered, a note of bitterness in his voice.

“Okay, but even if we did manage to capture him, which I hardly expect we will, what good would it do us when we're still human?” Starscream wanted to know.

Beside him, Slipstream scoffed and rolled her eyes. “Give him a minute. He'll get there in the end.”

It seemed that Megatron wasn't willing to wait for that, though, and answered his second's question himself: “But you have already mentioned it, my dear Starscream,” he said, using that soft, patronizing tone that he did when he wanted to insult the Seeker's intelligence; Starscream glowered at him even more than before. “The All-spark.”
Starscream made a derisive noise in his throat. “You think it'll change us back?”

“It's probably the best option we've got,” Thundercracker shrugged. “I mean, it's better than just waiting and seeing what happens, right?”

Yes, Starscream supposed that was true. The All-spark was quite mysterious and had powers that not even the Primes fully understood. He had exhausted his own database of scientific knowledge quite early on in their human experience searching for any explanation of how they had ended up in this predicament, and had been forced to conclude that it was a supernatural phenomenon of one sort or another. If it had come about through supernatural causes, then a supernatural artifact just might fix it.

“I still don't see what's wrong with the 'Wait and See What Happens' plan,” Slipstream spoke up with a yawn, and Starscream turned on her.

“If you like being a disgusting little insect so much. Slipstream, then you can stay here. I have no problem leaving you behind,” he snarled at her as a wave of nausea swept through him at the mere thought of spending the rest of his (now considerably shorter) life in this form.

“No one is being left behind,” Soundwave cut in loudly, leveling a glare at the Seeker.

Starscream blinked in surprise, having been under the impression that Soundwave would jump at any chance to rid himself of the femme who had recently been attaching herself to him like a space barnacle.

“So, er...” Thundercracker's voice came in from behind him. “The one part I don't understand is how are we getting to America?”

Yes, Starscream wanted to know that part, too. If Megatron thought that he was going to walk the whole way, then he had another thing coming. The old fool had to be aware of the fact that there was an ocean in the way, too, as he had spent a considerable amount of time at the bottom of it.

But Megatron just smirked and fell back onto the tangled mess of pillows, sheets, and blankets on the bed before announcing simply, “We fly.”

The words hit Starscream like a dagger to the chest, and he felt an actual physical pain in his back as he thought of the wings he no longer had. The grief quickly morphed into anger, though, and he stared at his commander in enraged bewilderment for a moment as he tried to suppress all the things that he wanted to shout at him but knew he couldn't risk. He knew that he was in disgrace with Megatron right now, but for his commander to be so insensitive as to order him to do something that he wanted so desperately but couldn't...

“We can't,” he said finally, his voice slow and venomous. “You know we can't anymore.”

“Starscream,” Megatron sighed, apparently sensing his second's swirling emotions but too tired to deal with them as he settled back into the bed and closed his eyes. “Humans own planes too.”

Well.

Somehow he had managed to make it even worse.

Starscream marched over to the bed where the warlord lay, nostrils quivering in righteous indignation, and climbed right up next to him on the mattress, intent on giving him a piece of his mind. Megatron's thick brows furrowed slightly, and one of his eyes opened a crack.
“You expect me to get on a plane piloted by a human?” he demanded, and was further frustrated that the words came out in more of a terrified squeak than the furious hiss he had been going for.

“You're not afraid of flying, are you, Seeker?” Megatron asked, his mouth quirking slightly in amusement. “I don't think that they crash them that often.”

Starscream didn't see what there was to be amused by. “I will not get on that plane,” he announced, sitting back on his heels. “I refuse to die in this disgusting flesh form at the hands of a human whose head was too big for his cockpit!”

“We'll see,” Megatron shrugged before looking over to the other two Seekers. “Does either of you have any problems with flying?”

They both shook their heads, and Starscream felt more fear sink into the pit of his stomach as he realized that the likelihood of his having to get inside of another jet was growing by the moment.

“But—OW!!” he started, and cut off with a yelp as Megatron reached over and grabbed hold of his injured side, trying to turn him so that he could get a better look at it. “Stop!” Starscream whined, swatting at him.

“If I was you, I would worry more about the things in the here and now that could kill me,” his leader said, letting go of him. “Thundercracker, what did you do with the medical supplies?”

“You can't distract me that easily,” Starscream continued as Thundercracker got up and went to grab the bag of things they had gotten for dressing wounds. “I'm telling you, I'm not getting on that plane!”

“We'll see,” Megatron said, sounding utterly unperturbed by his second's hang ups.

Starscream bit his lip and resisted the urge to say something insulting. Whatever plans his leader had been making without him this whole time, he knew that he couldn't possibly have enough money to move them yet, especially now that they were having to spend some of their funds on lodging. It would take a while for them to finish preparing, and he would have all that time to wheedle away at Megatron and convince him of just how stupid his plan was. They would see, indeed.

Thundercracker sank down on the bed beside him then and began pulling supplies out of the bag. All other thoughts temporarily fled Starscream's mind as he examined what was about to be used on him.

“Which one of you picked these things out?” he wanted to know, taking a clear plastic bottle in hand and turning it about.

“I did,” Soundwave replied, and the Seeker nodded in acceptance. He'd been worried that it may have been Thundercracker or their thick-skulled leader selecting supplies, in which case he wouldn't have been surprised if they tried to rub cold medicine on his open wound. Soundwave would have at least had the sense to ask the store clerk for something intended for topical use, whether he could have recognized the correct chemicals himself or not.

The writing on the bottle he held was all in Hindi, so Starscream unscrewed the top and took a whiff to try and guess its contents. He drew back sharply with a choked cough; whatever was in there, it smelled like it would kill him, let alone any microbes that were trying to infect him.

“It's rubbing alcohol,” Soundwave explained. “A highly effective disinfectant.”
It also, as it turned out, stung like the pit. Starscream, still trying not to push Megatron's patience too far, had to hold a pillow to his face to muffle his cries as his brother dabbed the substance along his side.

“This is pretty deep,” Thundercracker said, sounding concerned. “Are you sure he doesn't need a doctor?”

“We don't have the money to spend on such superficial injuries,” Megatron replied. Starscream scowled at him, wondering if he would be singing a different tune were it himself who'd nearly been gutted with a pocket knife that afternoon, but wasn't about to argue; he never wanted to see that horrible clinic again.

Once the cut was disinfected and properly covered in clean, white bandages, Thundercracker started examining some of his brother's other injuries. Starscream indulged him, allowing the older Seeker to twist and turn his body this way and that because he was too tired to fight it by then.

“How do we know if anything's broken?” Thundercracker wanted to know as he ran a gentle hand over a particularly ugly bruise on his little brother's stomach.

“There aren't any bones to break there,” Starscream pointed out, wondering at the complete lack of “tingling feelings” that Thundercracker's touch was creating. So, it really was just Megatron. He wasn't sure whether to be relieved or further annoyed by the realization.

“There would be considerably more swelling if anything was broken,” Soundwave spoke up as he heaved himself off the bed and started for the bathroom door.

“Oh, but it's been so peaceful...” Slipstream whined as the prospect of releasing the three younger members of their faction loomed.

Megatron must have been thinking the same thing because he spoke up next: “Leave them, Soundwave. I'm sure they can entertain themselves in there for a little while longer, and I'm quite enjoying the quiet.”

Soundwave hesitated, clearly torn between obeying his leader and not wanting to neglect his creations.

“You can let them out later,” Megatron suggested, pulling a pillow out from beneath Starscream to use himself and ignoring the half-muffled snarl the action elicited from his second.

“What if they've broken something in there?” the intelligence officer murmured questioningly, more to himself than anyone else.

Starscream practically launched himself off the bed at the thought of anything happening to his shower, only to have Megatron's thick arm wrap around him from behind and forcibly tug him back down.

“For once in your life, just relax, Starscream,” he said, pulling the Seeker's hips up against himself while taking care not to put too much pressure on his injuries.

Starscream did the exact opposite of relaxation as the rough hairs on his leader's cheek pricked against his hip and warm breath ghosted down his leg. Megatron's arm was still resting across his lap; if he had a reaction now, it would be apparent to everyone in the room, but Megatron most of all. So, it was fortunate when Slipstream spoke up a moment later.

“I suppose it's really not a question of if they've broken anything so much as what they've broken,” she said, throwing a wink in Starscream's direction.
He gawped. Had she just...

“Alright,” Megatron groaned, releasing his grip on his second and folding his arms behind his head instead. “Let them out.”

Starscream jumped up off the bed once more, giving his cousin a look that was somewhere between amazed gratitude and embarrassed fury, and was across the room pulling the bathroom door open in a heartbeat.

Thankfully, nothing was broken, and the three Decepticons inside had calmed down considerably, hopefully a sign that the horrid blue stuff was leaving their systems at last. They had, as it turned out, used up all of the hot water, but Starscream supposed it would be a pain to try to shower without getting his new bandaging material wet in the first place. He would just have to be sure to get in there first the next morning.

“Put your clothes back on before you freeze to death,” Megatron ordered when his second re-emerged behind his younger brother and the twins.

Starscream grimaced. “They’re filthy. I refuse to wear them for a second longer, and if that means I have to spend the rest of my time as an organic freezing to death, then so be it. You might not care about hygiene, but I do. We all reek.”

Frenzy, who was busy being taken out of his water-sodden clothes by Soundwave, subtly leaned forward to take a whiff of his creator and then reared back, wrinkling his nose.

Megatron exhaled tiredly and Starscream folded his arms across his chest, setting his face determinedly. His leader apparently decided that this wasn’t worth the argument.

“We will buy clothes tomorrow,” he announced, and Starscream couldn’t help but notice how his cousin’s head popped up at the mention. “But I still can’t have you prancing around the hotel nude. It might raise suspicions.”

“More like get us thrown out and Starscream arrested,” Slipstream muttered under her breath. It was rather rich of her, Starscream thought, considering that she had been the one who had insisted so adamantly on their first day as humans that she didn’t need any clothing on her lower half.

Megatron pulled a blanket off the bed he was lying on and approached his second as if planning to wrap the material around the other man’s shaking shoulders. Starscream quickly stepped out of his reach with a hiss and snatched the blanket away to do it himself. Soundwave and Thundercracker followed their leader’s example and did the same with Skywarp and the twins.

The others started settling into beds then, Megatron collapsing on the twin and leaving his subordinates to fight it out amongst themselves as to where they would be sleeping. There was a brief argument between Soundwave and Slipstream over the sofa, which the femme won by pointing out both that the sofa was too short for him and that she was sick of sleeping in close proximity to large males who had habits of crushing her in their sleep. Soundwave, as the male chiefly responsible for unintentionally crushing her, immediately dropped it and let her do what she pleased.

This left only the double for Soundwave, the twins, and the three remaining Seekers to squeeze themselves into, which—apart from Starscream—they all managed.

The former Air Commander had about as much luck as Soundwave in getting his cousin to budge, or even just convincing her to share (loathe as he was to admit it, they were both small enough to fit
if she would just scoot over), no matter how much he hissed at her.

After about a minute of increasingly heated argument, Megatron sat up in bed and snapped at Starscream to, “Get over here, you impudent brat!”

Starscream scowled, but still didn't dare disobey his leader. Once within arm's reach, he found himself seized around the waist once more and gave a cry of protest as Megatron began wrestling him into the bed. The Seeker did everything short of deck the other man in the face to get free of the cramped bed, tangled sheets, and Megatron's confining clutches, but to no avail. He gave in eventually, deciding that spending a night in close quarters with Megatron was at least better than doing so on the floor (which, despite being cleaner than that of their shanty, was also far colder and harder), and let himself slump into the unbelievably soft mattress. It took some effort not to sigh in relief at lying on something that wasn't hard and covered in dirt.

He rolled onto his side, facing away from his leader, and dragged a handful of covers up to his chest. Megatron's warm, clothed chest brushed against his back, and he shivered as a large, rough palm slid over his bare hip. Starscream bit his lip and forced his mind to focus on something other than the completely oblivious man spooning his backside, but had to admit that he was getting somewhat used to it by now.

There were a few hushed whispers from the others before he heard the rustle of sheets and someone climbed out of the double bed to tread softly across the room and switch the lights off with a sharp click, leaving them all in relative darkness, only the orange glow of street lights and car headlights filtered through the thin curtains to illuminate the room.

The Seeker shivered again as Megatron's breath ghosted across his shoulder and shuffled down further into the sheets. His leader shifted behind him, and the hand on his hip slid up his side until it hit the bandages and paused. Ever so gently, Megatron's fingers settled over the thick, white gauze and tape.

“Does it hurt?” his deep voice rumbled through Starscream's back, and the Seeker turned slightly so that he could see the other man's face over his shoulder. The light from the window glinted off Megatron's dark eyes, and there was a strange expression on his face—like anger, but not quite.

“Yes,” Starscream murmured, turning away.

Megatron sighed, and pulled him closer to his chest, his hand now settled just below his ribcage and his nose buried in his second's wet hair. The Seeker stayed awkwardly rigid for a while longer, counting his heartbeats, which seemed almost deafening in the strange room, until Megatron started to relax against him and he knew that his leader had drifted off to sleep.

Starscream remained awake a while longer after that, despite having wanted so desperately to sleep the whole rest of the evening. There were too many thoughts swirling in his head again, mostly about the events of that afternoon. The sting in his side and the throbbing aches throughout the rest of his body served as unavoidable reminders of how close he had come to dying for the second time in so many weeks. This time was different from the malaria, though; this time was entirely the fault of his own cockiness.

Who did he think he was? Starscream the Great, second-in-command and Air Commander of the Decepticons? No, he was a human. Just a tiny, pathetic human who didn't have the strength to fight off a single man, let alone six. He needed the others, not because he wasn't smart enough or skilled enough to do this on his own, but because he wasn't physically capable of it. He would have to be more cooperative from now on, he knew, and that was going to be his greatest challenge yet.
Well, not quite, he reflected as Megatron murmured something in his sleep, his lips moving teasingly against the back of his second's head.

It was a long time before Starscream was able to relax properly into the soft, warm bed and his leader's arms and drift off to sleep.
Chapter 31

Megatron woke the next morning to the sounds of car horns and shouting—the same noises he had fallen asleep to last night. He breathed in, nostrils filling with the scent of something he would have identified as Starscream had he not been so groggy, and ran a hand up and down the warm, smooth surface it was resting against. There was a small gasp, and suddenly the warmth that he had been vaguely aware was pressed against his front vanished, along with most of the blankets, with a thudding noise.

The warlord sat up, blinking blearily to find that his bed mate of the previous evening had disappeared. A muffled shriek came from somewhere over the side of the bed, and Megatron peeked over to find Starscream fighting to extricate himself from the nest of blankets he had managed to get tangled round his limbs.

After a moment of struggling, a somewhat flushed face framed in mussy brown hair emerged and Starscream caught sight of him. Megatron felt a wave of amusement and something unfamiliar but pleasant roll through him at the sight, and quirked a questioning eyebrow at his second. Starscream glared at him and crawled back up onto the bed without comment, burying his face in a pillow and refusing to look at his leader.

Still greatly amused but wise enough not to comment on it this early in the morning, Megatron snagged some of the covers back from him and shuffled forward, intending to settle around the smaller man's comfortably warm body and go back to sleep for as long as he could before anyone else (mostly the twins) woke up. However, the appendage between his legs (whose purpose he had thus far only understood as a hose for emptying waste fluids from the body) was strangely stiff at the moment, as it sometimes was in the morning, and it happened to bump against Starscream's backside when he shuffled closer to him.

The effect was instant and dramatic. For Megatron's part, it was like lightning shooting throughout his body from his groin, and he pulled back with a half-started gasp. As for Starscream, the young man jumped violently and flipped himself around so quickly it was like he'd had thrusters in his hands to give Megatron the most horrifically offended expression the warlord had ever seen.

“WHAT THE FR—”

Megatron, who was feeling neither as exhausted nor as patient as he had last night, hastily reached out and clapped a hand over his second's mouth, pulling him forward by the face until Starscream's wide, terrified, blue eyes were the only thing in his vision.

They stared at each other for a moment, both stock still, and Megatron forgot his previous intentions to scold the Seeker as he found himself suddenly consumed with the observation that Starscream's eyes were, as far as human eyes went, quite lovely—a fetchingly large, rounded shape and such a perfectly serene blue. And then he noticed for the first time just how soft Starscream's skin was.

The flesh between his legs throbbed again and an entirely new feeling started welling up from the pit of his stomach.

“Lower your voice,” he purred, finding it strangely hard to get his own voice out in any other tone with the strange new feeling clenching in his throat. “You'll wake Soundwave's infernal brats.”

He then released Starscream's chin, noting how his rough grip had left red marks on the other
man's normally porcelain jaw. He expected then that Starscream would lurch away from him, rebury his face in the pillow, and pull the sheets back over his head, or perhaps even clamber out of the bed entirely and run away to hide in the bathroom. However, he was surprised and bizarrely pleased when instead his second leaned forward, coming closer to him with his mouth slightly parted and half-lidded eyes focused as if under some sort of trance.

A part of Megatron considered slapping Starscream across the face to snap him out of it, but it was quickly overtaken by a much larger part of him that felt a sudden compelling need to brush his hands over the younger man's unnaturally soft-looking cheeks; to run his hands through that thick, silky hair. Yet his arms seemed to have become heavy and stiff, and he couldn't quite find the right command to make his hand move from where it still lay on the mattress between them. He was only dimly aware of leaning forward as well so that Starscream was now so close that he could feel the Seeker's hot, damp breath on his cheek.

Their noses bumped, and Megatron felt as if his heart was going to pound out of his chest as the flesh between his legs seemed almost to scream for... something. He didn't know what. Whatever was going on, he couldn't imagine it was healthy, but he also couldn't seem to deny himself the chance to indulge in it.

He heard Starscream swallow and lick his lips before the Seeker's pretty blue eyes closed and—

"I'm hungry!" one of the twins' voices rang out from somewhere amongst the forms sprawled on the double bed next to them.

Megatron didn't think he'd ever seen Starscream move so quickly, not even in battle. The Seeker was out of the bed and slamming the bathroom door behind him so fast that it was as if he'd somehow stolen Skywarp's sigma abilities.

The warlord stared after him until he heard the squeak of a tap and the sudden rush of water from within. He pushed dark hair out of his eyes and turned to see all the occupants of the double bed now awake and watching him curiously, though still half-asleep in several cases. He scowled at them and suddenly they all seemed to have better things to do.

At least the distraction of the twin's complaint seemed to have jolted his body back to normal; his waste hose was already starting to soften again. Although, the question still remained as to what in the Pit had just happened.

Starscream let himself slide down the bathroom door until he was sitting on the cold tiles in front of it, willing his heart rate to return to normal along with his obnoxiously single-minded reproductive organs. What had just happened? What in the Pit had just happened!? Megatron had been... And he had... And they almost... He buried his face in his knees, feeling like he was going to be sick.

There was no way Megatron knew what he was doing just now. If Starscream himself—who spent extensive amounts of time even before this ordeal researching the science of organics—had only recently found out about such things, then the likelihood that Megatron, Lord of Oblivion, knew about it was somewhere just shy of zero. And if he found out... No, the issue was more when he found out because someone was bound to tell him sooner or later. When he realized that Starscream had attempted to force something so horrifically organic on him...
Well, the Seeker didn't much like his chances.

And yet...

He couldn't stop recalling the image of Megatron's dark, smoldering eyes so close that he could almost feel their eyelashes brush when he blinked, the feel of his leader's warm breath on his face, his musky smell filling the Seeker's nostrils.

He wanted him.

No, Starscream tried to remind himself. It wasn't that he wanted Megatron, it was just that his temporary flesh prison wanted Megatron. *He* certainly wasn't interested in doing something so disgusting with his leader, or being *intimate* with him in any way! It was just so very difficult to remind himself of that sometimes. Especially when—with the exception of the previous day's events—he kept finding himself looking into Megatron's eyes and seeing notes of something there that he never had before; something warm that seemed to pull on every fiber of his being at once.

He didn't *want* Megatron, but there just may have been a part of him that wanted Megatron to look at him like that more often. Was it worth going out of his way and putting aside everything else he wanted just to keep his leader happy, though?

With a frustrated snarl, Starscream forced himself to his feet and grabbed hold of the shower head. His one comfort was that at least now he had the option of scrubbing himself until no trace of the imbecile remained on him anywhere.

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Thundercracker was first to approach the bathroom door, one of the towels from the wardrobe in hand. Luckily, Starscream hadn't thought to lock it in his haste to get away from their commander, so his brother was free to wrench it open; he wasn't going to let Starscream try to hog the shower again this morning.

“What?” Starscream sneered at him through the haze of steam that had filled the small space. He was squatting in the middle of the floor, apparently busy pulling the bandage off his side. The many bruises covering his body looked twice as bad this morning.

“Don't take it off!” Thundercracker protested, moving over to stop him. Starscream hissed and turned the spray on him instead.

“I can't leave it on now that it's wet!” he explained to his spluttering brother.

“Get out already!” the older Seeker choked, trying to shield his face from the spray.

“No! I'm not done!”

“I'll tell Megatron!” Thundercracker didn't care how childish this sounded; he too was desperate to get out of those horrible clothes and feel the rush of clean water down his back.

Starscream stared at him in disbelief for a moment before gracing him with the filthiest expression he could and then throwing the shower head at him in frustration. He made sure to ram his shoulder into his brother's on his way out.
Thundercracker watched him stomp out, dripping wet and without even bothering to pick up a towel to dry himself off, and frowned as the door slammed shut. He'd noticed it last night when his brother was parading naked around their hotel room, but was more aware of it now that he was less exhausted: Starscream was too skinny. His shoulder blades jutted almost like wings and each of his vertebrae was visible down his narrow back. There was something odd about just how much his hip bones jutted out, too; he was starting to look like one of the starving beggars they'd seen so many of in the slums.

Thundercracker adjusted the temperature dial on the shower to something a little less close to the scalding water Starscream apparently preferred and began stripping his clothes off to reveal his own human body. He took a moment to examine himself more thoroughly than he had in a while as a month's worth of dirt and grime started to slough off and spiral down the drain. While he was still rather slim for a human, there was definite lack of visible bones when compared with his brother. It was something that he would have to address later.

He took the time to attempt untangling some of his hair, which turned out to be a futile process. In the past month, his dark brown locks had grown to nearly jaw-length, and were now so tangled that he didn't know how he would ever get them tamed without just shearing off the lot of it. Perhaps if he had a comb rather than his fingers he might have more luck, but for now he had to be content simply with managing to rinse most of the dirt out of it.

When he was finally finished with his shower, he felt some amazement at how refreshed his skin felt—almost as if it could breathe for the first time in weeks now that it was dirt-free. He snatched his towel from the hook on the back of the door and dried himself off before stepping out of the bathroom, towel around his waist now, to inform whoever was next in line that the shower was now free.

Slipstream was by the door, putting on her cheap sandals when he emerged. It looked as though she was planning to go out, despite the fact that no one else seemed inclined to go anywhere. Thundercracker looked to the others for confirmation.

“She is going to find us more suitable clothing” Soundwave explained before he had even asked, and Thundercracker wondered if the communications officer had retained some of his telepathy after all.

“Aren't you going to get cleaned up first?” he asked his cousin. “The shower's fr—”

“Nope,” Slipstream interrupted, shaking her head and stepping closer to the single bed so that she could receive a wad of money that Megatron was counting out.

Thundercracker wasn't the only one to wrinkle his nose at Slipstream's apparent disregard for hygiene. He had always thought that femmes (or females, or whatever Slipstream should be referred to as now) were more prone than mechs to maintenance, and more prone in general to care about aspects of their appearance such as how shiny and waxed their armor was. Clearly, Slipstream had never received that memo.

She was about to head out the door when Megatron's voice stopped her: “Soundwave and Thundercracker will go with you.”

Soundwave stood obediently, whilst Slipstream turned on her heel to glare at her commander.

Thundercracker merely sighed, retreating into the bathroom to retrieve his clothes. As reluctant as he was to put on the filthy rags again and venture out with his vicious cousin and the cold, almost emotionless intelligence officer, at least he wouldn't be stuck in a hotel room with Skywarp,
Starscream, and the twins for company. He felt a sudden, unfamiliar admiration for his leader then, as he exited into the dusty-smelling corridor, pausing only to wave dutifully back at a considerably-calmer-than-last-night Skywarp.
Not ten minutes after Slipstream, Thundercracker, and Soundwave had disappeared from the hotel room, Megatron was sorely regretting his decision to stay behind and (for lack of a better word) babysit the rest of the faction.

For whatever reason, Rumble and Frenzy seemed to have taken their creator's absence as permission for them to wreak as much havoc as they liked, and Megatron actually felt a bit of longing for their previous temporary home. At least when they had lived in the shanty, there had always been somewhere else for the twins to go. He'd thought about locking them out of the room, but people were not likely to be as accepting of children running about unattended in the hotel and its surrounding neighborhood as they had been in the slums. And so, he was subjected to the full, ear-splitting magnitude of their chaos confined to the space of the cramped suite.

All Megatron wanted was to sleep, because for once he was in an actual bed and he couldn't help but awe over how comfortable it was to his pathetically fragile human body, but that was obviously off the menu for the morning. And speaking of menus, he was starving, but didn't want to leave Starscream to his own devices long enough to go visit the restaurant he had seen in the hotel lobby the previous evening.

At least Starscream was currently electing to hide himself away in the double bed—the only indication of his presence being the occasionally shifting lump beneath the sheets—rather than adding to the noise by shrieking at the twins himself. Skywarp had also apparently decided that one night of shenanigans with Rumble and Frenzy was enough, and was now watching them with wide eyes as they jumped from the sofa to the Seeker-less side of the double bed and back again.

Rather than deal with it, Megatron decided to take a leaf out of Starscream's book and retreat beneath the covers of the twin bed. He allowed himself to sink into the plush pillows and sighed with relief as his muscles relaxed, confident that the twins would be able to take care of themselves just fine if he were to pretend they weren't there for an hour or two.

A sudden furious screech, the sort that could only ever belong to his second, proved him wrong. He jolted back up to find that the twins had thrown themselves over the Starscream-shaped lump beneath the covers of the double bed.

Snarling in frustration, Megatron kicked the sheets away and rolled out of his own bed. Glaring hatefully but silently at the twins and Starscream, he stormed across the suite and into the bathroom, making sure to slam the door after himself.

“Megatron's angry,” he heard Skywarp's voice whimpering through the thin door separating him from the main room, which he was currently leaning against.

“When isn't he?” Starscream's voice answered back, and Megatron felt a twinge of indignation at
that. There had been a good chunk of time between leaving the hospital and Starscream's lovely
display of intelligence yesterday when he had hardly been angry at all. It had been odd. “And how
the Pit is anyone supposed to sleep around here with you making all that noise?” Starscream
continued, his voice rising over the twins' resumed shrieks and howls.

Skywarp muttered something in reply that Megatron couldn't catch, but that Starscream responded
to with “Get off my bed, chutiya!”

“But if you sleep all day, you might be up all night and... and...” Megatron heard Skywarp protest,
and found himself inclined to agree, though currently too lazy to weigh in on the matter.

“Skywarp!” Starscream cut his brother off, “I don't give a slag!”

That seemed to be the end of that, and Megatron had no doubt that the timid youngest Seeker
would have retreated back to the couch, or possibly behind it. He wondered vaguely if Skywarp
could fit inside the wardrobe and how long it would take before it became the boy's favorite
retreat. Skywarp had always been a failure of a Decepticon, and Megatron would have gotten rid of
him hundreds of millennia ago if he didn't know that he would lose both of the Seeker's older
brothers were he to do so.

Megatron had yet to spend any time in the little wash room other than to relieve himself a couple of
times and had therefore not made the thorough inspection of it that most of his subordinates had.
At the moment, it was still rather wet from both Starscream and Thundercracker's earlier showers.
The warlord wiped moisture from the mirror hanging over the sink and began to make an
examination of himself.

Of course, he'd seen his reflection in shop windows and the like over the past few weeks, but this
was the first time he'd had access to such a clear view of his own face. The first thing that struck
him was how much paler it was than most of the other human faces he'd been looking at lately—
with the exception of his own faction members, that was. He had marveled many times in the early
morning light at how pale Starscream's body looked pressed against his own, and it was surprising
somehow that his face was not the dark, oaky shade he'd become accustomed to.

His brow and nose were both more prominent than any of the others' he noted, and there was
something strange about the shape of his eyebrows. They were almost like twin wings, arching into
points high above his eyes before curving back around at the corners. He waggled them curiously,
and then pulled them together into a scowl, pleased at the fearsomeness of the result.

The abundance of other hair on his face was another matter. For one thing, the dark hair on his
head had grown now to fall almost to his shoulder in a stringy, matted tangle that was anything but
elegant. He remembered that it had been somewhat wavy even in the beginning, though. Megatron
ran a hand through it, his fingers catching on a multitude of snags and snarls. Human men were
allowed to have long hair, from what he had gathered, and he suspected it might even look a bit
regal if he were to clean and groom it properly. The same applied to his facial hair.

Megatron didn't doubt that physical appearance was important for gaining other humans' respect
the same way it was for Cybertronians; last night's experience with the desk clerk had been proof
enough of that. In the slums, their unkempt appearances had helped them blend in with their
surroundings and even (he suspected) garnered them some street credit with their neighbors.
However, the slums were behind them now, and they would have to be more aware of things like
hygiene and grooming from now on. Starscream would be pleased, he realized, and the thought
made him chuckle just the slightest.

Some fifteen minutes later, Megatron emerged from the bathroom, dripping wet and clad only in
one of the gray hotel towels that had become the garb of much of his faction in the last 24 hours, to find the twins had somehow managed to rip down the curtain rod and split it so they each had a half. Starscream was still hidden under the blankets, and Skywarp was nowhere to be seen.

“Stop it,” Megatron growled, catching Rumble's half of the curtain rod just before it collided with the side of his twin's head. He caught the end of Frenzy's as well before wrenching both from the twins and throwing them down to the floor. “Fix it,” he ordered, certain that not doing so would mean paying the hotel extra money to replace the hideous thing.

Frenzy opened his mouth as if to protest, and Megatron silenced him with a glare. “Fix it *now*, or I will hang the two of you from it!”

Both Rumble and Frenzy's lips pursed shut, minds doubtless cycling through all the possible implications this held, and they nodded enthusiastically before scrambling to figure out how to reattach the two halves of the rod, which at least looked as though they were intended to come apart to begin with.

Megatron made a noise of satisfaction at this shift in attitude and turned around to find that Starscream had resurfaced from beneath the blankets and was now staring at him, eyes wide and face slightly flushed. The Seeker's gaze tracked up his commander's form until blue eyes met black, and suddenly his face went an even darker shade of red. The two of them stared at each other for a moment, and Megatron felt just the smallest hint of that pleasant stirring in the pit of his stomach from that morning before Starscream suddenly dove back beneath the covers, pulling them forcefully up over his head.

There was something very strange going on here, and Megatron was not sure he wanted to know what it was.

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Thundercracker was hoping to Primus that he never, ever had to go clothes shopping ever again. *Ever.*

At first, he had been enthralled by the packed marketplace, bustling with people and filled with colorful shop stalls. They had come to an open air market rather than one of the actual stores further downtown because Slipstream said it would be cheaper. While it was similar to the ones in the slums, there was more order to it as well as a good deal less stink and filth. The Seeker had been eager to examine the many fruits, clothes, jewelry, household goods, and even what looked to be toys spilling out of the vendors' displays, but his eagerness was nothing compared to the spell that the sight seemed to cast over his cousin.

The only thing that stopped Slipstream launching herself at the bountiful merchandise was Soundwave's tight grip on the back of her shirt.

Maybe it would have been more interesting if they could have looked more at some of the local garments, stunning in their color and flashing with bits of decorative metal in many places, but they were under strict orders to buy only the attire of a holiday-maker. There was no point in pretending that they belonged here, and attempting to do so would only make them stand out more. They needed only two changes of clothes and footwear for each of them; it didn't matter what they looked like so long as they were cheap.
Slipstream's apparent determination to ignore these orders was promising at first, but Thundercracker found little interest in the multitude of thin, skimpy garments she had brought her attention to instead. As if the garments themselves weren't dull enough, his cousin just couldn't satisfy herself until she had looked at every single possible option in the entire market.

Three hours into what should have been a thirty-minute trip, Thundercracker couldn't even find the energy to stand anymore. As there were no chairs or seats, he resorted to sitting on the ground, regardless of its dirty state—his legs were numb, and he was pretty sure that wasn't normal. He flinched when someone stepped uncomfortably close, thinking he was about to be trod on, but relaxed as he realized it was only Soundwave standing over him, likely to decrease the chances of just such an occurrence. Thundercracker leaned back against the taller man's legs with a sigh and an unprecedented sense of camaraderie for him.

Slipstream had been flitting back and forth between the different clothing racks at one particular stall for an hour now, occasionally holding something up for inspection before either throwing it back or placing it atop the ever-growing mountain of clothes that Soundwave had the misfortune of having to hold. Thundercracker sighed as he watched her toss another two garments in Soundwave's direction, making the stack so tall that the intelligence officer's face was only just visible over its top, and thanked Primus that at least he wasn't being used as a pack mule.

“What is taking so long?” Thundercracker finally dared to ask when his cousin had been rifling through a rack of pants for what felt like an eternity.

“I can't find anything big enough for Megatron and Soundwave,” she explained, her brow furrowed. She pulled one pair off the rack and walked over to Soundwave. “Turn around,” she ordered, and the former satellite did so without question, craning back over his shoulder in an attempt to see what she was doing. Slipstream held the pants up to his back and pursed her lips thoughtfully.

“This country is just too small,” she said finally, going to put the pants back. The native woman who seemed to be the owner of the stall finally came over to talk to her then, and the two women spoke in Hindi for a few moments before Slipstream turned back to her comrades.

“Right; pay for those, and then we're going,” she announced.

“Back to the hotel?” Thundercracker asked hopefully. He attempted to get up and toppled over when his legs rebelled against the concept.

“No, stupid,” Slipstream scoffed. “We have to go somewhere that sells foreign brands. Shopping requires strategy.”

Far more so than Thundercracker ever would have guessed, apparently. He was glad now that he had left Skywarp back at the hotel; his brother would have been crying with exhaustion by now for sure. He just hoped that the twins hadn't managed to harass him too much.

“Will. You. BE. QUIET!?” Megatron roared, voice growing in volume and stress with each word as the twins continued to ignore him.

The more he watched his two smallest, youngest, and most vulnerable recruits openly disobey him,
the more he was beginning to believe that most of his mechs had been more fearful of his fusion
canon than his actual person.

How had this even happened? Not two hours ago, when he had threatened them with a curtain rod,
they had obeyed him immediately. Now, after listening to them argue over who was taller for the
last twenty minutes, he had informed them that the next one to open his mouth would be thrown
out a window, and they had merely laughed and thrown a pillow at him! And they had been getting
so much more manageable lately with the influence of that human friend of theirs... Or perhaps it
had only seemed that way to Megatron because they were never around.

Either way, the twins were now jumping up and down on his bed, throwing his pillows, and
screaming. Loudly.

The incessant movement, he could take. The constant questions, though irritating, he could deal
with. But screaming? Screaming was what Starscream did. Something would have to be done about
it.

“Get down! Now!” he shouted again as Frenzy climbed onto the headboard and opened his arms
wide, about to throw himself at Rumble with a loud war cry for the second time in so many
seconds.

Starscream was being no help at all and still hadn't appeared from beneath the covers of the double
bed, while Skywarp had (as Megatron initially suspected) hidden himself between the wall and the
end of the sofa. He wouldn't have minded Starscream at least not contributing more to the chaos if
it weren't for the fact that he could clearly hear the Seeker's muffled sniggers from under the
covers, even over the twins' shouting.

“CAN WE GO OUT?!” Rumble demanded with far too much volume, considering Megatron was
barely two feet from him.

“YEAH! YEAH, CAN WE?!” his twin joined in, the both of them still bouncing up and down on
the bed.

Megatron reached out to grab them and drag them off it before they broke something, but they
leaped away with another burst of giggles.

“NO!” the warlord barked, fuming and barely restraining himself from climbing up on the bed to
get hold of them and rip their heads off. How did Soundwave manage to stay so calm and collected
all the time when dealing with them? “You are not leaving this room!”

The twins, completely unperturbed by his bellowing, whined in disappointment and continued to
pummel one another with the plush pillows, which were starting to get rather misshapen.

And then Starscream decided to get involved at last.

“Stop shouting, Lord Megatron!” he shrieked from under the covers, his voice somewhat muffled.
“Some of us are trying to sleep!”

And that was enough.

Megatron gave a snarl of frustration and walked around his own bed to the side of the double,
where he seized the blankets Starscream was hiding under and wrenched them clean away.
Starscream screeched at the sudden blinding light and lack of warmth, and jumped up, attempting
to reclaim some of the bedding. His commander simply shoved him back down onto the bed and
bundled the covers up before moving to dump them over the end of the sofa, forgetting that
Skywarp had been hiding there. The youngest Seeker didn't even make a sound as the cascade of blankets and sheets engulfed him.

The warlord then moved to the window and snatched the curtain rod back down from its hanging place, letting the curtain itself slide off to pool on the floor. Both twins instantly went silent, as did Starscream.

“No, Lord Megatron! We didn't mean it!” Rumble wailed as his commander advanced across the room toward himself and his twin.

“We'll stop! We'll be silent! We promise!” Frenzy put in.

The two of them jumped down off the bed and darted for the bathroom. Megatron reached out and snatched one of them—Rumble, as it turned out—by the arm. The boy shrieked and wailed in terror as he tried unsuccessfully to twist out of his commander's vice-like grip. Megatron ignored him and shifted his hold to the boy's shirt.

He shoved the curtain rod through one sleeve and out the other so that it pulled Rumble's arms out stiff and awkward at his sides. Then, he picked the curtain rod back up, twin and all, and replaced it on its hooks over the window. Rumble blinked at him in surprise from his new vantage point, his shirt collar pulled up almost over his nose, and his little legs kicking for purchase against the glass of the window. Megatron stepped back and nodded in appreciation at his handiwork.

A burst of laughter rang out from the other side of the room, and Megatron turned in surprise. Starscream was sat now on the twin bed, clutching at his injured side and laughing so hard that he was actually rolling about on the bed, tears glistening in his bright, blue eyes.

All annoyance Megatron had felt toward the Seeker that day instantly melted; he could not remember the last time he had heard Starscream laugh like that—not a snicker nor a sarcastic bark, but honest to goodness laughter. He found that he unexpectedly liked the sound of it, and also the sight of his second's face lifted and creased with amusement. The ghost of a smile pulled at his own mouth, and Megatron quickly cleared his throat to chase it away.

“You may come down when the both of you have been silent for at least thirty minutes,” he informed the unfortunate twin hung in the window.

“But—” Frenzy started behind him, and Megatron shot a glare at him that shut him up immediately.

On the bed behind him, Starscream was now laid on his back, kicking his legs as he continued to revel in Rumble's amusing position. If he had known this was what it would take to improve his second's mood, Megatron would have turned both the Cassetticons into window hangings ages ago.

Chapter End Notes

As a side note, I imagine Megatron in this story looking a bit like Jason Momoa...? Who would y'all cast as the different characters in this one? I've never found anyone satisfactory as a Starscream model...
Chapter 33

The hotel room was suspiciously quiet when Soundwave and the others returned. The intelligence officer had fully expected that he would be able to hear his creations' screaming from the other end of the hall if not the street outside, and the lack of it was setting him on edge a bit. He didn't doubt that Megatron would have long since grown weary of their overexcited, high-pitched yelling and found some way to shut them up.

He could only hope that it had been as nonviolent as possible; as much as he cared about his creations, he really didn't want to have to deal with them right now. All he wanted was to throw the seemingly hundreds of bags he'd been reduced to lugging around onto the floor and lie down before his legs gave out from underneath him. Judging by the shake in Thundercracker's legs, the Seeker wanted to do the same.

Slipstream, the only one with free hands, unlocked the door to let them in, and all at once, a cacophony of indignant yelling sprang up.

“Soundwave! Megatron hung Rumble on the curtain rod!” Frenzy was squealing as he ran up to his creator.

“He said I could come down in 30 minutes, but he just keeps making it longer!” Rumble added, his voice slightly muffled.

“He does not! You just have no idea how long 30 minutes is, you little rats!” That was Starscream.

Peering in, Soundwave saw Megatron reclined on the sofa, covered in sheets stolen from the double bed, and a surprisingly refreshed-looking Starscream sitting crosslegged on his and Megatron's bed. His twins on the other hand...

Soundwave took one look at Rumble's position and let out a snort of laughter, surprising even himself. His creations stared at him in wide-mouthed horror.

“I am sure you did something to deserve it,” Soundwave said as Slipstream and Thundercracker broke into gales of laughter behind him.

“We were just having fun!” Frenzy protested.

“Bo-ooooss!” Rumble whined.

Soundwave sighed and stepped into the room.

“May I take him down, Lord Megatron?” he asked.

“If you promise never to leave me with them again,” Megatron grumbled from the couch, though Soundwave could see the amusement pulling at his leader's face as well.

No sooner had Rumble been released from his hanging prison than he and his twin were falling upon the shopping bags. Slipstream hissed and snapped at them, but to no avail.

“Is this for us?” Frenzy demanded, holding up a pair of pants that was longer than he was tall.
“Obviously not!” Slipstream replied, snatching the pants away from them. “Those are Soundwave's. These are yours.”

And then she procured two identical outfits of blue shirts and khaki shorts.

“What's this for?” Rumble wanted to know, holding up the underwear that Slipstream had given him with the other things.

“It goes on your butt,” Slipstream said, and both twins' faces instantly lit up with delight.

Soundwave couldn't help but feel some sense of appreciation for the femme's crass wording then as his creations stripped off their old clothes and started pulling on the underwear. He had told her when she bought them that both boys would probably refuse to wear them, and she had simply given him a knowing look and said, “You need to learn how to work their angles more, Soundwave.” Apparently, she'd been right.

“I AM THE BUTT MAN!” Rumble was declaring now, standing tall and proud in nothing but his new underwear.

“I AM THE BIGGER BUTT MAN!” his twin announced from beside him.

“More quietly,” Soundwave reminded them, “or Lord Megatron may hang you up by your underwear next.”

He doubted the underwear was strong enough to hold if Megatron were to try, but both twins took the hint and started putting the rest of their clothes on much more quietly.

“What'd you get for me?” Starscream spoke up at last from the bed, and Slipstream threw a set of clothes in his direction.

“Where's Skywarp?” Thundercracker asked, looking around the suite with more clothes in his own hands.

“Bathroom,” Megatron grunted.

“Put these in there while you're at it,” Slipstream said, holding out another bag full of several colorful plastic bottles, tubes, and what looked like polishing cloths.

“What are those?” Megatron wanted to know.

“Cleaning solvents,” she responded. “You didn't think humans cleaned themselves with just water all the time, did you?”

Starscream, who was in the middle of sliding a shirt over his head, suddenly looked up and flung the garment aside.

“I wanna try them!” he squealed, bouncing out of the bed and snatching the bag from his brother's hands.

“You will do no such thing,” Megatron growled, hastily seizing them back.

“Why not?” the Seeker whined. “I wanna be clean!”

“Before that, you will eat something,” his leader insisted, shoving the solvents at Thundercracker again.
Starscream scowled, but relented, moving toward the bed where he had left his clothes, somewhat to Soundwave's surprise. Thundercracker shrugged and disappeared into the bathroom in search of his youngest brother.

“You purchased considerably more than I instructed,” Megatron commented, turning his attention away from his second-in-command for a moment.

“You said you wanted the clothes so that we could fit in with the humans in this part of town,” Slipstream reminded him. “Well, the humans around here have more than two changes of clothing —especially the foreigners.”

“The clothes were very cheap; we did not spend too much money,” Soundwave put in before Megatron could complain any further. He happened to agree with Slipstream on this matter. It wouldn't do to go around wearing dirty clothes in this part of town, and the more they had, the longer they could go before they would have to take them to one of the many laundromats he had seen around while they were shopping.

Megatron heaved a reluctant sigh. “Very well. Where are my clothes? I have been waiting all day to be able to go downstairs and eat something.”

Soundwave pulled an outfit out of a bag and handed it over to him. “The fit may be off,” he warned his leader. “It is difficult to find clothing for men of our stature in this country, it seems.”

“Can't be worse than the ones we've been wearing up till now,” the other man grunted as he held his new pants up to himself.

“Uh... except these are ridiculous?” Starscream spoke up from the bed, and Soundwave turned to see him standing there in his new jeans, holding the waistband up so that it was all-too-obvious that he could have fit most of a second of himself in them. “What were you thinking, Slipstream? These are even worse than the ones I pulled out of the trash!”

Slipstream glanced at him with disinterest.

“I got you the same size as your brothers,” she said. “They fit T.C. just fine. I don't know what's wrong with you.”

The Seeker blinked at her, and then glanced down at his rather prominent hip bones, which Soundwave had a feeling his pants were going to slide right off of if he tried to wear them just like that.

“Here,” the intelligence officer said, stepping over and pulling a long, silken scarf from one of the shopping bags. “Use this as a belt and we can try to find something that fits better another time.”

“That's mine!” Slipstream complained, trying to snatch the fabric back before Soundwave could hand it over to her cousin. Starscream was too fast for her, though.

“As it's your fault I have nothing fitting to wear, I see no problem taking it,” he sneered at her.

“It's your fault that you're too proud to eat anything!” she snarled at him.

“Enough!” Megatron barked before she or Starscream could say more, and both fell silent, glaring daggers at one another.

“Boss!”
Soundwave looked down as he felt a tug on his hand. Rumble and Frenzy were both looking up at him expectantly, both of them wearing their new shirts back to front.

“We gonna get something to eat tonight?” the boys wanted to know.

“Yes, I suppose we should,” their creator sighed.

Both twins instantly started jumping up and down and shouting out different foods that they wanted to eat.

“Yes, yes, we'll see what they have,” Soundwave assured them, ushering both boys toward the door before they could irritate their commander into finding less savory things to do with the curtain rods. He needn't have worried, though; as he and the twins were slipping out the door, Megatron was too busy trying to convince Starscream to let him redo the bandage on his side to notice anything else.

Starscream really hated it that Skywarp had turned out to be right. He really, really did. According to the green numbers of the dusty alarm clock sat on the window sill, it was 2:34 in the morning, and he was still awake.

It wasn't a matter of not being tired because he was exhausted out of his mind. Unfortunately, he was also uncomfortably warm and aching in far too many places as well as achingly aware of his bed partner's presence. He flinched every time one of Megatron's arms or legs made contact with his bare skin. He would have shifted his position to get away from his leader a bit, but he just couldn't be bothered.

The evening had not gone well for Starscream. As an intelligent, scientifically-minded individual, he was perfectly aware that he needed to consume food to maintain his human form, and he had been doing that—consuming enough to maintain himself. He had not hitherto paid much consideration to the fact that there might be any point to eating beyond that, such as not ending up as a disgusting bag of bones who had to hold his pants up with a scarf.

All the same, he couldn't bring himself to eat anymore than usual at dinner that evening. The problem was that he was an intelligent, scientifically-minded individual, and therefore knew exactly where his food had come from: the ground. Most of the material on his plate that Megatron expected him to put in his body had come from seeds planted in the soil, pulling organic nutrients out of the ground from other decaying organics (or often even the other organics' waste materials) and using them to create this.... mess that he had to depend on for survival. If it wasn't that, then it was the actual flesh of another actual, living being that had once been walking around on the soil, eating those same plant materials that he could barely bring himself to consume.

He didn't care that this body wasn't his real one; he had no intentions of sharing it with such a horror show.

But Megatron and Soundwave had both been watching him closely the entire meal, and so he had no choice but to force himself to eat enough to satisfy them. Now he felt sick. He'd wanted nothing more than to run into the bathroom and purge his stomach all evening, but the door of the en suite was too thin. Someone would hear him and then Megatron would think he'd stopped taking his anti-malarial pills and gotten sick again or something. It was unlikely to do more than limit his
Starscream wrapped his arms around himself, hating that he could feel his intestines at work on the food he had eaten, that he could feel his ribs so clearly beneath his fragile human skin, that he had no other options to solve his predicament.

He rolled onto his side as gently as possible so that he was facing Megatron. His leader's face looked so peaceful, so untroubled. It wasn't fair.

This was all his fault! Wasn't he supposed to be their Commander? Wasn't he supposed to guide them to fly clear of trouble? Wasn't he supposed to protect them? Protect him? But what had Megatron been doing?

Nothing! He'd crashed himself here on this planet and gotten himself frozen and left Starscream all alone and then they'd gotten him back just for him to go and leave them all again! And Starscream had thought for so long that he didn't need anyone's help or protection, because he was Starscream, king of the skies! But...

It wasn't slagging fair!

Sometimes, Starscream found himself thinking of all the ways in which Megatron had become delicate. It would take a mere three minutes for his fleshy lungs to give up after being deprived of oxygen. His heart needed to beat constantly to keep those lungs going. A bullet, a knife, a microscopic parasite passed to him from an insect... The smallest thing could steal him away. He was vulnerable.

Starscream wondered if he was aware of it himself. Did he think, as Starscream sometimes did, on the humans' rule of three? Three minutes without air, three days without water, three weeks without food, and they would all be dead.

Something trickled across his nose from his eye, and he lifted his hand swiftly to wipe it away.

Megatron was more vulnerable than he had ever been, and sometimes Starscream wanted so desperately to goad him into showing those vulnerabilities, lowering the warlord down to his own broken state of mind. But even more than that, he had this increasingly undeniable urge to crawl as close as he could get to Megatron and wrap himself tightly in the infallible, dependable aura that his leader always seemed to project. Yet, he had no doubt that if he did, Megatron would just push him away all the harder.

Another couple of tears trickled down his cheek to seep into the pillow, and he sniffed quietly as his nose started trying to run, too.

The more intelligent, though equally malicious, side of him said his desires were nothing more than a wishful fantasy anyways. Megatron couldn't protect him; he was weak and broken. It was only the Pit-forsaken chemicals in this defective flesh bag Starscream was captive in that made him think he would be safe in Megatron's arms—that made him see only the way his leader loomed tall...
and powerful over everyone, like there was still indestructible iron plating under that delicate skin
and hard steel in those dark eyes.

Starscream jolted as he suddenly realized Megatron's hard, dark eyes were open, and focused on
him.

“Starscream,” his leader's quiet voice came through the dark. “What is the matter?”

Starscream hastily lowered his head, wiping at his face and sniffing angrily. He muttered
something about having dust in his eyes and made to roll himself over again, but Megatron's
massive hand reached out for him. His palm cupped the entire side of Starscream's face, warm
against his damp cheek, and the Seeker felt a strange warmth spread through him, like a hole
whose existence he hadn't known was being filled. Megatron's thumb swiped under his eye, wiping
away a few more tears, and Starscream scrunched his eyes up angrily before wrenching the hand
away from his face.

The mattress squealed and bounced as Megatron sat up, resting his weight on one arm and
throwing the other one over Starscream's waist.

“I cannot help you if you don't tell me what's wrong,” he said, his voice almost intimate in the
quiet room.

Starscream swallowed thickly. “Just... leave me alone.”

Megatron exhaled heavily, his breath fluttering over his second's sensitive skin. “How do you think
I can sleep with you snivelling next to me?”

Starscream's face heated up furiously, and tears started to form once more in his damp, stinging
eyes. “Fine!” he snapped. “I'll sleep somewhere else.”

He began to roll off the bed, despite knowing perfectly well that there was nowhere else to sleep
but the cold, hard floor. A strong hand closed around his wrist, stilling him in his movements and
slowly, almost carefully, dragging him back between the sheets.

Moments later, he was once more lying on his side, this time with his back pressed into the
unbearably comforting warmth of Megatron's chest.

“I'm tired,” he choked out, his voice breaking.

The arm Megatron had wrapped around his waist tightened and a sigh blew a burst of hot air
against his ear. “Then go to sleep.”

It was easy for him to say, Starscream reflected. He was so certain about everything, wasn't he?
Starscream was quite sure that Megatron didn't spend hours at a time stressing about how they
were going to get out of this predicament until it started to rip him apart inside; he'd just decided on
a solution and had full confidence that it would work. Not to mention, he had no idea what he was
doing to his SIC every time they lay together...

Or did he?

Starscream couldn't help but remember that morning when something hard and warm and right
around the region of Megatron's groin had most definitely poked him in the rear. But... That was
probably just a random biological reaction... right? There was no way that Megatron was attracted
to an ugly, bony little human like him. Quite frankly, he would think less of his leader if he was.
He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to think of something else.

“Did it hurt?” he whispered finally, voicing a question that had been on his mind for a long time now.

“You'll have to be more specific,” Megatron muttered groggily against the back of his neck.

“Deactivating,” Starscream said simply, and he felt Megatron instantly stiffen against him. Seconds ticked by in which his leader made no answer, but it was obvious that he was still awake. “And onlining again,” he added, hoping to prompt an answer. “Both, really.”

Megatron huffed and rolled away from the Seeker. Starscream's shoulders tensed at the loss of his leader's soothing presence. He cursed his own idiocy for bringing up something that was so obviously bound to ruin the moment he'd been having, but he still had nothing better to do than pursue it.

“My lord?” he tried, rolling over himself and sliding closer to the other man once more. “Master?”

He brushed his fingers down Megatron's arm. The warlord just burrowed deeper into his pillow. “Lord High Protector?”

“Starscream!”

The Seeker withdrew his hand quickly as his leader's face turned out of the pillow once more, his dark eyes flashing obvious displeasure in the dim light of the room.

“Go to sleep,” Megatron growled.

“I can't,” the younger man hissed back.

“Try.”

“I am trying!”

“Try harder.” Megatron pulled his pillow out from beneath himself and slammed it down over his head, doubtless in hopes of drowning out the sound of his second's voice.

Starscream pouted and glanced around the room at the other inhabitants, all sleeping peacefully. It wasn't fair. His gaze fell on his brothers pressed against each other in the double bed, and another thought occurred to him.

“Can you still feel... Does your bond still exist?” he asked, settling down on the bed so that his and Megatron's faces were mere inches apart now.

Megatron scowled and pulled the pillow off his head before whacking the Seeker with it. “Can you still feel your brothers?” he snarled.

“Somewhat,” Starscream answered casually, unperturbed by either Megatron's half-hearted assault or the risks always associated when bringing up his leader's rarely spoken of past. This was more important. “Could he find us through your bond?”

“I am fairly sure that he ignores its existence,” Megatron snorted, settling down again. “What would the flesh bags think if they knew Optimus Prime shared genetic coding with me?”

Starscream hummed in agreement and settled down into the mattress once more, arms folded across his chest. Well, that was one anxiety taken care of, but there were still so many others... He
started running through a list of them as he stared up at the dark ceiling, wondering if it was worth invoking Megatron's wrath to try talking to him about any of them. His leader's back continued to face him, though—hard and immovable—so Starscream fretted in silence, his hands clenching tighter and tighter in the covers.

After several long minutes of this, there was a shuffling and bouncing of mattress springs as Megatron rolled himself back over, pressing himself against his second again and burying his face in the smaller man's hair. Starscream stiffened, his eyes widening so that the blackness of the room swam for a moment as his pupils tried to adjust.

“Just sleep, Starscream,” the warlord muttered, voice muffled against the Seeker's head. “Whatever's bothering you, we can deal with it in the morning.”

Starscream nodded mutely.

Just once, he told himself as comfort and reassurance started spreading through him.

Just this once, he would allow himself to settle into his leader's warmth, burying his face and all of his worries in that impossibly firm, immovable chest, even if he knew it would be little more than a foolish dream in the morning light.

Chapter End Notes

I apologize if there were any awkward parts in this chapter. I usually have someone read them over for me before posting, but I needed to get something up to feel productive and ease my own recent state of mental/emotional crisis. 0---0
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

Ugh. This chapter made me crave Indian food so bad, but the buffet down the street is closed on Mondays....

Slipstream wasn't sure why the thought of anyone beside herself having sex should arouse any interest whatsoever, but somehow she just couldn't squash the strange sense of triumph she felt every time it seemed that her cousin and Megatron might be getting even just the slightest bit closer to a union of their rather reluctant flesh.

She'd heard them whispering to each other last night, and though she didn't know what they'd been saying, it must have been relatively positive, since neither of them had started shouting at the other. Now, in the morning light, she was forced to shove her blanket in her mouth to hide her giggle as she woke to find Megatron lying more or less completely on top of Starscream, their legs intertwined and her leader's face pressed comfortably into her cousin's neck. She doubted that Megatron had bothered to educate himself in matters of sexuality, but it couldn't be long until he figured it out at this rate.

Slipstream's glee at her cousin's predicament was cut short when the twins woke up, which meant Soundwave also woke up. She spent the next twenty or so minutes helping him get the boys dressed, slathered in sunscreen and insect repellant, and out of the hotel room without making enough noise to wake up anyone else.

Normally, she would have just gone back to sleep and let him deal with it, but these days she was willing to do just about anything that might paint her favorably in Soundwave's eyes. After all, he was not the sort of oblivious idiot who wouldn't know what she wanted if she ever got the opportunity to pull him down to her level and mash their mouths together. Unfortunately, he was the sort of idiot who she didn't think would take kindly to it unless she spent the time to do some work on him beforehand.

Slipstream had had to leave her books behind at the shack when they moved, but it hadn't been difficult to surreptitiously sneak a few more out of one of the shops they'd gone to yesterday. She'd pretended to take forever in the bathroom the previous evening to give herself a chance to start reading one of them, and it was full of new tricks and techniques that she couldn't wait to try. She considered her tactics as she walked down to breakfast just a little behind Soundwave and his twins, her eyes fixed on the rolling gait of her target's shoulders.

Of course, it would be impossible to manage anything with Rumble and Frenzy underfoot, she realized as they got down to the lobby.

The hotel restaurant was tiny—just a counter to make orders at and five square tables. This didn't stop the twins from trying to hurtle around it at full speed. Slipstream found herself completely occupied in making sure the two of them didn't break anything while Soundwave ordered food not only for them but for the four still sleeping upstairs, too. Fortunately, the boys' attention snapped to the food as soon as it was available.

“What'd you get us?” they screamed at the tops of their voices as Soundwave turned back from the
counter, balancing several trays on his arms.

“It is called idli and vada,” he said, setting a tray with three plates of a food Slipstream had seen for sale at street stalls several times in the past on one of the tables.

“Is it good?” Rumble demanded even as he was grabbing one of the idli—a chewy-looking white disk—and taking a bite.

“You're supposed to eat it with the chutney,” Soundwave told him, demonstrating by spooning some chunky paste out of a small pot and onto his own idli. Slipstream went for the vada, which were some kind of ring-shaped fried food and had a dipping sauce all their own. Rumble and Frenzy instantly began a contest to see who could handle the most of the spicy sauce on their idli.

“So, what's the plan for today?” Slipstream asked Soundwave as she started in on her second vada.

“I believe we will be surveying the area and regaining our bearings,” the intelligence officer replied.

“Didn't we do enough of that yesterday while we were shopping?” Slipstream wanted to know.

“Lord Megatron wishes to survey more than the locations of those stores at which one can secure the best deals on clothing. Although, he may change his mind if his pants are anything like as tight in the crotch as these ones,” Soundwave told her.

“You said they fit fine yesterday!” the Seeker protested, slamming a hand down on the table so that the trays jumped. “God! Now I'm gonna have to go find a whole new set of clothes for both of you, and—”

“Slipstream,” Soundwave interrupted. “I was merely attempting to tease you.”

The young woman blinked at him. She could have just imagined it, but she was pretty sure the smallest of smiles was twitching at the corner of his mouth. Her face started to heat up with more than embarrassment, and she quickly ducked her head to hide it.

“Emotion doesn't suit you,” she lied.

Starscream was used to waking up in awkward positions by now, but that didn't make it pleasant. Today, there was something pressing him uncomfortably into the bed, and he felt abnormally warm and sticky. It took a moment of muddled thoughts and half-asleep moaning before he realized that Megatron had shifted in his sleep and rolled on top of him, and considerably longer before he was awake enough to bother doing anything about the situation.

Ever so carefully, Starscream pushed against the mattress to see if he could at least extricate his left arm, which was currently crushed beneath Megatron's chest and completely numb. The futility of this effort quickly became apparent, and he relaxed into the mattress again with a frustrated sigh.

He was more than a little thankful that Megatron had finally bothered to shower last night as the shoulder that lay just under his nose smelled of clean skin and the floral soap his leader had used instead of the aroma of stale sweat and something not entirely unlike feces that he had come to expect from close proximity with his leader. It was still more organic than the Seeker generally
Starscream glanced around the room to see what the others were up to, hoping that Megatron would wake up soon; he needed to use the bathroom.

Slipstream, Soundwave and the twins were all gone, thank Primus, while his brothers were sprawled out on the double bed beside him. He watched the two of them breathing in sync for a moment and tried to ignore the small stab of pain he felt at being left out of that. He hadn't been a part of that in years, so he didn't know why it should bother him now.

He attempted once again to maneuver his arm out from under his leader to no avail before it occurred to him that if he couldn't get it out, perhaps he could get himself farther in. It took a bit of finagling, but Starscream eventually managed to wedge his left shoulder and hip farther underneath Megatron's bulk, relieving some of the strain on his arm. Unfortunately, no sooner had he gotten himself situated than Megatron began to shift in his sleep. The Seeker's eyes widened as his commander's massive arms started to worm their way under his body to tightening around his lower back. He wriggled, and Megatron's grip tightened.

Starscream bit back a groan. So, this was why he always woke up in such questionable positions every morning. Megatron clearly thought he was some kind of body pillow.

He turned away, teeth gritted, as Megatron breathed deeply against his ear. The larger man's bare chest was pressed against his own—hard and smooth and everything his organic body wanted, apparently, as that tingling feeling started spreading out from his stomach, and he felt the obnoxiously single-minded flesh between his legs starting to react.

Starscream closed his eyes and breathed deep, focusing on recounting a list of every single star system he had visited and its basic classification specs rather than how much he wanted to wrap his legs around Megatron's waist. He was just starting to get his body to behave when suddenly Megatron started nuzzling him, a hot mouth pressing against the corner of his jaw.

Starscream did the only thing he could think of. He pinched him—hard.

Megatron jolted out of sleep, his eyes opening part way. He glanced over at Starscream, his rough, bristly cheek still pressed against the Seeker's smooth one.

"Did you just pinch me?" he asked, voice still muddy with sleep.

"You're crushing me," Starscream muttered, wanting to look away from his leader's dark, unfocused eyes, but finding himself too hypnotized to do so.

Megatron drew back slightly and looked down, noticing that he was, indeed, lying completely on top of his second. He heaved a sigh before tightening his grip on the Seeker's waist once more and flipping the both of them over.

Starscream stiffened as his world was suddenly flipped around and he found himself sprawled out over Megatron's hard, warm, skin-covered chest instead of the soft, fabric-covered mattress. Megatron just settled in, one hand resting on the Seeker's lower back and the other coming up to caress his hair a moment before apparently falling straight back to sleep, leaving his second trapped in his new position.

After a moment of lying there, trying to ignore how the rise and fall of Megatron's powerful chest was practically sending shockwaves through his whole body, Starscream began working to pry one of the thick forearms away.
“Starscream,” Megatron muttered sleepily, tightening his grip on his second. “Just go to sleep.”

“I have to pee!” he protested.

“Hold it,” his leader ordered.

“I’ve been holding it!” Starscream hissed back. “Why do you think I wanted you off me?”

Megatron groaned as if somehow the Seeker's bladder discomfort was inconveniencing him, and finally let go. Starscream instantly rolled off of him and sprinted for the bathroom before the other man could come up with some reason to call him back.

A few minutes later, feeling very much relieved, Starscream came back into the main room to find that Slipstream had returned, a tray of food balanced on each arm.

“You have a good sleep?” she asked him, and though the question was innocent enough, there was something in her expression that made Starscream scowl.

He threw himself onto the couch and pulled her blanket up over himself, sneering at the blue tank top and black shorts that she had chosen for herself today, which looked far more expensive than any of the clothes she had bought for the rest of them. He hoped she got sun burn.

Slipstream ignored him and moved over to kick the twin bed. Megatron snorted and blinked up at her a moment in confusion before she held out one of the trays.

“Food,” she explained, and the former warlord instantly sat up, reaching to take one of the trays.

“Where is Soundwave?” he asked her groggily.

“He took the twins outside for a minute so they could run off some of their energy,” Slipstream replied, moving now to the double bed where she woke Thundercracker by flicking his nose.

For a moment, Starscream thought perhaps he would get away with not eating anything this morning, but then Megatron climbed out of the twin bed and walked over to sit by him, tray in hand. The Seeker wrinkled his nose and scooted away from the plates of strange round objects and pots of colorful pastes sitting on the tray; his commander followed.

“I don’t want it,” Starscream snapped, pulling the blanket up over his head.

“I don’t care if you want it or not, you still have to eat it,” Megatron told him, ripping his second's cover away.

“It’s gross! It smells awful! It'll make me throw up!” the smaller man whined, now trying to hide himself in the corner of the couch.

“Starscream,” Megatron said, his voice turning dangerous.

Starscream whined and flailed his limbs about in frustration.

“Stop throwing a tantrum and just eat something already,” Megatron growled. “Look: this one is white like rice. You like rice, don't you?”

That made the Seeker stop and turn to face his leader again. “How do you know that?” he asked suspiciously.

“Because I pay attention,” Megatron replied, his tone softening just the slightest. He picked up one
of the white disks and offered it out to his second.

“Come on, Starscream, the idli barely tastes like anything unless you put the sauce on it,” Skywarp called from the other side of the room.

Starscream shot a glare at him, but took the food—an idli, apparently—from Megatron anyway. Skywarp was right, he reflected as he chewed a tentative bite; it didn't taste like anything much aside from rice. Unfortunately, the taste wasn't the problem, but... Well, rice was okay in small amounts. He knew logically that it still grew out of the ground, but he had flown over rice paddies before and always admired the way the glassy pools reflected the sky and the undersides of his own wings back to him. If he had to eat something, it might as well be something so elegant as rice.

Beside him, Megatron had already downed both of his own idli along with most of the brown paste that had come with them, and was starting in on the other things. Starscream made a face and pointedly refused to look at him until he had finished. He couldn't believe Megatron enjoyed organic food so much.

Starscream was halfway through his idli when a quick succession of loud banging noises sounded from out in the hallway, rapidly growing in volume as if whatever was making them was getting closer. He sighed and counted down in his head.

Three

Two

One...

The door banged open, smashing into the wall with an almighty crash and bouncing back slightly at the force of the impact, revealing two very excited twins standing in the doorway. Both, due to Slipstream's idiocy no doubt, were dressed exactly the same in white polo shirts and beige cargo pants. Starscream and Megatron both groaned at the sight of them.

“Look! Look!” one of them was shouting (there was no way to know which without expending energy that Starscream did not have at the moment), and he and his twin approached Slipstream, holding something... fuzzy. They held it out proudly to the young woman, who was standing by Skywarp's side of the double bed at the moment. Before any of the rest of them could figure out what it was, the youngest Seeker let out an unearthly shriek and scrambled over his brother to get to the opposite side of the room as quickly as possible.

The twin holding the fur ball drew back, hugging it protectively to his chest.

“You'll scare him!” he shouted at Skywarp, who was now trying to climb the curtains.

Starscream was about to yell at his brother to pull himself together when he also got a better look at the fluffy object cradled against... Rumble's chest.

“WHAT THE PIT IS THAT!” he screeched, clambering up onto the back of the couch lest the creature manage to get loose and start running about the floor.

Megatron finally decided to get involved then, setting the almost empty tray down on the couch and striding toward the twins.

“Get rid of it!” his second called after him.
Whatever that thing was, it was clearly alive, and therefore had the potential to carry diseases and filth and all manner of things that Starscream did not want in their hotel room. Perhaps it was a rat. Ajit had told Starscream stories about how rats would come into a hut at night and chew bloody holes in the bottoms of anyone's feet that were left out of the covers. He tucked his own feet further beneath himself at the thought.

Megatron had grabbed hold of Rumble's precious bundle of fluff, and the twin was attempting to play some kind of tug-of-war with him to retain his grasp on it. He gave up and let his leader take it when the creature gave a cry of pain. The former warlord lifted the small, furred creature by a section of loose skin on its back and held it aloft for inspection.

"Don't hurt him!" Frenzy pleaded, making to step forward as the organic wriggled in their leader's grasp.

"What is it?" Megatron asked, frowning at the creature.

"It's a dog," Slipstream replied simply, and Starscream noticed that she was gazing at the matted ball of brown and black fur with an odd sort of fondness in her eyes.

"I knew it!" Skywarp cried from where Thundercracker had just managed to get him down from the window.

"Rabies!" Starscream declared, sneering at the thing. "We should burn it."

"No!" Rumble squealed. "Soundwave said it was fine!"

"Soundwave gave this to you?" Megatron demanded, brandishing the dog at them. It seemed to enjoy this as its tail started to wag happily.

"We found him," Frenzy explained sullenly. "It's only a baby...."

"Soundwave said to get rid of it, but..." Rumble began, his voice trailing off.

"CAN WE KEEP IT?" Frenzy suddenly shouted, clasping his hands together as if praying.

"NO!" Starscream shrieked from the couch at the same time that his commander replied in kind and began walking toward the window.

The twins realized what he was going to do and instantly fell upon his legs.

"No! Don't kill it, please! We'll behave; we'll do whatever you want! Please don't hurt him!" they begged as Megatron growled in irritation, his progress only slightly impeded by their weight around his ankles.

"It is vermin that will likely grow to become dangerous and diseased," he told them as he began to unlatch the window.

"We'll get rid of it!" Rumble tried again. "Just don't throw him out the window, please!"

"How am I to know that you won't just bring it back in again at the next available opportunity?" Megatron asked, now sliding the window open.

The twins didn't have an answer for that.

"He's not hurting anybody," Rumble said quietly, eyes beginning to glisten as the puppy's innocent gaze met his.
“Not hurting anybody!? Just look at Skywarp!” Starscream howled, jabbing a finger at his younger brother, who was sobbing in terror and trying to escape Thundercracker's grasp so that he could flee the room altogether.

Megatron grunted in agreement and began to lift the arm clutching animal out the window. Rumble and Frenzy gasped in horror.

But the fur ball, as if sensing its impending doom, began to wriggle frantically. It kicked out, and one of its clawed paws managed to catch its captor's wrist. Megatron released him instinctively, and the puppy fell to their hotel room's dingy, linoleum tile floor with a small thud before bouncing right back up again and starting to bound across the room, making high-pitched yapping noises as it went.

Skywarp actually screamed louder than Starscream for once and leapt atop the double bed, seizing pillow after pillow to chuck at the somewhat uncoordinated creature. Megatron strode forward as if to kick the puppy, but Frenzy dove forward to shield it with his own body.

“Get it out of here!” Starscream shrieked, grabbing Slipstream's pillow from the couch and hurling it at Frenzy. Unfortunately, pillows were not known for their accuracy, and the projectile missed its intended target to smack Megatron in the face instead. Slipstream, who had been watching the proceedings in sulky silence for the last few minutes, started laughing as her leader stumbled backward and nearly tripped over his own feet.

Rumble took full advantage of the chaos to pull the door of the hotel room open and herd the puppy toward it.

“RUN, PUPPY! RUN TO FREEDOM!” he shouted as he chased the creature down the hallway, flapping his arms wildly to encourage it to keep going. Frenzy made to follow him, but Megatron slammed the door shut before he could.

“Where is Soundwave?” he growled, looming menacingly over the boy.
Chapter 35

Soundwave, as it turned out, had *not* given the twins permission to drag the dog back to their hotel room, which he explained when he reappeared breathing heavily and hauling Rumble by the ear several minutes later. Megatron seemed to accept his apologies for the incident and his claims that the creature had been sufficiently dealt with, but Starscream was suspicious; Rumble would have been far more upset if his creator had actually disposed of the worthless ball of fur, after all.

At least in the aftermath of the chaos, no one had noticed Starscream dropping the rest of his breakfast out the open window.

However, the stress of the whole situation combined with his lack of sleep the previous evening had left Starscream with a pounding headache, and he was just trying to pull Slipstream's blanket up over himself and go back to sleep when Megatron announced to the room at large that it was time to get going as they had things to do today.

Starscream just groaned and pulled the blanket more tightly around himself. “Starscream,” he heard Megatron's voice a moment before large hands seized the blanket and pulled it off of him.

The Seeker squealed and rolled over to bury his face in the back of the couch. Beyond his leader, he could hear Soundwave preparing the others for the day: making sure that everyone had taken their anti-malarial pills, applying sunscreen and bug spray, telling Frenzy to stop hitting his brother with his shoe... The usual morning routine.

Starscream had no intention of dealing with any of it. Headache aside, the thought of going outside was strangely abhorrent today.

“If you think that I am going to let you lounge around in bed all day just so you can keep me up all night with stupid questions again, you have another thing coming,” Megatron informed his second, seizing his upper arm now and hauling him right up off the couch.

“No! I'm tired!” Starscream protested.

“So am I,” Megatron countered, setting the Seeker on his feet. “Now get dressed. We need to survey the area.”

Starscream just slumped against him as the others started filing out the front door, Slipstream chasing the twins who had run off without the others, Soundwave chasing Slipstream insisting she put on sunscreen, and the others following because they also needed sunscreen and Soundwave had all of it.

“Stop acting out, you idiot,” Megatron growled, but Starscream wasn't particularly perturbed. His face was resting against his commander's chest, and the thump of his heartbeat deep beneath his skin was somehow soothing.

“I just want to sleep,” Starscream whined, deciding to indulge his desire to wrap his arms around his leader's waist. Megatron had done it to him in bed that morning, after all. “My head hurts. It feels like my stupid human brain is shrinking!”

“Drink some water,” Megatron said, grabbing the Seeker's arms by the wrists and unwinding them from around his person.
“Please,” Starscream whined, looking up at his leader now with his most pleading expression. “I just don't want to go out. Let me stay here. I won't sleep, I promise.”

“We're not splitting up. Primus knows what you'd get up to if I left you here alone.”

“Then stay with me!” the Seeker tried next. Even staying in the hotel with Megatron all day would be preferable to going outside. Just the thought of walking down the streets with other humans pressing him on every side and that constant jumble of noises and colors and smells was making him nauseous. “I don't feel well. Please, lord Megatron?”

He buried his face in his leader's chest, fully expecting to be shoved away. Instead, there was a moment of hesitation before Megatron released one of his wrists and laid a hand on his head, stroking it through his hair several times.

“...Megatron?” Starscream turned his face up to his leader's once more to find the other man staring down at him like he wasn't sure what exactly he was seeing anymore. It only lasted a split-second, though, and then Megatron cleared his throat and shoved him away with so much force that the Seeker landed on the couch with a huff.

“Get dressed,” the former warlord ordered, bending to pick up a shirt.

Starscream sat on the couch, glaring at Megatron and wondering what on Earth had just happened, until his leader had pulled the shirt over his head and vacated the room.

A few seconds later, Thundercracker appeared in the doorway, peering in curiously until he found his brother. Starscream didn't even bother looking at him as the older Seeker offered him a dark green shirt. He hated that color, which Slipstream had probably known when she picked it. Not to mention, it was long-sleeved. He understood that the long sleeves were useful for keeping off both sun rays and mosquitoes, but they were still uncomfortable.

Thundercracker heaved a sigh and moved a little closer to him. “Starscream?”

Finally, the younger Seeker snatched the shirt out of his hand and pulled it on over his head. He didn't get off the couch though.

“How are you feeling today?” his brother asked, sinking down next to him.

“How do you think?” Starscream snapped back.

Thundercracker wrapped an arm around his shoulder, lowering it to rub across his back, where his wings would have been attached. “Do you need your bandage changed?” he asked.

Starscream shook his head.

“Did you take your pills?”

He considered lying, but Megatron counted them every day to make sure each of them really had. Thundercracker sighed again and moved to grab the bottle of pills with his brother's name scrawled across it.

“I hate these,” Starscream groaned as his brother offered him one of the white tablets.

“You hated being sick more,” Thundercracker reminded him.

Starscream rolled his eyes before swallowing the pill and showing Thundercracker the inside of his
mouth to prove it was really gone.

“C'mon,” the older Seeker rumbled then, tugging on his hands. “Megatron's waiting for us.”

Starscream nodded and finally allowed himself to be led out into the hallway and down the stairs.

The dark circles under Starscream's eyes were far more noticeable in the bright daylight of the marketplace; Thundercracker tried not to be too concerned.

The three Seeker brothers were hanging near the back of the group, Skywarp trailing a little behind the other two as he stared open-mouthed at everything around them. Soundwave and Slipstream had gone ahead after the twins, who had taken off as soon as the hotel lobby's door opened for them, and Megatron had placed himself in between his elite trine and the rest of his troops so that he could keep an eye on both as they made their way down the street.

Having already had his fill of the colorful shops and stalls the previous day, Thundercracker was free to focus on keeping track of his brothers rather than the sensory overload of the city, which seemed to be holding Skywarp's entire attention hostage. The younger Seeker kept walking backwards, and Thundercracker would have to turn around and tug him away from whatever person or object he had been about to trip over this time. Still, it was a nice change from the overly anxious mess that Skywarp usually became in crowded places.

Starscream seemed to be taking that role today, his anxiety exhibiting itself in short-tempered snappishness and a frame so tense he looked like he would break rather than Skywarp's typical shyness and blubbering.

Thundercracker tried to maintain some kind of physical contact, however small, with his less sociable brother, but it wasn't easy when Skywarp was pulling his attention away every two seconds.

“T.C.!” the younger Seeker was gasping now, and Thundercracker turned to find him pointing at a long line of large bowls full of colorful grains and seeds sitting in the shade of a nearby stall's wooden roof. “Look! It's like a rainbow!”

“Oh, very nice, Warp,” he agreed, turning away hastily once more as he felt Starscream start to wander out from under the hand he'd had on his shoulder.

“T.C., can we buy some? I wanna know what they taste like!” Skywarp squealed, starting to run toward the stall.

“Not right now, Warp,” Thundercracker told him, diving forward to catch hold of him before the boy could dip his hands in one of the bowls or something. From a little ways away, he heard Starscream mutter something under his breath about “idiots,” and turned to find that, surprisingly, he wasn't talking about Skywarp.

There was a clothing stall across the street filled with boots, jackets, and hats, and Slipstream was currently engaged in what seemed to be a three-way argument with the stall owner and Soundwave. Apparently, the owner was adamant that she buy the pair of light blue and black boots that perfectly matched her top, while Slipstream was adamant that they were too expensive, and Soundwave was adamant that she not buy them in the first place.
In the end, the intelligence officer simply snatched the boots out of her hands and pushed them back at the stall owner—a man barely half his size—before bending down to wrap his arms around Slipstream's thighs and slinging her over his shoulder. Skywarp giggled and Thundercracker snorted slightly as Soundwave continued on up the street as if he did not have a young woman slung over his shoulder, screaming at him in both Hindi and English and demanding boots.

“I hope he drops her on her head,” commented Starscream as their cousin's shouts started to fade away and merge with the general noise of the street.

“You are in a bad mood this morning, aren't you?” Megatron's voice cut in before Thundercracker could chastise his brother himself, and he turned to find their leader had backtracked to see what they were up to. Skywarp shrank behind his brother a bit as the former warlord came to a stop in front of them.

“Can we go back now?” Starscream hissed testily as he wrapped his arms more securely around himself, eyes flicking to and fro at the passing crowd.

“No,” Megatron replied simply. “Now, come; you three are falling behind.” And he strode ahead again without a backward glance.

Thundercracker watched his brother's expression darken, a muscle twitching in the younger man's jaw as he bit into his lower lip. Even in this form, Thundercracker could recognize Starscream's “trying not to cry” face. He stepped forward to wrap an arm around his brother's shoulders and pull him close. Starscream allowed it, falling against him wordlessly, and Thundercracker pressed their foreheads together for a second before pulling back to let Skywarp in.

Starscream tolerated them for a few moments before catching Megatron looking back at them and shoving the both of them away. He walked off, muttering, “Get off me, sentimental femmes...”

Thundercracker shared a smile with Skywarp before they followed after him; it was still progress.

Starscream was in a bad mood, and he saw no reason to do anything to change that. He was tired, his head hurt, and his stomach kept lurching uncomfortably with something that felt very similar to fear at random moments. Sticking close to his brothers helped, but he didn't want to look like he was incapable of fending for himself, so he pushed on ahead of them a ways.

Unfortunately, this put him up close enough to Megatron that his leader seemed to decide he was looking for a conversation.

“Cheer up, Starscream,” the former warlord said, turning back to his second. “Whatever you're worrying about, it'll probably never happen.”

“That's what I thought about all this insanity in the first place!” Starscream snapped, teeth bared.

Megatron's amused smile faltered slightly.

“Why are we here?” Starscream demanded of him. “We're not even doing anything! We can't survey the area properly in a clump like this; all we're seeing is this one street, and it's taken us nearly four hours to get just a few blocks! We're just screwing around! Why can't I just go back to the hotel!? What do you want from me!”
Megatron scowled as the Seeker's voice started rising into hysteria, attracting attention from those around them. “Perhaps you should sit down,” he said in a low voice, a hint of threat barely concealed.

Starscream only just managed to refrain from calling Megatron something very, very rude before assuring him that he was just fine.

“What would you rather we be doing right now, Starscream?” Megatron asked, stepping a little closer to the smaller man. For once, Starscream didn't move away from him.

“Something!” he spat. “Like fixing this!” His voice broke slightly as he gestured down at his pitifully skinny human frame. His emotions were welling up uncontrollably inside of him, and he didn't like it. He didn't have the energy for it.

“I just wanna sleep,” the Seeker whimpered, bringing his hands up to clench in his hair and sinking down into a crouch.

One of Megatron's large, sandaled feet extended to brush against his own. “You are being ridiculous, Starscream,” he said. “At the present moment, we are barely surviving, and we have already encountered quite a few difficulties. While we prepare to forge ahead with our plans for revenge, we must also take some time to rest and recuperate. The first step of preparation for any battle is making sure that one has the necessary resources and stamina to make it through until the end, is it not?”

Starscream hated that Megatron was right.

“You are the one being ridiculous,” he muttered into his knees, and felt his leader's presence draw closer to hear what he was saying. “We are a superior race. We don't need 'time to recuperate' from such paltry little—”

“You are struggling far more than anyone else,” Megatron interrupted, with a note of amusement in his voice. “No one else has had an emotional breakdown yet, no one else has nearly gotten themselves killed by small-time crooks, and no one else struggles simply to put enough fuel in their body to maintain a healthy form. You need to stop thinking about—”

“Don't act as if you know what I am thinking!” Starscream snarled, his head snapping up to glare at his leader. “Just because I am not as deluded as you and your pathetic lackeys—”

“Starscream,” Megatron barked suddenly, snapping the Seeker out of his rant. The Seeker felt a jolt of fear for a moment as his leader glowered down at him. It seemed he had pushed a little too far. “Pull yourself together and deal with it. Do not make me tell you again.”

Starscream drew his mouth into a thin line and forced himself back to his feet. “I am not struggling,” he insisted in a resentful hiss. “Can we go back yet?”

Megatron stared at him long and hard for a moment before sighing heavily. “We will go back as soon as we have found something to eat,” he promised.

“I'm not hungry; I'm just tired,” Starscream replied quickly. “And my head hurts.”

“You may not be, but I am,” Megatron countered. “And you need to drink some water. Come; there was a restaurant down one of those streets over there that said something about all-you-can eat for 200 rupees....”

Starscream rolled his eyes and followed after his leader. At least he would be able to sit down at a
restaurant.
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

I realized while writing this chapter that I called the clinic in the slums by the wrong name. It was supposed to be "St. Margaret's", not "St. Augustine's." Woops! I'll go back and fix that someday...

Megatron had discovered his new favorite kind of restaurant: all-you-can-eat buffets. For just 200 rupees each, they were allowed to eat as much of anything they liked from the warmers set out in rows down the middle of the shop. Starscream had complained incessantly that the food looked like it had been there for several days and would likely make all of them sick, but the fact of the matter was that they had all eaten far more questionable things in the slums without issue. All of them excepting the whiny Seeker ate until they couldn't handle any more, and then waddled their way back out onto the street.

Megatron had promised Starscream that they could go back after eating, but really they had a lot more ground to survey still. He briefly considered sending his second back with Thundercracker, but there was no way he could send Thundercracker back without Skywarp, and he lacked confidence in the older Seeker's ability to pay attention to both of his brothers at once. To solve the problem, Megatron elected to send the others on ahead under Soundwave's supervision while he himself accompanied Starscream back to the hotel.

The two of them walked in silence, Starscream keeping himself tightly withdrawn and pressed so close to Megatron that the other man kept having to watch not to step on his feet.

"Starscream, would you just..." Megatron growled in frustration after a while, taking the Seeker by the shoulders and pushing him about an arm's length away. "Stay at least that far away or I'm going to end up breaking one of your legs."

It was a statement of fact rather than a threat, but Starscream glared defiantly back at him anyway.

"As you are perfectly capable of walking by yourself, I fail to understand your insistence on constantly hanging off me in the first place," his leader growled, continuing on down the street.

"Running into you is simply preferable to running into any of the rest of the human scum around here," the Seeker huffed, trotting to keep up with him.

Megatron snorted, and continued nudging the Seeker away from himself every few steps.

As frustrating as Starscream's behavior was, a certain part of the ex-warlord was genuinely concerned about his second. He seemed paler than usual today and kept folding his arms tightly across his stomach and pulling his lower lip into his mouth like he was going to throw up or something. He'd been doing it a good deal the previous evening as well. Megatron suspected that Starscream had yet to fully recover from the malaria, and that his recent stress was only making it worse.

And the Seeker did seem ridiculously stressed, which Megatron couldn't understand. Their living situation had improved dramatically, they no longer had to scrape and claw to fulfill even the most
basic of needs, and they had a plan to get out of this ridiculous predicament for good. Everyone else was relaxing and letting go a bit, but it seemed that Starscream was just spiraling right back into the whirlwind of fear and doubt that had almost consumed him back at the shanty.

It just wasn't like him. Starscream's two greatest features had always been his cunning and his resilience. No matter how Megatron or anyone else beat him down, he was always back up and scheming again before he'd even finished nursing his wounds. Now, it was almost like he was... broken. Megatron couldn't help but remember the female doctor's comment about malaria sometimes having neurological side effects and wondering if something of the sort had happened to Starscream.

They were only about two blocks away from their hotel again when something caught Megatron's eye over the tarps covering the slapdash market stalls around them and he pulled to a halt.

“What?” Starscream demanded, also coming to a halt.

Megatron ignored him and squinted at the blue and white sign he could almost read on the other side of the street. For a moment, he thought that he was imagining things because he had just been thinking about the malaria and the doctors, but no, he was pretty sure that sign said what he thought it did.

“Come with me,” he ordered, beckoning his second to follow him.

“That's not the way to the hotel!” Starscream protested, and Megatron rolled his eyes.

“I am aware,” he called, turning back. “Now, come.”

“No!” Starscream pouted, stamping his foot. “You don't get to just order me around wherever you want without explanation like a sparkling!”

“Then perhaps you should stop acting like one,” Megatron pointed out, raising an eyebrow at the tantruming Seeker.

“Megatron, you said we would go back!” he whined, going spineless and screwing up his face like he was about to start crying.

Megatron closed his eyes and turned his face up to the heavens, praying for strength from anyone who might be listening, before stepping forward and seizing Starscream's wrist.

“Come,” he growled, turning to tug his second along behind him through the market stalls. The seeker came, whining the whole way.

When they reached the other side of the street, they found themselves in front of a large, white building with a blue sign over the door reading, “St. Margaret's Emergency Clinic: Central Branch.”

“I don't need a doctor!” Starscream said quickly, clawing at the hand on his wrist.

“We are not here for you,” Megatron growled, tugging sharply at his wrist, and the Seeker stopped.

Not that he honestly thought Starscream would not benefit from examination by a medical professional, but that would doubtless cost money that they did not have to spare.

Still, what were the odds that the exact same medical facility would be just two blocks from their hotel? The building might be far larger and less slapdash, but it had the same name as the other
one. It was almost as though someone up there really was looking out for them, though he couldn't imagine why.

"Can we help you?"

Both Decepticons jumped slightly and turned to find a woman in a nurse's uniform looking at them curiously.

"No," Megatron started to say. "We were just..."

But the woman interrupted him with a sudden exclamation. "I know you!" she said, her face dawning with recognition. "You were at the Southern branch—the Americans with malaria!"

Starscream shrank behind Megatron as though scared that the woman's enthusiasm might be contagious. Megatron frowned as he reflected that this coincidence might be just a little too much.

"You are Dipti's friends," the woman continued. "Have you seen her? I always see her volunteering with her class when I work that branch on Thursdays, but yesterday she was gone and no one knew where."

"We haven't seen the little brat!" Starscream snapped from under Megatron's arm, and his leader pushed him farther behind himself in irritation.

"We saw her brother a few days ago, but we haven't seen her," Megatron supplied more helpfully. It never paid to be short with medical professionals, after all, regardless of his opinions of their species as a whole.

"Well, I'm sure she'll show up," the nurse said, waving the issue aside. "I'll have to tell everyone at the Southern branch that I saw you. They're always so curious what happened to the Americans in the—"

"No!" Megatron cut her off hastily. "You must not tell anyone that you saw us."

"But they'll be so relieved to hear you're doing well."

"It is of the utmost importance that no one know where we have gone," Megatron insisted, and the woman took a small step back at the growl in his voice. "All of our lives could be in danger if the wrong people were to get that information," he added, hoping that he could impress upon this woman the gravity of the situation.

"Oh. Oh, I see," the nurse stammered, her face shifting rapidly from surprise to all seriousness. "I will keep your secret; I promise."

"We thank you for it," the ex-warlord assured her before turning abruptly to take his second's forearm and start tugging him away again, leaving the nurse blinking after them in the afternoon sun. They had almost made it all the way back to the other side of the street before Starscream apparently decided that he hadn't had enough to say lately.

"You should have killed her," he announced.

"And what purpose would that have served, Starscream?" Megatron sighed, though the thought had crossed his mind as well.

"She's going to go back and tell everyone where we are! You know she is!" the Seeker insisted.
“Be that as it may, we do not have the resources right now to escape the attention of law enforcement if we were to go around murdering random citizens,” his leader reminded him. They’d had this conversation back on one of their first days in this country when Starscream had suggested slitting a stall owner’s throat and running off with his goods.

“Well, I don't like her,” Starscream groused after a contemplative pause.

“What's there to like or not like?” Megatron asked him. “She's just a random human you met for barely a minute.”

“She was looking at you.”

Megatron hardly dared delve into the twisted logic of his second’s brain that had dredged that up, but it was almost like a grisly scab that he just had to pick at.

“It is customary for humans to look at those they are engaged in conversation with,” he pointed out.

“She wasn't just looking, though, she was looking,” Starscream insisted.

“I continue failing to see how this is in any way relevant,” Megatron told him.

“Of course you don’t...” the Seeker muttered under his breath, and Megatron decided it was best to drop the subject altogether.

True to his word, Starscream did not sleep when they got back to the hotel, though Megatron almost wished that he would. Instead, the Seeker wrapped himself in a blanket and curled up on the couch, his head pillowed on the arm of it as he stared blankly at the window. Megatron kept expecting him to start talking or go take a shower or something, but no; he just continued to stare as the minutes on the clock ticked by.

With nothing better to do, Megatron decided to tidy their room. It was an activity that was beneath him, really, but it was better than staring at nothing like Starscream, at least. Plus, it would give him an excuse to properly search through all of Slipstream's belongings. He wasn't sure, but he had strong suspicions that half the reason the young woman bought so many clothes was so that she could hide things in the pile.

If he was right, then Slipstream either had not had the time to amass much contraband in their new location or was keeping the interesting stuff on her person today, because all he found were a rather confusing book and a couple of bracelets.

Straightening the covers on the double bed produced two rocks, courtesy of the twins no doubt, and... strange stains on the bottom sheet and one of the pillows that looked suspiciously like blood. Megatron frowned and tried to remember which of his troops had been sleeping on this side of the bed. He was pretty sure that it was Skywarp and Thundercracker, but neither of them had any injuries to his knowledge. Starscream had been lying in the double bed for a while yesterday, though. One of his injuries must have reopened and bled through the bandage.

He turned back to his second then, scrutinizing him. Most of Starscream's injuries were currently hidden beneath his clothes, excepting the large bruise on his jaw. It looked painful, but Megatron
refused to feel any sympathy over that.

The actual anger at Starscream for his idiocy of the other day had more or less faded by now, which was one of many recent surprises in Megatron's emotional life. He had spent the last four million years in a near-constant state of rage, it seemed, but now... It wasn't that he didn't get angry anymore because he most certainly did, it was just the fact that the anger did eventually go away. Starscream's little thieving stunt should have been enough to keep him in fury with the Seeker for weeks, but by that same night Megatron's desire to feel the other man's warmth against him while he slept had already outweighed his resentment.

Now, as he watched Starscream staring out the window like he was a million miles away, there was annoyance, yes, but also a strange twisting in his chest that his second's attention was so easily stolen by something he couldn't even see.

“Starscream,” Megatron called, and the Seeker grunted in acknowledgment. “Let me see that cut on your side again.”

Starscream sat up, scowling. “It's fine,” he insisted. “It certainly doesn't need your ham-fisted ministrations.”

“I said I wanted to see it, not that I was going to attempt to treat it,” Megatron growled at him.

The Seeker huffed in irritation and then tugged his shirt up over his head.

“There, see?” he demanded, raising his arm to expose the injury.

“Why do you not have a bandage on that?” the ex-warlord demanded, his brow furrowing as he stepped over to take a closer look.

“Because it's itchy and annoying,” Starscream grumbled, already picking up his shirt again.

“It will be far more annoying if you allow micro-organics to crawl into it and infect you,” Megatron scolded, looking around for the bag of medical supplies. If they did end up having to take Starscream to the hospital, it would be more than the expense that they had to endure—the Seeker would doubtless whine and squeal and make as big a fuss as possible over every little thing that the doctors did to him.

Starscream huffed in irritation, but apparently didn't have the energy to argue, which was strange because the Seeker's enthusiasm for arguing and generally being disagreeable tended to multiply exponentially the more tired he got. Today, though, he just sat with his arm held stiffly out to the side and continued to glare sulkily out the window, wincing occasionally, while Megatron smeared a generous amount of the yellowish paste intended to ward off infection over his side. The ex-warlord was just starting to stick the new bandage down when he decided that a silent and withdrawn Starscream was, in fact, far more worrying than a talkative Starscream was annoying.

“What are you thinking of?” he ventured finally.

“Nothing,” his second replied.

“I know you too well to believe your mind could ever be devoid of thought,” Megatron pressed.

“You don't want to hear what I'm thinking about anyway,” Starscream muttered.

“Try me.”
It wasn't until Megatron was fixing the last bit of adhesive over the Seeker's narrow waist that Starscream finally spoke again, his voice strangely soft.

“I was wondering: where did you go?”

Megatron paused, sensing that this was the start of another conversation that he would rather not have.

“When you were offline,” Starscream continued. “Where did you go?”

The ex-warlord patted the last bit of tape in place and sat back on the floor in front of the Seeker, who watched him expectantly with those massive blue eyes of his. Where was this sudden fascination with the macabre coming from, Megatron wondered.

“I was offline,” he said finally. “I didn't go anywhere.”

“Didn't you go to the Pit? See the Unmaker?” his second pressed, a strange hunger glistening in his eyes.

“Why do you assume I would have gone to the Pit?” Megatron demanded. “Why not the Well of Allsparks?”

The Seeker snorted. “They wouldn't have let you in. Primus isn't stupid.”

“You once told me you did not believe in such ridiculous things as Gods and afterlives.”

“Because I have never had the chance to gather any empirical data on the matter,” Starscream explained. “You have.”

“So, I am your latest little science experiment?”

“Please! Science is anything but 'little.' What happened?”

Megatron hesitated, thinking back to the strange blankness in his memory following the searing pain of having his spark burnt out by The Boy. It was strangely similar to the gap in his memory just before waking up as a human, he realized now—it wasn't the emptiness of a night of sleep, simply... a lack of sufficient information to form proper memories over a certain period of time. Or possibly an inability to comprehend and quantify the information obtained during that time.

“I do not remember,” he finally admitted.

Starscream leaned back into the couch, a strange distance settling over his face once more. “So, there is nothing,” he concluded.

“I did not say that,” Megatron contradicted, and a strange desperation to keep the Seeker here and present with him had him reaching out to rest a hand on his knee. Starscream's eyes flicked back to him. “I cannot remember, but there was something.”

“...You just don't want to tell me.”

Megatron actually chuckled a little. “I am not quite so spiteful as you. I am withholding nothing from you, little Seeker.”

“Stop using that word,” Starscream said testily.

“Excuse me?”
“That word!” the Seeker snarled, shaking Megatron's hand from his knee. “That utterly infuriating word!”

Megatron frowned, reviewing his last few sentences for what could have possibly caused offense, while simultaneously grateful that he had finally gotten any emotion out of his second.

“Little!” Starscream snapped when it became apparent that his commander had no idea what he was talking about. “I am not little! I am a perfectly acceptable size for a human.”

“A human female maybe…” Megatron muttered, making a mental note to call Starscream 'little' as often as possible.

The Seeker just scowled at him for a moment, looking like he wasn't sure whether to kick the other man in the face or burst into tears, before reaching for his shirt and pulling it back over his head.

“I don't want to talk to you anymore,” he announced from within the folds of fabric.

“Suit yourself,” Megatron sighed, getting himself up from the floor. He could give the Seeker some time to sulk before he bothered him again.
Thundercracker wasn't particularly happy about Starscream going back to the hotel with Megatron. With the state his brother had been in today, the two were liable to get in a fight if left alone like that, but Thundercracker couldn't go against his leader's directions, either. All he could do was focus on Skywarp for the time being and hope that Starscream would fall asleep before he had a chance to provoke Megatron too much.

The two brothers continued to trail slightly behind the others as they pressed on with their explorations. Skywarp's good mood of the morning was starting to fade as the novelty of being out in a new place wore off, and he was walking close to Thundercracker again, his head down for the most part.

“You alright, then?” Thundercracker asked him after a while.

“Fine!” Skywarp chirped, a little too cheerfully.

Well, he was still better than he had been when Thundercracker had found him in a corner of the bathroom the previous afternoon, at least.

They continued on through the crowds and stalls in silence a while longer until they found Soundwave, Slipstream and the twins again, all three of whom were sat waiting for them on the side of the street around a large clay structure. Rumble and Frenzy were leaning over the top of it, peering down into the middle and occasionally throwing small pebbles that Slipstream passed them into its center.

As Thundercracker drew closer, he could hear the telltale splash of water far below. A well.

“Funny,” he remarked as he peered over the side of the clay walls into the seemingly endless depths beyond. “Back in the slums, there would be dozens of people waiting for a turn at this.”

“It is likely the water inside is not fit for consumption,” Soundwave pointed out.

“I don't think the stuff we got out of that pump was by most standards, either,” Slipstream snorted.

“If no one can use it, then why is it still here?” Frenzy wanted to know, turning to his creator.

“Old wells are often thought to have magical properties under human superstitions,” Soundwave informed him. “They throw coins into them as payment for wishes.”

Both of the twins' faces instantly lit up.

“You got any coins, boss?” Rumble demanded rushing toward his creator.

The intelligence officer dug into his pockets and pulled out a small handful of silver paisas, which Frenzy instantly snagged from his open palm.

“Do the wishes come true?” Rumble wanted to know as his twin passed him some of the coins.

Soundwave just shrugged, which the twins seemed to take as answer enough anyway. They were even so generous as to give Slipstream and Thundercracker each a coin.
“Seems awful dodgy to me,” Slipstream commented, squinting into the dark depths.

“I dunno,” Thundercracker mused, turning the coin over in his hand. “I reckon if we can suddenly wake up as humans one day, there's no reason a puddle of water can't grant wishes.”

Slipstream seemed to consider this for a moment before nodding in agreement and flicking her coin into the well.

Thundercracker on the other hand hesitated a moment before turning back to his brother, who was hovering just behind them as though scared to get any closer.

“Skywarp, come and make a wish,” the older Seeker offered, holding the coin out to him.

Skywarp's eyes widened and he shook his head, frozen in place. “W-what if I fall in?” he said in a hushed voice.

“You won't fall in; don't be stupid,” Thundercracker replied, beckoning him closer again.

The boy took a few cautious steps forward until he could lean over the top of the clay wall before rearing back hastily. “I-it's really deep!” he squeaked.

“Skywarp,” Thundercracker said, as forcefully as he could without sounding stern or gruff. “You're not going to fall in. Just toss the coin.”

He pushed the coin into his brother's hand, and Skywarp quickly flung it at the opening of the well before backing away again.

“What did you wish for?” Thundercracker asked.

Skywarp blushed. “I forgot...”

Thundercracker sighed and reached out to ruffle the boy's hair. “Don't worry; there will be other wishes.”

His brother smiled shyly, and opened his mouth to reply just as the twins came scurrying around from the other side of the well, barreling straight into Skywarp. The Seeker spun round with a cry of surprise before tripping over his own feet and toppling backward toward the edge of the well. Thundercracker dove forward to grab him before his head could connect with the hard clay, and caught him by the forearm. Skywarp jerked, letting out a yelp of pain, and Thundercracker let go on reflex.

Fortunately, his initial catch had changed his brother's trajectory enough that the boy just landed on his butt in front of the well with a huff.

“Sorry, Warp! I forgot,” Thundercracker explained, sinking down beside him as his brother pulled his arm up against his chest, wincing in pain.

“Forgot what?” a deep voice spoke up from behind them, and Thundercracker froze as Soundwave's large shadow fell across them.

“Did you hurt your arm, Warp?” Slipstream asked disinterestedly from somewhere off to the side.

“No,” Skywarp replied, avoiding eye contact as he pulled the arm in question even closer to himself.

Thundercracker winced. The boy may as well have confessed everything then and there.
Soundwave knelt down on Skywarp's other side now and held a hand out expectantly. “May I see?”

“It's nothing!” the boy insisted, turning away from the intelligence officer.

“Warp, just show him,” Thundercracker sighed.

Skywarp looked up at him in surprise, and Thundercracker jerked his head emphatically in Soundwave's direction. His brother's gaze turned down, and finally he held his arm out to the former satellite.

Soundwave took it, and Thundercracker looked away as he carefully pulled the sleeve up to the boy's elbow. There was a long pause, and then Soundwave glanced up at the two Seekers, his face dark.

“Primus, Warp!” Slipstream breathed. “What did you do?”

Thundercracker let his gaze travel back to his brother's arm. Both the front and back of his right forearm were covered in varying sizes and shapes of scabs, some of which still looked a bit damp and oozy.

“Why were you keeping this a secret?” Soundwave demanded. “Were you trying to jeopardize your brother's health?”

“No!” Thundercracker said quickly. “No, we just... we didn't....”

“Because I did it to myself, and TC didn't want me to get in trouble,” Skywarp spoke up, his voice barely more than a whisper.

Soundwave turned to him now, expression inscrutable, and the Seeker squirmed under his gaze, a few tears squeezing out the corner of one eye.

“What do you mean you did this to yourself?” the intelligence officer wanted to know.

“I don't know,” Skywarp whimpered. “I just... did it.”

Soundwave was about to say something else when the twins appeared again.

“Boss! We got more places to go!”

“What's taking so long?”

And then:

“Wow, Warp! What happened?”

“Did we do that?”

“You did that! You're the one who ran into him!”

“Did not!”

“Did too!”

“Did not!”
“Did—”

“Alright!” Soundwave interrupted them, and both twins instantly fell silent. “I think we have done enough exploring for one day.”

There was an instant chorus of disagreement from both boys.

“Hey!” Slipstream interrupted them. “Let's go back and see if that dead cat is still there.”

All traces of objection disappeared at once, and the twins were off down the street in a shot, the young woman trailing after them. Soundwave watched them go for a moment before turning back to the Seekers.

“You cannot keep this a secret,” he told them gravely. “Potential threats to our troops' functioning must be reported, even if those threats are themselves.”

Thundercracker hung his head, and Skywarp started to cry in earnest.

“Is... Is Megatron g-gonna p-p-punish me?” he wailed.

Thundercracker's head snapped up expectantly. Megatron could just try to punish Skywarp! But, to his immense surprise, Soundwave was quirking the smallest of smiles at them.

“While a consequence is doubtless in order, I am not sure I would quantify it as a punishment,” the intelligence officer told them. He got to his feet and held a hand out to help Skywarp up. “Now, come. We ought to get those wounds cleaned before anything untoward happens to them.”

Starscream woke with a start, surprised to find that he had fallen asleep in the first place. He had been determined to stay up until nighttime so that he wouldn't have to lie awake by Megatron again all night, but apparently his body had had other ideas—as usual.

He stretched, and his feet hit something sooner than expected. When he glanced down in that direction, he found Megatron seated on the other end of the couch, watching him with mild interest. His eyes were half-closed as if he too had been asleep until mere moments ago.

“Well, hello there, little one,” he said, smiling slyly at the Seeker.

Starscream scowled back at him before hauling himself up off the couch and moving to the window. He wasn't even going to deign that with a reply.

“It's getting cloudy,” he remarked, peering through the smudgy glass at the sky beyond. There had been clouds in the sky before now, but this was the first time since landing in this country that he had seen them gather together like this.

“And what does that mean?” Megatron wanted to know, coming over to join him.

“Perhaps it will rain,” Starscream shrugged, trying to ignore the leap his stomach did when the larger man pressed close behind him.

Fortunately, Megatron left again after grunting at the gradually darkening sky.
“We need to find something to keep around as entertainment while here in the hotel,” he remarked as he went to straighten the pillows on the double bed for at least the fourth time that day. “These books Slipstream seems to find so much amusement in are utterly inscrutable. Is all human literature like this?”

“I wouldn't know,” Starscream huffed. “I've never bothered to read any.”

According to the clock, he had been asleep for at least three hours, and he felt considerably more clear-headed than he had the rest of the day, though his mouth and throat were begging for hydration and his stomach for food. One of them at least he was happy to oblige.

“I'm going to get some water,” he told his leader, moving for the door.

“I will accompany you,” Megatron instantly announced, and Starscream rolled his eyes, hand clenching on the door knob.

“Just how long do I have to behave for before you'll stop dogging my every step?” he demanded when Megatron had joined him at the door.

“I am not dogging anything,” the other man protested. “I simply wish to get some water.”

The Seeker sniffed in disbelief and opened the door, only to be bombarded by Rumble and Frenzy.

“Hey, Screamer! Hi, Megatron!” the two boys shouted as they shoved past their commanding officers and into the hotel room.

Starscream was willing to forgive the offense to his own person when he saw the look on Megatron’s face at being addressed without any honorifics.

Slipstream came panting up to the doorway before their leader had time to do anything about it.

“Are those two getting in the shower?” she asked, doubled over with her hands on her knees.

“No, they're jumping on the bed,” Starscream informed her.

The young woman swore and also pushed past the two men in the doorway.

“GET IN THE SHOWER!” she screamed at the twins, jabbing a finger at the bathroom.

“Come on, Slipstream!” one of them whined. “It was just a dead cat!”

“Covered in bugs and parasites and all those other things your creator said! Now get!”

The boys groaned and jumped off the bed to obey, Slipstream following after them. Starscream was just opening his mouth to ask what exactly had happened out there when a touch on his shoulder made him jump. He spun around to find his brothers and Soundwave standing behind him now, Thundercracker hastily withdrawing the hand he had lain on him a moment ago.

“Sorry, didn't mean to startle you, but you two are blocking the door,” his brother explained.

Before Starscream could respond, Megatron grabbed the back of his shirt and tugged him into the room once more, clearing the entryway for the other three.

“You are back earlier than expected,” Megatron remarked to Soundwave as he passed.

“There has arisen an unexpected complication,” the intelligence officer intoned, and for some
reason, Skywarp tensed and pressed himself even closer to Thundercracker's side.

“What'd you do now, Warp?” Starscream demanded, striding over to his brothers.

“Leave him alone, Starscream,” Thundercracker snapped, and he tugged his youngest brother closer.

Starscream drew back, Thundercracker's words and sudden glare hitting him almost like a blow. His older brother had been so nice to him these last few days that he had forgotten that Skywarp would always be his favorite and his top priority.

“What kind of complication?” Megatron asked wearily.

“It seems that Skywarp has been intentionally harming himself,” Soundwave explained, and at the expression on his leader's face, quickly added, “This is not an uncommon way for humans to relieve extreme stress, though it is an unhealthy one.”

“First I've heard of it,” Starscream muttered, moving back toward the door. He still wanted that water.

“Show me,” Megatron ordered, and Skywarp hesitated a good long while before Thundercracker murmured something in his ear and he tentatively started pulling up his sleeves.

Starscream's eyes widened as more and more of the dark scabs became visible against his little brother's pale arms. He didn't have much of a gauge for human injuries, but... that looked painful. Skywarp had done that to himself? Well, he couldn't imagine who else would want to hurt him. Sure, Starscream himself might knock his brother around a little bit every now and then when he was getting too obnoxious, but this was something else.

And he had done that to himself?!

“When and how did you do this?” Megatron wanted to know.

“I... Yesterday,” Skywarp squeaked, his voice barely a whisper and his eyes fixed on the floor. “I bit myself. I'm sorry.”

Starscream was expecting Megatron to break out into a tirade of anger any second now, but instead his leader's face was merely thoughtful as he reached out a surprisingly gentle hand and took Skywarp's arm, turning it about.

“Why?” he wanted to know.

Skywarp fidgeted and squirmed a moment while Thundercracker rubbed his back encouragingly. This was a great deal of coddling for someone who had been stupid enough to injure himself, Starscream felt.

“It... it was too much,” Skywarp said finally. “The noise and... Everything was too much. But the pain is something else to focus on.”

Starscream fully expected Megatron to shove the boy away from him in disgust at this expression of weakness, but instead, his leader just hummed with some interest and turned to ask Soundwave how many medical supplies they had left. With a snort of disgust, Starscream turned and swept from the room, not much caring that Megatron was likely to be upset at him for it later.
The water in the hotel room was technically potable, but after having to walk nearly 20 minutes to stand in line for water that tasted like dirt every day for so long, Starscream was more than okay with walking down four flights of stairs for the sweet, cold water from the cooler in the lobby. At the moment, the trip had the added benefit of taking him away from the nauseating atmosphere that was currently choking the hotel room. He was sure that Megatron would disapprove of him coming down here alone, whatever he might say to the contrary, but if he was too busy fawning over Skywarp to notice Starscream slipping out the door, then that was his problem.

Starscream certainly got a sense of vindictive triumph some five minutes after entering the lobby when his commander came bursting out of the stairwell, breathing heavily as he scanned the area.

“I’m right here, dumbaft,” Starscream muttered from behind his glass of water, sinking further into the couch he had settled on.

It still took Megatron another moment to spot him. Their eyes met across the room, and Starscream nearly choked because Megatron looked… scared.

That changed a split-second later, though, and the warlord’s face was fair livid as he stormed over to his errant Seeker.

“What do you think you’re doing!?” he demanded in an angry hiss.


“You know you are not to be without supervision right now!” his commander whisper-shouted at him.

“You never actually said that,” Starscream muttered. “In fact, you said you weren’t dogging my every move.”

“It was strongly implied! You are far from being too ignorant to understand your current position!”

Starscream slammed his glass down on an end table and surged to his feet. His irritation only compounded when this brought his eyes level with about the middle of Megatron’s chest.

“My ‘current situation,’” he snarled, “is that I’m stuck in some ridiculous predicament straight out of a fragging fairy tale with a bunch of losers I can’t stand, and you”—he jabbed Megatron in the chest, fully aware he was liable to lose the finger he’d used—“won’t let me get a glass of fragging water without supervision!”

“I am growing weary of these antics, Starscream,” the warlord growled, his face darkening farther.

“What’s new!?” the Seeker snarled. “Maybe I should express myself by chewing holes in my arms like Skywarp instead!”

“At least we wouldn’t have to listen to you whining for once!” Megatron returned.

The young man’s jaw dropped. How dare he? How dare he!? Didn't he know how much Starscream was hurting right now?

Apparently not, because he kept right on going.
“Your brother is young, Starscream. He is young and has spent most of his life protected by others. I do not expect him to know how to handle himself in this situation. You, on the other hand, may not be much older than he, but have proven several times over that you are perfectly capable of looking out for yourself. You simply insist on choosing not to.”

“You aren't giving me the chance!” Starscream shrieked, throwing his hands in the air.

“I have given you the chance many times over!” Megatron snapped. “Thus far, you have squandered it every time! Now stop moping and come back upstairs!”

“I'm not going anywhere until you agree to let me do as I like!”

“That,” Megatron growled, “is never going to happen.”

“Of course!” the Seeker snarled. “You don't trust me, you don't like me... I'm nothing but a nuisance to you! Maybe I should just go throw myself off the roof and rid you of the—”

He didn't even see the slap coming. Just one second he was shouting and the next he was stumbling sideways. Strong hands caught him before he could fall into the coffee table, and then he was staring dumbfounded into Megatron's furious face. It was the same kind of fury he had seen there when the former warlord saved him from the gang the other day: wild, intense, and tinged with something else he didn't recognize.

“Never,” his leader spat, his grip painfully tight on the smaller man's biceps. “Never say anything like that again!”

Starscream opened his mouth to retort, but suddenly all the emotions he had been trying so hard to push away throughout the day surged to the surface, shoving his anger aside in their wake. A high-pitched sob escaped him instead, and suddenly he found himself bawling, salty tears stinging in the small split Megatron's blow had left in his upper lip.

A flash of confusion crossed his commander's face, and then he was abruptly released to sink to his knees.

“Stop that!” he heard Megatron bark as he tipped forward to curl himself into a ball, still crying.

He would have liked to stop—this was ridiculously embarrassing—but he couldn't. The empty ache that had been gnawing in his chest the last two days had finally broken loose and was consuming him.

He was ugly.

He was useless.

He was weak.

He was disgusting.

He was detestable.

He was human.

He wished the ground would just open up and swallow him whole. And Megatron just stood there staring at him, clearly repulsed by his vulnerability.

After a moment, his commander bent down and seized him by the elbow.
“Get up,” the other man grumbled as he tugged on him, sounding tired now more than annoyed. “You are perfectly fine.”

If only he knew how wrong he was... But Starscream couldn't escape his grip—Megatron would just throw him over his shoulder like a rag doll if he tried, anyway—so he allowed himself to be pulled to his feet and led, still crying, back up the stairs.

It took Slipstream all of about 10 seconds after returning to the hotel to realize that someone had been going through her stuff. The pile was nothing like the same shape as when she'd left, and she knew that pink blouse had been somewhere near the bottom. The question was just whether it had been her cousin or her leader who had disturbed it. She sincerely hoped it was Megatron because she was sure he would have had far more qualms about searching any of her hiding places.

Slipstream got the twins into the shower and then waited until her leader had gone tearing out the door after Starscream before digging her box of pads out of the pile and leafing through it. She smiled to herself when she found the 5,000 rupees she had stashed there still tucked safely into various wrappers. The other 5,000 was still hidden in the crotch panels of various pairs of underwear, so all was well.

Except she couldn't find her book, and that was almost more worrying than if the money had gone missing.

Like Starscream, she highly doubted her commander knew enough to take suspicion at the book's contents, but on the off chance he did—on the off chance he found out that she had interest in such a crude, organic practice—she didn't like her chances.

Although, that wouldn't be half so bad as if he asked her what it was about. That one she was more than happy to leave to Soundwave.

Speaking of whom...

She glanced across the room to where the intelligence officer was seated on the edge of the double bed, Skywarp perched nervously beside him. He was holding the Seeker by the wrist and carefully wiping dirt and dried blood from his arm with a damp wash cloth. Thundercracker was pressed close against his brother's other side, and the three of them looked strangely comfortable there. Slipstream's eyes narrowed as Skywarp turned a shy smile upward at something Soundwave had said.

Soundwave never used that kind of gentle voice on her. And if Starscream was gay, then it stood to reason in Slipstream's mind that his brothers would be, too...

She shook the paranoia from her head. Skywarp was just a kid—even more so than Starscream. Supposing he did have a crush on Soundwave, there was no way the sensible intelligence officer would ever reciprocate. Not that she seriously thought Skywarp would have a crush on Soundwave. He would probably melt into a puddle of nervous goo at the very thought of daring to have a crush on anyone, let alone Soundwave.

The bathroom door banged open then and the twins came bouncing back out into the room in a cloud of perfume, stark naked and with their hair flinging water over everything.
“Boss, we're out of soap!” one of them announced.

Soundwave heaved a sigh and leveled his creations with a knowing look. “Because you used far more than necessary?”

“But boss, it makes bubbles!” Frenzy protested.

“I fail to see the relevance,” his creator intoned.

“Well, we need more medical supplies anyway, so I guess one of us might as well go out,” Thundercracker put in.

“I suppose so,” Soundwave sighed. “Slipstream, why don't you take some of your money and the twins and make a pharmacy run?”

The young woman's mouth dropped open. First off, how did he know? Secondly, he wasn't seriously expecting her to go out alone with the twins, was he? And finally, how did he know???

“It is probably not the best idea to keep money in your underwear, by the way,” the intelligence officer continued. “You don't know where it's been, and I believe human women are prone to infection in such areas.”

The twins' faces both lit up.

“You can keep things in your underwear!?” they wanted to know.

“No,” their creator hastily informed them.

It was then that the front door of their room banged open and Megatron came through, dragging a sniffling Starscream behind him. The other members of the faction fell silent as they took in the look of resignation on their leader's face, the miserable quality to Starscream's general disposition, and the bright red handprint on the Seeker's cheek.

Slipstream groaned inwardly. Suddenly, the thought of going out with the twins didn't sound so bad compared to being stuck in the hotel room with a post-argument Megatron and Starscream.

“Okay. Rumble? Frenzy? Get dressed and let's go,” she announced, stepping over to grab a pair of underwear that she knew held several hundred rupees.

The twins pulled their clothes on in record time and without argument before scurrying after her into the hallway.

“And get some pain killers while you're at it!” Soundwave called after them.

Starscream spent the rest of the evening sulking, and Megatron did his best to ignore both his behavior and the fresh bruise on his face. The young man was starting to look seriously pitiful with the almost faded bruises across his nose, the one on his jaw that was still an ugly dark blue and red, and now the fainter patch of blue at the corner of his mouth.

Now that his anger had abated a bit, Megatron actually felt a little guilty about hitting him. He wasn't really sure why he had. It was as if the moment the suggestion of Starscream “removing
himself” had come up, something else had taken control of his body. Life without Starscream used to be a favorite fantasy that the warlord would delve into with enthusiasm when he needed some stress relief, but now he didn't even want to think about it, and he didn't know why; just that he'd wanted the Seeker to shut up right that second.

He doubted that it would actually be a problem. Starscream had always been far too fond of himself to even consider suicide. It was simply something that had popped into the Seeker's silly head in the heat of the moment. The self-harm on the other hand...

Soundwave had said it was a common reaction that humans had to extreme stress—a way to deal with mental pain by actualizing it. That was exactly the sort of idiotic behavior Megatron could see his second engaging in, especially as he seemed to be far more slave to his human chemistry than any of the others. The former warlord hadn't much cared about Skywarp's doing it because the injuries were superficial enough, and he didn't doubt that the boy would actually make an effort to try some of the other coping mechanisms Soundwave had promised to teach him. Starscream, however, was liable to end up chewing off his own hand should he start on such nonsense, and Megatron greatly doubted he would take anyone's advice on the matter.

The former warlord glanced over at his second and frowned. Starscream had rejected his brothers' attempts to talk to or comfort him and had just been sitting in a corner for the past hour, staring dismally at the floor.

Megatron sighed. His ability to stay mad at Starscream seemed to be weakening with each passing day.

“We are going to get dinner,” he announced, moving over to prod the Seeker with a foot.

Starscream gave a whiny little grunt and turned away from him. Okay, so maybe it wasn't so hard to still be mad at him.

“Stop moping already,” Megatron snapped.

“I'm not moping,” the Seeker mumbled. “Just tired.”

“Does that mean I might actually get some sleep tonight?” Megatron wanted to know, and his second's gaze finally jerked up to him, anger flashing in his eyes. That was alright, though. Anger was better than despair and self-pity.

“I'm always tired!” Starscream spat. “I was tired yesterday, and what good did that do me!?”

“Then I guess it's a good thing you'll be able to sleep in tomorrow morning,” his commander told him.

Starscream blinked up at him in surprise, and then his eyes narrowed again. “You're just saying that to get on my good side,” he hissed, turning back to the floor.

Megatron rolled his eyes and turned to the rest of the faction, who were waiting in the doorway with questioning looks. He nodded at them to say that they could go on ahead, and Thundercracker hesitated, clearly unwilling to leave his brother alone with his commander again. That was understandable, Megatron supposed. If he'd had a proper brother instead of a treacherous bag of wind, he probably wouldn't take kindly to people hitting him, either.

The thought made him pause, both because it was the first time the concept had ever seriously occurred to him, and as he realized that he had, in fact, referred to Starscream as a “treacherous bag of wind” on multiple occasions in the past. Thundercracker always followed his orders with
complete loyalty, so Megatron had never thought to wonder if the oldest of his Seekers might harbor any resentment toward him for how he treated Starscream. For the moment, he decided to file it away under “Things to Think About Later,” and nodded more emphatically for the other two Seekers to leave before turning back to his second.

“I have been thinking,” he said as he slid down the wall to sit beside the smaller man. “I am not willing to let you wander on your own yet.”

Starscream’s shoulders tensed even more, and he huddled himself farther into his corner, away from Megatron. He was still close enough that the former warlord could feel his warmth against his side, and he was suddenly struck with the insane desire to put an arm around the Seeker and tuck his bony little body up against himself—an urge that he quickly shook off before continuing.

“But I need you to get yourself together, Starscream. I do. You are not just a nuisance; you are my second-in-command, and I would appreciate your help. I can’t pretend to understand why this is so much harder for you than everyone else, but I am willing to help you if you are willing to try.”

“Help me?” Starscream sneered, turning to face him. “How would you help me?”

“You said that you want to be doing something productive,” Megatron reminded him. “I can give you something productive to do.”

Starscream seemed to be considering. “What’s the catch?”

“You are constantly exhausted, ill and overly emotional,” his commander pointed out, ignoring the indignant spluttering noises his second started making to forge ahead. “You know full well that these are all symptoms of fuel deprivation, and I think it likely they would improve if you were to start eating more regularly.”

The young man made a face at him.

“Demonstrate a willingness to take care of your physical needs, and I will take you with us when we begin the next phase of our plan,” Megatron explained. “Fail to do so, and I will make you stay here with your brothers.”

“They can’t stop me doing what I want!” the Seeker snapped.

“Okay, correction then: fail to do so, and I will tie you up and leave you here alone while we are gone,” his commander warned.

“Why do you even care?” Starscream demanded.

“Because,” Megatron growled, “I am foolish enough to believe that the mech I appointed as my second-in-command is still somewhere beneath all this stupidly stubborn self-pity, and I could use him right about now.”

Starscream blinked at him, and then turned back to stare at his feet.

“We keep doing this,” he muttered.

“What?” his leader wanted to know.

“This cycle: you do something stupid, I get angry, you get angry, I break down, you lecture me...”

Megatron frowned and reached up to rub the back of his neck. It was true; they had been doing that
a lot lately. This made the third time in as many weeks, though it had been much smaller than the others. Really, the whole thing might have blown over without an issue if Starscream hadn't made that comment about... about the roof.

“You forgot the step where you start doing something dangerous and self-destructive,” he said after a while.

Starscream snorted. “Reckless,” he grumbled. “I'm not self-destructive, I'm reckless. And I seem to remember you liked that quality when you hired me.”

“I liked that you were daring,” Megatron corrected. “There is a big difference between being willing to lead a fleet into the maw of the Pit and refusing to fuel yourself for days on end. One is courage; the other just sheer idiocy.”

The Seeker rolled his eyes.

“Come eat dinner,” his commander said, starting to get to his feet. “And perhaps we can break this cycle for once. I would like to work with you again, Starscream, instead of just spending all my time trying to keep you alive.”

He offered a hand out to his second, and Starscream hesitated before reaching out to take it, his own hand soft and delicate in the former warlord's. A strangely perfect fit, Megatron couldn't help but notice.
The sound of a distant explosion cut through Megatron's recharge, far earlier than he would have liked. The warlord groaned, wondering whose helm he would have to rip off for this offense. He wasn't ready to get up and deal with war. His recharge slab seemed unusually comfortable, and Starscream was pressed perfectly small and warm against his front, and...

...Starscream?

Another distant rumble sounded, and Megatron opened his eyes to find himself still human and still lying in a hotel room in India, not lord of the battlefield once more as he had been dreaming.

He heaved a disappointed sigh and reached an arm out for the comforting warmth of his second, letting his hand rest on the small of the younger man's back. Starscream shifted and made a small murmuring noise in his sleep.

Megatron smiled slightly to himself. If being human had one advantage, it was their species' highly developed sense of touch. However frustrating he could be at times, there was nothing that soothed Megatron's nerves quite like feeling Starscream's fragile body against his own. The Seeker was warm and soft, and he fit perfectly in the former warlord's arms. It was probably why Megatron could never be mad at him for too long anymore.

He slipped his hand inside the younger man's shirt and began to gently trail his fingers up and down Starscream's back, enjoying the feel of smooth skin. After a moment, he moved his hand around to rest on the Seeker's side, feeling his ribs expand and contract beneath what little flesh there was there.

A car passed outside, the glow of its headlights sending faint illumination even as high as their fourth story window, and a beam of orangey light slid across the Seeker's sleeping face before vanishing again.

Beautiful.

The word stumbled its way through Megatron's brain unbidden and certainly unexpected. Beautiful? Beautiful?? Yes, there had always been a certain beauty to Starscream's flight maneuvers, and the cold cunning of his mind, and his ability to dispose of their enemies, and...

Megatron blinked. He hadn't realized he had ever found so much beauty in Starscream as a Cybertronian. Either way, he couldn't understand why he should think any human was “beautiful,” let alone his brat of a second-in-command.

Before he had much time to dwell on it, a sudden flash of bright, white light filled the room, followed quickly after by a crack of sound—the explosions had not been part of his dream after all. Megatron shot out of bed and hurried to the window, vaguely aware of Starscream making sleepy whining noises and starting to sit up behind him.

There was nothing amiss that he could see in the street outside, unless he counted the fact that it was raining for the first time since they had arrived in this country. The precipitation was falling in heavy sheets, so thick that it was difficult to see the buildings on the other side of the street. Megatron did his best to squint through it, flecks of moisture blowing through the window screen to hit his face, but the only things moving in the street below were bits of sodden paper and rubbish that the wind caught up and sent dancing through the air.
Another flash of light lit the room, and this time, he saw it arcing across the sky. When the answering boom rang out, he heard Skywarp shriek in terror on the double bed behind him.

“It's the Autobots!” the boy squealed.

“No it isn't,” Starscream's voice informed him impatiently. “It's just a thunderstorm.”

Megatron turned around to find his second was slipping out of the bed, blanket wrapped round his shoulders, to join him at the window. Starscream reached up and pulled the window shut before settling down on the floor in front of it, his arms folded on the sill.

“What is it?” Megatron asked him.

“Light created by electrical discharge,” the Seeker explained, never able to completely suppress his inner scientist. “Like static electricity. The build up of ice and dust in the clouds creates the differing charges in various parts of them, or between the clouds and the ground, which the lightning—the flashing light—then balances.”

Megatron hummed his interest and turned back to the display outside, his body relaxing once more. So, it was not an attack, but rather an astrological event. Electrical charge... Energy. This planet had energy in its very sky.

Lightning spiked across the sky once more, and this time it took a second before the answering rumble reached them.

“What is the sound, then?” the former warlord wanted to know.

“The rapid movement of air,” Starscream replied with a yawn. “The lightning heats the air quickly, and then it cools again. The sudden expansion and contraction makes sound waves.”

He sounded proud of himself, and Megatron couldn't help but smile as he glanced back down at the young man.

“Still quite the little scientist, I see,” he commented, and Starscream's face instantly fell. It took Megatron a second to realize he had used the Seeker's least favorite adjective, and then his smile shifted from contentment to amusement.

Still scowling, Starscream got up and moved to throw himself down on not the single but rather the double bed, falling between his brothers. Skywarp yelped at his sudden appearance before realizing who it was and latching onto him. Megatron's own smile slipped a bit as he watched them.

“How long do these usually last?” he asked as he returned to his own bed, hoping to regain the Seeker's attention.

“Not long,” his second replied, rather uninformatively, and without glancing back at him.

Megatron watched as the three Seekers arranged themselves, Skywarp pressed into Starscream's front and Thundercracker against his back. The oldest of the brothers grunted sleepily and gave Starscream's shoulder an affectionate squeeze before throwing his arm across both of the younger two. After another moment, all three of them were breathing in sync.

The former warlord watched them a little longer, a strange aching in his chest, until another flash of lightning illuminated Slipstream on the far side of the room, who was sitting up on the couch and giving him a strange look. He grunted in annoyance and flopped back over onto his own Seekerless
The storm calmed at some point after that, but Megatron couldn't remember falling asleep. When he woke the next day, the room was bathed in bright sunlight, too bright for it to have been morning still. He lifted his head groggily and rubbed a hand across his eyes. A weight against his back shifted, and he smirked; Starscream always came crawling back to him in the end.

However, when he tilted his head back to look over his shoulder, he was greeted with not a head full of dark brown hair, but one of dirty blond instead. He groaned and glanced at the double bed to see that the twins had apparently been kicked off their usual pillow (Soundwave) by Slipstream. His scowl deepened when he saw that Starscream was still buried somewhere in the pile of Seekers next to them.

Why had Starscream not returned to sleep with him, and—more importantly—why did it bother him so much?

One of the twins—Rumble, upon closer inspection—twisted and pressed into his back. Frenzy, who was lying against his side rather than on top of him like his brother, moved at almost the exact same time, curling himself into a tighter ball around his commander's right arm.

Well, this wouldn't do. Megatron allowed such behavior of Starscream out of necessity, but he couldn't have just any of his troops thinking they could invade his sleeping space. Still, the twins disrespecting his authority while asleep was at least quieter than them doing it while awake. He supposed he could put up with it just a little longer.

A glance at the alarm clock on the window sill told him that it was almost noon. How could he still be so tired when he had slept through half the day? His stomach was growling at him to eat something, but he couldn't muster the energy to actually get up. Instead, he heaved a sigh and sank down into his pillows once more, wrinkling his nose as he inhaled the familiar scent of his second through the pillowcase.

Rumble moved again, and he stilled, not wanting to wake any of them.

Everyone would need to be on top form today. With what information Soundwave had gathered the previous afternoon, they were now ready to get to work. Starscream would finally have a chance to use his talents effectively. He would probably be pleased, and somehow Megatron couldn't help but smile at the thought.

Of course, that was assuming Starscream continued to do well today. He had eaten his dinner properly last night and without argument, which had been a vast improvement over his usual behavior, and hadn't spent quite so long in the shower as usual. He'd even fallen asleep not too long after midnight. Megatron had lain awake and watched him for a good while after that to make sure he really was asleep, which he realized now was probably why he was still so tired. At any rate, if the Seeker could keep it up for another eight hours, he would be coming out with them tonight.

Megatron really hoped he would manage to keep it up.

The twins, on the other hand, they would probably leave here with Slipstream. Or Thundercracker. They would have to see how Skywarp was doing that evening.
Megatron remained tolerant and unmoving for a while as the two boys tossed and turned against
him, absently wondering how Soundwave managed to put up with it and glancing his way as he
did. His third looked very content curled around Slipstream, and the former warlord felt envy
niggling at his mind. This was the first time in over a month that he had woken up without
Starscream either wrapped in his arms or pressed against his back, and he didn't like it. Although,
he couldn't help but notice that his waste hose had taken itself out of its morning stiffness in record
time, and the twins had one significant advantage over the Seeker in that at least they didn't pinch,
bite, or hit him randomly in the night.

Just then, almost as if Primus had been listening in on his thoughts, there was a sharp tug on his
hair and he jerked up, hissing in pain. Searching behind himself, he found the culprit to be Frenzy,
who had reached out and clasped a handful of his commander's hair in his sleep. Unable to wrench
the boy's grip out of his hair, Megatron growled in annoyance and elbowed him off the bed.

Frenzy fell to the floor with a thump, and his twin jolted awake at exactly the same time.

The afternoon then progressed in their normal wake up routine. Slipstream appeared in yet another
outfit that no one had realized she'd owned, the twins had a pillow fight, Starscream hogged the
shower, five separate arguments occurred (four of them involving the aforementioned Seeker),
Megatron lost his temper twice, and, as usual, no one really knew what their meal consisted of. At
least Starscream ate it, though.

All this took barely two hours, leaving them with nearly six more to fill before they could head out.

The twins tried playing a game that involved far too much yelling, and their creator soon shut them
down. Slipstream was trying to read her book, but kept getting interrupted by the twins. Megatron
wondered why she put up with them to the extent that she did, but didn't put too much thought into
it. She was getting good at keeping them entertained without too much noise, and that was all he
cared about.

The Seekers were all huddled on the double bed, talking in low voices and occasionally laughing,
which was.... mildly disturbing. No group of people containing Starscream should ever be so
relaxed, and Megatron was certain that his second was up to something. He tried listening in on
their conversation, but they were just gossiping about people they'd known before the war from
what he could tell.

Still, Starscream had eaten all of his breakfast before he disappeared into the shower for almost a
full hour, and he ate a late lunch with everyone else around four in the afternoon as well.

Slipstream took the twins out with Soundwave's permission after they'd eaten, and things got quiet
for a while.

“I'm bored,” Starscream declared when he and his brothers had lapsed into silence for several
minutes. He pushed himself up off the double bed and started for the bathroom. “I'm taking
another shower.”

Megatron narrowed his eyes in suspicion, wondering if the Seeker was perhaps attempting to wash
away his human form in hopes of finding metal still there underneath or some such foolishness.

Another hour passed, and Starscream emerged in a cloud of manufactured perfume for the second
time that day. The Seeker glanced around the room for a moment, his hands planted on his hips, and then came over to lean into Megatron's personal space, his eyes narrowed as if he was studying the ex-warlord's face for rust spots.

“What?” Megatron demanded, pushing him away.

“Stop,” Starscream griped, trying to get close again. “I'm trying to figure out why you're so much hairier than the rest of us!”

But Megatron refused to become Starscream's latest lab specimen just because he was bored, and held the young man at bay by planting a large foot on his bony chest. The Seeker instantly squealed in disgust and recoiled from him.

“Wash your feet once in a while!” he snapped. “All that hair must be because your body is too old to keep heat in any other way.”

“What do you care?” his commander wanted to know, frowning at the implication that he was in any way 'old.' Sure, his human face had more lines to it than Starscream's did, but that wasn't saying much. Starscream's human body only just passed as a full-grown adult, he was fairly sure.

“If it's caused by something environmental, I'd rather avoid it,” Starscream sniffed at him. “At least now I'm still relatively smooth.”

He moved back toward his brothers, and Megatron frowned after him, distracted by the thought of Starscream and his smoothness.

Around eight o'clock, the sun finally started going down. Megatron shared a glance with Soundwave, who inclined his head, and then the both of them stood.

“Starscream, come with me,” the ex-warlord ordered, ignoring how everyone's attention had shifted to either himself or his second. “We are going out.”

Starscream frowned at him and then looked pointedly to the darkening sky outside. “In the middle of the night?”

“It is hardly the middle of the night yet,” Megatron pointed out, opening the door and motioning for Starscream to come walk through it. “And as you don't sleep at night anyway, I don't see a problem.”

The Seeker scowled, but got to his feet regardless and stomped through the door, glaring at his leader as he passed.
The night air was as chilly as ever, though it had been a few days since Starscream had been exposed to it. He shivered and rubbed at his arms through the thin sleeves of his shirt, quickening his pace to keep himself warm as he and Megatron made their way down the street. Above them, the sky was a dark blue color, but would become ebony within minutes. The Seeker tightened his arms around his chest to better protect himself from the light breeze.

He would have said something rude to Megatron about his poor planning, but it seemed that this was the fabled next stage of their plans, and Starscream didn't fancy getting himself stuck back in the hotel room with his brothers.

Most areas of the market were closed for the day, and the normally bustling street was void of its usual pushy regulars—only a few others passed them on the sidewalks. The street lamps above began to flicker dimly before brightening and casting the two Decepticons in a yellow spotlight. In the distance, Starscream saw others flickering on as well.

Despite the barrenness of their neighborhood, the city was clearly still awake. Distinct sounds of traffic and crowds drifted toward them from somewhere between the buildings on either side.

Megatron led the way forward in silence, checking frequently to ensure that his second was still with him as they followed the route they had gone along the previous morning. He needn't have worried; Starscream was not keen on the idea of being left alone in the dark for any strange human to come across. Not after his experiences with getting mugged the other day.

As the market opened up into a wider street, they started coming across more and more stalls whose wares were still out for sale and, consequently, more people still out and about shopping for said wares. The number of cows started to increase too, for some reason. The large animals roamed freely in the streets and sidewalks, walking amongst the people and in front of the traffic. Starscream was stunned that no one else seemed particularly bothered by their presence—not even Megatron.

They were passing a stall full of vibrantly technicolor clothing when a loud moo sounded suddenly from right behind him, and Starscream shot forward into Megatron's back before whipping around. A huge, horned beast stood before him, staring up at the Seeker with the street lights reflected in its liquid brown eyes. Terrified, Starscream clutched handfuls of Megatron's shirt and flattened himself against his leader's broad back.

"Me... Megatron!" he whispered frantically, convinced that if he were to shout he would startle the cow into attacking him. "Get rid of it. Get rid of it!"

Megatron turned casually, and Starscream scrambled to put the larger man between himself and the beast. The cow blinked and stepped forward, the bell around its neck clanging as it moved. With boldness that only served to increase Starscream's panic, it bumped Megatron's chest with its nose, and the ex-warlord fell back slightly.

"Don't let it get me!" Starscream squeaked, hiding his face in his commander's back.

Megatron just made a noise of mild amusement and pushed the Seeker along with himself out of
the bovine's path. It waddled on by without paying them further attention.

“How can they just let those wild animals run loose in the streets?” Starscream demanded as he stepped a little farther from his leader, feeling slightly chagrined.

“Oh, yes,” Megatron muttered. “Utterly vicious.”

He reached back to grab hold of the front of Starscream's shirt, attempting to pull him along into the crowd of people and cattle once more. The Seeker dug in his heels.

“No, I don't like this! Let's go back!” he squealed.

Megatron made a noise of frustration and tugged harder, just as a particularly large bull slipped past so close to Starscream that its tail flicked the young man's arm. The Seeker shrieked and shot forward, and the two men progressed.

Before long, they were out of the cattle-packed street and into a denser section of the city—somewhere that Starscream didn't recognize. He assumed this must be where the rest of their team had gone after he and Megatron had returned to the hotel the previous day. The streets were brighter here, cheap neon lights in every window and sign. There were so many of them that they all seemed to blur into one, illuminating the area like some garish imitation of daylight. Starscream looked to his commander for some clue as to why they were here, but Megatron had his gaze set firmly ahead of them, glaring harshly at any who dared to glance their way for more than a split-second.

The sound of music caught Starscream's attention next. A deep bass blasted for a second as a door a little ways ahead opened to expel several laughing and stumbling humans—a man and a woman—out into the street. The two of them nearly walked straight into Megatron and Starscream before veering off sharply, too enraptured in clinging to each other and laughing to even notice. Starscream wrinkled his nose at them.

Another group of drunken humans started meandering towards them—this one entirely men—and Megatron shifted around to put himself between them and Starscream. The Seeker glared at him until the men had passed.

“I don't need your protection!” he hissed.

“Just from cows?” Megatron asked, quirking an eyebrow at him, and Starscream let the subject drop.

Their walk ended at an almost deserted section of road. The lights were dimmer here and it was quiet enough for them to hear car horns and sirens in the distance. There was no neon or vibrating bass tunes.

Starscream was about to ask his leader what they were doing here when Megatron seized hold of the Seeker and pulled him into the nearest alley, pressing him into the cool brick wall at the entrance. His last experience in an alley still fresh on his mind, Starscream fought back with a cry of alarm as the rest of the dark, filthy-smelling passageway seemed to yawn before him.

“Stop it!” Megatron hissed, giving him a bit of a shake, and the Seeker stilled.

“What are we doing here!?" he demanded, clinging to the larger man and trying to make it look like anything but nerves.

“That," his leader answered, pointing at a row of cash machines on the other side of the street
across from their alley that Starscream hadn't noticed before.

And suddenly Starscream understood. His fears instantly evaporated into both triumph and indignation.

“Why, you hypocritical aft-brain!” he breathed. “After all that talk about not drawing attention to ourselves, you're just going to shamelessly con as many squishies as it takes to meet your goals, aren't you?”

Megatron turned to give him a look that Starscream couldn't see in the darkness of the alley, but that he assumed was a dirty one.

“We will not be drawing attention to ourselves,” he said. “Tell me, Starscream: if the human gang hadn't already been following you the other day, would anyone ever have caught you?”

“Of course not!” his second snapped.

“Well, then considering we have yet to get on the wrong side of any gangs in this part of town, I don't see as there's any problem with pursuing this route.”

Starscream just blinked up at the other man. He couldn't seriously....

But the sound of someone approaching in the silence of the night interrupted his thoughts and stole both his and Megatron's attentions away again. A tall figure stepped forward into a street light, and Starscream recognized Soundwave's strong features. Megatron let out a short whistle, and the other man headed for them.

“Where are the others?” the ex-warlord wanted to know once the intelligence officer had joined them.

“Skywarp was unable to make it through the marketplace without a breakdown,” Soundwave sighed. “I sent him and Thundercracker back to the hotel.”

Starscream rolled his eyes, which neither of the others noticed in the dark, and Megatron made a noise of frustration.

“He wouldn't have been much use to us in any case,” Soundwave pointed out.

“I suppose we’ll have to make do with the three of us,” Megatron grumbled, and then turned to his second. “Now, how do we get the money out of those machines?”

Starscream rolled his eyes so hard his whole head moved this time. “You have to wait for a human to come first,” he said, unable to bear just how dumb his comrades could be sometimes.

“We can't afford to just wait here all—”

“Someone's coming,” Soundwave interrupted the ex-warlord, and all three men fell silent, crowding at the mouth of the alley to see out without being seen and Starscream somehow ended up being pushed to the forefront.

The lone human man coming toward them was staggering off-balance and singing indistinctly to himself as he made his way to the cash machines.

“Perfect,” Starscream heard Megatron whisper in his ear, hot breath tickling the back of his neck and putting his hair on end.
The Seeker took a deep breath and turned around. This was his chance to prove himself at last.

“Give me some money,” he whispered, holding his hand out to Megatron.

“You are supposed to be stealing from the intoxicated human, not me,” his leader reminded him.

“Just give it to me,” he hissed again, meeting Megatron's dark, suspicious eyes. “Trust me this one time.”

Somewhat apprehensive, the other man dug a hand into his pocket and removed a few notes, which he handed over to the Seeker. The young man snatched them away and promptly strode into the street, head held high as he headed straight for the cash machines that the human was stumbling his way toward.

Starscream had done this a thousand times with Ajit, and he timed it just right, reaching the cash machine a split second after the human and standing as close behind him as he could without raising suspicion. His eyes flickered back to where he knew Soundwave and Megatron to be concealed, and he smirked slightly before throwing the money Megatron had given him to the filthy pavement at the drunken human's feet. If only he could see the ex-warlord's disbelieving expression right now.

The Seeker waited patiently while the human entered his card number into the cash machine before tapping him on the shoulder. The man turned around, reeking of alcohol and struggling to focus on Starscream's face, and the younger man simply pointed to the ground.

The flesh bag saw the money, and its eyes lit up. It bent down slowly, wobbling precariously as it reached out for the bills. Meanwhile, Starscream stepped around him, pressed a few buttons on the cash machine, and withdrew the maximum amount available in the account. He then took the money—and the card because why not—and walked off. By the time the organic had straightened up again, a couple of crumpled rupees in hand, his card, money, and the young, skinny-looking foreign boy who had so kindly pointed out the spare change had all vanished.

Ten minutes later, after the inebriated flesh bag had stumbled off—swearing and raging at nothing—the Decepticons hiding in the alleyway not twenty feet away finally deemed it safe to speak again.

And, for the first time in weeks, Starscream allowed himself to look smug.

“Where did you learn that?” Megatron's voice asked him softly from somewhere within the gloomy alleyway. Starscream squinted through the darkness to see his leader's faint, silver outline.

“Does it matter?” he sneered, finding himself strangely reluctant to bring up his temporary human business partner. He held out the wad of money, and Megatron took it, large hand brushing his second's slighter one. Starscream pulled back quickly, his skin prickling at the unexpected contact.

His leader then stepped forward, into the light of a nearby street lamp, and Starscream risked a glance at him. Megatron was looking at him strangely; he almost looked... proud.

“Clever little Seeker,” the older man said fondly, pocketing the money and placing a hand on his second's head for a moment before lowering it to clasp his shoulder instead.

Starscream's expression soured, despite the show of affection.

“Little!?” he snarled.
But Megatron had already turned back to Soundwave. “You take the west side; we will stay east,” he was saying.

Soundwave tore his gaze away from something at the far end of the alley, seeming to come out of some sort of trance. Starscream frowned and peered around him, worried that there really was something to fear down that way, but saw nothing other than the distant light of street that the alley opened back onto.

“Yes, Lord Megatron,” Soundwave was saying, inclining his head before striding off toward the street in question.

“So,” Megatron's deep voice purred as Soundwave's silhouette disappeared into the shadows. “How many more of those tricks do you have hidden up your sleeve?”

Starscream turned back to him, lips quirking slightly. “A few.”

Soundwave headed for the other end of the alley as quickly as he could without tripping over anything in the dark, so as not to lose his quarry. He had thought the previous day that it seemed someone was following them, but had dismissed it as human paranoia because how could he know that when he no longer possessed telepathy or any form of surveillance network? There was no doubt in his mind now, though, that he had seen a small form watching them from the other end of the alley just now and ducking back around the corner every time one of them came too close to looking directly at it. Soundwave wouldn't be much of an intelligence officer if he couldn't spot such an obvious spy.

He reached the end of the alley and pressed himself against the bricks just by the corner, waiting. Back where he’d come from, Megatron and Starscream were positioning themselves to wait for another human victim. They were too far away to notice Soundwave.

A few moments passed, and then a familiar small figure poked its head around the corner into the alleyway once more.

“Good evening, Ajit,” Soundwave intoned quietly, and the boy's mouth dropped, his eyes flying wide.

Before he could make any noise, Soundwave reached out and clasped a hand over his mouth, pulling him back around into the street. He was more concerned about his leader seeing him talking to the boy than anyone who might be walking past as Megatron discovering the situation right now would unavoidably lead to Starscream getting involved as well.

“Why are you following us?” Soundwave asked, getting straight to the point as he pulled his hand away from the boy's face. Ajit did not seem concerned with escaping him, so Soundwave relaxed his grip on his arms as well.

“For help!” the boy told him, and he actually grabbed onto Soundwave's arm.

“We do not require your assistance anymore,” the intelligence officer told him, and then when the boy's face screwed up in confusion, “We do not need your help.”

“No! No, you help me!” Ajit clarified. “Malaria, I help you. Captain have trouble, I help you. Now
Soundwave blinked at him, long and slow, and then let go.

“You cannot be around us, Ajit Singh,” he said. “Our enemies will find us again.”

“Okay. Okay, I leave, but still help. Please!” There were tears in the boy's eyes now. Soundwave considered. Megatron had promised Ajit that they would repay their debts to him someday.

“What do you need?” he asked.

“My sister,” Ajit told him, the tears starting to spill down his dirty cheeks. “Dipti she gone. Johar... Man try to kill Captain? Johar. He taked her because I help you. Please! Help to find her!”

A strange bolt of ice seemed to pierce Soundwave's chest. The human girl Dipti had been a friend to his twins—probably the only real friend they'd had in millennia—and she was in trouble because of them.

All the same, they didn't have the time or resources to go tearing up the entire city to find one tiny human girl. Soundwave reckoned it was very likely that she was already dead somewhere or in one of the excessively unsavory establishments he had seen in the parts of town he and Megatron went to for the most illegal parts of their plans—the ones where girls of all ages stood in doors or lay listless on mattresses waiting for someone to pay the right price. It was unlikely that Ajit would go away quietly if Soundwave were to tell him that, though.

“We will keep an eye out,” he said, and the boy's face lit up. “If we get any information about her, we will pass it to you through the doctors at the clinic. Please do not risk yourself or us by coming here again.”

Ajit nodded fervently.

“Thank you, sir! Thank you!” he gushed, along with a good many Hindi phrases that Soundwave had a feeling were blessings calling upon some deity or other.

The intelligence officer nodded and released the boy at last, hoping as he ran off into the crowd once more that this would be the last they saw of him.

Chapter End Notes

And the plot rears its ugly head again...
“Well, this is fun,” Slipstream muttered sarcastically to herself as she watched another dark silhouette pass the hotel in the street below. The twins' suggested game of Squishy Combat (deciding which two squishies would win in a death match based on looks alone) would have been more entertaining if there were actually any squishies passing by to play it with. They'd been going for over an hour now, and so far they had seen a grand total of three cows and two humans.

The cows always won, according to the twins.

Slipstream was just thinking about going down to the restaurant for a second dinner when the sound of wailing came from somewhere down the hall, gradually approaching their door.

“Is that Screamer again?” Rumble asked, wrinkling his nose as he turned to her.

“No, Screamer's louder'n that,” his twin contradicted.

“It's probably Skywarp,” Slipstream sighed, recognizing her cousin's voice a moment before the door swung open and Thundercracker stepped through, his arms wrapped tightly around his brother's shoulders as he guided him across the threshold.

“Look, we're back at the hotel! You'll be fine now,” the older Seeker was saying. “There aren't any cows in here.”

Skywarp wrenched himself out of his brother's hold and dove across the room for the wardrobe, pulling a blanket off the twin bed as he went.

“Warp, don't!” Thundercracker pleaded, moving after him.

“What's wrong with Skywarp?” Frenzy asked in a hushed voice as they watched Thundercracker pleading and wrestling with his brother.

“No idea,” Slipstream told him. “But I think Thundercracker's got it. Right, T.C.?”

“Actually, if you could—” the Seeker started, looking over to her with desperation in his face.

“Yup. He's fine,” his cousin cut him off. “Rumble, Frenzy, let's go out.”

The boys glanced at each other and then turned wary looks back to her.

“It's late,” Rumble told her.

“So?” she said, moving to dig around in the pile of her clothes for something.

“The shops won't be open,” the boy tried to reason with her over Skywarp's indistinct wails.

Slipstream pulled a wad of money out of a pair of underwear with a cry of triumph. She knew Soundwave couldn't have gotten all of it.

“I knew you could keep stuff in your underwear!” Frenzy said indignantly.

“Slipstream, I could really use your help!” Thundercracker tried again. He was holding both of
Skywarp's wrists in one hand and had his other hand clamped over the boy's mouth.

“You're doing great, cousin,” Slipstream assured him. “You boys coming or not?”

The twins looked at each other. They could either stay here with Skywarp—who seemed to have lost his sanity to cows—and wait for the others to return, or they could go out into the city at night with a half-crazed young woman hell-bent on finding at least one shop that was open after 9 PM.

They scrambled after her toward the door.

Slipstream did feel a little guilty about leaving her cousins in that state, but reasoned that having the twins around would only make it harder for Thundercracker to calm Skywarp down.

Neither the twins nor Slipstream had bothered preparing for the evening chill, so they moved as quickly as they could as they headed out of the surroundings that had become familiar to them and into the back alleys.

“It's a shortcut,” Slipstream claimed when the twins questioned her, though in truth she hadn't the slightest clue where she was going. However, her solo wanderings in the past few weeks had given her experience in sniffing out the signs of a shopping district, and it wasn't long before they had stumbled upon a likely looking prospect.

It was called “Big Bazaar.” Its obnoxiously large, backlit orange and blue sign (and the fact that the lights were even still on) instantly caught their attention. Slipstream broke into a run, not waiting to see if the twins would follow, and almost lost her shoes in the process. Who knew but that the store might close its doors any second, after all?

The inside of the store was far warmer than the street outside, and the young woman sighed with relief as her goose-pimpled flesh began to prickle with renewed warmth. The twins made similar noises of content as they stepped in behind her, and then instantly began trying to stick their ice cold hands against each other's backs and faces. Slipstream ignored them until a small hand slid up the back of her own shirt to press chillingly against the small of her back.

She cried out in alarm and whipped around to swat at the offender—Frenzy—but the boy skipped away, cackling merrily before she could.

“Behave!” Slipstream snarled at them. “Or I'll take you back and tell Soundwave you can't be trusted alone ever again.”

That seemed to quell the twins somewhat, and Slipstream finally felt free to turn and properly examine the store.

It was huge, and not just compared to the poor excuses for stores she'd frequented on the edges of the slum. There were at least five levels, and the shop floor stretched out as far as she could see in front of her. The lights all throughout made it so bright that her eyes were starting to water already—unprepared for such brilliance after being out in the night streets for so long. Everything any human could ever want was laid out in front of her: food, furniture, all sorts of odd-looking objects and electrical appliances that organics seemed to like so much... But none of that stuff mattered because there were clothes—three whole floors of them from what the directory said.

Slipstream made her way through aisles of bedding toward the escalators and the sign over them with both English and Hindi reading, “2F Womens Apparel.” The twins pulled a couple of pillows off the shelves behind her as they went, but she ignored them. She had learned that it was necessary to pick one's battles when dealing with Rumble and Frenzy—if she let them do as they
liked with the pillows, they were more likely to listen if she told them not to play with something more breakable.

“Woah! They got escalators on this planet!” she heard one of them exclaiming behind her as she stepped onto the moving stairs—probably Rumble. Frenzy had been on Earth long enough to have seen an escalator before.

Any thought of the twins was instantly pushed to the back of her mind, though, as she stepped out onto the second story and there they were: clothes of every color and design and size and...

“Primus,” she gasped lustfully. There were shoes.

She darted toward the lines and lines of racks holding hundreds upon hundreds of shoes and almost swooned. Of all the clothing items humans had invented, shoes were Slipstream's favorites because slipping her foot into a good pair of sequined or polished leather heels was almost like walking around on armored pedes and thrusters once more. Only significantly less comfortable, but who cared?

The twins reached her as she was examining a strappy, blue stiletto.

“What's that do?” Frenzy asked curiously, pointing to the heel.

“It's a shoe,” Slipstream snapped at him impatiently, ripping off her sandal and forcing the contraption onto her foot.

“That can't be a shoe!” Rumble cried in disbelief, tilting his head this way and that to look at it from better angles. “How's anyone supposed to walk in that?”

“With practice,” she informed him. Practice that, sadly, she hadn't quite accumulated yet, she was forced to admit as she wobbled a few steps in the beautiful blue shoe.

“What's the pointy thing for, then?” Frenzy muttered, picking up another stiletto and flipping it over to inspect said 'pointy thing.'

Slipstream rolled her eyes as she moved over to inspect her foot's reflection in a tiny mirror placed just right for that purpose. “To stab people with.”

Unfortunately, the twins believed her, and turned to exchange eager grins, clearly already formulating plans for what they could do with the multi-use shoes.

“Buy us a pair!” Rumble demanded, reaching for a pair of dark blue boots with ridiculously high, thin heels.

“No,” the young woman sneered at them. “Boys don't wear heels.”

“Yes we do!” Frenzy argued, picking up his own pair of bright red stilettos and, like his brother, flipping them over to inspect the point on the bottom.

“Will you put those back!?” Slipstream snapped, finally turning away from her foot's reflection and spotting them with the shoes. “You're not hookers!”

She was fairly certain that they had no idea what the word meant, but she'd said it with enough vitriol that both of them looked mortified anyway. They dropped the shoes instantly, and Rumble started glancing around at the store and its endless products.
“Can't we have anything?” he asked, somewhat miserably.

“Like what?” Slipstream asked, not really planning to part with any of her well-earned money (or rather, Starscream's stolen money that she had in turn earned by managing to keep it hidden for so long) for anyone else's sake.

The twins shrugged, and they looked so dejected that the young woman felt her resolve waver. Perhaps it would be best to spend a little bit of money on things to occupy them during long hours in the hotel room. They might stop bothering her quite so much if she did, after all.

“Fine,” she snapped. “You brats can have one thing!”

She turned to lead the way to the children's section, and couldn't help but smile a little as the twins celebrated quietly behind her back.

It took Thundercracker nearly an hour to get Skywar out of the wardrobe.

“I'm sorry...” the boy whimpered once he was out and curled on the bed instead, only the very top of his face showing over the blanket.

Thundercracker sighed and allowed himself to fall onto the bed beside him.

“Why does this happen?” he asked.

“I don't know,” Skywar confessed. “I just... Sometimes, stuff happens, and it's not even that bad, but then it'll make me think of something else that was, and it's like my brain just freezes up and I don't know what to do anymore.”

It sounded like a processor glitch to Thundercracker, but he wasn't sure that humans got those.

“What was it this time?” he wanted to know.

“Too many people,” Skywar whimpered miserably. “And then I saw a little boy who looked like Anoushka's son who died of the malaria, and I started thinking about what if something happened to you or Star, and then there were those... those cows, and... Please, don't die, T.C.!”

“I'm not planning on it,” the older Seeker assured him. “And I don't think Megatron's planning on letting anything happen to Starscream anytime soon.”

“Why does Starscream spend all his time with Megatron if he hates him so much?” Skywar wondered.

“Who knows?” Thundercracker muttered, rolling his eyes. “At least they're not trying to kill each other anymore.”

Skywar sniffed and burrowed down farther in the blankets.

“I wish he'd spend more time with us,” he mumbled. “I like it when we're all together.”

“He's always mean to you,” Thundercracker pointed out.
“He wasn't today,” Skywarp contradicted.

“Well...” That was only subjectively speaking, really. Starscream had been short and impatient with their youngest brother as usual, but Thundercracker supposed it was true that he hadn't outright insulted him at all. It had been nice when he'd slipped into bed with them that morning, though. With the three of them so close, Thundercracker had almost been able to feel their bond strengthening again—had been able to send pulses of comfort to his brothers, however weak.

“I want my wings back,” Skywarp spoke up again. “And my warp drive. I hate being useless.”

“Oh, Skywarp, you're not useless,” his brother assured him, though he could thoroughly relate. “Back in the slums, you were better at stealing food than Starscream, and you learned how to cook. That's useful, even if we can't use it right now.”

The boy's watery, red eyes appeared over the top of the blanket again. “I miss Anoushka,” he whispered. “Is it wrong to miss a human, T.C.?”

“Well....” That was a tricky one. “It's probably not the best idea to get attached...”

“Do we really have to destroy this whole planet when we get our bodies back?” Skywarp asked. “I... I don't think I want to.”

“I don't know, Warp,” Thundercracker sighed. “Just... We'll figure it out when we get there. Just please don't hurt yourself anymore.”

Skywarp swallowed and nodded. “I'll try.”

Thundercracker reached over and brushed some hair out of his face. Despite his vow the other day to pay more attention to Starscream, he was grateful that Megatron seemed so willing to do it for him lately. One brother in emotional crisis was the most he could handle at a time, it seemed.

Megatron and Starscream couldn't stay at the cash machines for too long. There were too many cameras in the area, and one of their victims could very well have sobered up upon discovering they had been robbed and actually had the insight to call the police.

“Intoxicated fleshies aren't likely to remember your face,” Starscream was saying as they wove their way through a busy street, at least twenty minutes away from the cash machines, “and squishy authorities are far less likely to take their word for it. That's why they're such perfect targets. It's their own fault, really. If they insist on destroying what little brain cells they have by poisoning themselves to that point, then they deserve to be stolen from.”

“There are a lot of humans here,” Megatron commented, looking around the busy street and wondering how on Cybertron his second could do anything with so many people about. “And no cash points. And most of these humans do not seem to be under the influence of... anything.”

Starscream shook his head. “Cash points make for bigger payouts, but it takes a long time, and there is more risk of getting caught with the cameras and all. Pick-pocketing is a lot quicker and any imbecile can do it, so you'll be fine,” he explained, and Megatron chose to ignore the indirect insult. “But I need you to do something first.”
Megatron quirked an eyebrow. Earlier, Starscream had told him that he wouldn't need his assistance and that his commander would only get in his way. Up to this point, it had seemed to be true, so Megatron had just observed with a certain amount of reluctant admiration. The fact that Starscream was changing his tune now was more than a little suspicious, and the ex-warlord couldn't help his suspicions that his role in this was going to be as degrading as possible.

“What would that be?” he asked warily

Starscream glanced up the street and back down it again. Megatron watched his sharp eyes scan over individual members of the passing crowd before flickering higher, checking for any surveillance against buildings or street lamps. Finally satisfied, he pointed down the road.

“Walk down the street, and when you reach the third lamp, start shouting that you've been robbed.”

“In English?”

“It doesn't matter what language. Just make a show of searching your pockets and panicking,” Starscream told him, still searching the buildings towering above them for any cameras. He glanced back and frowned as he realized his leader still hadn't done as he had asked.

“What purpose would that serve?” Megatron rumbled. “Wouldn't that just alert the flesh bags to the presence of a thief amongst them?”

Starscream snorted and glared at the passing crowd. “How am I supposed to steal from them if I don't know where they keep their money?” he asked. “Humans are stupid and selfish. If they hear someone near them has been robbed, their first worry is whether or not they've fallen victim to the same thing. When they check their pockets, I'll be able to see where they keep their valuables. It's much faster than waiting for them to decide to buy something and take them out.”

When the Seeker looked back up at his leader's face, he took a nervous step back.

“What?” he screeched.

Megatron was a little too stunned to answer. In a way, it was like the trustworthy, intelligent, young Starscream that he had promoted to be his Air Commander and second-in-command all those millions of years ago had suddenly materialized in the place of the screechy, unpleasant little glitch he'd had to put up with for so long. And to think that all he had to do to bring out this side of him again was simply support him in his thieving endeavors. He had to wonder, though, how long Starscream would remain like this before returning to his normal, spiteful, sneering self. Perhaps he should savor it.

Instead of saying any of this out loud, he slipped a large hand behind the Seeker's head, completely ignoring how Starscream's eyes widened as if he expected to be strangled any moment now, and stroked his short brown locks, massaging the soft hair at the nape of his neck. A strange thrill coursed through Megatron as he enjoyed the sensation of the silky locks and Starscream's warmth on his hand. He had the strangest urge to pull the young man into an embrace—a need to feel him warm and soft against himself right then—but Starscream was already looking at him with something between confusion and disgust. Megatron lowered his hand, though not before running his fingers leisurely through his second's hair.

“Well, those humans aren't going to steal from themselves, are they?” he said, and Starscream snorted before ushering him away.
Chapter 42

The hotel room was both unlocked and empty when Megatron and Starscream finally returned to it in the early hours of the morning, which did not please Megatron in the slightest. It should have been occupied by everyone but themselves and Soundwave, so where had they all run off to? Slipstream he assumed had wrangled the twins into something frivolous, like shopping, but Primus only knew what Thundercracker and Skywarp were up to. Especially as Soundwave had strongly implied that Skywarp had not been in a stable mental state when the intelligence officer had parted with them.

“They're... fine. They're probably fine,” Starscream said when Megatron voiced this, and the older man noted the concern that the Seeker couldn't quite keep from his voice.

“I'm sure they are,” he said quickly. “Thundercracker has always been good at keeping these kinds of things under control. Now, let's take a look at our spoils for the evening.”

That seemed to pull Starscream away from any apprehensions he might have been harboring, and the Seeker was quickly settling down on the floor across from Megatron as the older man started pulling wad after crumpled wad of money from his pockets and waistband. Starscream let out a low whistle as the pile between them grew.

“We'll separate the currencies first and then count them,” said Megatron, beginning to split the money according to its country of origin.

Starscream nodded in agreement and went straight for a bright green note, much smaller than the others, that read '100 Euro.' It was by far the highest valued note in the pile, and Megatron couldn't help but roll his eyes a bit. The Seeker took all of the Euros and Pounds, leaving his commander to handle all the wrinkly, grubbier money.

When all the money was separated, they had 12 different piles, all alternating in currency and value, and Megatron sat back with a sigh, glancing at the window. They would need to find out the currency exchange rates before they would now for sure how much they had, but it was certainly a substantial amount—more than he had expected.

“It is nearly morning,” he mentioned casually as he noticed the lightening sky outside. Then, he turned back to the Seeker sitting opposite him and frowned.

Starscream smiled at him, and Megatron instantly knew that something was wrong. His gaze shifted back down to the money.

Eleven piles.

“Put it back,” he ordered sternly, deciding to give his second a chance to be mature on his own, rather than just holding him down and taking it by force.

However, Starscream's expression remained innocent as he held out his hands, palms open. “Put what back?”

“Starscream,” Megatron rumbled in his most intimidating tone. They had been having such a good
evening together, too. “Put it back before I take it back.”

“What? The money?” the young man asked again, eyes still wide and innocent. “It’s all there.”

Megatron growled. “Care to tell me where the stack of twenty dollar bills has vanished to, then?”

Starscream shrugged again, still confident in his lie. “There weren’t any.”

Megatron climbed to his feet and loomed over his second, hand held out expectantly. “Last chance.”

Starscream scrambled to his own feet, expression now slightly panicked. He took a tentative step back, moving away from Megatron the tiniest bit, and then another. The ex-warlord scowled as he saw the Seeker swallow hard.

“There weren’t any,” Starscream repeated in a quiet voice.

Megatron took one step forward and Starscream bolted, heading for the door. His leader leapt across the room, taking advantage of his much longer legs to get ahead of the Seeker and block his path. Starscream backtracked around to the beds, jumping on top of the double and throwing pillows at Megatron as the larger man advanced on him.

“Give it back!” Megatron repeated the earlier order.

“No, it's mine!” the brat shrieked, jumping down onto the other side of the bed just as Megatron reached for him. “I deserve to get something! Get away from me!”

He made to go around the foot of the bed, and Megatron moved to cut him off. The Seeker scurried back up the other way, clearly planning to vault his way over the bed once Megatron was on the same side as him, and so the older man redirected once more.

“Will you ever cease to be such an avaricious little pest!? Megatron barked as they went back and forth like this several more times. Despite his frustration, the ex-warlord was surprised to find that he was actually enjoying this.

Starscream, however, froze facing his leader across the bed, and his eyes widened even further.

“Stop. Calling. ME. LITTLE!!” he shrieked, his voice cracking slightly toward the end.

In his fury, he was distracted just long enough for Megatron to vault over the bed. With another shriek, this time one of shock, he ran for the front door again with the larger man just behind him. His hands shook as he fumbled with the door handle, unable to get it open before Megatron slammed into him, pinning him against the door. The ex-warlord laughed at the panicked snarl the Seeker made when he wrapped his arms around the young man's narrow waist and lifted him clean off the floor.

“You... unbelievable... agh!” Starscream snarled, kicking and flailing in his leader's arms.

Megatron spun around and flung him onto the double bed. The brat bounced twice before Megatron jumped on top of him, practically laying on top of him as he quickly restrained his arms and legs.

“Get off me! Get off!” the Seeker screeched, thrashing around and pulling desperately at the vicelike grip his leader had on his wrists.
Megatron pulled back enough to smirk at him, and then transferred both the younger man's wrists to one hand before sitting up to straddle his waist.

“Let's see where you've hidden that money, shall we?” he murmured smugly.

Starscream gasped and bit his lower lip in an expression that Megatron had never seen on him before. It was part fearful, but there was something else in there, too. Something stirred low in the ex-warlord's gut, and he recognized it as the same strangeness he had felt the other morning when Starscream had been leaning in toward his face in bed. He did his best to shove that aside and start searching his second for any hidden bills.

As he slipped his palm up under the younger man's t-shirt and began rummaging around beneath his clothes, though, Starscream let out the start of a strangled cry that set every nerve in Megatron's body on fire. He paused in his search for a moment and looked down at his second's face. The Seeker had his eyes screwed shut and his jaw clenched in a desperate kind of expression that somehow made Megatron very aware all of a sudden of the fact that Starscream's body felt rather... nice? Against his crotch??

A mysterious hotness crept up the back of Megatron's neck before diving down his throat, through his stomach, and straight into his waste hose. The flesh there started to tighten the way that it often did in the morning, and Megatron decided that it was about time he got this search over with.

Without a cockpit, Starscream's human form had precious few hiding places available. The money was not in any of his pants pockets, which meant it must be tucked into the wasitband instead.

Megatron grabbed the front of the Seeker's jeans and ripped them open, the button popping off and the zip flying down. Starscream's eyes shot open with a sudden gasp, and he surged up against his leader with a renewed strength. The ex-warlord held him tight to the mattress, though, his gaze falling to the light trail of hair moving from the young man's navel down to... Megatron's waste hose throbbed, and he gave a little gasp of surprise as one of Starscream's thighs rubbed against it, intensifying the sensation.

Both men stopped instantly. There was a long pause, and then their eyes met, Megatron's bewildered and Starscream's horrified.

At that exact moment, the door clicked open, and Slipstream barged in, followed quickly by the shouting twins. The boys were busy throwing colorful balls at each other, but both froze in place as they noticed their commanders on the bed. One of them was holding a large, colorful plastic gun, which he quickly shoved behind his back.

Starscream closed his eyes and groaned as if he had been caught in the middle of something shameful. Megatron just scowled at Slipstream, and then the twins, who swiftly moved behind her, as if the petite woman could protect them from their volatile leader. At least the sudden appearance of other people seemed to have calmed his body down a bit as it had the other morning, and the not-entirely-unpleasant throbbing in his crotch had stopped.

After a moment's silence, Frenzy fought up the courage to tug on Slipstream's hand and ask in a hushed voice, “What are they doing?”

Megatron turned back to Starscream, giving no warning before ramming his hand between his second and the mattress and slipping around the back of his pants to tug the large wad of dollars loose from his waist band. Starscream's scowl deepened as his commander made a show of tucking the money back into his own pocket.
The mattress groaned as Megatron then climbed off of the Seeker and turned to the twins. “I was teaching my subordinate a well-needed lesson. Hopefully, one he will remember for a long time.”

The twins looked confused, but Slipstream's eyes widened and her lips quirked. For some inexplicable reason, she turned to her cousin and winked. Starscream's already flushed face turned even redder, and he quickly busied himself readjusting his clothes.

Megatron decided that he'd had enough of this nonsense for one night—or morning, as it now was—and bent to collect the rest of the money off the floor. His grumbling stomach agreed, and the ex-warlord spared one final curious glance at his second's sulking back before he slipped past Slipstream and the twins in search of food.

Starscream did his best not to look at Slipstream as he heard her putting down her shopping bags (which she'd done a remarkable job of hiding from Megatron) and striding toward him. His heart was pounding so hard he felt like he was going to throw up, and his hands shook as he tried to change out of his ruined pants and into something more comfortable for sleeping in.

The other morning in bed may have been a fluke, but just now? He knew that right there was exactly what he'd thought it was from the shocked expression on Megatron's face if nothing else.

“Little bit kinky, but who am I to judge,” he heard his cousin comment after a while.

“What?” Starscream snapped, whirling around to sneer at her. “Kinky?” He felt like she had mentioned that word before when she explained the whole concept of recreational sex in the first place, but he couldn't put a meaning to it.

“Yes. Sticking money down your pants and having him go in after it like that? I suppose that's one way to get his hands where you want them,” Slipstream smirked.

Starscream's jaw dropped. She thought...

“I didn't do anything of the sort! SHUT UP!” he shrieked, not caring who heard him.

The door swung open again, and Starscream, fearing his leader's return, spun around so quickly that he nearly tripped over his own feet. It was only Soundwave, though. Slipstream, who moments ago had been carefully picking him to pieces, seemed to melt into a puddle of goo on the spot.

And suddenly several things clicked into place in Starscream's head. Slipstream... wanted to... with Soundwave???

Well, at least he wasn't the only crazy one in the family.

Soundwave didn't seem to have any attention to spare for her, though, other than a quick glance before he turned to his creations.

“Were you shouting?” he wanted to know.

They shook their heads, and Frenzy's grip on the plastic gun tightened. “Nah, that was Screamer.”

Behind them, Starscream hissed. No one paid him any attention.
“Where is Lord Megatron?” the intelligence officer wanted to know next.

“He went downstairs,” Rumble informed him, starting to load a few of the foam balls into their new toy. “I think he was annoyed ’cause we interrupted his game with Starscream.”

Soundwave’s eyebrows hitched about a half-centimeter higher—a remarkable reaction from him indeed. “Game?”

“We weren’t doing anything!” Starscream screeched hastily, because Soundwave spent an awful lot of time talking to Slipstream, and it had suddenly occurred to the Seeker that his cousin was not in any way above betraying his secret to the intelligence officer. The look of disbelief that Soundwave gave him was almost proof enough that she had. He was going to rip her slagging hair out as soon as he got the chance.

“Where are your brothers?” Soundwave asked, having the wisdom to move on to another subject.

“The slag if I know,” Starscream snorted.

“Downstairs getting breakfast,” Slipstream interjected. “We saw them on the way up. They should be back any minute now.”

Well. That was some small relief, at least.

“Good,” Rumble smiled. “I’m starving!”

The others lapsed into a conversation then about the origin and purpose of the plastic gun that the twins were carrying around, which it seemed Slipstream had inexplicably decided to purchase for them. Starscream didn't much care, and so dove into his bed, wrapping the covers around himself and trying to ignore how much it smelled like Megatron.

As Slipstream had predicted, Thundercracker and Skywarp returned a few minutes later with trays of food to share around with everyone. While they were handing these out, the door opened again and Megatron slipped back into the room. Soundwave made his way over to his commander, inclining his head respectfully.

“The mission was successful, Lord Megatron,” he announced, digging in his pockets to pull out a considerably smaller amount of money than what Starscream had managed to acquire.

Megatron took it silently, and Soundwave noticed how his eyes flickered over to Starscream, now seated on the double bed and picking sulkily at his breakfast.

“Might I suggest,” the intelligence officer continued, pulling his leader's attention back to himself, “that we move on to other sections of the city to lessen the chances of the theft being linked back to the hotel, and thereby us.”

The ex-warlord nodded, lifting a hand to rub across his stubbly chin. “Very well,” he said. “Is there anything else to report?”

Soundwave hesitated, the image of Ajit's frantic, dirt-smeared face flashing across his memory for a moment, and then shook his head.
“Everything else is in order,” he replied.

“Good, good...” Megatron's voice trailed off as his gaze wandered back to his second. When he spoke next, his voice was low. “There is a matter I would like to discuss with you in private.”

Soundwave nodded and followed his leader out into the hallway, closing the door and leaning against it. Megatron stood in front of him, avoiding eye contact and running a hand over the back of his neck.

“What is troubling you, my lord?” the intelligence officer asked, guessing that this would likely be related to whatever had transpired between himself and Starscream that evening.

Megatron dropped his hands down to his sides and finally looked up to meet the other man's gaze. He looked... embarrassed?

“Soundwave, does your waste hose—the thing between your legs—does it ever get... stiff?”

Soundwave's mouth actually dropped open for a second. He had expected another concern about Starscream's mental state or his eating habits. This was... not something that he especially wanted to discuss with his leader.

“It is... a natural physical reaction to certain stimuli, yes,” he replied.

“Such as?” Megatron prompted.

“Did this happen while you were with Starscream?” Soundwave guessed, not quite willing to believe what Slipstream had been subtly insinuating at him for the past two weeks until he heard it from his leader's mouth himself.

“Yes,” Megatron confessed, blinking at his third in surprise.

A lesser man might have sighed, or groaned, or something, but Soundwave had enough experience under his belt at hiding disappointment to keep it off his face even in this form. Starscream... It would be Starscream.

Well, he didn't need to explain the emotional aspects of sexual intercourse to his leader, but he supposed that he should at least explain enough to ensure that none of them were going to wake up in the near future to find their leader dry humping a sleeping Starscream. That scenario was just five shades of terrible that he did not want to deal with. He wasn't about to do it here in the hallway where anyone could walk by and overhear them, though.

“I think,” he said after a moment, somehow managing to keep his voice as devoid of emotion as usual, “that we should take a walk.”

Chapter End Notes

And thus, in chapter 42, Megatron learns the answer to life, the universe, and everything. *bows out*
Megatron waited until Starscream had already fallen asleep before carefully climbing into the bed beside him. Unlike usual, he did not wrap himself around his second's slumbering form or pull him into his arms. Instead, he lay with his back to the Seeker, ramrod straight and wide awake despite the fact that he'd now been up for almost 24 hours.

His talk with Soundwave had been... enlightening? No, that wasn't the right word... Horrifying. Yes, that's what it had been. This human body of his wanted to... With Starscream!? He glanced over his shoulder at the sleeping Seeker and shuddered. If it had been anyone other than Soundwave who'd told him, he probably would have executed them on the spot.

He still didn't quite believe it, of course. After all, that was an activity humans engaged in for reproduction, but he and Starscream were both male. Why would his organic instincts encourage him to mate with someone who couldn't conceive offspring? Soundwave had mentioned something called “recreational sex” and explained that most humans needed to experience sexual climax on a regular basis for the sake of their mental and physical well-being, whether they were attempting to reproduce or not. Megatron didn't understand the logic, and he certainly didn't understand why his body would want to relieve its urges with Starscream of all people! Yes, the Seeker's human form was visually appealing, as humans went, but...

For a moment, Megatron tried to amuse himself with the image of himself pressing into Starscream, the Seeker lying beneath him with his arms folded and his eyebrows drawn together as he told his commander to hurry up and get on with it. Or would Starscream mock him for giving in to such disgustingly primitive needs? Certainly, he wouldn't enjoy it... would he?

And suddenly in his imaginings, Starscream was telling him how good it felt, begging him for more, reaching out for him as he worked himself in and out of the smaller man's body...

Megatron's eyes flew wide as he felt a throb of excitement from the flesh between his legs—the flesh he now knew was called a “dick”—and hastily pushed that image out of his mind. Starscream was even more disdainful of human practices than his commander. What could possibly possess him to want Megatron sticking his dick up his...

The ex-warlord shuddered again. No, he wasn't going to do that to Starscream. He had at least that much respect for the brat. He would not succumb to paltry organic needs, either by giving in to his temptations regarding his second-in-command or by engaging in the alternative method of relief Soundwave had suggested to him. Both were as bad as each other in his mind.

Of course, it would be a lot easier to ignore those needs if he weren't lying in bed with the little stinker, he realized, but the alternatives were either forcing himself into the double bed with five other people already or evicting Slipstream from the couch, which was too short for him to stretch out on anyway.

Megatron lay, considering his options, until there was a rustling from beside him and a soft, slender hand found his chest. The ex-warlord looked down at it, and then over at the sleeping face of the young man it belonged to. Starscream mumbled something indistinct and started pressing closer to his commander.

A second later, Megatron had extracted himself from the bed and was stumbling across the room to

Chapter 43

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And suddenly in his imaginings, Starscream was telling him how good it felt, begging him for more, reaching out for him as he worked himself in and out of the smaller man's body...

Megatron's eyes flew wide as he felt a throb of excitement from the flesh between his legs—the flesh he now knew was called a “dick”—and hastily pushed that image out of his mind. Starscream was even more disdainful of human practices than his commander. What could possibly possess him to want Megatron sticking his dick up his...

The ex-warlord shuddered again. No, he wasn't going to do that to Starscream. He had at least that much respect for the brat. He would not succumb to paltry organic needs, either by giving in to his temptations regarding his second-in-command or by engaging in the alternative method of relief Soundwave had suggested to him. Both were as bad as each other in his mind.

Of course, it would be a lot easier to ignore those needs if he weren't lying in bed with the little stinker, he realized, but the alternatives were either forcing himself into the double bed with five other people already or evicting Slipstream from the couch, which was too short for him to stretch out on anyway.

Megatron lay, considering his options, until there was a rustling from beside him and a soft, slender hand found his chest. The ex-warlord looked down at it, and then over at the sleeping face of the young man it belonged to. Starscream mumbled something indistinct and started pressing closer to his commander.

A second later, Megatron had extracted himself from the bed and was stumbling across the room to
the couch. It took a bit of shaking to wake Slipstream, but she didn't argue when he told her to
switch places with him. Probably because he was already pulling her up off the couch before she
had even opened her eyes all the way.

He settled himself into the lumpy cushions and listened to her grumbling as she moved over to the
twin bed. There was a gasp, followed by a thud, and Megatron peered back over his shoulder to see
Starscream working to pick himself up off the floor as Slipstream spread herself out on the twin
bed. The ex-warlord rolled his eyes and turned over again. He should have expected that.

“What are you doing!?” he heard Starscream hiss.

“Leader dearest kicked me off the couch,” his cousin replied.

“What? Why!?”

“I assumed you did something to him....”

Megatron threw a pillow over his ear to shut out the rest of their grumbling. He was less successful
at ignoring how intrinsically wrong it felt trying to sleep without another heartbeat against his, but
eventually, he managed to drift off.

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Starscream spent most of the day bouncing back and forth between the twin bed and the double
until Soundwave took his spot on the twin, and he had no choice but to hunker down with his
brothers for the rest of the afternoon.

He knew that he shouldn't care about Megatron abandoning him (he'd done the same thing the
previous morning, after all), but for some reason he did. Sleeping with his brothers was all very
well and good, but neither of them could so completely envelop him as Megatron did. He wanted
the comfort of his commander's strong arms around him, but didn't quite dare try and worm his
way onto the couch with the larger man to get it.

It probably wouldn't have rankled with him so much if he'd had some concrete idea of why it had
happened, although he could guess that it might have something to do with the business on the bed
that morning. If Megatron was suddenly discovering his sexuality, then Starscream couldn't blame
him avoiding physical contact. It was the same thing that he himself had done in the beginning,
after all.

However, he couldn't quite bring himself to believe that was the case. Megatron? Attracted to him?
Megatron wanting to have dirty, organic sex with him? Skywarp would muster the courage to
initiate conversations with strangers before that happened.

So, he was left stewing in hurt and staring longingly at his leader's broad back on the other side of
the room every time something roused him from sleep, which seemed to happen every twenty
minutes or so.

Starscream himself had gotten quite accustomed to sleeping during daylight hours, but most of his
comrades hadn't. It seemed even the fact that they'd been awake the whole night was not enough to
recondition them immediately. The whole lot of them were constantly waking up, tossing and
turning and rousing the rest of their bedmates every time they did. The Seeker finally got sick of it
around three in the afternoon and sat up with an irritated huff.
To his surprise, Megatron was also sitting up, blinking blearily and rubbing his hand over his stubbly face. The two of them locked gazes, and Starscream felt himself blush. Megatron looked away first, running his hand through the hair on the back of his neck now, and then turned back to his second. He pointed to Starscream, then himself, and then mimed eating. Starscream rolled his eyes at the thought of food, but figured he'd better get it over with as soon as possible.

Not to mention, he thought as he carefully worked his way out from between his brothers, if Megatron wanted to eat breakfast with him, then he couldn't possibly be angry at him. He must have just moved because he was too hot, or something.

“I hope you're well-rested for tonight's work,” Megatron murmured to him as they shut the door behind themselves.

“It's amazing how well you can sleep when you don't have a massive wall of meat rolling over you every two minutes,” his second sneered back at him, neglecting the fact that he'd spent the whole night getting rolled over by various people anyway.

Megatron snorted and put up a hand like he was going to run it through Starscream's hair. The Seeker was just getting ready to snarl at his commander not to touch him when the other man suddenly snapped his hand back to his side of his own accord. Starscream frowned. It wasn't as if he enjoyed Megatron's caresses, but somehow he felt almost offended now he was denied one.

Their afternoon meal was a typical mess of rice and sauces with unspeakable things suspended in them. Starscream managed to choke down enough of it to satisfy his commander, and then sat trying to keep it down while Megatron finished his own, much larger serving.

“I am glad that you have finally found it in yourself to take sufficient sustenance,” Megatron told him at some point.

“Well, anything is better than becoming so weak as to have to rely on you,” Starscream returned, not meeting his commander's gaze.

“You already do rely on me,” Megatron snorted.

“Oh? Did I just imagine the entirety of last night when you were standing around uselessly, watching me dominate the squishies all evening?” the Seeker demanded, finally looking up and jabbing his fork at the other man. He wished Megatron would stop talking and just finish up already, but he wasn't about to let a statement like that stand.

“And did I imagine the part where you were clinging to me in terror over a cow and begging to come back to the hotel?”

“Cows are dangerous!” Starscream protested. “They can break your bones if they step on you, and those horns are deadly!”

“Did your little human friend teach you that, too?”

“He wasn't my friend!” the Seeker hissed, a knot of indignation twisting at his already sensitive stomach. “He was a tool, which even you used when it was convenient.”

“True,” Megatron conceded. “Definitely the most useful tool I had around for a while. It's a pity we had to leave him behind.”

Starscream hummed disinterestedly, drumming his fingertips on the table. “Finish eating already,” he snapped.
“I’d rather take my time,” his commander replied, scraping another bite of rice and sauce together and popping it in his mouth. “I don’t know what you have against it,” he continued through his mouthful.

“You’re disgusting,” his second sneered at him. “Do you have any idea how human you look when you do that?”

Megatron’s face darkened far more than he’d expected, and the ex-warlord swallowed before replying: “If you think for a second, Starscream, that I take any pleasure in being trapped in this pathetic state, you are greatly mistaken.”

“The curry sauce on your mustache says otherwise,” the Seeker scoffed, looking away and folding his arms across his chest as Megatron wiped at his facial hair in frustration.

“I assume there is some method for removing this stuff?” he muttered, and Starscream assumed he was talking about the hair, not the curry.

“A razor,” he said simply, starting to jitter his leg impatiently.

“I shall have to ask Slipstream to locate one,” his commander grumbled, going back to his food with noticeably less gusto.

Starscream cursed his own folly; if he hadn’t commented on the other man’s eating habits, Megatron might still be shoveling the stuff into his face, and they could get out of here faster.

“Do you think you could teach the others any of your tricks before tonight?” Megatron asked after a moment.

“Less talking, more eating!” Starscream snarled at him.

Megatron set his spoon down with a definitive clack and glared at him. “I am beginning to think you did not sleep at all.”

“I slept perfectly fine, no thanks to you!” his second returned.

“And what fault was it of mine?” Megatron demanded.

Starscream clamped his mouth shut and turned away to hide his blush. He hadn’t meant to say that. Maybe he was more than a little tired, after all.

“I can teach them,” he muttered after a while. “Though, I doubt any of them will ever match my level of skill.”

Megatron just rolled his eyes and went back to his food.

The others were starting to stir when the two officers returned to the hotel room, and Starscream made a hasty beeline for the bathroom before anyone else could beat him to it. He turned on the shower as high as he could before dropping down in front of the toilet and shoving his fingers down his throat. There was a part of him that felt guilty as he flushed his breakfast down the drain, but it wasn’t nearly so strong as the relief he felt knowing that slag was no longer inside of him.

It was fine, anyway, he told himself as he rinsed his mouth in the sink. Even if he did this after almost every meal, it wasn’t as if he ever threw up the whole meal. Megatron just didn’t understand that he was smaller and didn’t need to eat so much. Obviously, he was still getting enough nutrients, or else he would have collapsed by now. As long as he kept drinking water he would be
fine.

No one ever needed to know.
The Decepticons spent the rest of the afternoon practicing their pickpocketing skills on each other. They were greatly in need of it; apart from Starscream, none of them had ever tried stealing directly from another human before.

“It's not that hard,” the Seeker insisted as he watched his comrades’ efforts. “And no matter what, you aren't going to be a major suspect because you're white. Everyone around here assumes that white people are rich, so why would we want to steal?”

“I don't think I'm white,” Megatron put in, glancing down at his arms.

“You're close enough, and everyone else around you is,” his second assured him, waving the concern aside. “You'll be even more convincing if you get a shave.”

Megatron proved somewhat clumsy and unskilled at pickpocketing, though, and the ex-warlord's frustration mounted as he failed time and again to slip Soundwave's wallet out of his pocket without the other man noticing. It didn't help that Skywarp of all people turned out to be the best at it after Starscream.

“Don't worry,” the Seeker assured his commander when it was nearly time for them to head out for the evening. “I'll find something that even you can help with.”

He reached up to give the other man's cheek a condescending pat, and Megatron snatched his wrist with a frustrated growl. Starscream quirked an eyebrow at him as he started to squeeze.

“You hurt my wrist and you'll be losing thousands of dollars tonight, you know,” he said, and Megatron released him with a bit of a shove.

The ex-warlord was relieved really at how easy it had been to keep things normal between himself and his second today. He'd asked the Seeker to eat with him that morning in hopes that he could remind himself of their natural dynamic. Starscream was bratty and untrustworthy, he had to remember, and he didn't want intimacy of any sort with someone he couldn't trust.

“Slipstream, I want you out with Soundwave tonight,” Megatron announced. “Rumble and Frenzy will stay here with Thundercracker and Skywarp.”

“What!? But we wanna go out, too!” Rumble instantly began to protest.

“Children on the streets at night are too suspicious,” their commander told them.

Skywarp said nothing about his own relegation to babysitting, but instantly started to withdraw, giving Thundercracker little more than monosyllabic grunts when his brother tried to talk to him. He was huddled up in the double bed when the others left, and Megatron couldn’t help noticing his distinct family resemblance to Starscream in that attitude.

Once outside the hotel, Soundwave and Slipstream went in one direction while Starscream and Megatron took another.

“Where are we going?” the Seeker asked as he fell into step beside his commander.
He was brighter and more energetic than he had been when they’d set out the previous evening, doubtless because this time he knew he was about to get a chance to apply his criminal talents. Megatron noticed the way the city lights flashed in his blue eyes, making them look even larger than usual, and couldn’t quite resist laying a hand on the smaller man’s shoulder.

“There is another entertainment district several blocks from where we were last night. I’m sure we can find cash points and drunk humans aplenty there,” he replied.

“We should go into one of the clubs,” Starscream told him, a playful grin spreading across his face.

“What would be the point of that?” Megatron wanted to know.

“I told you I would find something that even you could help with,” the Seeker reminded him. “We’re going to go hugger mugging.”

Megatron frowned, but he’d seen enough of his second’s skills the previous night to trust him in at least this.

Hugger mugging, as it turned out, was as stupid as it sounded. It was also surprisingly productive. The idea was fairly simple, and even the clumsiest of thieves could pull it off.

Megatron watched from the dark wall of the club, entranced as Starscream moved on to his fourth dance partner, or rather victim. Drunk humans were so painfully easy to steal from that Megatron couldn’t help but wonder why the Seeker bothered to put so much thought into it. Not that he didn’t enjoy watching him when his mind was engaged.

To the untrained eye, Starscream wrapped his arms around the young woman's waist and back, moving her to the rhythm of the music and laughing with her before spinning her away so that he could find another equally drunken girl. None of them realized that the sly hand he'd slipped up or down their clothing was not to sneak a feel, but to steal the small deposit of cash they'd thought they were being subtle about hiding in their undergarments.

It was somewhat disgraceful—both molesting and stealing from young women (and the occasional old one) all too smashed even to remember their own names—but Megatron couldn't deny he was proud of his second for thinking it up in the first place. Not to mention, it was oddly intoxicating to watch the Seeker whirling around the flashing, smoky dance floor.

They left the club after a mere twenty minutes, just in case anyone started to notice missing possessions. It wasn't worth the risk to stay when there were so many more night clubs they could hit. They would have to pay a few rupees to get into each one, but they came out with so many more that it was a justifiable cost.

“You should try it out at the next one,” Starscream told his leader as they stepped into the dark streets once more.

“Are you sure?” Megatron wondered. “It seems I would draw far more attention than you do.”

“Exactly,” his second insisted, prodding the larger man’s chest with a sharp finger. “Just about every woman in that club is going to be dying for a turn with a hunk like you. Just make sure and smile so they know you’re trying to dance, not murder them.”
Megatron blinked at this assessment. “The human females… they find me attractive?” he wondered.

“Humans are attracted to things that are evolutionarily advantageous,” Starscream replied in a bored tone. “Tall frame, big muscles, symmetrical face… You reek of prime breeding stock to all these little glitches.”

Yes, Megatron had thought that was how human attraction worked, but if that was the case, then he ought to be attracted to Slipstream, who was healthy, well-proportioned, and very much female. So, why was he so mesmerized by the sway of Starscream’s bony little ass a few feet in front of him?

The ex-warlord forced his gaze up to find his second glancing back at him over his shoulder, that mischievous smile of his flashing brighter than any of the neon lights around them, and something in his chest lurched.

“Keep up, dummy,” the Seeker laughed, jogging off toward the entrance of their next venue.

A couple hours, a dozen clubs, and several thousand dollars later, Megatron found himself in the hotel shower, staring down at what he now knew was called an erection. The blasted thing stuck stiff and ready from the rest of his body, just begging to be touched, to get some kind of stimulation beyond the tease of the water droplets from the shower.

How did this happen? How had he gotten stuck in a human body that wanted to mate with Starscream of all people!? The warm tension in the pit of the warlord's stomach surged slightly as he thought of the Seeker spinning in the club lights, and he leaned forward to let his forehead fall against the tiles of the bathroom wall with a groan.

He couldn't do this—he wouldn't! He was Megatron, Lord High Protector of Cybertron, and he would not succumb to such a disgustingly primitive instinct.

But he also couldn't stand getting another one of these embarrassing reactions every single time Starscream brushed his arm or threw one of those gorgeous smiles in his direction. Soundwave had said that relieving the tension by himself on a regular basis would make him less sensitive to the Seeker's devilish charms, but was that worth throwing away so much of his pride as a Cybertronian?

He reached down and tentatively brushed a finger along the length of his erection, just to see what would happen. The flesh felt strange and abnormally hot to the touch, but the small stimulation was... nice. He stroked himself again, this time dragging his finger up the bottom of the appendage, and found his eyes fluttering shut as he exhaled with the satisfaction of it.

Megatron gave himself a few more gentle strokes as he thought.

Consciously, he knew this was wrong, but the problem was that it didn’t feel wrong. It felt like when he was fighting against a powerful opponent, but he just knew that he was the one who was going to come out on top. Or like whirling through a storm in jet mode. Or… or like lying in bed with Starscream and feeling the Seeker’s body shift against him, feeling Starscream’s breath on his neck, looking into his almost endlessly blue eyes…
The ex-warlord huffed breathlessly and closed his eyes as he wrapped his whole hand around himself.

It would be crass to go all the way, but this much indulgence would be okay, wouldn't it? This was just another human need like eating or sleeping, wasn't it? And really, wasn't eating also disgustingly organic in its own way? Starscream seemed to think so at least.

Starscream… Beautiful, cunning, deadly Starscream...

The flesh in Megatron’s hand (Soundwave had called it a “penis,” but that word just didn’t seem to fit in this experience somehow) throbbed with want at the thought of the Seeker, and he couldn’t help himself. All possible reasons for not doing this started falling away in a haze of unrecognizable pleasure as he tightened his grip and pumped a bit harder.

Megatron opened his eyes a crack and watched with mild curiosity the way the tip of his penis slipped inside the skin when his hand came up, only to peek out again as he brought it down. Was there any purpose to that or was it just another strangeness of the human body? He had absolutely no frame of reference for anything about this; he just knew that every fiber of his being wanted it.

On his next downward pass, the ex-warlord was surprised to see a drop of something clear that was not water glistening on the end of his erection. He swept an inquisitive finger over the viscous substance and gasped at how much more pleasure that gave him than just sliding up and down the shaft.

Some part of him was still insisting that he stop—that this was wrong, and he would regret giving into it later—but it was lost in the warm fog that had consumed his brain, leaving room for nothing but scratching this itch at long last.

It couldn’t be so wrong, anyway. It wasn’t hurting anyone else, after all, and if this was really just a physical need that all humans had, then he couldn’t even be the only one in his troops who was doing it, right? They all had the same anatomy, and the rest of them had such weaker self-control than he did. Odds on, they had all succumbed to this temptation weeks ago, and he had been the only one holding out in his ignorance. For all he knew, this was what Starscream did for so long in the shower every day.

Suddenly the image of the Seeker, bent over, panting, and soaking wet as he fisted an erection, swept through Megatron’s mind like a tidal wave. The warlord’s breath hitched as the pressure in his gut reached an intensity that was almost terrifying, only to release all at once with a sensation like nothing he’d ever imagined. It was like his whole mind and body had just gone numb in one beautiful, all-consuming moment of ecstasy. A grunt of both surprise and pleasure escaped him along with several spurts of something thick and white, which he realized with a small shock must be the reproductive fluid he’d been told about.

The whole thing lasted a matter of seconds, and then he was just standing there in the bathroom, dripping wet and breathing heavily as his body went back to its usual state. He slumped to the floor, staring in mild horror at the viscous substance he’d just sprayed on the wall. That… He wanted to do that to Starscream?

He did.

He honestly did… but he wasn’t going to because that really would be a surrender of his identity.

Soundwave had been right, too: he felt far more level-headed for having relieved that pressure. He was sure that he needn’t worry about accidentally slipping up and doing something horrible to his
Air Commander when he knew that he could come and do this whenever it got to be too much.

Megatron washed his mess down the drain and finished his shower, feeling rather satisfied with himself. When he stepped back out into the main room, most of his troops were settling into their sleeping spots. Slipstream gave him a curt nod before pushing past to take her turn at the shower, and Megatron wondered briefly if human females also did this… self-pleasuring. If they did, he was quite certain Slipstream was indulging in it. She seemed all-too-comfortable with being human compared with most of the others.

He pushed the thought from his mind and made his way to the twin bed, where Starscream looked to be half-asleep already. Megatron shifted him aside carefully as he worked his way under the blankets to curl up against the smaller man’s back. Starscream mumbled something at him about taking up too much room, and the ex-warlord wrapped an arm around the Seeker to pull him back from the edge of the bed and closer to his own chest. He buried his face in his second’s hair, which was still damp from his own shower earlier, and inhaled deeply.

“‘M trying to sleep, idiot,” Starscream grumbled at him.

“You did well tonight,” his commander murmured back with a smile.

For answer, the Seeker laid a hand over the one Megatron had wrapped around his waist and let his body relax into the older man.

This was okay, Megatron decided as they started to drift off together. Human instincts aside, this right here was almost more than just okay.

Chapter End Notes

Oh. Hello, explicit rating. Nice of you to join the party at last. Fffff
Hey, y'all! Sorry it's been a minute. This chapter is longer than usual, though, so that's something.

“No,” Slipstream said automatically, and she refused to let the heartbroken looks on the twins' faces sway her opinion.

“We thought you liked spending time with us...” Rumble muttered under his breath, turning his gaze down toward the grubby floor of the hotel restaurant.

Slipstream, who had been pointedly ignoring the group of men staring rather shamelessly at her chest from the table opposite, laid her cutlery down and pushed her plate away, finally turning to sneer down at the twins.

“Just because you keep getting dumped on me doesn't mean I like it,” she explained to them.

“Oh...” Frenzy mumbled, also looking down at his feet.

The woman rolled her eyes and tried to ignore the way her cousins were now watching their exchange from around the table as well. At least, two of them were. On her left, Starscream was apparently focused intently on smearing his remaining food—which was still most of it—around his plate.

It had been a week now since they had started their money-making scheme, and tonight was the first night that Megatron had agreed to let the twins accompany the rest of them. Their commander had green-lit Skywarp to join them again a few days ago, and Slipstream had been stuck with the twins every night since. Now, when she was finally promised a night away from them, the first thing the little devils had done was come running to ask her to be their chaperone tonight. She'd been watching Soundwave's creations all this time, and he didn't even have the decency to ask her to accompany them himself? Some men had such unbelievable nerve.

“Go away. I'm eating,” she sniffed, flapping her arms at the two of them. Neither twin moved; they just shuffled awkwardly like they had more to say. “What!?” she snapped.

They exchanged a glance before Rumble swallowed and turned back to Slipstream.

“It's just... we like you,” he announced.

Slipstream blinked, reeling back slightly as she heard someone snorting behind her. A quick glance told her it was Skywarp, who was trying to hide his amusement in his water glass and failing. Beside him, Thundercracker was watching her more stoically, although the corner of his mouth was twitching. Starscream, fortunately, was still absorbed in his food, his face fixed in a miserable expression. She spared a moment of curiosity for his bad mood (he'd been almost freakishly cheery for Starscream the last few days) before returning to her own issues.

“Why?” she demanded.
“Because you're super cool!” Frenzy said, as if this should have been obvious. “Even if you are kind of an aft sometimes.”

“Yeah!” Rumble agreed with a broad grin.

Slipstream narrowed her eyes at them. “Whatever...,” she muttered, unsure how to feel about this turn of events. Primus, was she actually feeling guilty about resenting them? She certainly hoped not.

She turned back to her food, feeling the urge to shove something down her throat and get rid of the lump forming in it, and found Skywarp halfway through snagging a piece of naan off her plate. The young woman glared at him, and he backed away in a hurry. She was just cramming a far-too-large spoonful of rice and curry into her mouth when she caught sight of Megatron and Soundwave entering the hotel restaurant. The third-in-command met her gaze and nodded slightly, and Slipstream choked on her mouthful, spraying rice across the table.

“SLIPSTREAM!” Starscream shrieked from beside her. “That's disgusting! I'm not eating this anymore!” He pushed his plate away from himself, still with only a few bites taken from it.

“I didn't even get your plate!” his cousin snapped at him, watching as the twins rushed over to Soundwave and started trying to tug him down to their level. She narrowed her eyes suspiciously as she watched him kneel down so they could babble at him excitedly. All the tables in the restaurant were occupied at the moment, plus the crowd of people queueing for food to go, and the resulting cacophony of chatter and noise from the kitchen made it impossible for her to hear them.

Her attempted eavesdropping was interrupted a moment later anyway when Megatron grabbed an empty chair from one of the other tables and slid in between herself and Starscream. Slipstream's eyes narrowed even further at the way her commander dragged a hand through Starscream's hair and squeezed the other man's shoulder as he sat down, and the way that her cousin did not flinch away or make any complaint at all about the contact.

“Finish your food,” Megatron told Starscream, pushing his abandoned plate back toward him before reaching out to drag the remains of Thundercracker's and Skywarp's plates toward himself.

“I don't want it,” Starscream whined, folding his arms tightly across his chest. “It's making my stomach hurt.”

Megatron looked up from Skywarp's curry, frowning as he reached up to press a hand against his second's forehead.

“Stop it!” the Seeker snapped, pushing him away. “I'm not sick, I just don't feel good.”

“Drink some water,” Thundercracker suggested, nudging his half-full glass.

Starscream looked like he was thinking about throwing the water at his brother for a moment, but then he picked it up and took a careful sip instead. He continued sipping at his water, slumped low in his chair, and Megatron nodded his approval before starting to shovel food into his mouth again.

Slipstream watched him disdainfully for a moment until he looked up at something across the restaurant, paused, glared for a longer pause, and then reached across the table to pick up a menu. The young woman frowned as he unfolded it, propped it up in front of her so that she was concealed from the chin down, and then wordlessly returned to his meal as if nothing had happened.

Starscream snickered, and Slipstream peered over the top of the menu toward the men that had
been staring gormlessly at her chest all evening to see that they had now returned to their meals and seemed to be trying very hard not to look her way again.

“You should put more clothes on,” Megaton commented, clearly to her, though he didn't take his attention off his food for a moment. “Human men are disgusting creatures.”

Slipstream stared at him, eyes almost bugging out of her head. Had he... But if he knew that, then... She snapped her gaze up to Starscream, who was still drinking his water with a smug little smile on his face like it was perfectly normal for their oblivious commander to know that there was anything wrong with men staring at a woman's breasts.

“I don't get it,” she heard Skywarp whispering to Thundercracker, who shrugged. Well, at least that was all as it should be.

Her shock was interrupted a moment later, though, when a warm hand touched her shoulder lightly, and she nearly jumped out of her skin.

“Slipstream,” Soundwave spoke from behind her. How he had gotten there was anyone's guess. “I require a word.”

She quickly nodded and got to her feet, not missing how Megatron started in on the remnants of her food as she followed the intelligence officer toward the lobby. The twins grinned at her hopefully before scurrying over toward the table.

Soundwave came to a stop in front of a podium that had, when they first arrived, held a cheap, distasteful purple vase full of flowers, which had not survived its two weeks' exposure to the twins. She also drew to a halt and looked up at him expectantly, but all he did was stare, his dark eyes cutting through her like he could still raid her thoughts.

“What?” she snapped when she couldn't stand the intensity of his gaze any longer. She cocked her head sideways and raised an eyebrow with as much attitude as she could muster. The act didn't seem to intimidate Soundwave at all, though she certainly felt a bit intimidated when he stepped forward just the slightest. She refused to show it, placing a hand on her hip and tilting it as she craned her neck back to look at him.

“Rumble and Frenzy have been growing quite attached to you, you know,” he started, and she couldn't help but notice a significant lack of his usual stiff formality.

“So?” she asked. She tried to angle her body sideways a bit, doing her best to look attractive without making it apparent that she was trying.

Soundwave didn't seem to notice any of this, and his eyes stayed fixed on her face.

“I wanted to thank you,” he said simply.

Slipstream stopped in the middle of trying to be subtle about pushing her chest out and blinked at him. “...Yeah,” was all she could manage. She'd spent so much time with the twins over the last week that she'd almost forgotten her original motivation for tolerating them was to get their creator's attention. Now, she was feeling a bit blindsided by the fact that it might actually be paying off.

“They are very young. This experience has been stressful for them, and I was worried how they would handle having to leave their friend behind in the slums,” Soundwave went on, and Slipstream had to suppress a snort at the thought of the twins being stressed by anything. If there was anyone unaffected by this whole miserable situation, it was those two. They seemed to be
treating the experience as some kind of exciting adventure. “But the time they’ve spent with you has helped them adjust far better than I could have hoped. It’s reassuring to know that there’s at least one other person who can look out for them when I’m not around.”

“Oh. Well...,” Slipstream started, wracking her brain for the right response. “You know how it is. I can’t just leave... helpless younglings to go through such a terrible ordeal on their own.” She tried to force her mouth into something like a sweet smile, but it was difficult when she was so used to using it for sneering instead.

“They tell me that they requested your company this evening, but that you are not interested?” Soundwave questioned, cocking his head to the side slightly.

“Well... if you really wanted me to come, then I wouldn’t be able to say no,” the young woman simpered, fluttering her eye lashes at him.

“I do,” he said simply, and Slipstream's heart stuttered a bit before: “I would welcome an extra pair of eyes to keep track of them.”

Her smile faltered every so slightly, and she had to remind herself that this was still a victory. Time with Soundwave was time with Soundwave, regardless of why he wanted her there.

“Well, I suppose I could make an exception,” she told him with a theatrical sigh.

The smile he gave her in return was more than worth it.

Starscream had very much been telling the truth about feeling unwell. He'd woken that afternoon with a pounding headache and a persistent, burning pain in his throat. A few days ago, he would have burrowed further under the covers and used his symptoms as an excuse to spend as long as possible in the hotel room, but his opinions on spending time outside had shifted considerably since they’d acquired an actual objective for him to accomplish in so doing. So, he’d dragged himself up anyway.

Of course, there was also the fact that his opinion on spending time with Megatron had been shifting in the last few days; there was definitely something going on there. The two of them still bickered as much as ever, but was a different kind of bickering—a different kind of tension—that left Starscream wanting more instead of wanting to sulk off and be alone for the rest of the day. Last night, while they were arguing about which derelict, late night street food stand they should buy their midnight meal from, the Seeker had found himself smiling—not a smirk or a sneer, but an actual smile—and he didn’t even mind. He hadn't minded either when he'd started shivering in the early morning chill as they walked back to their hotel, and Megatron had wrapped an arm around his shoulders, pulling him closer and helping him rub some life back into his arms.

Starscream’s body was as determined as ever to get satisfaction from the ex-warlord, but somehow the increasingly less-than-casual touches from his leader were becoming less and less abhorrent. Part of him was afraid of what that could mean, what they might be hurtling toward, but it was insignificant when compared to the part of him that was just grateful that being around Megatron seemed to keep the less agreeable portions of his human thoughts at bay. Some of them had been getting rather... persistent of late.

“Starscream?”
The Seeker looked up from where he'd been carefully picking his way through the mess of garbage littering the alley they were cutting through to find Megatron had gotten a good deal ahead of him. Starscream sped up, hopping over a couple of trash bags and tripping over a discarded shoe as he came level with his commander. The larger man caught him and held him out at arm's length for a moment, looking down at his second with a strange expression.

"Are you sure you're feeling alright?" he asked. "You look... the wrong color."

"I'm fine," Starscream assured him, pulling out of his grasp.

"Keep up, then," Megatron rumbled. "We're almost there."

Their objective for the evening was a club district—the same one they'd gone to on their first evening of hugger mugging. Starscream's aching head throbbed harder at the thought of being crammed into a club with all that pounding bass and flashing light.

"Let's do the cash points again," he whined, wrinkling his nose as Megatron started toward a club entrance. It was one of the larger ones, and the Seeker didn't fancy the impending throng of sweaty human bodies anymore than the noise.

"We just did cash points last night," Megatron returned. "Unless you know of any that none of us has used in the last few days."

Starscream didn't, and so he let himself be dragged into the club. It was as horrible in there as he had expected, the whole room full of smoky haze and the scent of alcohol. His head was starting to spin already, and he gripped the back of Megatron's shirt to avoid being separated as they pushed themselves into the crowd. Maybe he could just worm his way to the back of the room and wait against a wall until his commander decided they'd been here long enough? But then he wouldn't have any cash to show for their efforts, and Megatron might think that he was becoming useless again.

"Meet me by that pillar at 10:30," Megatron shouted to him, pointing over the heads of the surging crowd to a decorative column on the edge of the dance floor. "If you get more money than me, you can choose where we get lunch!"

"You're already hungry again!?" Starscream demanded.

"What's that?" his leader asked, leaning in closer and turning his ear toward the Seeker.

"N... Nothing." the smaller man stammered as he got a whiff of Megatron through all the other smells around them.

"Don't be a brat," Megatron told him anyway, ruffling his hair before he slipped off into the crowd.

Starscream took a deep breath to steady himself and started looking around for a target. He could do this, he told himself. Sick or no, he could still get more money off the squishies than Megatron.

Soundwave allowed himself to smile as he watched his creations and Slipstream bounding ahead of him, jumping from crack to crack on the pavement. They were playing some kind of game, and every now and then, one of the twins would come racing back and try to convince him to join in.
He had a strict policy of never engaging in competitive activities with his twins, though; they always cheated. This didn't seem to bother Slipstream, which Soundwave reflected was probably because she cheated just as much, if not more.

A few blocks from the hotel, the intelligence officer stopped by a particular alley and gave a low whistle. There was a rattling noise and a clang, from somewhere in the gloom, and a small, four-legged shape came bursting into the streetlight. Soundwave bent down to greet the overeager canid, rubbing a large hand over her ears and allowing her to put a number of grimy pawprints on his pants. Then, he turned and called to the others.

Rumble and Frenzy turned back and squinted through the legs of the people who had gotten between themselves and their creator until they caught sight of the familiar, furry face licking his hands.

“PUPPY DOG!!” both boys squealed, rushing forward. Soundwave caught the dog up in his arms to prevent her running or the twins accidentally smothering her. She wriggled about, letting out a yip of surprise, but eagerly licked at Frenzy's fingers when he reached for her.

Slipstream was slower on the uptake than the twins, and came trotting up behind them a moment later, looking utterly dumbfounded.

“You kept that thing?” she asked, looking between the dog and Soundwave like he was holding a live bomb or a scraplet colony.

“I saw fit to continue investing in her survival, yes,” the intelligence officer told her.

“It's a girl?” Rumble whined, making a face of disgust.

“What's wrong with girls?” Slipstream demanded.

“Nothing,” Frenzy assured her quickly, reaching out to pat the puppy's head.

Soundwave set her back on the pavement where the twins could reach her better and pulled a chunk of bread from his pocket. The puppy's eyes immediately flew to it, and she left the twins' affections to jump at their creator again.

“Sit!” he told her. At first, the command did nothing, but after a couple of repetitions, her rear end plunked down on the pavement as she continued to stare at the bread, tail wagging and tongue lolling to the side. “Good girl,” Soundwave announced, setting the bread on the pavement in front of her.

“Woah! She eats even faster than Megatron!” Frenzy exclaimed as the dog devoured the bread.

“She is hungry,” Soundwave explained.

“How'd you teach her to do that?” Slipstream wanted to know, moving to stand closer to him.

“I have been finding time to engage with her,” he explained.

“Does Megatron know?” she prodded.

“No,” he confessed. “I deemed it information that he did not need to know.”

The young woman gave him another look of incredulity, but there was something else in it this time, though. Wonder? Admiration? She showed positive emotions so rarely that he'd had little
chance to learn how they displayed on her face.

A group of humans walked by then, laughing loudly, and the puppy started, scurrying back out of sight down the alley. They could hear her running into things for a while and then silence fell again. Soundwave looked to the twins’ dejected expressions and sighed.

“She is not your pet,” he told them, feeling the need to remind them that the dog belonged out here and not in the hotel.

“We know,” Rumble muttered as his twin nodded in agreement. “Is she gonna be alright, though? Nothing’s gonna happen to her, right?”

Soundwave did not let any of his own doubt show as he answered, “Of course. She will be here again tomorrow.”

“Can we see her then?” Rumble asked hopefully.

“Yes,” their creator promised. “We will feed her again tomorrow.”

“Can we take her to meet Dipti sometime?” Frenzy asked, and Soundwave suddenly felt as though someone had dropped a cinder block into his stomach. He had to swallow before he spoke next as his mouth had gone dry.

“I told you already: we can't see Dipti anymore,” he reminded them.

“'Cause it's dangerous, right?” Rumble confirmed. “But after you and Megatron take care of the bad guys, we can, right?”

Soundwave hesitated, unsure what to say to that. He couldn't very well explain to his creations that neither he nor their commander was in a position to take care of any bad guys right now—it would shatter whatever sense of false security had been keeping them going this whole time—but nor did he have the heart to explain to them the real reasons they wouldn't see Dipti again.

“Don't be stupid,” Slipstream cut in. “As soon as they take care of the bad guys, we're going to America. There won't be time to see your little friend again. Right, Soundwave?”

“Yes,” he agreed, shooting her a look of gratitude. “Now, come. Let us return to our mission.”

The twins grumbled and scuffed their feet, but moved to lead the way once more nonetheless. As Soundwave followed them, he felt something brush his fingers, and then another hand clasped hold of him. He looked over at Slipstream, who was staring resolutely ahead as she twined her slender fingers through his.

Soundwave was perfectly aware of what the gesture meant. He did not let go.

It only took a couple of dance partners before Starscream had to take a break, his head spinning so much that he was stumbling almost as badly as some of the inebriated women he had just stolen from as he pushed his way off the dance floor. The Seeker found a spot against a back wall where there weren't any people to step on or shove him and leaned back against the wall.

From his current vantage point, he could still see Megatron towering above everyone else on the
dance floor. His commander's charming devil grin flashed in the multi-colored lights as he swayed back and forth with his current partner—a slender young woman with waist-length curls who had her arms wrapped far too tightly round the ex-warlord's neck for Starscream's taste. He scowled and entertained himself briefly with the image of himself stepping out there and wrenching on a handful of her stupid hair. What would it feel like to be her—being pressed against Megatron like that, his commander's large, powerful hands on his hips, moving together with the music? Would Megatron dance with him if he asked?

The Seeker sank down to the sticky floor of the club and buried his head in his knees. He pressed his hands to his ears as he swallowed thickly, trying not to be sick. Perhaps it was because he'd forced himself to throw up so many times lately, but his stomach was being more insistent than he would have expected for such little stimulation.

After a moment or two, Starscream felt a touch on his arm and drew more tightly into himself, assuming it was Megatron. The touch came again, more insistently, and a strange voice shouted down by his ear:

"Hey! Hey, American!"

Starscream's head shot up as he jerked away from the stranger, a stocky, well-dressed native man whose teeth practically glowed in the club lights. Whatever he wanted, Starscream didn't know, and he didn't care. The Seeker simply sneered at the man, trying to ignore the surge of pain in his head from moving so sharply, and started to get up.

"You're very drunk, no?" the man said, taking Starscream by the elbow, possibly to help him up, possibly to restrain him—the Seeker didn't wait to find out. He clenched his fist and swung round. Unfortunately, whatever ailment he was suffering sent him off-balance, and his punch came too slowly. The stranger leaned back from him and caught his arm with ease before pulling the Seeker close against himself.

"Fuck off!" Starscream shrieked, struggling against the hold. His head swam again, and this time everything went black for a moment. He felt his knees buckle before his vision came back and he caught himself against his captor. The Seeker cursed inwardly. Of course his body would randomly start shutting down on him at a time like this.

"Don't worry, lovely," the man was telling him over the roar of the music. "No one can see us back here. Let's have some fun."

And then, before Starscream could get all of his senses back, the man leaned in and kissed him on the mouth. It was hot and wet and tasted like something horrible that Starscream could only assume was human alcohol. The Seeker chomped down on the man's lip, and then brought a knee up into his groin as hard as he could. His assailant made a startled noise, his grip loosening enough for Starscream to escape and slip away into the crowd.

He felt sick and dizzy, and the taste of the man's spit was still in his mouth as he shoved people out of his way, seeking his commander out in the crowd. Whatever had just happened, he wasn't entirely sure, but his heart was pounding so hard that he could barely even hear the music anymore. A strange, rushing noise had replaced the din of the people around him, and it was suddenly oppressively hot.

Starscream swallowed thickly, and stopped in the middle of the floor, staring around frantically for Megatron. He couldn't see his commander anywhere, and there were too many people, and the flashing lights were boring straight through his skull, and he felt so small, and he wanted to scream, and...
“Starscream!”

A warm, strong hand closed around his shoulder, and the Seeker whirled around to see Megatron there, a look of confusion on his wonderfully familiar face. His commander said something else that he couldn't hear, and Starscream stepped forward, intending to throw himself around the larger man, only to have his legs give out entirely beneath him.

He was aware of the world shifting and Megatron catching him, and then everything went black.
Chapter 46

The world was swaying strangely as Starscream clawed his way back to consciousness. He felt awful—almost as bad as having malaria, plus that burning in his throat. Everything was unbearably cold, except for where he was pressed against Megatron's chest, and... Megatron?

Yes, it was Megatron. He could hear the other man's heavy breathing now, and gradually realized that his commander was carrying him. Starscream shifted slightly and tried to speak, but found his mouth uncooperative. He managed to get out a couple of groaning noises as Megatron came to a halt.

“Starscream?” the other man called carefully, and there was a distinct note of fear in his voice.

The Seeker forced his eyes open and found himself looking up at his commander's face against a backdrop of streetlights and inky black sky. He looked... concerned? But that couldn't be right. Since when had Megatron ever bothered being concerned about him? Starscream made another small noise of confusion, and his commander turned his gaze forward, starting to walk again.

“You'll be okay,” he muttered. “Whatever it is, you'll be okay.”

Now thoroughly mystified, Starscream decided that the best course of action was to let himself drift back to sleep and hope the world would have gone back to normal when he woke up again.

When he did wake up, Megatron was setting him down on the twin bed in the hotel.

“Cold,” Starscream managed to get out as his commander started to move away. To his surprise, Megatron actually turned back and wrapped the blanket up around him, brushing his hair slightly before disappearing again. Starscream pulled the warmth more tightly about himself and squeezed his eyes shut. His head still hurt, and it felt like the whole world was spinning, even as he lay perfectly still. After a moment, a cool hand pressed against his forehead, and Starscream cracked an eye open to see his commander looking at him with that completely un-Megatron-like expression again.

“Don’t touch me,” the Seeker croaked, the words burning in his throat, and Megatron frowned at him.

“You're still feverish,” he announced, removing his hand.

Still? When had he started being feverish? Starscream frowned and tried to shift away, but Megatron was grabbing hold of him now, sitting him up and wrapping the blanket more securely about his shoulders.

“Leave me alone,” Starscream whined, and then coughed as something obstructed his airways. He continued to cough for several agonizing seconds, clutching at his head and bowing over as each concussive wave of air seemed to stab straight up into his brain. Megatron held him the whole time, his hands firm on the Seeker's shoulders.

“Are you alright?” he demanded when his second had finished. “Breathe, Starscream! Just
breathe!"

The Seeker would have snapped at him to shut up and that he was breathing if his coughing fit hadn't left him so abysmally dizzy. He tried to flop back down on the mattress, keeping his eyes shut as he waited for the world to stop spinning and some strength to come back into his limbs, but Megatron pulled him close against his chest instead, awkwardly patting the smaller man's back as his labored breathing came back to normal.

“Okay, we're going now,” Megatron announced after a pause, slipping his arms back under Starscream's body and heaving him up once more, blanket and all.

“Wha... Where!” the Seeker whined, wriggling about so that Megatron nearly dropped him.

“To the hospital. Where do you think?” his commander growled. “I left a note for the others to tell them where we’ve gone.”

“No!” his second moaned, and Megatron had to change his hold to avoid losing him.

“You are clearly very sick, Starscream. You need a doctor,” he tried to reason, but Starscream didn't care. If they went to the hospital, then people would probably try to poke him with needles again, and he absolutely couldn't have that.

“Don't wanna!” he complained, but Megatron was already heading out the door with his second clutched to his front like a very large infant. Starscream continued to struggle feebly the whole way.

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Even in the middle of the night, the hospital's waiting room was frustratingly chaotic. It looked as though everyone there had come in groups, and in some cases, there seemed to be as many as three full generations of a family present for one sick child or parent. Starscream clung to his commander as they waited in line to check in, overly conscious of the many humans coughing and sneezing and bleeding all around them. If he wasn’t sick already, he was sure he would be by the time they got out.

Megatron had finally grown tired of Starscream's squirming and set him down when they arrived, but still kept one arm wrapped tightly around the smaller man’s shoulders. Whether it was to help support him or prevent him trying to escape, Starscream wasn't sure, but was forced to accept he probably wouldn't make it far without him anyway. His legs continued to shake beneath him, and he felt an increasing need to vomit the longer he stayed upright.

When they were about halfway to the reception desk, a strange rushing noise started growing in Starscream’s ears, and his vision suddenly went white. Megatron caught him as he pitched toward the floor.

“I'm fine! I'm perfectly fine,” Starscream tried to insist when his senses returned a moment later. His commander just huffed in disbelief and hefted the Seeker back into his arms. Starscream began struggling again, fully expecting his commander to drop him on the floor out of spite. Instead, Megatron hoisted him up more securely and leaned down to murmur in his ear: “Starscream, just relax. It's okay.”

The Seeker glared up at him, lost for words. This was not okay. None of this was okay! He was
sick, and about to be at the mercy of human doctors again, and Megatron had suddenly started acting like Thundercracker! In what way could any of this possibly be “okay”!?

Starscream decided to bury his face in his leader's shoulder and remain still to avoid the possibility of eliciting any further unsettling behavior from him.

“What brings you here this evening?” the young woman at the desk asked when they finally reached her, and Megatron launched into an explanation before Starscream could even think about answering.

“This man requires medical treatment,” the ex-warlord announced, indicating the Seeker draped across his front. “He's feverish and coughing and keeps shutting down unexpectedly. I suspect a malaria relapse.”

“It's not! I took the pills,” Starscream whined into his shoulder, pulling his blanket tighter as a sudden chill swept through him. He just wanted to go lie down somewhere.

“Fill out this form, please,” the receptionist said, pushing a clipboard and a pen toward them. Megatron spent a minute trying to figure out how to write while still holding Starscream, but eventually gave up with a noise of frustration and set his second on the ground in front of the reception desk instead. The Seeker moaned as his rear end met the cold, hard tiles, and he started pulling himself up until he could see what Megatron was writing on the form.

At the top of the page was a box labeled “PATIENT NAME,” in which his commander had written “Vos” as Starscream’s family name and “Star” as his first. That was acceptable, Starscream supposed, but then he looked over at the “AGE” box and his jaw dropped.

“Change that!” he hissed, his voice breaking slightly as he jabbed a shaky finger at the offending box.

“Starscream, please don't argue with me right now,” his commander sighed.

“I am not nineteen,” the Seeker whined, closing his eyes and slumping over onto the receptionist's counter as his head swam again.

“Fine,” Megatron sighed, and when Starscream looked next, the number had changed to 20. It wasn't much better, but he didn't have the energy to argue further. “I need a date for your birthday,” his commander muttered at him a moment later, and Starscream supplied the first random human date that popped into his head.

“December seventh.”

When the form was filled out, they were finally free to go and sit on one of the lightly padded benches in the waiting room. Starscream immediately flopped over into Megatron's lap when they did, and his commander threw an arm over him, pulling him more securely onto the bench. A large hand settled in his hair, and a moment later, the Seeker had fallen asleep again.

Starscream slept fitfully after that, woken frequently by other patients shouting and crying or the sounds of doctors running up and down the hall with carts of equipment. Every time he woke, it
was more and more difficult to breathe through his nose. He sniffed and sniffed, but whatever was
blocking his airways would not move.

Eventually, Starscream woke to find that a significant amount of snot had dribbled out of his nose
and onto Megatron's pants. He made a face and surreptitiously tried to wipe the rest of the stuff off
his face and onto the other man's pants, but there was a seemingly endless supply.

“What are you doing?” Megatron demanded, pushing at him. Starscream sat up, keeping his eyes
shut against the pain of the overhead lights, and his commander made a noise of disgust. “Don’t
wipe your fluids on me!”

The Seeker whined at him, and a moment later felt the fabric of his blanket scrubbing at his face.
He spluttered and tried to escape, but Megatron held him firm until he’d cleaned all the snot off of
him.

“Disgusting...” his leader muttered as he finally released him.

Starscream just continued to whine and sniff miserably. He already knew he was disgusting; the
jerk didn’t have to go rubbing it in.

“My throat hurt. I wan’ wadder,” he croaked, his voice coming out obnoxiously hoarse and nasal.

“Just a minute,” Megatron sighed, and the Seeker cracked his eyes open a bit as he felt the other
man’s presence vanish from beside him on the bench.

He watched his leader picking his way across the room toward a small water cooler before settling
back against the wall with a tired little sigh. That was when he noticed the woman who had been
sitting on Megatron’s other side was staring at him. Starscream glared at her, and she gave a snort
of laughter before turning back to the man beside her and the young child in his arms. She said
something to the man, and then both of them turned to stare at the Seeker. Unable to make a
sufficient escape at the moment, Starscream pulled his blanket up over his head and fantasized
about having a blaster to disintegrate them with.

Megatron returned a moment later, sinking down onto the bench again with a huff and nudging his
second. Starscream reached out through a gap in his blanket and took the small, paper cup of water
he was offering. It did little to soothe the burning in his throat, but felt good nonetheless. When it
was gone, the Seeker rearranged himself to settle in against his commander’s shoulder. He would
rather lie down again, but his hip and thigh ached too much where they had been resting against the
bench all this time.

“How long hab we been here?” he wanted to know.

“Almost two hours now,” Megatron told him, pushing sweaty hair back from his forehead.
“Primus, you look awful...”


“You’ve been sleeping,” Megatron pointed out.

“In a bed. Widdoud all dese beoble around.” He sniffled in an effort to clear his nose a bit more
and then broke into a coughing fit.

“We’re getting you looked at,” Megatron said firmly as his second finished and started clutching
his head and moaning in pain.
“I don’ hab malaria!” the Seeker insisted, his voice breaking again.

“Then we need to find out what is wrong with you because I’m fairly certain humans aren’t supposed to shut down randomly.”

Starscream was still trying to formulate a reply to that when someone called out over the waiting room, “Star Vos? Mr. Star Vos?” And Megatron started nudging him up off the bench.

Megatron made him cooperate with the nurse as she took his height, weight, and various vitals. Starscream tried to see what she was writing on her clipboard, but she whisked it away too soon. Then, there was a long room full of narrow beds with curtains around them and a flimsy, oversized garment that they wanted him to change into.

“I’m not taking my clothes off,” the Seeker mumbled, falling gratefully on the bed the nurse had said was his before his legs could give out from beneath him again.

“I can’t imagine why you would need to,” Megatron agreed, holding up the strange fabric. “How does this thing even work?”

“Who cares?” Starscream muttered, curling up beneath his blanket and shutting his eyes again. He felt like he could sleep for the next million years and it wouldn't be enough.

Unfortunately, it seemed that was not to be so as the curtain hissed back just then, and a woman’s voice spoke: “Well, if it isn’t my favorite American slumdogs.”

Starscream lifted his head, frowning, to see none other than the woman doctor who’d helped treat their malaria standing at the foot of his bed, yet another clipboard in hand and a cart of medical supplies behind her. He groaned and slumped back down onto the flimsy pillow.

“This is unexpected,” he heard Megatron saying to the doctor.

“I work this branch half the week and the southern branch the other half,” she explained. “But I agree; I had thought you finally went back to your country. The intake form says you think this was a malaria relapse?”

“It’s not,” Starscream sniffed, “I took the pills.”

“Mm. You sound more like you have a cold, but we’ll run a blood test just in case,” the woman told him, scribbling something on her clipboard. “Other than that, are you aware that you’ve lost three kilos in the last two weeks?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” the Seeker grumbled, sitting up a bit so that he could see her.

“Your weight, Mr. Vos,” she reiterated, tapping her pencil on the clipboard for emphasis. “You were already underweight when you were in for malaria, but now you’ve dropped down all the way to 45 kilos. Have you been eating at all?”

“Of course I eat,” Starscream snapped, feeling heat creep into his face.

“I see to it that he does,” Megatron put in. “He eats just as much as his brothers, and neither of them is losing weight.”
“And you keep down all of the food that you eat?” the doctor wanted to know.

“Keep… What?”

“You’re not throwing it back up again, are you?”

For a second, Starscream felt as though the Indian woman’s eyes were boring straight into him and somehow she knew.

And then rational thought caught up with him again, and he realized that she was simply inquiring after any other symptoms of illness he might be having. There was no reason she would suspect him of purposely purging his meals. Why would she? Humans didn’t do that. It was just something that he had come up with on his own—rather brilliantly, he had thought—to avoid contaminating himself with too much organic filth.

“No,” he croaked, and he had to clear an obstruction from his throat before he continued. “I haven’t thrown up since we started taking the pills.”

“No one else has mentioned seeing him throwing up,” Megatron added.

The human woman made a humming noise that sounded like she doubted them, and Starscream had a distinct urge to throw something at her.

“Well, I will test for malaria just in case, but I think the main problem is just your weight,” she said after a moment of scribbling on her clipboard. “When you’re so underweight, it’s not uncommon to pass out even just from standing up too quickly. If you really are eating a normal amount and still losing this much weight, you should visit a doctor who specializes in metabolic disorders. Also, your immune system is probably weakened, so it’s possible your cold could develop into something more serious, like pneumonia. I would advise you stay in bed and get plenty of fluids until it’s passed. Now, as far as—”

“What do you mean, ‘cold’?” Megatron interrupted her, and Starscream could hear the telltale note of impatience he got when he was feeling out of his depth. “He does complain of being cold more often than the others, but I didn’t realize that could actually cause any serious issues.”

“Cold,” the woman repeated. “You know? A cold? A viral infection that causes sinus congestion and fever?”

Megatron still looked blank, but Starscream felt a dawning comprehension. So, that was why he had so much snot all of a sudden.

“How long will it last?” he wanted to know.

“A few days? A week? Hard to say,” the doctor shrugged. “I will give you a list of medicines you should purchase to help with the symptoms and reduce the risk of complications. I will also give you a list of dietary supplements to help with weight gain.”

Starscream perked up at that. Did the humans perhaps have synthesized materials that could replace food?

“What will happen if he doesn’t start gaining weight?” Megatron wanted to know.

The woman started listing off symptoms to him, and Starscream tuned her out, settling back into his bed instead. He was sure that the symptoms for malnutrition in humans would be the same as Cybertronians, after all: sluggishness, loss of inessential systems, irrational thought processes...
The compromised immune system was new to him, but all of it would be easily taken care of if this dietary supplements business played out.

Why had no one told him sooner that there were alternatives to eating actual food? They could have avoided this whole mess, and he could have saved himself the discomfort that came with forcing himself to vomit several times a day. Well, that was all behind him now; the obnoxious squishy doctor was going to give him a way out at last!

Megatron and the doctor continued talking, and Starscream let himself drift toward unconsciousness again, hoping this time they would let him stay that way for a while. He had almost managed when he felt his commander’s hands on him, carefully working one of his arms out from beneath his blanket, pulling it out straight and…

Starscream’s eyes flew open as something cold and wet swiped across the crook of his elbow, and the scent of rubbing alcohol hit his nose. He screamed as loud as his damaged throat would allow and thrashed violently, but Megatron just tightened his grip and put more weight on the smaller man’s chest.

“I hate you! I hate you, you filthy, stinking human!” the Seeker howled, striking at whatever he could reach of Megatron and kicking desperately. None of it had any effect, and his commander completely ignored his insults.

There was another pair of hands on him—the doctor’s, he guessed—and then a sharp pinch that faded as she wrapped his elbow in layer upon layer of tape.

“You are incredibly dehydrated, my friend,” the horrible woman commented. Starscream finally stopped fighting and looked down, breathing heavily, to see an IV port taped very securely to his arm, a stream of dark red blood creeping sluggishly down its length to fill a tube the doctor was holding to it.

“What… That’s my blood!” he rasped.

“This is how we test for malaria,” the doctor explained. “You were asleep the last time we did it.”

He scowled at her and tried again to pull his arm out of Megatron’s grasp.

“Hold still, you fool,” his commander grunted, shoving his elbow all the harder into the smaller man’s chest.

“Asshole,” Starscream sniffed.

“Oh, yes. How dare I make sure my Air Commander gets medical treatment,” Megatron returned, rolling his eyes.

“You two are as delightful as ever,” the doctor muttered under her breath as she sealed off the end of the IV tube and slipped the vial of blood into a pocket on her white coat. “I’ll have a nurse come by with a saline drip while I run this. Don’t let him do anything stupid.”

“Madam doctor, I am afraid you ask an impossible task,” Megatron sighed, finally releasing his second.

Starscream glared at him as he reached to peel the tape off his arm. Megatron seized his wrist before he could.

“Did you already forget what happened the last time you pulled one of those out?” he growled.
“Leave it in, or I'll shove it down your throat.”

Well, Starscream reflected as he stuck his tongue out at the other man, at least whatever the doctor had said seemed to have restored his commander back to the good old Megadolt that he knew and despised so well.
Chapter 47

I did some doodles for this story recently, which you can see here.

Also, I now have a Twitter, if anyone likes that. I'll probably post more casual stuff about my writing projects and progress on there than I do on Tumblr.
https://twitter.com/kanon_kita

The sky was just starting to turn gray over the tops of the buildings when Thundercracker and Skywarp finally made their way back to the hotel. They had ended up wandering so far afield in their escapades that evening that it had taken almost two hours to walk all the way back. Not that it was such a bad thing. Skywarp had been doing so well all night that Thundercracker didn't mind being out with him a bit longer.

“Megatron's gonna be so impressed today,” the boy chirped as they wound their way up the stairs to the hotel room. “I bet we even got more than him and Star.”

“Slow down, Warp. You're gonna trip,” Thundercracker called after him.

They had gotten a pretty decent haul for the evening, though. Skywarp's pickpocketing skills had been impressive to begin with and just kept improving as his anxieties about getting close to the other humans seemed to settle.

“I wonder how the twins did on their first night,” Skywarp mused, hanging off the railing as he waited for his brother to catch up with him. Thundercracker didn't understand how he could still have so much energy.

“I'm wondering how Starscream did,” he commented as he drew level with the younger Seeker. “He wasn't looking so good when they left.”

“He'll be fine. He was with Megatron,” Skywarp shrugged.

“That's what I'm worried about,” Thundercracker muttered.

“They've been getting along lately,” his brother pointed out as they rounded the final landing.

“Yeah, because Starscream's been in a good mood and relatively cooperative. How long do you think it'll last if he's feeling sick and grumpy?”

Skywarp fell silent, his face contemplative, as he pushed his way through the door for the fourth floor, and Thundercracker felt a small stab of guilt. He hadn't meant to bring the boy's mood down with worrying again.

“But you're right. It's probably fine,” he said quickly, pushing his features into a reassuring smile. “What was that food we ate tonight called again?”
And Skywarp instantly lit up as he started explaining all about their dinner, which had been something called “litti chokha.” Apparently, Anoushka had taught him how to make it not long before they'd left the slums.

“So then you pinch the dough up around the filling, and you gotta be careful not to stretch it too thin so the juices won't leak out,” he was saying as they stepped into their room.”And then, what you gotta do is—”

He was cut off a moment later as the twins came rushing toward them, shouting over the top of each other so that Thundercracker couldn't even begin to understand what they were getting on about.

“One at a time! No one can understand you when you shout like that!” Slipstream's voice called over them, and Thundercracker looked around to find that she was the only other one in the room.

“Where is everybody?” he asked as the twins paused to catch their breaths.

“Megatron took Screamer to the hospital, so the boss went out to find them,” Frenzy announced, and his twin shoved him.

“ I wanted to tell it!” Rumble whined.

Thundercracker stared at them, not sure he'd heard properly. Behind him, Skywarp made a high-pitched whining noise and burst into tears.

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Even out of the waiting room, the hospital was noisy. Megatron had spent several hours now perched on the too-small metal chair by Starscream’s bed with nothing to do but listen to machines beeping and doctors talking and patients being in pain and the almost incessant whistling sound of the Seeker’s breath beside him. He was sorely tempted to reach over and pinch his second’s nose shut to make it stop, but didn’t trust him to be resourceful enough to start breathing through his mouth if he did.

It was impressive, and slightly worrying, how much Starscream sleeping even with all the noise and how much time he had already spent napping that evening. Doctor Krishna had assured Megatron that the Seeker would probably be considerably more energetic—though still sick—when he’d finished rehydrating. Right now, he was most of the way through his second round of fluid infusion, and he did look better, at least. There was color back in his face, and the dark circles under his eyes had faded.

Megatron would not say that he had panicked, per se, when Starscream had collapsed at the club, but there had certainly been some very strong, disturbingly human emotions that had sent him running out the door with his second’s limp body clutched in his arms. Thankfully, that had faded when the doctor had explained what was actually wrong with Starscream, and now the ex-warlord was mostly just annoyed—partly at Starscream, yes, because the idiot Seeker really needed to learn his own limits already, but a surprising majority of it was simply at the human condition in general. How curious it was to be in the middle of a Starscream fiasco and have something other than the Seeker to aim his frustration at.

A shifting on the bed beside him brought Megatron out of the trance of boredom he’d fallen into, and he looked over to see Starscream’s face pull into a pained expression.
Ah, so he was finally waking up again.

There was some more shifting, accompanied by a bit of moaning, and then the Seeker’s eyes flew open wide with a gasp.

“Bad dream?” Megatron ventured, and fearful blue eyes darted to him before softening into something more like resignation.

“I’m not a sparkling; I don’t have nightmares,” Starscream muttered, his voice hoarse, but less nasally than before. He pushed himself upright and reached for the box of flimsy paper squares the doctors had given him to deal with the sinus drainage (tissues, they were apparently called). “How much longer do we have to be here?”

“They said we’ll be able to go when that IV bag is empty,” Megatron answered, and Starscream turned a sulky eye on the bag in question as he blew his nose.

“You didn’t really believe that doctor when she said I was too skinny… did you?” he asked when he’d finished.

“I think she would know more about it than either of us,” his commander returned, eyebrows raising slightly. Starscream had better not be planning to wriggle his way out of the renourishing plan that the doctor had given them. Megatron was fairly certain the Seeker hadn’t been listening when she’d listed off all of the things that could happen if didn’t start gaining weight, but it had started with a worsening of his low energy levels and ended with organ failure and death. “She claims you would need to visit a doctor who specializes in such things to be sure, but that it is very likely your body lacks the ability to sufficiently process nutrients from what little food you do eat.”

“I told you there was no point in me eating more,” the Seeker grumbled. “And that I didn’t have malaria again, but you never do listen to me.”

Megatron just rolled his eyes and decided to change the subject before Starscream could try his patience any further on this one.

“We will need to pay the hospital fees before we leave. I don’t suppose you managed to get any cash before you took ill,” he asked.

Starscream seemed to think for a moment before reaching down to dig a small wad of Rupees from his pants pocket, which he passed over to Megatron without complaint.

“There was something else that happened right before I took ill, you know,” he croaked, an enlightened expression crossing his face for a moment. “I was, in fact, assaulted. By a human. Not that I expect you to care.”

“You’re right, I don’t,” Megatron answered casually as he counted the money. Combined with what he had in his own pocket, it was just a little more than enough for their fees. Perfect.

And then he properly registered what Starscream had said.

“Sorry, but what was that?” he asked, head snapping up.

The Seeker gave him a strange look, somewhere between haughtiness and suspicion, before he elaborated.

“While we were at the club, a human tried to force himself on me. I made short work of him, of course, but it was one of the most disgusting experiences I’ve ever had.”
“Force… What do you mean, he ‘tried to force himself’ on you?” Megatron wondered at the unfamiliar phrase.

“As in, he kissed me,” Starscream explained, rolling his eyes “Without my permission. And he probably would have done more if I were as helpless as he seemed to think I would be. Not that I expect you to understand any of this…”

“I do,” his commander interrupted, eyes narrowing as he imagined this random human man seizing his Air Commander around the waist and…

“You do!?” Starscream squeaked, a note of not-quite-concealed terror twisting his features.

And Megatron pulled himself out of fantasies of ripping the human man’s face off long enough to realize that if Starscream found out he understood as much as he did, then there was a very good chance the young man would never let his commander touch him again, let alone share a bed with him.

“I know about kissing,” he amended quickly. “Humans put their mouths on each other to show affection. So, what were you doing before that to make a stranger wish to show you affection?”

“Just dancing,” the Seeker said lightly, starting to pick a bit at the tape on his arm. “I guess I was so attractive he couldn’t keep his hands off me.”

“Humans are attracted to each other for reproductive purposes,” his commander pointed out, reaching over to pull the young man’s fingers away from his IV. “Why would another man be attracted to you?”

“It’s itchy,” Starscream whined, trying to tug out of his grasp and failing miserably. “And perhaps I’m just so attractive to the humans that they don’t care what gender I am.”

“I find that unlikely,” Megatron lied, shifting his grip to twine his fingers through Starscream’s, and then decided to use this opportunity to cast aside any suspicion the Seeker may be starting to harbor about the nature of these increasingly frequent displays of what Megatron could no longer deny was some form of physical affection. “You were tiny even before you got so bony, your skin is stupidly pale, your eyes are so big they look like they’re going to fall out of your head half the time, and you constantly look like you’re plotting to kill everyone around you. Hardly a catch by human standards, I imagine.”

Starscream’s nostrils flared, and he squeezed the other man’s hand back as hard as he could. “Oh, and you’re so desirable!?” he hissed.

“You’ve said yourself that I am,” his commander reminded him, smirking slightly to conceal a wince. “I believe you made reference to my height, the size of my muscles, and something about my face. And it must be true, considering the way the human women react to me.”

“Oh, bravo! You can turn some drunk human femmes’ empty heads!” Starscream snarled. “I’m sure they’d lose interest if they knew what an insensitive brute you really are!”

“Just as I’m sure they’d lose all interest in you if they found out how gay you are.”

The sentence popped out of Megatron’s mouth before he could stop it, leaving a ringing silence in its wake. The two men stared at each other, and Megatron felt an unfamiliar void stretching in front of him.

He shouldn’t have used that word. He wasn’t supposed to know about humans being attracted to
the same gender, or even wanting to be intimate for anything other than reproduction to begin with. He needed to back track and explain it away somehow or Starscream would know.

But even sick and malnourished and tucked up in a hospital bed with his hair going in every direction, there was something about the Seeker that made Megatron want him to know. He wanted to just pour it all out and share every single dirty fantasy he’d had about the other man in the past week, and how he wanted to do so much more than just sleep in the same bed as him, and wasn’t this a perfect opening for that?

But Starscream had said it was ‘disgusting.’ Having a human kiss him was one of the most disgusting experiences he’d ever had.

Megatron forced himself to laugh.

“You do know what ‘gay’ means, don’t you?” he smirked, shoving his desires as deep as he could.

“I… Do you know what it means?” Starscream demanded.

“Of course. It’s a human slur for someone particularly irritating,” he invented.

Starscream scowled and pulled his hand away. “You’re an idiot,” he sneered.

The curtain hissed back before Megatron could reply to that, and the nurse stepped in, greeting them in the overly friendly way that she had every time she’d stopped by to check Starscream’s vitals.

“Looks like you’ve finally finished up there,” she chirped, stepping over to Starscream’s now-empty IV bag.

“Then hurry up and get it out of me, you incompetent fuddu,” the Seeker snapped.

Megatron didn’t know what the Hindi slur meant, but he didn’t miss the way the young woman recoiled at the sound of it like Starscream had just hit her in the face.

“Don’t mind him; he lacks a fundamental understanding of decency,” the ex-warlord sighed, hoping he might at least save his second from getting injected with something toxic, or whatever doctors around here did to ungrateful patients.

After one last vitals check, Megatron was stepping out into the graying dawn at last with a handful of prescription slips in one fist and Starscream’s narrow bicep in the other.

“You don’t have to hold me. It’s not like I’m going to run away, or something,” his second whined, swiping at his nose with a tissue.

“I never thought you would,” his commander returned. “But I might as well be prepared if you start to collapse again.”

“Not gonna do that, either,” Starscream muttered, and then broke into a coughing fit.

Megatron rolled his eyes and tugged the Seeker along impatiently; it had been far too long since he’d eaten anything.
It was only a ten-minute walk back to the hotel, and they were nearly there when a familiar voice called out to them over the sparsely populated morning street. Megatron turned to see Soundwave striding toward them, expression unreadable.

“Where are the others?” Megatron wanted to know as the intelligence officer drew near. Starscream just glared sulkily, his blanket pulled partway up his face.

“They are at the hotel. We returned not long ago and found your note. I thought it would be expedient to locate you and determine the nature of Commander Starscream’s ailment before his brothers returned, if possible,” he explained, his gaze turning down to the young man in question. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” the Seeker snapped. “I just have a cold, and Megatron overreacted.”

“Starscream lost consciousness due to dehydration and malnutrition,” his commander corrected. “He has also acquired some form of viral infection.”

“Why are you malnourished when you have been eating properly for over a week?” Soundwave asked his fellow officer, eyebrows rising ever so slightly.

The Seeker’s face flushed, and he turned away. “It’s a metabolic disorder,” he grumbled. “It’s not like it’s my fault my body doesn’t work.”

Soundwave still looked doubtful, and Megatron found himself coming to his second’s defense for some reason.

“That’s what the doctor said,” he told his intelligence officer, and then he held out the prescription slips. “If you have any money on you, then take these to the pharmacy and procure the medications they list. Starscream and I will continue back to the hotel so that we can both get some food.”

Soundwave took the slips, but continued staring at Starscream with something Megatron could only read as suspicion for a moment before nodding curtly.

“I will see you later, my lord. Please ensure that Rumble and Frenzy are in bed at a reasonable time if I take long,” he said before starting off.

Megatron frowned slightly and ran a hand over his facial hair as he watched the other man’s retreating back. He had a feeling that Soundwave might want to talk to him sometime when Starscream wasn’t around, but for now, he had a malnourished Seeker to feed.

Thundercracker had felt the tension go out of Skywarp in a wave when Starscream and Megatron finally walked in the door, Starscream unharmed and looking only a little worse for wear. His youngest brother had done quite well, all things considered, after hearing about Starscream’s trip to the hospital, and had only hyperventilated for a few minutes before the breathing exercises Soundwave had taught them brought him back to a steady baseline. Thundercracker was proud of him, and only wished the breathing exercises were as effective on the knots of tension in his own stomach and shoulders, which didn’t dissipate even after Starscream returned.

“Cold? How did you get cold?” Skywarp was asking his brother now. “If you need more clothes, you can borrow mine.”
“No, it’s a virus,” Starscream grumped at the younger Seeker as he climbed into the twin bed and pulled a second blanket up around himself.

“Screamer sounds funny,” one of the twins giggled, and Starscream sat up a bit to glare in their direction.

“What exactly did the doctors say?” Thundercracker asked, turning to Megatron as Skywarp moved over to make an attempt at coddling their sick brother.

“That he is sick with a common virus, but that it has the potential to develop into a dangerous infection if he doesn’t rest because he is also severely underweight and his immune system is compromised,” their commander explained, sounding like he was reciting something he had memorized.

Thundercracker frowned and turned back to the other two Seekers. He’d known Starscream was small and bony compared to the rest of them, but he hadn’t thought it was a big deal. There were plenty of people in the slums who were just as skinny and still went about their business every day, after all.

“He will be confined to his bed until his symptoms have gone,” Megatron announced, and Starscream’s head snapped up.

“What!?” he tried to shriek, but his voice broke halfway through and it turned into a hoarse whisper instead. “You didn’t say—”

“Until I have some assurance that your body can handle basic tasks without dropping you into the human equivalent of stasis lock,” the other man interrupted. “you will stay in that bed, and you will sleep, you will eat, and you will take any and all medications that the doctor has prescribed, and that will be all.”

“You can’t keep me here!” Starscream rasped in disbelief. “I can go out anytime I want, and I’d like to see you try and stop me!”

He sat up in the bed, threw the covers aside, and surged to his feet. Thundercracker watched, somewhere between curiosity and horror, as the color instantly drained out of his brother’s face and the young man’s knees subsequently gave out beneath him.

“Most impressive,” Megatron said flatly as Skywarp caught the other Seeker with a cry of surprise before he hit the floor. “I’m going to get us some food. I’ll leave him in your care in the meantime, Thundercracker.”

The oldest Seeker nodded, and stepped over to help Skywarp maneuver their brother back into bed while their commander stepped out the door, closely followed by the twins begging to get their own dinner.

“It’ll be fine, Star,” Skywarp was saying as they pulled the blankets up around Starscream’s shivering form. “We’ll bring you some books or something.”

The other Seeker kicked out at him from beneath the blankets, and Skywarp pulled back with a cry of alarm.

“T.C., he’s kicking me! ” he whined, scuttling across the bed with his hands out to block any further assaults.

“Then get off the bed. And Starscream, knock it off,” Thundercracker sighed. “He’s just worried
about you.”

“He doesn’t need to be,” Starscream sniffed, burrowing away from his brother.

Thundercracker rolled his eyes, and motioned for Skywarp to come and sit on the double bed beside him. If Starscream wanted to lay there and pretend he wasn’t crying until Megatron came back, then that was fine with him. Just so long as he stayed put where Thundercracker could keep an eye on him for once.

Chapter End Notes

As far as I can tell, "fuddu" (the thing Starscream called the nurse) is the Hindi equivalent of c*nt. Correct me if I'm wrong. At any rate, Starscream just knows it's an insult.
Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

Did not realize how long I'd let it go since last updating this fic! Sorry about that.

For the first time ever, Starscream was alone in the twin bed when he woke. Some vague part of him remembered Megatron's arm carefully sliding out from beneath his head a while ago, and a jumble of different voices, but now the hotel room was quiet but for the noise of early evening traffic drifting up through the open window. He was alone.

Starscream sat up too quickly and felt the room swim around him. When it stopped, he was lying down again and found that he was not, in fact, alone.

“Evening,” Thundercracker greeted him from the double bed. “How are you feeling?”

It took Starscream a minute to come up with a satisfactory answer for that. Truth be told, he felt just as bad as when he'd left the hospital the previous evening, possibly worse. His throat had escalated from dry and scratchy to raw, burning, and almost bruised, while his nose was now completely blocked with sinus drainage. However, he also knew that the longer he was reporting symptoms of illness, the longer Megatron would force him to stay in this room.

“As healthy as this useless body can be,” he settled for. The words stuck in his throat and came out in a dry, toneless rasp that was definitely worse than the previous evening. He scowled and tried coughing his throat clear. It did nothing except to send him into a rather dramatic coughing fit that ended with him clutching at his pounding head and gasping for breath.

“Water?” Thundercracker's voice offered, and Starscream cracked a teary eye open to see his brother standing in front of him now with a glass of water in hand. The younger Seeker glared up at him but took it anyway.

“Where are the others?” he wanted to know when he'd downed most of it.

“Downstairs,” Thundercracker explained, settling himself on the edge of the bed. Starscream rolled onto his back to put more distance between them.

“Is Megatron really planning to leave me here alone all night?” he asked, and then winced at the sound of his own voice.

His brother gave a light chuckle. “You'd like that, wouldn't you?”

Actually, Starscream would hate nothing more at the moment. He wanted either to go with the others or to have someone here with him. If they left him alone, then who would get him more water when he needed it? But again, he had appearances to maintain.

“Of course I would!” he snapped, the force of the words pulling unpleasantly at his throat. “I'm sick of you lot breathing down my neck every second of every day!”

Thundercracker hummed disinterestedly and reached out to press a hand against the younger man's forehead.
“Stop!” Starscream rasped, pushing him away. “I'm cold. Get me another blanket.”

“How do you ask?” his older brother teased.

“I am your Air Commander, and I order you to get me another blanket!” Starscream threw back with a glare. The effect was ruined somewhat when a bit of snot started to drip from his nose. Thundercracker snorted and tossed him the tissue box before moving to grab one of the blankets off the double bed for him.

“I don't know how you're still cold,” he remarked over the sound of Starscream blowing his nose. “I'm sweating and I don't have any blankets. Although, I suppose none of us is really used to sleeping alone, hm?”

“I prefer having the bed to myself,” Starscream lied, sweeping his used tissues into the growing pile beside said bed.

“Well, I can't pretend I'm not glad you and Megatron have been managing to share it without trying to kill each other so far,” Thundercracker told him as he spread the new blanket over his brother. “Actually, you two have been getting along surprising well since all of this started. Please don't tell me you're trying to lull him into a sense of false security, or something.”

Starscream huffed indignantly and pulled the second blanket up under his chin. “Becoming human has made our leader soft in more ways than one. There would be no satisfaction in overthrowing him now,” he explained.

“So, it's got nothing to do with the fact that you would be totally dead without him in this world?” his brother asked, quirking a disbelieving eyebrow.

“I would not!” Starscream tried to shriek. His voice broke on the last strangled syllable, and he ended up in another coughing fit. When he'd finished, Thundercracker reached under the bed to retrieve a plastic bag full of pill packages and bottles.

“I've got some pills here that you're supposed to take,” he announced, pulling one of the bottles out. Rather than pills, it held a dark, viscous liquid. “I think this one's for your throat? I dunno. Soundwave said take this and this and this when you wake up, and this one again after six hours if your fever comes back.”

He set the boxes of pills in question on the bed beside Starscream. The other Seeker picked them up and turned them over to read as much of the labels as he could.

“These are all for colds,” he observed. “The doctor said there were dietary supplements, too?”

“Those are the rest of these,” his brother explained, holding up the other ten or so large bottles still in the bag. “There's, like, pills and powders and things that you chew, and Megatron told me to remind you that they're supplements, not replacements. You still have to eat.”

Starscream sneered at him. “Obviously. Where is my breakfast, anyway?”

“Warp's getting it, but...” Thundercracker trailed off like he wasn't sure he wanted to say the next bit.

“What?” Starscream demanded suspiciously.

“Just... Apparently, the doctor said you have to start eating meat because it helps you gain weight,” the other Seeker explained in a rush.
“Oh.” A few weeks ago, Starscream would have been livid about this development, but now he knew he could just throw it back up again later, the idea of swallowing organic animal flesh wasn’t quite so abhorrent. “I suppose I shall have to adjust.”

Thundercracker blinked at him, caught somewhere between relief and suspicion.

“So, you’re gonna eat it? Just like that?” he wondered. “I thought you said you’d rather die than eat —”

“Yes, well, I exaggerated,” the other Seeker interrupted. “Obviously, I would rather eat organics than die as one.”

“Coulda fooled me,” his brother muttered.

Starscream was just formulating a scathing response to that when the a familiar voice came into range outside their room—Slipstream. She sounded annoyed.

Both brothers looked up as the door swung open and their cousin came storming in with a tray balanced on her arm and their youngest brother in tow.

“...go even five minutes without some kind of incident! You're all as bad as each other!” she was ranting.

Behind her, Skywarp was staring despondently down at something on his arms. Thundercracker was off the bed and at his side the second he'd stepped across the threshold. Starscream frowned at the spot he had vacated and then started pushing himself up to try and see what was going on.

“It was an accident,” Skywarp was explaining. “I tripped and they got all messed up.”

“Primus,” Thundercracker whispered, and Starscream could see his shoulders stiffen, almost as if he were hitching up his wings.

“Calm down,” Slipstream snapped grumpily as she brought the tray of food over to Starscream. “It's not as bad as it looks.”

“What's going on?” he asked. “What's not bad?”

Slipstream just shoved his breakfast at him and stalked off into the bathroom without even glancing at him. Thundercracker was leading Skywarp over to the bed now, keeping the boy's arms out in front of him.

“Does it hurt?” he asked his brother, and Skywarp shook his head.

“It stung at first, but I barely feel it now,” the youngest Seeker explained. “I'm just sorry I got blood on Slipstream's top.”

“My favorite top!” the young woman called from the bathroom, and then Starscream heard the water turn on.

“What is going on?” he squawked, setting his food aside and craning his neck to try and see what had become of Skywarp's arms.

“Nothing,” his younger brother assured him with a weak smile. “I just pulled some of my scabs off by accident is all.”

He held up one of his forearms to show the grisly mess his strange destressing habit had left
behind. Several of the largest scabs had been ripped clean off and bright, almost orangey blood was tracking down his arm. Starscream’s stomach lurched and he quickly turned away with an unimpressed scoff.

“Eat your food,” Thundercracker told him.

Starscream looked at the tray, which had rice, some vegetables, and a couple pieces of meat—still on its bones—and his stomach lurched again. He might not even need to use his fingers to purge this meal.

The door swung open again then, and Starscream gratefully turned his attention away from the horrific meal to the other four members of their faction returning from dinner. When he caught sight of Megatron at the back of the group, the lurching in his stomach suddenly stopped, and he had an insane urge to reach out and demand the other man come hold him. Megatron’s eyes met his, and the Seeker quickly looked back down at his food.

He picked up the spoon to push some rice around for appearances’ sake, and listened as Soundwave started asking after Skywarp’s injuries. A moment later, the bed dipped down beside him.

“I am eating it, so you don't need to watch me,” Starscream rasped. He heard Megatron hum disinterestedly, and a large hand pressed against his forehead.

“Your fever's up again,” his commander announced as the Seeker pulled away from him. “Did you take the medicine yet?”

“I'll take it after I eat,” Starscream told him, finally looking up from his food and nearly swallowing his tongue.

Megatron was looking at him... fondly. It was the only word for that expression. The ex-warlord’s dark eyes had softened to a gentle smolder beneath those heavy, angular brows of his, and there was the smallest of smiles pulling at his mouth.

“Starscream!” one of the twins called from the other side of the room, ripping his gaze away from their commander's face. “When are you gonna die?”

A wellspring of indignation rose up in the Seeker and he opened his mouth to screech back at the little hellion, only to have Megatron's hand clamp firmly over it.

“How do you think your throat is going to feel any better if you keep shrieking at everyone?” his commander asked over the twins' uncontrollable gales of laughter.

Starscream glared at him and stuck his tongue out to lick the other man's hand.

“After having you snot all over me the whole night through, your saliva is unimpressive,” Megatron told him. The Seeker tried to talk through his hand and started coughing again. It had the desired effect anyway as Megatron let him go so that he could cough freely.

“I hope you catch it, too,” Starscream wheezed after a moment.

“An apparent possibility,” his commander conceded. “Although, since I am otherwise relatively healthy and you are not, at least I will not be confined to my bed if I do.”

“Like you actually care about my health,” the Seeker muttered, pulling his tray over and tearing a piece from one of the meat chunks. He brought it up to eye level and made a face at it. “You like seeing me miserable.”
He forced himself to put the meat in his mouth and immediately gagged.

“Yes, Starscream,” Megatron snorted, watching as the smaller man shuddered his way through his first ever bite of meat. “You've sussed me out. You are the one person whose suffering will always bring me joy.”

Starscream glared and chewed faster to free his mouth for a rebuttal, but Megatron had moved on to investigate Skywarp's drama by the time he'd finally swallowed.

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Really the amount of blood Skywarp had gotten on Slipstream's top was inconsequential, and it was a black top anyway. She was just in the mood to yell at someone, and knew that having that someone be Soundwave—although more accurate—was counterproductive.

What made Soundwave so different from any other human man, she wondered as she scrubbed ferociously at the blood spots in the bathroom sink. Everything she knew about them said that human males were driven purely by hormones and the prized appendages between their legs. She knew Soundwave had one, though it had been a while since she'd actually seen it. So, why wasn't he doing anything about it?

Thusfar, Slipstream had done everything short of stripping down naked and shoving her hands down the intelligence officer's pants to let him know what she wanted from him, and it wasn't as if he hadn't returned any of her affections in kind! He complimented her, he actively sought her company, he shared a bed with her, he held her hand. Soundwave wasn't as stupid as Megatron and Starscream; he had to be perfectly aware that, apart from official declarations, they were pretty much already in a relationship. So, why hadn't he ravished her yet like Liam did Francine in *Highlanders at High Noon*? Slipstream was dying to know what it would feel like when he pressed his iron-hard tumescence into the glistening portals of her womanhood, but he seemed utterly immune to her feminine spell.

Was it because he wasn't human? Well, neither was she. And Megatron and Starscream were supposed to be far from human as well, but that certainly didn't stop them drooling all over each other at every chance they got. If only she could convince Starscream to unwind a bit and just throw himself at Megatron. She was fairly sure it wouldn't matter how well their commander understood recreational sex; if there was a needy little seeker grinding away in his lap, even someone as dim-witted as Megatron would get the hint.

Slipstream snorted at the image of the two of them bumbling their way through their first sexual encounter, and then stopped thoughtfully, the fabric of her shirt twisting in her fingers. At this point, even with all of his Cybertronian pride and bullheaded stupidity, Megatron probably would fuck her cousin if the bony little dweeb just spread his legs and said “please.” So, what was stopping her from doing the same to Soundwave?

Come to think of it, maybe Soundwave was waiting for her to say “please.” While she wasn't sure she'd put it past their commander to just take what he wanted from Starscream should push ever come to shove, Soundwave struck her as the sort who would want a clear invitation before making a move. Of course, she would have to get him alone first.

The Seeker femme hummed thoughtfully and turned off the sink. She hadn't gotten all the blood out of her shirt, but it was enough that she was sure it would come clean the rest of the way when
they took it to the landromat. She wrung the water from it and glanced up at her shirtless reflection in the mirror. Today's bra was a lacy black and red number she'd swiped from a department store downtown a couple nights ago. It was uncomfortable but pushed her breasts together fetchingly so that the pendant on her necklace nestled comfortably between two plump mounds of cream. No man could resist the opportunity to plunge his hand between a pair of perky, supple breasts freely offered.

Slipstream grinned, and then draped her shirt over the sink to dry before parading back into the main room with a dramatic sigh. Soundwave was sat on the double bed, wiping Skywarp's arms with a disinfectant cloth. Her cousin looked far more relaxed with him than he had the first time the intelligence officer had helped dress his wounds.

“My shirt will need proper washing,” she announced to the room at large. “I suppose it's about time we made another landromat run.”

“Okay,” Megatron grunted, not looking up from the city map he, Starscream, and Thundercracker were studying on the twin bed.

Starscream, on the other hand, looked up quite sharply before shoving his emptied breakfast tray aside and jumping out of the bed.

“And where do you think you're going?” his commander demanded, catching the smaller man's waistband before he could get too far.

“Bathroom,” the Seeker replied simply, and Megatron released him. He immediately shoved past Slipstream with an almost panicked look on his face.

“What is your problem?” the young woman snarled, but he'd already slammed the door behind himself. A second later, she heard the shower go on and shook her head in disbelief. There were more important things on her mind, though.

She adjusted her bra with a huff and sashayed over to the double bed. Soundwave looked up as she approached, and she twisted her features into a seductive smile.

“If you are planning to make a trip to the landromat, would you make sure and take the twins' things with you please?” the intelligence officer asked her as he unwrapped some bandages.

“Of course,” Slipstream simpered, leaning forward to rest her hands on the edge of the mattress so that her upper arms pushed her breasts out alluringly. “Anything for you, Soundwave. Although... wouldn't you rather come with me yourself?”

Her cousin turned around and gave her a curious look, which she ignored. Soundwave's eyes flicked from her face to her breasts, and then to the other side of the room where the twins were busy pulling apart one of the foam balls for their toy gun.

“I believe Rumble and Frenzy would enjoy that,” he said, starting to wrap gauze around Skywarp's arm.

“We don't have to bring them,” Slipstream insisted, angling her features into a pout. “We can just have some time alone—just me and you. I'm sure we don't need the twins to be a bit... naughty.”

“That would be counterproductive,” Soundwave pointed out. “As Thundercracker is staying here with Starscream for the evening, one of us will need to take the twins and Skywarp will go with the other.”
“I wanna go with Soundwave!” Skywarp spoke up abruptly.

“That seems a reasonable option,” the intelligence officer agreed, his lips quirking slightly. “Would you mind taking the twins, then, Slipstream?”

The young woman straightened up, eyes narrowing slightly as she watched her cousin's beaming face.

“Not at all,” she hissed.

No man could resist the opportunity to plunge his hand between a pair of perky, supple breasts... except the ones who could.
Two days later, Starscream couldn't take it any longer.

He had been patient, he had been compliant, but it had been three days and there was only so much time he could take of being stuck in a hotel room with Thundercracker before slowly descending into madness. He hadn't even been allowed out of the bed except to use the bathroom for spark's sake! For three days!

Starscream didn't care how sick he felt or how weak and shaky he still was, he couldn't do it for another day. He wouldn't. He was a warrior, Primus dammit! Warriors did not spend three days in bed because they were malnourished or infected with a low level virus.

It was late in the morning, and Starscream found himself wide awake with a horrifically dry throat and an empty water glass while his comrades slept off the night's activities around him. Well. Why should he have to wait for one of them to wake up just to get some water that didn't come from the bathroom tap?

He was trapped in Megatron's arms, as usual, but Starscream had garnered more than enough experience getting out of that situation. Carefully, he lifted the heavy, muscular limb that had fallen across his chest sometime while he was asleep and arranged it gently at his leader's side. Then, he started wriggling his way out from beneath the rest of the giant of a man with small, cautious movements. It took several minutes, but finally he was free to slip down over the side of the bed. Starscream stayed seated by the bed for a moment, his head resting on the edge of the mattress to avoid one of his increasingly common dizzy spells, and watched Megatron's face for the tiniest movement.

When he'd satisfied himself both that the other man was not feigning sleep to jump him as soon as his back was turned, and that his own legs weren't going to crumple from beneath him the second he stood up, Starscream collected his glass from the windowsill and tiptoed across the room, shivering as he went. He'd just been planning to get water from the lobby, but maybe it would be good to get outside in the sunlight, too.

The Seeker sent another glance over his shoulder at Megatron's incumbent form as he reached the door before starting to open it. He winced as the hinges let out a pained creak, almost as if they were screaming his escape to the room at large.

“Where are you going?” a soft feminine voice asked from behind him.

Starscream jumped around to see Slipstream watching him sleepily from the sofa. He mouthed something rude at her, and her eyebrows went up.

“Sorry, Screamer!” she shouted. “I didn't catch that.”

There was a rustling of blankets and groans from both beds, and Starscream glared daggers at his cousin, who was looking decidedly smug. Bitch. She was just bitter because she hadn't been able to spend as much time with Soundwave since Starscream had taken ill.

“Starscream!” Megatron's voice boomed across the room, and the Seeker sighed before shifting his glare from his cousin to his leader. “Get back here!” the other man barked, pointing at the bed, as if Starscream was some errant pet.
“I’m getting water,” the Seeker rasped, shaking the empty cup in Megatron's general direction.

“There’s water in the bathroom,” Slipstream pointed out as she made herself comfortable on the couch once more.

Starscream narrowed his eyes at her, considering if it was worth getting punched to fill his glass at the sink and empty it over her. Probably not. The last of the bruises on his face was finally almost faded. Anyway, his legs were starting to shake, and his ears were filling with that white noise he got when he was edging toward a collapse.

He heaved a sigh and wobbled his way back to the bedside, glaring murderously at his commander the whole way.

“You can't keep me locked in here forever,” he muttered when he'd reached him.

“I never intended to,” Megatron snorted, reaching out to take his wrist, thumb caressing his warm skin. “But I see no reason I couldn’t. I have already managed to keep you here three days, after all.”

“Exactly!” Starscream snapped, ignoring his body's insistent warnings that he get in the bed or get deposited on the linoleum tiles beside it. “Three days, and I’m better now.” He cleared his throat and utterly failed at keeping his voice strong and clear when he continued, “You are being illogical.”

“Really?” Megatron challenged, raising an eyebrow and reclining back into the pillows. “How so?”

“I am better than the rest of them,” his second pointed out. “You know I am. I can steal more money in less than an hour than any of them can in an entire night.”

“You know that I can feel you shaking, right?” his commander told him.

Before Starscream could reply, Megatron yanked on his captive wrist, and the Seeker toppled forward. He landed with an indignant squawk, which was overshadowed by the grunt Megatron let out as 45 kilos of very bony young man fell across his stomach.

Starscream pushed himself up a bit and snickered at his leader's pained expression—served the fragger right. Megatron's dark eyes cracked open to glare at him, and the larger man started to sit up, knocking Starscream into his lap. As the Seeker made to push himself up again, muttering in indignation, his forearm pressed against something stiff in the other man's pants. He shot upward just as Megatron jerked forward with a breathless grunt, and there was a resounding thunk as they collided.

“What are you two doing?” Starscream heard his older brother’s voice drift hazily from the double bed.

He hissed in reply and curled in on himself more tightly, clutching at his throbbing head.

“Nothing,” Megatron grunted a moment later.

Starscream felt a tug on the water glass he’d still been holding and released it. His commander muttered something at him about staying where he was before getting up in a creak of bed springs and limping across the room.

The Seeker didn’t look up until he’d heard the door click shut behind him. He would like to think that Megatron’s little reaction had been on his account, but thanks to a rather loud conversation between Slipstream and Soundwave the other day, they now all knew that “morning wood” was a
default state for most men. Why Starscream didn't suffer it himself was anyone's guess (apparently even Skywarp did), but then again, he hadn't had many reactions at all in the last week or so—not even when he was watching Megatron stretch after his shower the previous evening. Which wasn’t to say that Megatron wasn’t still a far larger fixture in his thoughts than he would like.

As usual, humanity kept on finding new ways to be unfair and confusing.

When Starscream woke up properly that evening, everyone else was up already, though Megatron, Slipstream, and Soundwave were nowhere to be seen. His four remaining comrades were crowding round the bathroom door as if there were some kind of show inside. Intrigued, Starscream rolled off the bed, dragging a blanket with him to throw around his shoulders.

“Hey,” Thundercracker greeted him when he drew near, and Skywarp shot him a quick smile before turning back to the bathroom. The twins were sat on the floor just in front of the door, staring with something like amazement as Slipstream's voice echoed out.

“Hold still!” his cousin snapped, and Starscream shouldered his brothers aside to get a better view.

Soundwave and Slipstream were both inside, the former sat on the closed toilet lid while the latter used a small blade to scrape a creamy white substance off his cheek, taking his facial hair with it. There were several small cuts on those parts of his face where Slipstream had already cut away the hair, and even as Starscream watched, Soundwave pulled away with a sharp hiss and a small trickle of blood welled up where Slipstream had just nicked him.

“If you didn't keep moving, I wouldn't have cut you!” Slipstream grumbled impatiently, scraping hair and foam from the blade before shoving his chin back to run it along his jaw now.

“What are you doing?” Starscream sneered at them, and the young woman threw a glance his way.

“Shaving,” she explained. “What does it look like?”

“What are you doing?” Starscream sneered at them, and the young woman threw a glance his way.

“Shaving,” she explained. “What does it look like?”

“Torture,” her cousin returned.

“I'll tell you what's torture is having to look at his face covered in this stupid bush all day long,” Slipstream countered, carefully scraping the knife over Soundwave's adam's apple. “I'll do Megs for you later if you want.”

Soundwave stared disapprovingly down his nose at her, doubtless wishing he could scold her for the informal address without risking a blade through the throat, accidental or otherwise. Starscream just scoffed.

“Megatron won't let you anywhere near him after he sees what you've done to Soundwave,” he pointed out. “Where did you get that knife, anyway?”

“It's a razor,” she told him. “And I bought it last night.”

“She stole it,” one of the twins announced.
“What did I say about talking?” Slipstream snapped, jabbing the razor at her accuser.

“I will not allow you to intentionally harm Lord Megatron,” Soundwave spoke up, taking advantage of the break in the shaving.

“It's not intentional,” Slipstream grumbled, rolling her eyes. “Stop moving!”

Starscream pulled his blanket closer around himself and shunted a twin out of the bathroom door so that he could sink down against the frame and watch. Behind him, his brothers said something about getting food and Thundercracker squeezed his shoulder lightly before slipping away.

He wasn't sure how he felt about his cousin cutting divots out of his leader's face, but he did agree with her about removing the excess hair. A few weeks ago, it had lent him a mature and almost ferocious sort of air, but now it looked more like it was trying to swallow his face whole.

“I can do Megatron,” Starscream spoke up after a moment.

Both Slipstream, Soundwave, and the twins all paused to look at him.

“What!?” he croaked. “My hand is far steadier than Slipstream's! I'm sure Megatron would prefer I was the one who did it.”

“I would prefer you got back in bed, Starscream,” Megatron's voice rang out, and the Seeker started slightly. He hadn't heard the door open again after his brothers, but there his leader was with a tray that undoubtedly held Starscream's breakfast.

The Seeker glared up at him. Stupid man and his stupid manliness.

“I don’t like eating in bed, and I'm not any worse off sitting here than there,” Starscream argued. It wasn't strictly true. His butt and spine were already starting to ache where they made contact with the floor and doorknob, but those were trivial details.

Megatron glowered at him for a moment, and the Seeker braced himself for an argument. Instead his commander shrugged and muttered, “I suppose that’s fair,” before setting the tray down beside his second.

Starscream blinked at it in surprise, and a large hand ruffled his already sleep-mussed hair as Megatron stepped over him and the twins to get into the bathroom. The Seeker listened to him interrogate Slipstream about the state of his intelligence officer's face for a moment before taking a piece of naan from his tray.

“How come you don't need to shave?” one of the twins asked in a low voice, and Starscream looked up to see both of them watching him curiously.

“My body is more efficient,” he answered haughtily through a mouthful of bread.

“Slipstream said only adults have to shave,” Frenzy announced. “So are you not an adult?”

“Only some adults have to shave,” Starscream corrected petulantly, reaching for the bowl of mixed fruit that Megatron had brought with his meal and pausing. It was entirely mango and strawberry—the only two fruits he liked. He glanced at his commander's back, and then set the fruit aside.

“Can I eat that?” Rumble asked, pointing to it.

“No,” Starscream snapped.
“But you don’t even want it,” the boy pouted at him.

“I’m saving it for after my shower,” Starscream insisted.

“Why do you take so many showers?” Frenzy wanted to know.

“Because this planet is disgusting and filthy,” the Seeker explained, picking up his plate of curry. He started separating out as much untainted rice as he could, pushing it to the side of the plate so he could eat that after his ‘shower’, too.

“You don’t even go outside. How are you still getting dirty?” Rumble put in.

“Stop asking stupid questions,” Starscream told him. Satisfied with his rice preservation project, he braced himself for the dreaded curry. He was just grimacing through his first bite when he heard his name crop up in the conversation happening in the bathroom.

“—watch Starscream tonight,” Megatron was saying.

“ What!? ” Slipstream shrieked back, and Starscream choked.

Megatron was going to leave him with Slipstream!?

“Why not Thundercracker again?” his cousin demanded. “Or Skywarp, or Soundwave, or you? Don't pretend like you wouldn't love spending the night here with him!”

“Don't presume to question my orders or understand me on a personal level, femme,” Megatron growled dangerously.

Starscream scrambled for his water, still trying to dislodge the last of whatever had gone down his windpipe so he could put in his own opinion.

“It's because I'm a girl, isn't it!?” Slipstream went on, gesticulating wildly. Soundwave hovered behind her, trying to get the razor out of her hand before she accidentally hit one of them with it in the confined space. “You men think you're so great! Think you can lord it over us women anytime you want just because you've got a flabby bit of dick between your legs—”

“ Enough, Slipstream!” Megatron barked.

The young woman’s mouth snapped shut, though she continued to glare. Soundwave took the opportunity to disarm her.

“I don't care what you have between your legs!” Megatron continued. “The twins do not operate at full capacity under your supervision, and you aren't suited to help Skywarp if his mind becomes unbalanced. I myself will be otherwise engaged this evening, and it is not your place to question how or where. You will stay with Starscream, and I do not wish to hear any further complaint on the matter”—he whirled around to his second, who was just getting his breath back—“from either of you.”

“I didn't say anything,” the Seeker wheezed, throwing his commander a dirty look.

Otherwise engaged indeed... What could Megatron possibly have to do that was so important he had to leave him with Slipstream of all people? Starscream picked up his fruit and started shoving angry bites of it down his throat as his commander stepped back over him.
It wasn’t just the fact that Slipstream was so abysmally below him in the command chain that bothered Starscream so much about being left in her care, but also the fact that he knew she wasn’t even going to do it right. The second he drifted off for a few minutes, she had disappeared without a trace, leaving him alone in the dark. How was Starscream supposed to get water now if he wasn’t allowed to leave his bed and his caretaker had run off? Well, at least if he was lucky she would forget to bring him lunch, too.

Starscream glanced over at the annoyingly bright alarm clock and let out a groan when he saw it was only 11:05. He had at least six hours until the others came back, and Primus knew when Slipstream would decide to show her face again.

The Seeker sighed and twisted about in his covers, wondering if he could manage a trip down to the lobby without anyone finding out. Of course, even if Slipstream did catch him, she couldn’t very well tattle on him without risking Megatron finding out that she had left him alone in the first place. This might be the chance he’d been waiting for to get out for a bit.

Yet, despite his determination that morning, Starscream found himself reluctant to leave the bed now. His body ached from lying around so long, but his head ached more every time he moved it. He knew that he was getting better—his nose was not so clogged and his fever had finally abated the previous evening—but it seemed that his body wasn’t getting the memo. A niggling voice in the back of his mind kept saying it was because of the purging, and he did his best to ignore it. After all, it wasn’t as if he didn’t keep anything down. He typically set aside a small portion of his meal (usually some of the rice and maybe some fruit) that he would consume along with his dietary supplements after he’d flushed the rest of it. By his own calculations, he should still be getting enough calories, vitamins, and minerals to function on. No, the problem must lay elsewhere. Perhaps he just needed to get his body used to the idea of being out of bed again.

But that would require getting out of bed, and he just couldn’t be bothered.

As annoying as it could be, Starscream had appreciated Thundercracker’s company the last few days. Soul-crushing misery had been a frequent companion throughout his human experience so far, but it hadn’t been so bad the whole week he was out conning other humans with Megatron. Instead of feeling like every moment was a struggle to stay aloft in a maelstrom of fears, doubts, and self-loathing, it had come in occasional waves, usually while he had his head in the toilet or was alone for too long. Ever since he’d collapsed in the club a few nights ago, it had gone back to the maelstrom, and now there was no one to distract him from it.

Useless, useless, useless, the thoughts went.

Starscream did his best to shove them away with the reminder that he was far from useless. As he had pointed out to Megatron that morning, he was better at stealing money than all the others combined.

What’s the point in being good at something if you’re stuck in bed where you can’t do it? the thoughts insisted anyway.
Ah, but he wouldn’t be stuck in bed forever. His cold would be completely better in a few more
days, and then Megatron would let him leave.

*Will he, though? Because the doctor said the weakness and collapsing was from the malnutrition,
and that’s the part that isn’t getting any better. As long as you won’t eat the humans’ food, you’re
just going to be lying around in bed for the rest of your life.*

The rest of his life as a human, that was. As a Cybertronian, he’d been indispensable. If Megatron
hadn’t thrown him away yet, he wasn’t about to now.

*Really? Where is everyone, then? Why did he leave you with Slipstream? He knows Slipstream. He
has to have known that she wouldn’t actually take care of you.*

That was true. Why would Megatron leave him with such an unsuited caretaker? Maybe he’d
known from the beginning that she would abandon him and just wanted his second to suffer.

*Or he knew that you wouldn’t be suspicious if she did abandon you.*

Because then they could *all* abandon him and he wouldn’t notice a thing until it was too late.

No, they wouldn’t do that.

*Wouldn’t they?*

Thundercracker and Skywarp wouldn’t do that.

*Thundercracker abandoned you once before. When you went to the Academy. Remember?*

He wouldn’t. And they left all their stuff here. And…

A cold knot of terror clenched in Starscream’s chest. It was irrational and stupid, but he couldn’t
stop wondering about what would happen if they really had left him. He pulled the blankets up
over his head, taking several deep breaths, and then determined that he would have to find
something to do to distract himself.

He pushed himself out of bed carefully to avoid any mishaps and ambled over to turn on the lights,
paying attention to his body’s many aches and pains for signs that it was about to betray him
again. It wasn’t so bad this time, though, and he decided that his struggles that morning must have
been from nothing more than exhaustion. As soon as the lights flicked on, he felt marginally better.

Almost on autopilot, Starscream wandered into the bathroom and looked around as if his
subconscious was expecting to find some sort of entertainment in there.

The razor Slipstream had used to shave Soundwave that morning was still sitting on the edge of the
sink, and Starscream picked it up, flicking his thumb over the blade to gauge its sharpness. He
thought of the knife that the human gangsters had turned on him a while back. This was weaker,
but sharper. And it folded in on itself. As a concealed weapon, it would give him a nice advantage
the next time some grimy human tried to take advantage of his diminutive stature. Of course,
Slipstream would doubtless blame him if she noticed it missing, but he could always hide it until
suspicion had passed.

Mood lightened further at the thought of Slipstream’s reaction when the razor came up missing,
Starscream moved back into the main room and headed for the double bed. (Megatron would
search their own bed far too thoroughly should a potential weapon show up missing with
Starscream the primary culprit.) He pulled up the edge of the sheet and carefully slit a few stitches
along one of the seams along the bottom before sliding the blade into the hole. Perfect.

He straightened the sheet again and smiled appreciatively at his handiwork. Then, his gaze fell upon the sofa and the mountain of Slipstream’s possessions beside it. What else could his cousin be hiding?

Starscream dug through the pile carefully, arranging the soft, colorful clothes on the couch so that he would be able to remember what order to replace them in. A couple of books fell out of a purple dress, and Starscream paused.

Slipstream’s books were her source of knowledge on sex. They were dirty, shameful things that no self-respecting Decepticon should keep around. As her superior officer, he ought to confiscate them… and find out exactly what human trash she’d been pumping into her mind. It was the responsible thing to do, both as an officer and a family member.

Starscream picked up one of the books—a thick volume entitled Secrets of the Sea. The cover displayed a shirtless man whose chest bore a striking resemblance to Megatron’s. Starscream flipped through the pages… and 4,000 Rupees fell out.

The Seeker’s eyes bulged, and he hastily reached for the other book. There were another 3,500 rupees tucked up in that one. Practically humming with glee, Starscream gathered the money into his waistband and started putting the clothes back where they’d been.

When Slipstream came back, he was going to wave it in her face, and tell her it was the price for his silence on her abandoning him.

Starscream hopped back into bed with the cash tucked into his waistband and the books clutched in his hands, and nestled under the blankets again, shivering slightly with both cold and excitement. Sometimes, he was so brilliant he scared himself.

It took Starscream a bit of browsing to find the first sex scene in Secrets of the Sea, but was it ever worth it when he did:

*Ike trailed his fingers down my sun-warmed skin, leaving gooseflesh and desire everywhere they touched,* he read. *He sighed against my cheek, warm and moist, and I ran my own hands through his thick, dark hair.*

*“Touch me, Ike,” I whispered, spreading my thighs in invitation. “I’ve waited so long to feel you stir me.”*

*“This is wrong, Serafina,” he rumbled, his hands hesitating, but all I could think of was the way his deep voice vibrated through me and rocked my very core.*

Starscream bit his lower lip as a point of heat started in his own core. This was all too familiar. If he were to replace Ike’s name with Megatron’s and this ditzy Serafina with his own… Well, he’d have to ignore certain other aspects of Serafina’s character, too, but it was close enough.

He read on, comparing the novel’s descriptions to his own memories of lying beneath Megatron’s all-encompassing bulk, and the fantasies he’d had about having large hands run over his body the way that Ike’s did Serafina’s. What would it feel like to have Megatron’s fingers press into him, to stretch him, to stroke the “pinnacle of his arousal”? What kind of noise would his commander make when Starscream wrapped his own delicate fingers around the other man’s “engorged member”?

The tension in the Seeker’s gut grew, and he felt a familiar pressure between his legs for the first
time in days. He considered for a minute, and then he took the book and hurried into the bathroom, 
his heart pounding in his throat and head.

Starscream locked the door behind himself and pulled his pants off, feeling rather like a sparkling 
eating stolen energon goodies in the storeroom again again as he sank down onto the cold tiles. He 
held the book with one hand and cautiously fisted his own arousal with the other.

Several minutes and five pages of heady beach sex later, both Starscream and Serafina were 
splattered in cum and sighing in contentment. The Seeker tossed the book aside and made a face at 
the gummy mess he’d made of his hand and inner thigh. At least it wasn’t on his face or chest. He 
didn’t think much at all of Serafina’s enjoyment of that. When he and Megatron had sex…

But you and Megatron aren’t going to have sex.

And just like that, Starscream’s mood plummeted again.

Because even if they genuinely were human and there was more reason to chase this organic urge 
other than not going off in their pants in the middle of the night as Thundercracker had rather 
embarrassingly done a few days ago, Starscream was still himself and Megatron was still 
Megatron. They hated each other and they always had.

The Seeker got to his feet, wincing at the soreness in his backside where the tiles had ground 
against his pelvic bones, and moved to wash his hands in the sink. His legs shook with the effort of 
staying upright as he wiped them clean, too, and Starscream felt a sudden wave of sleepiness wash 
over him.

Curling on his side in the twin bed once more, the young man pressed his face into Megatron’s 
pillow and inhaled deeply. Even with his congestion, he could smell his leader on it, a combination 
of soap and sweat and something that spoke inexplicably of comfort and safety.

Hatred could be a strange thing.

Slipstream had spent the night slipping in and out of clubs and grinding against a variety of strange, 
drunk men. She’d come out of it with some 100,000 Rupees snagged from the hopeful idiots’ 
pockets and a renewed sense of determination brought on by the the satisfaction of seeing man 
after man fall to her charms.

She was going to have sex with Soundwave. It was just a question of when.

With her bout of success, the young woman was in a good enough mood to think of grabbing a 
glass of water for Starscream on her way through the lobby.

Starscream was asleep when Slipstream reached the hotel room, huddled on one side of the bed as 
if unconsciously making room for another body. She crossed the room and stared down at him for 
a moment, wondering what on earth Megatron found so attractive about the whiny little bag of 
bones. Then, she reached out and flicked his nose.

The young man woke with a start, eyes wide with terror for a second before they focused on his 
cousin’s face.
“Where the frag have you been!?” he demanded, voice cracking.

“Around,” she told him, holding out the cup of water.

He glared at it petulantly before taking it and sitting up so he could sip without spilling.

“I ought to tell Megatron what you did,” he muttered into the cup.

“You could,” she shrugged. “Or you could take this and shut up.” She slipped a wad of rupees from her back pocket and waved it in front of his face. Starscream’s eyes bulged for a moment before narrowing thoughtfully.

“Or… we could give everything you got to Megatron and tell him that we both earned it,” he ventured. “Then he’d have to admit that I’m fit enough to leave the hotel room.”

Slipstream let out a bark of laughter.

“You think I’d give these kinds of earnings to Megatron for your sake?” she scoffed. “He’d just slag us both for disobeying orders, anyway, and you are not fit enough to leave the hotel room.”

“How would you know?” her cousin demanded, face pulling into a scowl.

“Because if you were, then you wouldn’t still be here,” Slipstream pointed out. “There wasn’t anything stopping you all night except your own stupidly dysfunctional body.”

“At least when I’m healthy, Megatron notices me as more than just a convenient babysitter,” Starscream muttered, smirking as he raised his glass to take another sip of water.

Slipstream reached out and knocked the bottom of it so that about half the cup’s contents sloshed up his nose and down his front. The younger Seeker choked and spluttered, and Slipstream laughed.

“Except you’re not healthy, Starscream, and it’s your own damn fault,” she smirked. “It’s a shame, really. Even if you are small and useless and male, you might’ve had a chance with Megatron if you were at least healthy enough to—”

A veil of water crashed into her, and Starscream cackled hoarsely as she stood there gasping in indignation as her dark hair dripped into her face.

Well. She wasn’t about to let him get away with that. It was about time the worthless, freeloading, little snake got what was coming to him already, and if Megatron was too busy thinking with his dick instead of his brain to do it himself, then she’d do it for him.

As soon as the initial shock had worn off, Slipstream shoved her hair out of her face and advanced on her cousin. His expression shifted from glee to horror in an instant, and he started scrambling to untangle himself from the covers, chucking his cup at her like he thought that would slow her down. The projectile missed its mark entirely, and Slipstream seized the blankets before Starscream could escape them and flung them up over his head.

He let out a muffled scream and struggled frantically as she wrestled him face first onto the mattress, putting her weight on the backs of his legs so he couldn’t kick her off. A flash of something pink stuck partway down the back of his sweatpants caught her eye, and she gasped as she noticed the paperback books that had been hidden beneath the blanket.

“You little sneak!” she hissed, slamming her fist into the half-healed gash on his side, though she
was enjoying this too much to really be angry. He let out a satisfying shriek, and she started beating
his narrow back with one fist while she shoved his blanket-wrapped head down into the mattress
with the other.

He screamed something that sounded like, “I’ll tell Megatron,” and Slipstream laughed. She didn’t
care what Starscream told their commander at this point.

Starscream struggled harder as she began to twist the blanket around his neck, but even several
inches shorter than him, she was heavier. He started to make muffled gasping noises, like it was
getting difficult to breathe. Slipstream utilized both hands to pull tighter and cackled sadistically at
the strangled choke the young man made.

“You know the real reason Megatron’s never gonna be with you?” she asked him, letting up just
enough to ensure she wouldn’t kill him. “It’s not because he’s too proud to give in to human
instincts, or because you’re both men, or even because you’ve tried to kill him so many times. It’s
because you’re pathetic! You’re a sniveling little nothing who can barely even keep himself alive.
You’re just a burden on all of us. Everyone talks about it when you aren’t around. We all wish
you’d just die already and leave us be!”

Starscream stopped struggling, his body relaxing beneath her. Slipstream blinked and loosened her
grip slightly.

“Starscream…?” she called, leaning forward as she tried to tell if he was still breathing.

The young man bucked violently, and Slipstream fell off him with a cry of surprise. A foot collided
with her stomach, shoving her off the bed. Starscream scrambled up to the headboard, coughing
and gasping for breath as he ripped the covers away from his face. His usually pale skin was
flushed and sweaty, and his eyes glistened from exertion and… Tears?

It struck Slipstream suddenly how young Starscream was as a human. Granted, he’d been young
for a Cybertronian, too, but she hadn’t seen him as such since before Megatron had disappeared.
Now, it was like she was watching her youngling cousin on the verge of breakdown after
Thundercracker had refused to accept his decision to enter the science academy all over again. Had
that last comment been taking it too far?

The young woman’s own smirk faltered as regret twinged through her, and a part of her wanted to
take it back—to tell him how devastated she’d really be if she lost any of the tiny family she had
left. But she shoved it down because this was Starscream, and he wasn’t a youngling anymore.


His nostrils flared, and Slipstream braced herself as the skinny young man threw himself across the
bed at her with a broken scream of rage. She caught his wrists easily and held him at bay as he
shrieked and thrashed, trying to claw at her face. It was one of the most gratifying moments of
Slipstream’s entire life. Finally some payback for all those years Starscream had been lording it
over her...

The door to the room opened and Starscream froze, staring over his cousin’s head at whoever had
just walked in. Slipstream didn’t bother to turn around. It was probably just one of her other
cousins, anyway.

There was a pause before anyone spoke, and it wasn’t Thundercracker or Skywarp, or even
Megatron.
“Explain,” Soundwave’s disapproving monotone sounded far closer than expected, and Slipstream turned to look at him so quickly that her hair, still wet in places, whipped around in an arch of water droplets. If any of them hit the intelligence officer, he didn’t show it.

“She tried to kill me!” her cousin wailed, and Slipstream released him with a rough shove, confident Soundwave would stop him if he tried to attack her again.

“I did nothing of the sort,” she insisted. “I was simply trying to keep him in bed like Lord Megatron ordered.”

“Wha… She left me here alone all night, and then she came back and tried to strangle me!” Starscream shrieked, his voice breaking with more than just the strain on his throat as he gesticulated wildly at her.

“Oh come on,” Slipstream scoffed, rolling her eyes. “Stop telling lies just because you don’t want to get left with someone who’ll actually discipline you for once.”

Her cousin made to retort, and Soundwave held up a hand to stop him. The intelligence officer then strode toward the bathroom and held open the door, saying simply, “A hot shower might help you feel better.”

Starscream gaped back and forth between the two of them for a moment, then sprang off the bed and fled for the bathroom, a half-stifled sob escaping him before he could slam the door behind himself. Slipstream stifled a laugh, and Soundwave continued to stare at the closed door for a while until the sound of the shower drowned out the sound of the young man’s tears.

“Why is Commander Starscream upset?” he asked, and Slipstream hastily wiped the amusement from her face as he turned to her.

She hadn’t heard him use Starscream’s title in ages. It was doubtless an effort to remind her that were they in any other situation right now, her cousin would be well within his rights to have her executed for such an affront and probably would. All it really served to remind her of was how much he’d deserved it.

“I imagine because I sat on him for a bit to stop him leaving, but you try and tell me Megatron wouldn’t have done the same thing if he’d been here,” she said, folding her arms defiantly.

Soundwave blinked at her and then nodded, apparently accepting her answer. Slipstream relaxed a bit and turned to gather up her belongings that Starscream had tried to steal. Her hand hesitated over the copy of *Secrets of the Sea*.

She turned back to Soundwave, who was now gathering up some of the foam balls that had come with the toy gun she’d bought the twins a while back.

“Where are Rumble and Frenzy?” she asked.

“We ran into your cousins at some point and Thundercracker offered to watch them if I would come back and check on you and Starscream,” he answered, not turning to look at her.

“How long do you reckon until they’re all back?” she pressed.

“It is not very late yet,” he said cryptically, and Slipstream glanced at the clock.

It was only three in the morning. The rest of them wouldn’t be back until five at the earliest, she was sure. And Starscream would probably be in the bathroom until Megatron or Thundercracker
coaxed him out. Which meant that she was alone with Soundwave. For at least two hours. No
twins, no cousins, and no Megatron. Just him and her.

The likelihood that she’d get another chance like this…

She wasn’t a coward like Starscream; she knew what she wanted. She set her dark eyes on
Soundwave’s unsuspecting form and narrowed them. Slipstream had survived this long by trusting
her instincts. She was just going to have to rely on them this one more time.

Chapter End Notes

Well, friends. I hope you're ready because all of the proverbial shits are about to hit their respective fans. >:3

I have been looking forward to this so much... Lol
Chapter 51

Soundwave sighed as he bent to pick up yet another of the colorful foam balls. How the twins had so many of them and where they kept coming from he wasn’t sure, but suspected that it involved Slipstream. He hadn’t minded her buying the toy in the first place—it gave them something to do other than breaking the furniture—but this was getting ridiculous.

The intelligence officer looked down at the horde of technicolor ammo he held in his arms and contemplated throwing them out the window and then feigning ignorance. Such a plan was unlikely to succeed, though. Rumble and Frenzy were as talented at reading him as he was them, and would probably guilt him into buying more anyway.

His twins were still out with Thundercracker and Skywarp now, and the only reason he’d left them there was because he trusted Thundercracker’s ability to wrangle them more than his ability to diffuse things if he’d returned to find the other two Seekers in… Well, the exact kind of scenario that Soundwave had found them in. Normally, the intelligence officer would trust Starscream’s ability to hold his own against his cousin, but clearly Thundercracker had been right to worry.

He’d let Slipstream keep her story for now, but he hadn’t missed the red marks on the other Seeker’s throat. Hopefully, they would fade before Megatron came back and Starscream would be too embarrassed to tell his side of the story.

“Soundwave?”

The intelligence officer turned at the sound of his name, arms still full of the foam balls, and found Slipstream smiling at him from the foot of the twin bed. It was a strange smile; almost predatory. Before he could parse out what it might mean, the slender young woman grasped the bottom of her tank top and pulled it over her head, tossing it to the floor. Then, she started to undo her bra, still fixing him with that uncomfortable smirk all the while.

“Are you hot?” Soundwave asked. “I could open the window if you like.”

Slipstream gave a tinkly little laugh as she dropped her bra on top of the tank top and slipped off the end of the bed.

“Yeah, I’m hot, Soundwave,” she told him, her voice unusually deep and husky. “I’m so hot for you.”

He frowned. That hadn’t even made any sense. Did she want him to open a window or not? She’d better cover up her breasts if she did because anyone in the street below or the building opposite would be able to see her as soon as he pulled back the curtains. Soundwave was about to point this out when Slipstream unzipped her skirt and dropped it to the floor. Followed by a pair of lacy blue panties.

The intelligence officer stood with his mouth open as pieces began to fall into place, but surely she wasn’t…

Slipstream ran her hands up over the curves of her hips, bringing them around to her front and finally cupping her breasts, her eyes fluttering shut as she let out a heady sigh. Soundwave was only vaguely aware of the foam balls spilling from his arms to bounce and roll across the floor.

Sweet Primus.
She was.

Soundwave swallowed, hard. What on Primus’s shining Cybertron had given her the impression that he would want her to... Oh. Oh, oh, oh. Actually, he could see exactly how she had gotten that impression. In fact, he had intentionally given her something like that impression at times, but he'd thought she was smart enough to understand that they couldn’t take their relationship in this direction.

Then again, however smart she was, Slipstream was also currently a human female at the peak of her fertility, and hormones could be powerful, confusing things. As the older, less hormone-riddled of the two, it was Soundwave’s duty to take control of this situation and remind her of the facts.

“Slipstream,” he said sternly, lifting his leg to take a step forward and finding himself doing the opposite instead.

“Soundwave,” she whispered, her voice and expression dripping with what he now realized was lust. It did not sound especially genuine, but then little did from her lips—her perfectly plump, dangerously red-painted lips...

Heat began to coil in Soundwave’s gut as he tried to find any part of Slipstream that he could look at without his human instincts shouting at him to do something he shouldn’t to it. He swallowed again.

Powerful, confusing things, indeed...

She stepped forward, petite hands outstretched to touch him, and he retreated rapidly, stepping on and almost tripping over several of the escaped balls. Slipstream caught him, pressing herself firmly against his chest as she helped him upright. He tried very hard not to notice how warm and soft her breasts felt against him or how perfectly they would fit in his hands. He needed to tell her off—to make her stop before they did something they’d both regret.

“...No,” was all he could manage.

Slipstream just smirked at him, those cruel lips of hers parting to reveal pearly white teeth. Some crazed part of the intelligence officer’s brain reflected that such good teeth were a mark of superior genetic coding, rather like her well-proportioned curves and her long, slender legs. The tension in his stomach started moving down.

“...No,” was all he could manage.

Slipstream just smirked at him, those cruel lips of hers parting to reveal pearly white teeth. Some crazed part of the intelligence officer’s brain reflected that such good teeth were a mark of superior genetic coding, rather like her well-proportioned curves and her long, slender legs. The tension in his stomach started moving down.

“Come on, Soundwave,” she breathed, snaking her arms up around his neck and pressing her pelvis forward against his. “I can tell you want it, too, you know.”

“Want” had nothing to do with this. Whether he wanted to or not, there were thousands of reasons that he shouldn’t, one of which seemed to be swimming around in his head like a mantra: she will get pregnant, she’ll get pregnant, she’ll get pregnant!!

He threw off the hand she was trying to sneak up the front of his shirt, ignoring the shocked expression she gave him in return.

“I will not mate with you,” he told her firmly, the way he would talk to one of his creations who was edging into hysterics.

The young woman’s expression shifted to confusion, and she stepped back slightly. The heat of her body against Soundwave’s vanished, and he wanted to scream at himself for missing it.

“Why?” Slipstream murmured, and then she sneered up at him. “Are you scared?”
Soundwave was unfazed. He knew well now how Slipstream’s anger was little more than a cover for her own fears. She belittled others to gain power over them, and she pushed people away because it was easier than being pushed away. It was no surprise that she and Starscream butted heads so often; they were remarkably similar.

To de-escalate this situation, Soundwave simply needed to address Slipstream’s fear that his rejection of her advances was a rejection of her as a person. It wasn’t anything wrong with her, it was just that…

“I do not want to,” he explained, taking a confident step back. Yes, that should resolve the situation nicely.

But Slipstream didn’t look as calm and composed as he had hoped.

She swallowed thickly, and her features fell as all the surprise in her gaze hardened into something else. Then, she stepped forward once more.

For a split-second, Soundwave thought she was about to re-initiate her earlier actions with a new tactic, but instead, she rose up on her toes, looking down her pointed nose at him with what could only be described as complete and utter disdain. She was a full foot shorter than him, but somehow she still managed to loom over him.

“Oh, then,” she hissed, her voice slow, careful, and icy cold.

Then, she turned away and began pulling her clothes back on with careful, even motions that matched her words, despite the slight tremble Soundwave could see in her hands. Everything he’d thought he understood about her dissolved in an instant. Had she misunderstood? Was she accepting his decision and just trying to hide her disappointment? Or was she really so irrational as not to realize how impractical it would be for them to have sexual intercourse right now?

“Slipstream?” he tried, reaching out for her. “You must see that our union simply would not make sense.”

The young woman turned around, now fully-clothed again, and Soundwave recoiled slightly at the expression on her face. Her lips were curled upward, but she wasn’t smiling. She couldn’t be; not with that much murder boiling in her eyes. After a painfully long pause, she opened her mouth and spoke in that same careful, icy tone:

“Fuck. You.”

And then she stormed over to the door, flinging it open with such force that the handle smashed a hole through the drywall. Soundwave blinked after her as her furious footfalls retreated down the hall.

Slipstream had to get out of this place; she didn’t care where to. She just had to get away from all these… men! Men who were so stupid and ignorant and thought that they knew everything when they just didn’t and…

She stopped walking and clutched a handful of hair in each hand, pulling at it painfully as she let out a furious shriek. It didn’t help. It didn’t help, and she was still stuck in this suffocating building
on this stifling planet in this nauseating body. Her hands clenched and unclenched, and she couldn’t bring herself to care how her long nails dug into the palms, piercing the soft skin.

Her throat was tight, and something was burning and blurring her eyes as she started walking again. Slipstream pushed open the door to the stairwell, not caring where she was going as long as it was far, far away from here.

Halfway down the first flight, she nearly ran into someone who was on his way up.

“Slipstream!” a familiar voice gasped, and she realized it was Skywarp. What he was doing back so early she didn’t know, but the sight of his concerned face only served to infuriate her more. He was the worst of the lot, sniveling and whining and pretending like he was some sweet, innocent little thing, and all the while playing his own games.

“Are you alright?” her cousin asked, leaning closer to peer into her face. “Do you want me to get Sound—”

Slipstream didn’t let him finish. She clenched her fist and sent it flying into Skywarp’s mouth as hard as she could.

The boy let out a cry of shock and pain as the blow sent him toppling backward down the last couple stairs to sprawl out on the landing. Slipstream didn’t stop there.

Soundwave liked Skywarp, didn’t he? He might hold Slipstream’s hand and tuck her against himself while he slept, but she was just the babysitter so that he could spend time with Skywarp and his nauseatingly sweet smile, wasn’t she?!

Her cousin was trying to get up, crying and dripping blood from his mouth, and Slipstream descended on him like a divine judgment. She kicked him in the chest, knocking him back again, and the sound of his terrified squeal and his head colliding with the wall were like music to her ears.

“You little bitch!” she snarled, grabbing him by the hair and lifting him. “You ever so much as look at him again and I’ll rip your fucking eyes out!”

“W-what did I d-do!?” Skywarp wailed, trying to pry her hand off his hair.

So, he was still going to play innocent, was he? Slipstream gave him a rough shake and pulled her other hand back to punch him again.

“SLIPSTREAM!”

Megatron’s furious roar made her jump, and her fist careened sideways into the drywall. The surprise quickly turned to anger, though. Here was another idiot who thought he was allowed to judge her. The ex-warlord was still a whole flight of stairs away, though, so she relieved her fury by kicking her cousin once more. He let out another high-pitched cry.

“Skywarp!” Thundercracker’s deep voice rang out as Megatron surged up the stairs toward her, three at a time, already raising a hand to strike her.

“Don’t you dare!” she shrieked, holding her ground as he reached them. “Don’t you dare hit me! After all the times you’ve… You have no right!”

Megatron froze, fist still raised, and a strange expression crossed his face.
Thundercracker’s fury was not so easily quelled, though, and Slipstream didn’t see him coming from around their commander’s bulk. His fist collided with the side of her face while she was busy watching Megatron for further signs of attack, and the blow knocked her head sideways, her long dark hair whipping around to cover most of her face.

“Does it make you feel big!?” her cousin shouted in her ear. “Does pushing him around make you feel powerful? Huh!? What’s he ever done to you!?”

She didn’t look up, staring instead at the accusing drops of Skywarp’s blood spattered about at her feet. There was blood in her own mouth now, too, staining her senses with a coppery sheen. Skywarp had huddled into the corner of the landing, where he was still sobbing in pain and terror, and Slipstream thought of her other cousin, probably still crying in the bathroom upstairs.

She risked a glance between her locks to see Megatron restraining Thundercracker, who looked angrier than she’d ever seen him, and she didn’t blame him.

And then, behind them, she saw the twins gaping at her from the landing below in absolute shock and hurt, and she’d never noticed before just how much they looked like tiny, innocent versions of their creator. Those were perfect mirrors of the expression Soundwave had given her just before she’d left the room.

She couldn’t be here anymore.

Before anyone could stop her, she turned and fled back up the stairs.
Megatron released Thundercracker as soon as Slipstream had disappeared, and the only thing keeping the Seeker from chasing after her and mauling her in the hallway was the sound of Skywarp’s sobs. He stepped away from their frozen commander and dropped onto the ground in front of his brother, carefully pulling the trembling, young man against himself.

Skywarp instantly latched onto him, tears soaking into Thundercracker’s shirt, and the older Seeker began to rock him, trying to resist the pull of despair his brother was unconsciously projecting at him.

Why was it always Skywarp that ended up getting hurt? And what the slag had possessed Slipstream to do such a thing in the first place? Why would anyone?

“We shouldn’t be out in the open,” Megatron’s deep voice came from behind him. “Come; we must get back to the room.”

Thundercracker resisted the urge to turn around and tell his leader to ram it up his own tail pipe. The man didn’t care about Skywarp, or even Slipstream. All he wanted was to get back and check on Starscream, because of course Starscream’s runny nose was more important than Skywarp getting the slag beaten out of him by a comrade.

“C’mon, Warp,” he murmured instead. “Let’s go get you patched up.”

Skywarp didn’t respond (he was still crying too hard to speak), but did allow his brother to help him up. They began a slow procession up the stairs while Megatron got the twins moving again.

Soundwave was waiting for them in the doorway, and Rumble and Frenzy immediately ran from Megatron’s side to wrap their arms around him, burying their faces in his stomach. He caressed their heads comfortably before looking to the emotional wreck that was Skywarp.

“What happened?” he wanted to know.

“Slipstream,” Thundercracker spat. “Just jumped him for no reason. Is she hiding somewhere in there now?”

The intelligence officer blinked. “I haven’t seen her since she left the room several minutes ago. I’m afraid I did something that made her rather emotional.”

Megatron sighed. “She must have gone down the back stairs. Whatever did you do to her, Soundwave?”

“We can discuss it at a later time,” Soundwave answered, and Thundercracker was inclined to agree; Slipstream didn’t need any more attention right now.

He stepped forward, and Soundwave moved aside so that he and Skywarp could get into the hotel room. Thundercracker helped Skywarp straight to the double bed, and then moved to the bathroom to fetch a warm washcloth, only to find it locked.

“Starscream, I need to get something,” he called, rapping on the door.
“Go away!” his other brother shrieked back at him.

Thundercracker let out a low growl of frustration; enough was enough.

“Starscream, get your ass out of there right this second or I will break this door down!” he shouted, pounding against the wood. “You aren’t the only one here with problems, you selfish, little prick!”

The bathroom door ripped open so suddenly that Thundercracker almost fell through it.

“I hate you,” Starscream snarled as he shoved past him.

Not in the mood to take that right now, Thundercracker pushed back. His brother stumbled, tripped, and didn’t get up.

“Stop being so dramatic,” the older Seeker scoffed, moving into the bathroom.

When he came back out, Skywarp was crouched over Starscream’s huddled form, still sniffling as he rubbed his brother’s back, because of course he was. Having one family member lash out at him tonight wasn’t enough of a warning, apparently. Thundercracker stepped forward, about to tell him not to bother, when he realized that Starscream was crying.

“What is going on now?” Megatron demanded, finally moving into the room and catching sight of Starscream on the floor. “What’s wrong with him?”

“He seems to have had some kind of argument with Slipstream before I returned,” Soundwave spoke up before any of the Seekers could. “I am not sure what about.”

A fresh wave of anger surged through Thundercracker. What did Slipstream have against his brothers!? But again, before he could do anything, Megatron was stepping forward with a sigh and motioning for Skywarp to move away from the other Seeker.

“Starscream, pull yourself together already; you’re embarrassing yourself,” their leader growled as he started dragging his second up off the floor.

Thundercracker clenched his jaw and led Skywarp back to the bed.

“But Starscream…” his brother protested tearily.

“Is not your problem right now,” Thundercracker told him. “Just let Megatron deal with it.”

“But…” Skywarp glanced back to Megatron, who was gripping one of Starscream’s wrists in each hand and speaking to him in a low, harsh tone whose words Thundercracker couldn’t make out. “I don’t want him to get hurt,” Skywarp whispered.

Sure, but Thundercracker didn’t want Skywarp getting more hurt by trying to get in the middle of that, either.

“It’ll be fine,” he assured the boy, pushing him toward the mattress. Skywarp finally sank down, and Thundercracker pressed the wash cloth to his split lip. His brother nodded, sniffing slightly, and took it. Thundercracker pulled him into another embrace, caressing his dark hair, before throwing a glance back at Starscream again.

Megatron was helping him shakily to his feet now, a large arm around his shoulders and his expression shifted from anger to… something else.

“We’re going for a short walk,” he informed Thundercracker, and then he led the trembling Seeker
out into the hall.

Everything would be fine, Thundercracker repeated to himself, tightening his hold on his remaining brother. Everything would be fine, and if he saw Slipstream again, he was going to rip her hair out.

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Slipstream didn’t even know how many humans she had shoved over in her mad dash to get away. When she had rounded at least four street ends and was positive none of her faction was following her, she finally slowed to an exhausted, stumbling walk and allowed herself to collapse onto the dirty concrete of the first alleyway she came across.

In the yellow glow of the street lamps, she stared down at her hands and the nail marks she had embedded in them. Her knuckles ached slightly from where she had punched Skywarp—Skywarp, who she knew full well wasn’t guilty of any of the things she’d wanted him to be. All she’d wanted—all she ever wanted—was something other than herself to aim her anger at, and she’d gone and picked one of the only people who still genuinely cared about her.

The image of her cousin’s terrified, tearful eyes and blood-smeared face flashed through her memory like a scar and overlaid itself with that of Starscream falling limp beneath her after she’d told him to go die.

No, that one was different, she tried to tell herself. Starscream had deserved it. He deserved… What—to die? Because he was a little bitch who treated the people around him like tools and lashed out irrationally at anyone who upset him? If Starscream deserved to die, then so did she.

Slipstream let her head fall forward onto her knees and started to sob. Of course none of her faction had followed her. Why would they?

She wanted to be Cybertronic again—to be able to soar up out of this scrapheap of a city and away from all of them. It wasn’t fair. Why had she ended up like this? Why was she stuck in this body? Why did she want so many things that she couldn’t have?

Something wet brushed the young woman’s leg, and she started, violently. Another small form jumped away from her, and she was about to scream when she recognized it—the puppy. She had somehow subconsciously run to the alley where Soundwave’s pseudo-pet lived.

The dog crept forward again, shiny dark nose quivering hopefully. Slipstream grabbed a piece of brick from a pile of rubbish by her hip, planning to throw it at the cursed animal because it was yet another thing that apparently Soundwave cared about more than herself, but then she paused. Did she really need to hurt one more innocent thing tonight?

She set the rock down and cautiously extended a hand. The puppy came forward to sniff and then lick at the offered appendage. Slipstream curled her fingers and scratched at the matted fur under the creature’s chin.

“Good girl,” she sniffed, remembering how Soundwave praised the dog when she followed a command. “Good dog.”

The animal crept forward, bumping her nose against Slipstream’s leg again, and started trying to climb up into the young woman’s lap. Slipstream straightened her legs to make space, and
suddenly had a lapful of squirming, tonguey dog.

She curled around the bundle of fur and waited for morning to come.

The late-night city air was frigidly cold after locking himself in the steamy bathroom, but at least it was easier for Starscream to breathe out here. He took deep, shuddering breaths as he stumbled along beside his commander, the taller man slowing to keep pace with him. Even with everything else racing through his mind, it was a relief just to be somewhere other than the hotel room for the first time in as many days.

“What happened?” Megatron pressed for the fifth time, and Starscream shook his head yet again.

“You said you would talk if I brought you outside, Starscream. We’re outside, so talk.”

The Seeker turned away, hugging himself more tightly against the chill. He had not technically said that; he had simply nodded his head when Megatron had given him the option. Now, he was hoping to drag things out as long as possible in case his commander was planning to bring him back in the second he got the information he wanted.

“What happened to Skywarp?” Starscream sniffed.

“Stop stalling and answer the question,” Megatron sighed.

“I’m not stalling; I just wanna know what happened to my brother,” the Seeker protested. He stumbled on an uneven section of pavement, and his companion quickly steadied him.

“Slipstream attacked him for no discernible reason,” Megatron finally answered. “And then Thundercracker punched her and she ran off.”

Thundercracker had punched Slipstream? As much as the image gave Starscream some satisfaction, there was also a tight knot of something he didn’t want to examine in the pit of his stomach as he remembered that it was Skywarp his brother had defended, not him. Never him.

“I hope she never comes back,” Starscream snarled, trying to hold back the returning quaver in his voice.

“Slipstream is a member of this faction, and is no less deserving of that distinction than you,” his commander scolded.

“She tried to strangle me!” Starscream shrieked, whipping around. “And then she attacked Skywarp for no reason, and you’re still going to take her side!?”

Megatron studied him for a moment. “She will receive discipline for her behavior toward Skywarp,” he said. “As for you, I see no evidence of damage to suggest that she was seriously trying to harm you.”

Starscream gaped at him.

“Moreover, I cannot fault her for succumbing to urges I’ve been suppressing for weeks,” the ex-warlord continued, a smile quirking his mouth.

Starscream closed his eyes and took a deep breath.
“Have you ever, once, in your entire life thought of me as anything but a nuisance?” he asked.

“Have you ever made a concerted effort to be anything else?” Megatron returned.

The Seeker slumped forward, falling into a crouch with his hands clenched in his hair, Slipstream’s words running in circles through his head.

“I’m done,” he said.

“You want to go back inside?” his commander asked, bending down to his level.

“Sure, why not?” Starscream muttered.

“One moment,” Megatron sighed. “I’m willing to bet that Slipstream didn’t feed you all night.”

Starscream had never been so ready to purge a meal. The greasy slop his commander had brought him from the food cart churned in his stomach the whole way back to the hotel, and it wasn’t just the thought of relief from it that had him shoving Rumble out of the bathroom the second they got back.

He wanted to hurt. He wanted the misery of his stomach clenching over and over again and the acrid burn in the back of his throat. He wanted to collapse,weak and sweaty on the bathroom tiles with the shower water beating down on him and feel his body cramp and spasm—his stupid, weak, organic body.

It wasn’t his. This wasn’t him. He hated it and all of the stupid, stupid things that it made him want.

He forced himself up and shoved his fingers down his throat for a second time…

...just as the door clicked open.

Chapter End Notes

Here we go...
Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

'Eyy! Sorry for the wait on this one. I had a hard time writing it to satisfaction.

Also, just a heads up: as you might be able to imagine, there is a lot of unpleasantness and rather sensitive material coming in the next few chapters. If you're sensitive to topics such as domestic violence and abuse, or if you or someone you know has ever struggled with any kind of suicidal ideation, you may wish to proceed with caution.

Soundwave hadn't expected the door to be unlocked; he'd just turned the handle to demonstrate to Rumble that he wouldn't be able to get back into the bathroom until Starscream was done with yet another of his excessive showers. When the handle actually did turn, both of his creations immediately slammed into the door, ripping it out of Soundwave's hand and smashing it into the bathroom wall.

“Get out, Screamer!” Frenzy shouted as he and his twin barreled into the room. “It was Rumble's turn!”

The shower was running, and Starscream was crouched on the floor in front of the toilet... choking on his fingers? They had been in his mouth when the door first banged open and now he was making a retching sound as he scrambled away from the toilet, his eyes wide with panic. Before Soundwave could register anything further, the Seeker's hand flew to his mouth again, not quite in time to stop the surge of vomit that his next gag brought up.

Rumble and Frenzy both jumped back, squealing in disgust, as Starscream collapsed to his knees and continued to puke all over the bathroom floor.

“Get... get ou—” he tried to wheeze at them between heaves.

Soundwave blinked down at the Seeker as heaves transitioned into sobs, and his thoughts started to line themselves up.

Starscream in the bathroom with the shower running.

Which wasn’t unusual because he did that a lot. Several times a day in fact. Usually... after eating.

And he’d been choking on his fingers.

Which Soundwave seriously doubted had been an accident.

And then vomiting…

And he hadn’t been gaining weight…

Even though he was eating…

The dots connected.
“Starscream, what have you done?” Soundwave breathed, unable to rein in his own horror. The Seeker had always been prone to self-destructive behaviors, but this?

“What’s going on?” Megatron demanded, and Soundwave felt his commander press close behind him.

“Screamer’s throwing up again!” Frenzy announced.

“FUCK OFF!” Starscream howled. His voice was hoarse and strained, and he broke off into a coughing fit at the end of it.

Soundwave seized each of his twins by an arm and dragged them whining and fussing from the bathroom. On the double bed, Thundercracker and Skywarp were peering anxiously at the whole affair.

“Take them downstairs and keep them occupied,” Soundwave requested, pushing the boys toward Thundercracker.

“Is Starscream okay?” the oldest Seeker asked.

“That is what we need to determine, free of distraction,” the intelligence officer told him.

A choked wail of, “Don’t touch me!” rang out from the bathroom, and Skywarp winced.

“Take them all downstairs,” Soundwave repeated, more forcefully this time.

Thundercracker nodded, his eyes flicking toward the bathroom again as he slid off the bed, pulling Skywarp with him.

“But boss—!” Rumble started to protest.

“Go,” his creator interrupted, and both twins glared petulantly for a moment before following the two Seekers out of the suite. This whole evening was turning out to be rather stressful for them, and Soundwave wished he still had his telepathy to give them some kind of comfort while he dealt with the catastrophe that was about to unfold in the bathroom.

When Soundwave returned, Megatron had turned off the shower and was crouched as far into the room as he could get without stepping in any of Starscream’s mess. The Seeker himself was huddled in the far corner, his face hidden in his knees and his hands clutched in his hair as he continued to sob.

“What happened?” Megatron asked, turning up to his third-in-command.

Soundwave took a moment to answer.

“I believe that we may have discovered the reason behind Starscream’s continued malnourishment,” he said finally.

“It’s not!” Starscream wailed, head popping up before Megatron could react. “It’s not... I just ate something bad!”

The ex-warlord gave him a strange look before turning back to Soundwave. “And what would that be?” he wanted to know.

“Nothing!” the Seeker shrieked. “I’m just sick! This disgusting planet is making me sick!”
“In a way,” Soundwave acknowledged with a nod of his head. “There is a tendency among some humans to develop an unhealthy obsession with their physical appearance, particularly their weight.”

“Wha... It's nothing to do with—” Starscream cut off with another gag and a look of panic. He didn't throw up again, but continued to breathe very deliberately with his hands over his mouth while Soundwave continued.

“In order to obtain unrealistic, self-imposed standards of beauty, some humans will intentionally starve themselves, as Starscream seems to have been doing since we first found ourselves in this situation.”

Megatron's face darkened as the Seeker frantically shook his head, crying too hard to speak.

“However, if they should find themselves in a situation in which they are forced to eat anyway...” Soundwave gestured to the mess of vomit on the floor. “There are other means of preventing the food from entering the system.”

His commander glanced at the floor, then to Starscream, and finally back up to Soundwave, looking confused.

“I found Starscream in the middle of shoving his fingers down his throat to make himself throw up, as I suspect he has been doing every time he claimed he was showering for the past several weeks,” Soundwave elaborated.

The look that overtook Megatron’s face as realization hit him was one that Soundwave had seen thousands of times. It was that special look he saved for when he was disciplining Starscream—the blank one that was somehow more terrifying than any of his rage.

“You have one chance,” the ex-warlord said, his voice low and even as he turned back to his trembling second. “One chance, Starscream, to convince me that Soundwave is mistaken.”

“And when have you ever believed me over him!?” the Seeker choked at him before turning to Soundwave. “It's nothing to do with looks, you fat-headed freak! Did you ever stop to think maybe I just can't stand the thought of poisoning myself with organic slop like the rest of you pigs!?”

“It is not poison when you yourself are organic, Starscream,” the intelligence officer returned calmly. He was about to begin explaining that the problem likely lay in some sort of damaged pathways within the Seeker’s human brain, sending him incorrect information about what was and was not a danger to him, when Megatron suddenly got to his feet, his expression still a stony wall of nothing.

And now Starscream’s face shifted into an expression that was somehow despair and guilt and regret all rolled into one. It was another one Soundwave had seen too many times before, just as he had seen this entire scene play out too many times, but somehow, it was keener this time. There was something in the Seeker’s eyes that looked like it really might break this time.

Megatron reached for the shower head and pulled it down before turning the hot water on. Starscream flinched, but the other man simply began rinsing what remained of his mess down the drain in the middle of the floor. It wasn't until the tiles were clean once more that the ex-warlord finally stepped forward, moving the temperature dial as high as it would go.

“I almost forgot not to trust you,” he said, towering over his second.

“Megatron, please...” the young man whimpered, watery blue eyes fixed on his commander’s face
with a new kind of desperation. “I'm sorry.”

And Soundwave almost believed it this time, but Megatron just stepped forward, raising the showerhead as steam started to billow from the spray.

“So you always say,” he growled.

The hotel restaurant wouldn't open for business for several more hours, and Thundercracker didn't want to be far if Starscream happened to need him anyway. He was still just outside in the hall with Skywarp huddled beside him when the screams started.

And Thundercracker had had enough.

He was on his feet and through the door a second later, ignoring Skywarp's frightened inquiries behind him. Soundwave met him at the bathroom door, catching the furious Seeker before he could see anything, but Thundercracker could hear the water running and Starscream shrieking about being burned and—

“Thundercracker, your interference will only make matters worse,” Soundwave spoke in a low voice, pinning the smaller man's arms to his sides.

“That's—my— brother!” the Seeker grunted, trying to kick the intelligence officer's legs out from under him.

“I am well aware,” Soundwave replied, avoiding his efforts. “And I am sure that Lord Megatron will be done with him shortly.”

“Fuck Megatron!” Thundercracker snarled, and suddenly the world flipped and spun, and he was pinned to the floor on his front with Soundwave's weight on top of him.

“Clear you head, Thundercracker,” the intelligence officer told him firmly but still quietly. “And think what will happen to both your brothers if you are not here. Because that is what will happen if you ever voice that sentiment again. Despite current circumstances, you are still a soldier, and Megatron is still your commanding officer.”

The truth of it only frustrated Thundercracker even more. It was the whole reason he'd sat idly by for so many millennia: letting Megatron hurt Starscream today meant relative security for all three of them would continue into tomorrow. But...

“What's he even supposed to have done!?” the Seeker snarled, trying to twist around so he could see the other man.

And Soundwave told him what Starscream had done.

And Thundercracker fell limp because that... How could he not have noticed that?

Before the thought could percolate further, the sound of the shower cut out, and Starscream's howls petered into a thin, whimpering cry. Soundwave released Thundercracker to scramble to his feet just as Megatron came walking into the main room, his front completely soaked. The Seeker didn't
even wait for the order before pushing past him into the bathroom, his jaw set and his fists clenched to stop himself doing anything he'd regret.

In the far corner, Starscream was stripped down to his underwear and huddled as far into the corner as he could get, his arms up over his face and his whole body shaking. Thundercracker stepped forward cautiously. It had been over a week since he'd seen his brother without clothes, and he couldn't remember if he'd been this bony then. Starscream looked wrong; his heat-flushed skin stretched tight over bones and veins in some places but too loose in others. Joints stuck out impossibly large and his ribs curved like jagged grins along his side.

And he'd still kept throwing up.

Soundwave said it was some kind of mental disorder related to a delusional body image, but Thundercracker knew his brother, and Starscream had never been that vain. He was, however, that paranoid, and he hated the human food. If only they'd realized just how much he'd hated it.

“Star?” the older Seeker ventured, crouching down and reaching out a tentative hand. His brother shrank back from him. “You're hurt,” Thundercracker said simply, taking in the angry red patches on Starscream's arms and legs and remembering his complaints of burning. The water in the shower did get hot enough to burn human skin.

“Fuck off!” Starscream choked, still hiding behind his arms.

“Starscream, I'm not—”

“I SAID FUCK OFF, THUNDERCRACKER!!!” the other Seeker shrieked, lashing out with one of those frighteningly thin legs. He caught his brother in the chest, knocking him back onto his rear on the wet floor. “I don't want you here, and you don't want to be here!! Go back to Skywarp already! I HATE ALL OF YOU!!”

“Starscream, you know I care about you,” Thundercracker tried desperately.

“No you don't!” his brother sobbed. “None of you do! You can all go fuck yourselves! Especially Megatron!” He raised his voice: “FUCK YOU!! YOU'VE NEVER BEEN ANYTHING BUT A FUCKING THUG!!”

“Starscream, don't!” Thundercracker hissed, diving forward to clap a hand over his brother's mouth. The smaller man struggled, squealing and sobbing and yelping in pain whenever he aggravated one of his burns. Then, suddenly, there were heavy footsteps, and a large hand reached into the mess and grabbed a fistful of his brother's hair before Thundercracker could react.

Starscream was dragged squealing to his feet and out of the bathroom, slipping several times in the puddles. Megatron hauled him back up each time until they made it into the main room where the ex-warlord threw his second against the wall between the two beds. The young man hit it hard and crumpled to the floor in a gasping heap, clutching at the side of his head.

“One more word out of you and I will break more than your nose,” Megatron snarled. “How dare you. How dare you!!”

In the bathroom doorway, Thundercracker tensed, and a high-pitched whimper alerted him to Skywarp's presence in the main doorway. Rumble and Frenzy were peering nervously around him, darting glances to their creator, who was standing stiffly by the window. None of them dared move.

“I trusted you!” their commander continued, looming over the Seeker so that he was blocked from
the others' views. “I vouched for you! I tried to help you, Starscream! And all that time you were literally throwing my trust down the drain!? For your own vanity!?!?”

“N-no...” Starscream tried.

“I SAID SHUT UP!” Megatron bellowed, and there was a blow.

Thundercracker jerked, and Skywarp squeaked again. By the window, Soundwave moved forward ever so slightly, but Megatron stepped back.

“You are hereby stripped of all command, Starscream,” he announced, and Starscream fell silent, apparently too shocked even to cry anymore. “Soundwave will take over your post as my second-in-command, and Thundercracker is now Air Commander. I will decide further details of your punishment this afternoon.”

He stepped away and turned to the rest of his troops, his furious, dark eyes meeting Thundercracker's as he did.

“Do you have something to add, Commander Thundercracker?” he growled.

“Not at all, sir,” Thundercracker replied, his voice so icy he barely recognized it. Megatron grunted and moved away to speak to Soundwave in low tones.

He was so angry he could barely feel his face anymore, or his hands. If he moved at all, he knew he would end up throwing himself at Megatron. The bastard hadn't even tried to understand. And stripped of command? He hadn't stripped Starscream's command for trying to assassinate him! What in the Pit was so terrible about what Starscream had done for him to deserve that?

Skywarp was darting across the room toward Starscream, though, and Thundercracker forced his attention away from their commander to follow him. The last thing he needed was Starscream lashing out and hurting Skywarp on top of everything else right now.

Starscream didn't lash out at his younger brother, though. He simply stared blankly ahead as Skywarp took his hand and brushed his hair back, muttering soothing nonsense at him. There was a bruise forming on his right temple where he'd hit the wall, and a bright red handmark on his left cheek added to the other angry red patches over his body. Blood trickled from a split in his lower lip, which he paid no attention.

Thundercracker pulled a sheet off the double bed and then reached out to pull his brother to his feet. There was no resistance, and he wrapped the fabric around Starscream's narrow shoulders before pulling him into a careful embrace. Skywarp joined a moment after, somehow still crying. Thundercracker didn't understand how the boy had so many tears to shed all the time.

With his brother pressed so close to his chest, Thundercracker could still feel the faintest echo of their bond and the complete and utter despair that Starscream was sinking into. Thundercracker's own emotions had just about reached their final boiling point when suddenly Soundwave's panicked voice cut through everyone's attention:

“Where have Rumble and Frenzy gone!?"
Unlike the rest of the Decepticons, Rumble and Frenzy were used to being smaller than everyone around them. Even compared to the humans, their Cybertronian forms had been small. Being pushed around or nearly stepped on was just a part of life because no one ever bothered looking that far down. Running through the early morning streets of Patna wasn’t too different from running through a battlefield, just without the explosions and guns: a man with a heavy food cart yelled at them as they tried to dive in front of him; a woman swatted at them when they made her drop an armful of colorful clothing she’d been arranging on her stall; several drunken men jeered and threw an empty bottle when Rumble tripped over his own shoelace in front of their stoop.

Frenzy grabbed his brother’s hand and held it tight, terrified he would lose him, as they fled from the men. Rumble squeezed back just as hard. Stripped of the mental bond that had linked them with their creator and fellow creations their entire lives, it was the only thing they had left.

When they’d gotten a few blocks away, the two of them stopped to catch their breaths, still clutching each other and peering around fearfully. Pink and gold were creeping into the sky above the tall buildings now, leaving the streets below bathed in a dull blueish-gray.

“We shouldn’t have left,” Rumble sniffed, glancing down at his skinned knees.

“Don’t be a baby,” Frenzy told him, and he bent down to dab some of the blood away with the hem of his own shirt. “We’ll be fine.”

“What are we doing out here? We don’t even know where Slipstream went!” his brother pointed out.

Frenzy paused at that because it was a good point. In truth, neither of the twins was sure why they had run off in the first place. There had been fighting and shouting, and it had been serious shouting for the first time in a long while. Something about it had shaken the twins to their cores like it never had before, and the overwhelming need to be somewhere else had swept through the both of them. The only “somewhere else” they’d been able to think of was Slipstream, and so off they’d gone.

And now here they were.

“We should go back,” Rumble mumbled miserably. “Boss will be mad if we don’t.”

His twin straightened up and looked up and down the street as another realization slowly dawned on him.

“Which way did we come from?” he asked.

Rumble blinked, and then he also scanned their surroundings. They were at an intersection—not a particularly busy one, but one where all the buildings were made of the same grayish-yellow brick. Neither of them had been paying attention to something so trivial as shop signs while they were running from the men with the bottles.

Frenzy bit his lower lip and reached out for Rumble’s hand once more.

“I think it was that way,” he said, pointing down the street just across from them.

“Are you sure it’s not that way?” his brother suggested, indicating a different street.
“Yeah,” Frenzy lied. “Cause there was the building with no windows.”

His twin hesitated only a moment before following him back into the press of humans starting their morning business. It couldn’t be too bad, anyway, he reasoned. If they got lost, surely Soundwave would find them, right?

As much as Megatron didn’t want to deal with the issue right now, it was clear that Soundwave was not going to calm down until they’d at least tried to find his twins. The intelligence officer had already run round the entire hotel and several surrounding streets without any luck, and now he wanted the rest of them to help him search. Megatron glanced between the pile of silent Seekers on the double bed and his now-second-in-command’s frantic face before making his decision.

“The Thundercracker!” he barked.

The Seeker stiffened before sitting up to glare at him insolently. Megatron should have demoted Starscream weeks ago. The fool hadn’t had a single lick of control over his troops since this whole thing started. Slipstream had always been a bit of a wild card, but for Thundercracker to be this insubordinate was unheard of.

“Come help us search,” Megatron told him.

He could see the refusal forming in the young man’s face as one of his hands gripped Starscream’s blanket, but Skywarp sat up slightly and brushed his hand. A look passed between the two of them, and Skywarp curled himself more tightly round Starscream’s limp form as Thundercracker pushed himself up to follow Soundwave out of the room. Megatron threw a last glance back at the two remaining Seekers before joining them.

The moment he’d realized what Soundwave was trying to tell him about Starscream, the rage had started bubbling up inside Megatron, and it had felt right. Anger was an old friend. For millions of years, he had worn his anger like a mantle, sailing through life on its roiling tides with certainty and precision. Today, he had let himself sink beneath its surface, and the darkness had risen around him like thick, hot tar, muting everything else and decaying away every warm, fond feeling or thought he’d had about Starscream in the last few weeks until there was nothing left but the fury.

He had thought—he’d let himself believe—that things might be different, that Starscream could change, but no. Starscream was every ounce the lying, scheming narcissist he’d always been. What had he been thinking? Why had he done this? He couldn’t possibly enjoy being tired and ill all the time… but he could enjoy watching his commander make a fool of himself.

It was the only explanation: Starscream had been purposely making himself ill to watch Megatron worry about him and run around trying to help him, doubtless snickering behind his hand the whole time. Starscream had manipulated him, made him care, made Megatron dare to hope that maybe—just maybe—he cared, too. Cared in a way that Megatron didn’t even know how to understand but had wanted to so dearly.

Assassination attempts didn’t even come close to this level of betrayal. That was political. This was personal, and things—memories and emotions that Megatron had buried since long before the war—had started to surface.

So, back beneath the sea of anger he’d fled. Except that something was wrong. Instead of sinking
neatly into the depths and resting there until things had cleared, Megatron felt like there was some invisible force that kept pushing him back to the surface.

There had been a moment in the bathroom of almost perfect clarity where everything froze and Starscream suddenly wasn’t his unruly second-in-command. He wasn’t the vindictive brat whom Megatron had been fighting against for the past four million years. He was just… Starscream. He was the beautiful, brilliant boy laughing beneath a street light. The one with a wit that cut like the finest energon blade. The one Megatron wrapped in his arms every night before he fell asleep. He was small and far more fragile than Megatron could ever have imagined, and he was hurting. And it was Megatron’s fault.

Something else had started flooding into the hole the anger had left in that moment, and Megatron didn’t want to look at it. He’d fled the bathroom, and spent every moment since then struggling with all his energy to stay submerged in anger’s tranquil depths, but he wasn’t Cybertronian anymore, and try as he might, humans didn’t sink.

“Lord Megatron?”

He brought himself back to the present to find Soundwave hesitating at the hotel’s front exit.

“Is that alright with you?” the intelligence officer repeated.

Megatron hadn’t heard a word he’d said. He didn’t even remember the walk down here. He glanced between his two soldiers, Soundwave frantic and trying not to show it and Thundercracker pointedly not glaring at his commander.

“Do what you think best,” the ex-warlord told him, his voice quieter than he’d expected and almost unsteady. Soundwave didn’t seem to notice, though. He nodded and practically fled the building with Thundercracker not far behind. Megatron hesitated a moment before following them into the sharp light of morning.

The sun had risen well over the tops of the buildings, and it felt like hours had passed since Rumble and Frenzy had fled with no sign of either their hotel or Slipstream. They no longer recognized any of their surroundings, and even with the warmth and light from the sun, the city had become more intimidating than they could remember it ever having been. Rumble was starting to veer towards panic when he finally caught a glimpse of a dark-haired, pale-skinned woman in the crowd.

“There!” he shouted, pointing at the retreating figure and tugging on his twin.

Frenzy whipped around, craning his neck. “I don’t see—” he started, but Rumble tugged him along anyway.

They dodged through the busy, impatient humans and dove across an intersection through a break in traffic to reach the woman. Rumble reached out and caught the back of her skirt.

“Slipstream!” he cried in relief.

The woman turned, and both twins’ expressions fell as they realized that it was not Slipstream at all.
She let out an awful scream and scampered back, brushing at her clothes as if Rumble’s touch had contaminated them. The twins also started back, and she began babbling at them in an unrecognizable language, her voice growing in volume. A tall, intimidating man approached from a nearby store, and the woman turned her complaints on him, clinging on his arm and pointing. He glared and yelled at them in the same foreign language.

The whole thing happened so quickly that Rumble and Frenzy were still just staring in confusion when the man reached out a hand to grab hold of Rumble’s skinny forearm and started shouting down in the boy’s face. He raised his other hand as if to strike the boy, and Frenzy was just breaking through his shock enough to recognize the danger when a strangely familiar voice rang out through the street.

“AY, AY, AY!” the voice cried, and the man holding Rumble looked up as a piece of overripe fruit sailed through the air and hit him splack! Right in the middle of his face!

He let go of Rumble, and before Frenzy could seize his brother again, someone not much larger than they was grabbing both of them and shouting, “Run!”

So they ran. It was two blocks later when Frenzy finally realized who was running with them.

“Ajit!” he gasped, and the other boy finally slowed to a stop.

“What you doing!?” he demanded, rounding on them. “You steal like that? How police no catch yet!?”

“What are you doing here?” Rumble wanted to know, feeling this was much more to the point. They hadn’t seen the boy in weeks, and now he showed up out of the blue just when they needed him? Soundwave hadn’t raised them not to question coincidences like that.

“Follow you,” Ajit told them, like this should have been obvious. “I see you run out of hotel alone and think you get lost, so I follow.”

“You watch our hotel!?” Frenzy wondered.

“Only sometime,” the older boy shrugged. “I think your papa is not helping. I wait for Captain, but he only come with the boss.”

Rumble and Frenzy exchanged glances.

“Is Soundwave supposed to be helping you with something?” Frenzy asked.

Ajit blinked at them. “Dipti,” he said, again as if this should have been obvious.

The twins just looked blank, and Ajit’s face fell slightly.

“He did no tell?” the boy asked.

“Tell what?” Rumble wanted to know.

Slipstream had watched the sun climb over the buildings through the early morning hours and thought. The puppy came and went, sometimes running up to the young woman with bits of trash
in her mouth, which she seemed to want praise for. It was a strange experience, having another
living being actively seek her affections. It reminded her of the twins, and then she thought once
more of the days when her cousins had been young and impressionable and she could do no wrong
in their eyes.

It was well into the morning when the young woman heard her name ring out over the morning
street, and at first she thought she was just hearing things. Then, it came again, louder this time,
and she looked up sharply, searching the street beyond her alley. She spotted her hailers barrel ing
across it through a gap in the traffic: Rumble, Frenzy, and—for some reason—that Indian boy who
used to run around with Starscream back in the slums.

The puppy, who had fallen asleep curled against Slipstream’s hip some time ago, jumped up and
ran toward the boys with excited yips. Both twins gasped in amazement and bent down to greet her
as they reached the sidewalk.

“Fluffy!” they exclaimed, letting the animal slather their faces in sloppy affection. The other boy
stood back, giving the dog a distasteful look.

“What are you doing here?” Slipstream demanded, unfolding herself stiffly from her spot on the
dirty pavement. She’d directed the question at the twins, but it was Starscream’s little pawn who
answered.

“We find you,” he told her.

“Why?” Slipstream sneered, and this time Rumble pulled his attention away from ‘Fluffy’ long
enough to respond.

“We’re running away with you!” he declared, and Slipstream’s eyebrows shot up.

“I’m not running away,” she told the boy, and watched as confusion flitted across his face.

“But… you hit Skywarp, and then you ran,” Frenzy pointed out.

“I came out to think for a bit,” Slipstream explained. “That doesn’t mean I’m not going back.”

“Oh.”

Both boys looked down in dejection, and Slipstream turned to their companion.

“And what are you doing here?” she wanted to know. “I thought Megatron told you to stay away,
or something.”

The urchin opened his mouth to answer, and Rumble cut him off.

“Some bad humans stole Dipti!” he announced, a note of righteous fury creeping into his voice.
“Jit told Soundwave about it, and he said he would help, but he didn’t do anything!”

Slipstream looked between the twins’ incensed expressions and Ajit’s own somewhat desperate
one, and remembered the little girl in question. Personally, she’d found the twins’ friend somewhat
obnoxious while she was around, but only in the same way that she found the twins themselves
obnoxious. And Dipti was young, but still female. And Soundwave had apparently brushed her life
aside as insignificant the same way he’d done Slipstream.

“What kind of bad humans?” she asked, dropping down to the boys’ level.
“Evil kind,” Ajit told her in a small voice. “Killing kind.”

Slipstream set her jaw.

“We’re going back,” she told Rumble and Frenzy, both of whom opened their mouths as if to protest. “No, we are. Because there are some things I need to say to your creator, and… I need to make sure Skywarp is alright.”

“Skywarp’s fine,” Rumble assured her. “He’s just Skywarp.”

“I think he’s upset about Starscream, though,” Frenzy put in.

“What did Starscream do?” Slipstream wanted to know.

The twins shrugged.

“He was throwing up in the bathroom, and then Megatron was shouting and hitting him like he used to,” Frenzy explained. “And then we ran away, so we dunno what happened after.”

Slipstream pulled her lips into her mouth and took a deep breath. She had been thinking about Starscream a lot over the last couple hours and the many ways in which the two of them were similar. She’d thought about the way she’d treated him lately and the things she’d said to him and the possibility that maybe he didn’t deserve it any more than she did. No more than Skywarp did. It was a very new concept, and one that she was starting to feel somewhat passionate about in the way that strong-minded people like Slipstream all over the universe tend to about new ideas for how things ought to be run.

“We are definitely going back,” she said, straightening up with her fists clenched at her sides. “And then we are going to find Ajit’s sister. Come on, boys.”

She started off down the street, treading like a woman five times her size, and the boys hesitated a moment behind her. Only a moment, though. There were few who could resist an order spoken in that kind of certainty.
I confess, I wrote myself into a bit of a corner here where certain things needed to be resolved before the story progresses to the next stage, but I realized while writing the chapter that I hadn't properly set up some of those resolutions. At least, it feels that way to me. I've edited it so many times I can't even tell anymore. In other words, if you're reading through and are like, "It makes no sense for this character to say this right now...." or, "Why is no one mentioning x, y, and z?" feel free to say something because there's a good chance I'll still take another pass at this chapter at some later date.

On the bright side, I ended up splitting this chapter in two after I finished writing it, so the next chapter is already written and the one after that I wrote, like, a year ago. So, there will be less time between the next few updates, in other words.

Under normal circumstances, Thundercracker would have been concerned about Rumble and Frenzy potentially getting lost among the humans, but right now he was somewhat relishing how much it was upsetting Soundwave. So, Soundwave was going to stop Thundercracker from helping his brother, and then expect the Seeker to drop everything to help him, was he? Thundercracker was pretty sure he’d lose in a one-on-one fight with either Megatron or Soundwave, which was what it would come to if he openly challenged their authority, but Starscream hadn’t been entirely self-taught in the field of passive aggression.

While Megatron and Soundwave headed off in opposite directions from the hotel entrance, Thundercracker bent down and pretended to tie his shoe. As soon as the other two men had disappeared, he straightened and headed back inside. It was almost six in the morning now. The hotel restaurant was just opening for business, and Thundercracker had a couple thousand Rupees in his pocket from the night's work. He didn’t have much appetite after everything that had happened, but he’d recently discovered tea, and found that he was in quite the mood for that.

He considered going back upstairs to the room, but at least if one of his two officers came back and found him down here, he could claim that he’d decided that one of them should wait at the hotel in case the twins or Slipstream showed up again. Besides, he wanted some time to cool down, and he wouldn’t be able to do that if he was still looking at the damage Starscream and Skywarp had suffered tonight. So, the young man sat in the restaurant, sipping tea and glaring at the opposite wall, while he tried to think rationally about his next steps.

What he really ought to do was take his brothers and just leave. While they were Cybertronian, there had been nowhere to go. There weren’t many places in the galaxy that a family of former Decepticon Seekers could go without being recognized, and none that Starscream would willingly live in. Megatron wouldn’t have wasted any resources tracking them down, either, and Thundercracker understood why even if he did resent it. A military commander couldn’t very well let his second-in-command dessert unpunished and expect to keep control of his remaining forces, after all.
But now that they were human, there was a whole planet of fellow humans to hide on, and Megatron had nothing at his disposal to find them. They could do it. Starscream was so sick right now that he would barely even be able to protest. Thundercracker could just wrap him in a blanket, throw him over his shoulder, and cart him away into the night. Between the three of them, they could make enough money to live quite well in this country. Maybe they could even get real jobs after a while. Instead of saving to leave the country, he could pay for Starscream to go to a bigger hospital and see a doctor who could actually help him.

The idea blossomed and expanded in Thundercracker’s head until he was on the verge of going upstairs and collecting his brothers right then and there. He was actually starting to get out of his chair when he realized one fatal flaw: Starscream just might kill himself for real if they threw away the slim hope they had of someday returning to their original forms.

The Seeker slumped back in his seat with a heavy sigh and rubbed at his eyes. It was nearing the time they usually went to bed for the day by now, but he had no desire to sleep. He ordered some food just to have something to do and thought some more.

There was a part of him that felt bad for the way he’d reacted to Slipstream earlier. Yes, she’d been out of line, but it wasn’t her fault she was like that. She’d never been what Thundercracker would call “nice,” but she didn’t used to be so casually cruel or violent. All of that was what came of being in any kind of close proximity to Megatron for too long. The mech had promised to fix Cybertron, to bring it back together, but all he’d done was destroy everything he’d ever touched, including Thundercracker’s family.

Time ticked by with no sign of any of the others while Thundercracker pushed his food around his plate and thought about what he was going to do to keep Megatron away from his brother until they managed to find the Allspark. He didn’t care how much better Starscream seemed to have been doing with him until tonight—it wasn’t worth it.

The young man was still drawing blanks when he looked up and, through the restaurant window, saw Slipstream walking down the street toward the hotel with Rumble, Frenzy, and Ajit in tow. Thundercracker jumped up, leaving his uneaten breakfast where it was, and almost pushed over two other hotel patrons waiting in line to order in his haste to catch them.

Slipstream stopped walking when he called her name, and looked for a moment like she was thinking about making a run for it. The twins, on the other hand, blew angry raspberries at him while Ajit seemed to be trying to hide behind Slipstream’s legs without getting too close to her.

“Stop that!” he heard Slipstream hiss at them. She said something else, and both boys shot arrogant looks in Thundercracker’s direction before grabbing Ajit’s hands and racing toward the hotel entrance.

When they’d gone, Slipstream finally turned around and approached her cousin, looking determined. A bruise marred her cheek where he had struck her earlier, and he found his eyes drawn unavoidably toward it.

“I’ll apologize to Skywarp,” she said before he had a chance to speak. “I will, I promise. I didn’t mean to hurt him.”

“It sure looked like you meant it,” Thundercracker growled, his eyebrows knitting together as his anger started to bubble up again.

“I know what it looked like!” she snapped back. “I meant… You were right. Skywarp’s never done anything to me.”
Thundercracker blinked, not sure he’d heard her correctly. Was this Slipstream admitting that she’d done something wrong!? 

“There are some things I want to fix around here, and I need your help,” she continued.

“I mean... it depends on, you know, what exactly you mean by that... I guess,” he stammered, feeling rather like he was getting emotional whiplash here.

“How about I show you?” Slipstream said, her eyes narrowing as she caught sight of something behind her cousin.

Thundercracker turned around to see none other than Megatron himself coming down the street with a dejected-looking Soundwave trailing behind him. Their commander caught sight of the two of them, and his face darkened predictably as he started to march toward them.

“Slipstream!” he barked. “You’ve got a lot of nerve, you selfish, spoiled—”

“Oh, shut up!” Slipstream interrupted stepping forward to meet him.

Megatron stopped short, just as he had when she had challenged him in the stairwell earlier, but this time his hand started to come up as if to strike her.

“In public?” Slipstream asked him, her eyebrow arching. “I don’t think they’ll take kindly to you knocking over a defenseless woman in the middle of the street in this part of town.”

Megatron’s hand lowered as he glanced around at the growing morning crowds. One or two people were watching them curiously, attention drawn by the raised voices. Then, he leaned down so that his nose was almost touching Slipstream’s instead.

“When we return to our suite...” he started to hiss, but a long arm shot out from behind and tugged him away from the woman. Megatron glanced behind himself in apparent confusion and found Soundwave standing there. It seemed to Thundercracker that the intelligence officer himself wasn’t sure why he was doing this.

“I... I’m afraid I must humbly request you back down, my Lord,” Soundwave told him, stepping between the two of them. “If you choose to harm Slipstream, I do not think I will be able to sit idly by.”

Thundercracker hadn’t been there when Megatron had first woken up as a human, but he imagined the expression of shock on his face now was a fairly accurate replica of the one he must have had then.

“Even you would turn against me, Soundwave?” the ex-warlord demanded.

“That depends entirely on you,” the other man told him.

Slipstream stepped out from behind Soundwave then, glaring up at him. “I appreciate your support, but where the fuck was this when he was torturing Starscream earlier? Or anytime!?”

Soundwave blinked, stepping back from her a bit.

“I... That was different,” he tried, looking between her and Megatron.

“Yeah, it is!” Thundercracker interjected, feeling it was about time he got in on this conversation. “Slipstream actually did something wrong; Starscream was just sick, and you knew that, but you
still told me we should just let Megatron do whatever he wants because he’s *Megatron*.”

“Starscream was not sick!” Megatron cut in. “He has been purposely sabotaging himself to make a fool of me!”

“You don’t need help with that,” Slipstream snorted.

“And anyway, he *wasn’t*,” Thundercracker added. “If you ever bothered listening to anything, you would’ve heard when Soundwave explained that!”

Everyone’s attention snapped back to the intelligence officer, who stared back like an Autobot caught in the path of Megatron’s fusion cannon.

“Well?” Slipstream prompted.

“He’s right,” Soundwave finally confessed. “It is unlikely that Starscream’s actions were in any way intended as a personal attack on anyone. Human brains are prone to many malfunctions which can prompt them to commit self-destructive acts that they cannot control without outside help. Starscream’s inability to properly nourish himself is mostly likely not much different than Skywarp’s instances of harming himself.”

There was another silence, and then:

“No,” Megatron declared, shaking his head. “No, he’s… He wasn’t… Everything he does is always to attack me!”

“You wish!” Slipstream laughed. “You’d just love it if you were the center of his universe, wouldn’t you? I’ve seen the way you’ve been looking at him since all of this started.”

“You see *nothing!*” Megatron snarled, snatching the tiny woman forward by the front of her blouse. Soundwave jerked forward reflexively, but Slipstream herself barely flinched. Thundercracker found himself simultaneously marveling at her boldness and wondering what on Earth Megatron looking at Starscream had to do with anything.

“I see so much more than you know,” the young woman smirked, and she looked so much like Starscream for a second that Thundercracker actually had to rub the image out of his eyes. “I’ve certainly seen the issues in your discipline methods.”

“You *dare* question my—”

“Yes, I dare!” Slipstream interrupted. “And someone else should have dared years ago!”

They were practically screaming in each other’s faces at this point, and a good number of passersby were stopping to stare or moving to the other side of the street to avoid them.

“I’m warning you, Seeker—”

“I lost my temper and attacked Skywarp *once*, and you all turned your backs on me!”

“—one more word and—”

“*He* uses Starscream as his personal punching bag for four million years—”

“—and I will give you a better demonstration of my discipline methods!”

“—and somehow we’re still letting him lead us!?”
Soundwave finally stepped in again when Megatron made as if to strike the young woman.

“And you’re so quick to find fault with Starscream, but you didn’t notice that your own second-in-command has been starving himself for almost two months!” Slipstream continued as the intelligence officer pulled her to safety. “How many times has he tried to tell us that the food here makes him sick, and how many times have you just shoved it down his throat anyway—literally sometimes!”

“He’s a grown mech!” Megatron shouted back.

“So is Skywarp!” the young woman countered. “And you didn’t douse him in scalding water when you found out he’d been chewing up his arms!”

Yes, Thundercracker had been wanting to bring that up.

“It’s like we’ve all gotten so used to seeing Starscream in pain that we don’t see it anymore!”

“Starscream is perfectly capable of taking care of himself!” Megatron countered. “His resilience has always been his greatest strength.”

“See!?” Slipstream shrieked, throwing her arms wide. “That’s exactly what I’m talking about! You just assume! We all just assume he’s okay because it’s too much work to actually talk to him!”

“And since when were you so righteous?” Megatron demanded. “When have you ever been anything but vicious and cruel to him!?”

“I never said I was innocent,” she sniffed. “Just that I’m not the only one who’s guilty, and in case you hadn’t noticed, oh exalted one, I happen to be his cousin. We had hundreds of millennia together and did quite well before you came along.”

That one actually seemed to shake Megatron a bit. It was like he had never once in the last four million years fully registered the fact that his second-in-command had a life outside of him.

“He’s not yours.”

Megatron’s attention snapped to Thundercracker, and the Seeker blinked as he realized he’d just said that aloud. But that was the issue, wasn’t it? Megatron thought of Starscream like a possession — his second-in-command, his Seeker, his problem — and that made him feel he had a right to take certain liberties with him, didn’t it?

“Starscream is not yours,” the young man repeated, more resolutely now. “He’s my brother, he’s Slipstream’s cousin, and he’s his own person. You don’t own him. You don’t own any of us. We chose to follow you of our own free will, and we can leave whenever we want.”

There was a fire raging in his commander’s eyes now, and Thundercracker didn’t care. What could Megatron do to him that would be worse than everything they’d already been through?

“Wake up already, Megatron. This is not a war anymore, and we are not your soldiers,” the Seeker growled. “And I want my brother back.”

“AND YOU THINK I DON’T!?” Megatron bellowed.

The second the words left his mouth, his expression changed from one of fury to a sort of horrified shock. It took a moment for Thundercracker to sort out what he was saying — to remember that Megatron also had a brother. A brother who had been trying to kill him for millions of years. It
didn’t change anything he’d done, but remembering it now, in this context, Thundercracker felt he suddenly understood his commander better than he ever had.

Megatron stepped back from the others, looking between the three of them like he was lost.

“I… I think I…” he stammered. “I need to think.”

He turned and ran for the lobby doors like the Unmaker’s servants were after him.

“I think we broke him, guys,” Slipstream spoke up after an awkward silence.

“He’ll be fine,” Thundercracker huffed. “He’s Megatron.”

“I understand your antipathy toward our leader at the moment, Thundercracker, and would also point out that you are demonstrating the same indifference toward his emotions that Slipstream just berated all of us for displaying toward your brother,” Soundwave said.

“Are you saying we should start trying to get Megatron to open up about his feelings?” the Seeker demanded, laughing at the sheer absurdity of the suggestion.

“No, and I doubt he would appreciate it even if you did,” Soundwave agreed. “I am merely saying that just as Megatron is not the only one who has neglected to acknowledge Starscream’s pain over the years, Starscream is not the only one who has been in pain. You show commendable concern for your brothers’ mental and emotional states, but who is ensuring that you are alright? It is true that we are not currently engaged in warfare, and perhaps it would be wise for each of us to reorder our priorities for the time being.”

Thundercracker paused, mouth slightly agape, as he tried to think how to respond to that. When was the last time anyone had asked him if he was alright? Other than Skywarp, who didn’t count because Thundercracker couldn’t give him an honest answer without worrying him.

“I brought the twins back, by the way,” Slipstream cut in. “They’re in the hotel.”

Soundwave closed his eyes and took a deep breath. On the exhale, his entire body seemed to come unclenched.

“Thank you,” he said, opening his eyes and turning to Slipstream. “And I’m sorry.”

“Yes, well,” Slipstream sniffed, folding her arms. “They showed up with that little friend of Starscream’s, and he had a very interesting story to tell me about a certain request he made of you that you completely ignored.”

“And what would you have had me do, Slipstream?” he asked, a small note of defense in his voice. “Challenging the men who took his sister would have set our plans back by months at best and ended with all our deaths at worst.”

“Well, have fun explaining that to Rumble and Frenzy,” she told him.

“What happened now?” Thundercracker wanted to know.

“I’ll tell you later,” his cousin assured him. “Should we go check on your brothers?”
Slipstream made a shockingly gracious apology to Skywarp, which ended with the boy hugging her and both of them crying. The twins were yelling at Soundwave about whatever was going on with their friend Dipti, while Ajit watched from the couch. They seemed to come to some kind of agreement after a while, and then Ajit was also crying and hugging Soundwave’s legs and thanking him. Soundwave eventually herded all three boys into the bathroom for a much-needed shower.

Starscream slept through all this, and Thundercracker sat beside him on the bed, absently stroking his smooth, dark hair. There were still angry-looking red blotches visible on his face and neck, and the spot where he’d hit his head on the wall was bruised and slightly swollen, but he looked unusually peaceful. When Rumble slammed the bathroom door shut, Starscream’s eyes fluttered open, and he glanced up at his brother.

“I’ve got you,” Thundercracker told him, and the other Seeker went back to sleep without comment.

A little while later, nestled under the covers with Starscream pressed to his front, Skywarp huddled against his back, and Slipstream snoring slightly beyond that, Thundercracker felt as though things really could be okay from now on.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone’s interested, I have an OFAM playlist on Youtube:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHUQt1HRmY&list=PLdCtk_iGye4nmfcl_OMxCYqelA2qq3Ok6
The songs correspond to things throughout all three books (including things that go well past where the original left off), and I’ve got a few that people suggested on Tumblr that I need to add...
It was almost noon when Megatron finally made his way back to the hotel room to find Soundwave sitting outside the door, waiting for him.

“My lord,” the other man greeted him, starting to get up.

“You can sit, Soundwave,” Megatron sighed, sinking down against the wall beside his third—or, no. Soundwave was his second now, he supposed. After a slight pause, Soundwave joined him.

“Did you find the twins?” Megatron wanted to know.

“They had come back with Slipstream, as it turns out,” Soundwave told him. “Also, I may have promised some form of assistance to the boy Ajit Singh, who I believe is eating lunch in the hotel restaurant at the moment.”

“Oh.”

“It is a lengthy story.”

“I trust your judgment.”

They lapsed into silence again. Megatron drummed his fingers on his knee and looked up and down the hallway at the rows of identical pink doors, trying to think how to start the conversation he was almost sure he wanted to have right now.

“I am sorry for attacking you earlier, my lord,” Soundwave said after a moment.

“Don’t be,” Megatron snorted. “I needed to hear it.”

“Yes, but there were probably more constructive ways in which we could have had that conversation,” the intelligence officer pointed out.

Megatron tilted his head in concession to that. “Not screaming at each other in public probably would have been a good start.”

It was Soundwave’s turn to concede the point.

“If I may be so bold as to ask, my lord,” he ventured after a moment, “what precisely did you leave to think about?”

For a while, Megatron just tugged at his beard as he considered whether he wanted to answer that or not. That fight had ripped apart his ties to the entirety of his little faction here, and he knew that the way they ended up re-tied would depend largely upon the manner in which he returned. He could come in acting as if nothing had ever happened, and he was fairly certain that things would continue on as they had for all these years. Slipstream and Thundercracker seemed right at their breaking points, yes, but he knew their pressure points well enough that he could get them back under his thumb soon enough. Everything would go back to normal with him as their commander and all of them skirting around him in fear.

Including Starscream.

“I was thinking about my brother, among other things.” He saw the surprise in the other man’s eyes. He didn't blame him; they'd spent the last four million years or so pretending that Megatron
didn't have a brother. Of course, therein lay the problem, he was starting to realize. “I think I’ve hated Optimus Prime for so long that I forgot I ever cared about Orion Pax.”

“I don’t suppose you would have hated him so much if you hadn't first cared for him,” Soundwave pointed out.

“Well, yes, but…” Megatron tried to arrange his thoughts, to figure out how to explain just what had happened in his mind that moment Thundercracker had mentioned wanting his brother back.

“Obviously, I remembered the fact that I cared for my brother, but I forgot what it felt like,” he tried. “I forgot why I cared for him.”

Soundwave just continued to stare expectantly.

“For instance, there was this time,” Megatron began to explain, “when we were still young, and we were scrounging for fuel in the Dead End. A gang fight broke out nearby, and I could hear the blaster fire getting closer and closer to us. So, I grabbed Orion and we hid in a drain pipe, and… I remember just clinging to each other while we waited for things to quiet down again, and feeling this fire burning in my spark as I held him and just knowing that if anyone tried to hurt him, I’d lose my own spark before I lost his. Only thing is…”

Megatron could feel his face warming as he spoke, but Soundwave had always been a good listener. He showed just enough interest to reassure that he wasn't judging, but not so much as to make it awkward.

“Only thing is, I'd completely forgotten that and every single other positive moment we'd had together until a couple hours ago,” he continued. “How did I forget that, Soundwave? How did I forget that having a brother is more than just pain?”

Soundwave nodded in understanding. “You repressed the memories,” he concluded.

“What's that now?” Megatron's brow furrowed.

“Losing a loved one in any way is painful, and particularly through betrayal,” Soundwave explained. “The processor sometimes encrypts and deep-stores memories of that person to avoid emotions that might be too much for a spark to handle. Some have reported forgetting the person altogether, but that was not possible in your case. It would seem your processor instead removed positive memories of your brother as it is far less painful to be betrayed by someone you never truly cared for.”

Megatron blinked. He'd never taken much interest in psychology beyond what was involved in the arts of persuasion and coercion, and sometimes he regretted that.

“That's… Okay,” he nodded as he tried to factor this in with everything else he'd been trying to process in the last couple hours. “So… do you think that could work the other way round?”

“I am not sure of your meaning, my Lord.”

“If you came to care for someone you once despised, could your processor hide away memories of the bad things he’d done in the past?” the ex-warlord elaborated.

Soundwave studied him hard, and Megatron turned his attention down to his sneakers, one of which had come partially untied without his notice.

“What you are wondering is if Starscream will ever forgive you,” Soundwave concluded.
“It’s not as if there aren’t things I’ve forgiven him for,” the other man muttered as he redid his shoelace.

“That is far from the point.”

“I know!” Megatron snapped. “I know, I just…” He let his head fall back against the wall. “When we woke up like this, I told myself that I wasn't going to hurt him anymore because I didn't want to accidentally kill him in this form, but now I think perhaps I've wanted to stop this for a while and merely felt I needed an excuse to do so.

“But even after I told myself I wouldn't, I still somehow found myself knocking him down time and again, and… It hurts. When I see him hurting now, it's like when I would see my brother hurting while we were still real brothers, and I don't understand! Why is this so hard? Why can't I just either hate him or not?”

Soundwave seemed to consider for a moment.

“Would you quantify your current feelings for Starscream as love?” he wanted to know.

“What kind of a question is that!?” Megatron snapped, feeling something lurch in his chest at the thought of applying that word to Starscream. “Do you love Slipstream!? ”

“I have very strong feelings for Slipstream that I do not pretend to understand,” the other man answered. “They are similar to the feelings I have for my creations in some ways, yet completely different in others. I imagine what you are experiencing with Starscream -- what I believe you may have been experiencing for far longer than you've been aware -- is something similar.”

“What do you mean, ‘far longer than you've been aware’?” Megatron asked warily.

“Perhaps,” Soundwave mused, “some of your problem with Starscream is that, from the beginning, you've had feelings for him that reminded you of your feelings for Orion.”

Megatron scoffed at the absurdity of that suggestion, but Soundwave wasn't done.

“Starscream at his core is quite an enchanting mech. He is intelligent, talented, ambitious, and his frame was always a work of art. I always assumed the reason you promoted him to your side over countless older and more experienced candidates was because you simply liked him as an individual and wanted him closer to you. Surely, on some level you were aware you had entirely personal reasons for keeping him around all these years.”

“That's…” Megatron tried before Soundwave plunged on.

“However, because of your brother, some part of you had come to equate feelings of affection and connection with the pain of betrayal.”

“Yes, well, he did betray me, multiple times,” Megatron grumbled, shifting awkwardly. He didn’t like how right this analysis felt, or what it meant.

“You saw betrayal in everything he did because it was what you expected, and eventually it became a self-fulfilling prophecy,” Soundwave pointed out. “You have been hurting him and pushing him away all these years because you were afraid of what would happen if you ever let him get any closer to you.”

Megatron just gaped at him.
“I do not mean to say that Starscream is innocent,” Soundwave amended. “The mech was likely hatched with chaos engraved in his spark. However, if you truly wish to end this cycle the two of you have been locked in for the past few million years and build a different sort of relationship with him, you will first have to recognize your own biases and blind spots toward him.”

Silence followed this speech. It all made sense, of course, because it was Soundwave, and everything he said made sense.

“Why have you never told me any of this before?” Megatron wanted to know.

“Because you were never ready to listen before,” the other man sighed, “and I was never ready to say it.”

“What did I ever do to deserve you, Soundwave?” the ex-warlord wondered.

“Nothing, my lord. I simply chose you out of all the ills Cybertron had to offer,” his intelligence officer replied, one corner of his mouth twitching slightly.

Megatron snorted. “You and too many other fools. What do you think happened to the rest of them? Are they also stuck like this somewhere?”

“As I have found no news reports detailing current Decepticon activity anywhere in the world, it seems most likely that they are either similarly preoccupied or dead,” Soundwave concluded.

Megatron sighed, running a hand over his face. “The Allspark plan had better work. I think one more catastrophe of that scale might finally break Starscream for good.”

Soundwave nodded his agreement, and the two of them lapsed into contemplative silence.

“What if I can’t do it?” Megatron asked after a minute or two. “With Starscream. What if no matter what I do, he never wants me the same way I want him?”

Soundwave considered him a moment.

“Are you thinking of having sexual relations with Starscream, my Lord?” he asked.

“If that was all I wanted from him, I wouldn’t be bothering with this,” Megatron huffed, feeling his face heat up. “From what I understand, organics’ mating instincts do not take things like ‘love’ into account. Or… not love. I meant… You know what I mean.”

“That… You’re not incorrect,” Soundwave conceded.

“But there is certainly a place in my spark I would like him to fill,” Megatron continued. “I want to be together without hurting each other. I would like to be able to trust each other like we used to, back when I first made him my second-in-command. I want him to feel safe with me so that if he’s ever going through something like that again, he’ll tell me instead of almost killing himself!”

“You realize that any such relationship ought to work both ways, yes?” Soundwave pointed out.

“I did say that I want to trust each other,” Megatron reminded him.

“Yes, which would mean that you would have to tell him when you’re struggling,” the other man iterated.

Megatron stared at him and tried to imagine opening up like this to Starscream. He laughed.
“I said I want a relationship with him, not that I want to turn him into a completely different person,” he said.

Soundwave shrugged. “Starscream will likely become frustrated if you expect him to be emotionally vulnerable with you but refuse to reciprocate. Not to mention, he is liable to consider you depending on others for such emotional support as a betrayal in itself.”

This was all far more complicated than Megatron would have liked. A part of him -- the human part, he assumed -- kept saying that he didn't need any of this messy, emotional stuff; he just needed to let go and follow his body’s urges, and the Seeker would be his. The Cybertronian part of him, however, was quite certain that this would only make matters worse, regardless of how good it would probably feel…

“Also, you have made yourself two powerful enemies tonight, one of whom is going to be a strong rival in this quest of yours to win the top spot on Starscream’s list of people he trusts. Mind you, both of you are going to have to get him to make the list in the first place to get anywhere on it.”

“Yes, so I’ve realized,” Megatron sighed. “If I want Starscream, I’ll have to take his whole family, won’t I?”

“I think that a more accurate way of phrasing it would be that you need to convince them to take you,” Soundwave contradicted. “And Thundercracker is nothing if not stubborn. Even if you can convince Starscream to forgive you, achieving the same with his brother will probably be the more difficult task.”

Megatron hummed and leaned back against the wall.

“I’ve got my work cut out for me,” he declared.

“Humility never has been one of your strengths,” Soundwave agreed. “Nor anger management.”

“You’ll help, though, won’t you?”

Soundwave smiled.

“Always, my lord.”

Starscream slept, but not well. His whole body ached and burned, and he couldn’t bring himself to care. There was a cacophony of sound in his head, and most of it was just screaming. He wanted to scream aloud, but it felt like his mouth was stuck shut. The others showed up again eventually, and he thought he saw Ajit at one point as he drifted in and out of consciousness. It was hard to tell which state was which anymore—both felt like a nightmare.

He remembered Thundercracker trying to say something to him that sounded like it was supposed to be reassuring, and really, how dare he? Thundercracker standing by and watching while Megatron beat him was nothing new in Starscream’s life, but his brother trying to act like he still cared about him afterward was a new low. It seemed like too much effort to try and scream at them or lash out anymore, though, and so Starscream just ignored the both of his brothers as they tried to pretend they were some kind of functional family. They made him want to hurl again.
At some point, he dreamed that a large hand caressed his hair, and Megatron’s voice murmured, “I’m so sorry, Star. Never again. Never again, I promise.”

The touch felt real, but it had to have been a dream. Megatron would never apologize. He would never acknowledge his mistake like that. Starscream was nothing but an occasionally useful but mostly obnoxious tool to him. How could he have thought that his commander had even the smallest inkling of affection for him? Such an idiot...

No, he wasn’t the idiot; Megatron was!

All of this was Megatron’s fault. He had ruined everything. They’d lost everything they were because of his obsession with his stupid brother! He’d thrown away everything the Decepticons had stood for and destroyed their entire world in his constant quest to one-up Optimus Prime. He’d gone so far as to leave them—to leave him—to chase after the All-spark, and not come back! Starscream had to take command for thousands of years, trying to pick up the pieces of Megatron’s mess while clinging to any hope he could find that his leader wasn’t dead.

And then they’d managed to track him down to this mudball, and Starscream had spent years hiding among the humans while they tried first to find him and then to rescue him. He’d let humans sit inside his cockpit, and had Megatron shown any gratitude when they finally got him out of there? No, he just went straight into criticizing Starscream for not having acquired the Cube, too! Thousands of years apart, thousands of years of keeping his organization together in his place, and a successful rescue operation, and the first thing Megatron did was insult him. Right before he went and got himself killed.

Never mind they’d found a way to bring him back, did he have any idea what it had done to Starscream to watch him die!? To see his sparkless husk dropped in the sea like so much refuse!? And then he’d gone and placed all their fates in the servos of that… that… that thing! That decrepit, so-called Prime! And, lo and behold, the same thing happened again! The Fallen nearly destroyed them all with his revenge-obsessed plans, and Megatron would have let him! The fool had only survived because Starscream practically dragged him away before he had a chance to go get more than just a part of his helm lopped off by his fragging brother.

If anyone deserved to be stripped of rank, it was Megatron!

Not that it would ever happen. The others would follow him as long as he was there to follow, and right now they were doubtless following him down yet another road to failure. How had Starscream ever deluded himself into thinking for even a second that a pig-headed oaf like Megatron could get them out of this predicament? Or that anything about the last few weeks would change anything between the two of them? They were all doomed to be stuck in these flesh bags as they rotted and died around them, provided Megatron didn’t end up killing Starscream before then.

Because he would if he ever tried to beat him the way he used to while they were Cybertronian. What failure would he blame on Starscream as an excuse? Would it be when something happened to prevent them getting to America? Or would they make it there, but something would make it impossible to track down the All-spark? Or they might even find the All-spark’s remnants, but it would do absolutely nothing. Any one of these things was liable to end with Megatron crushing Starscream’s stupidly fragile human body. It was just a matter of time.

Unless…

Starscream rolled over as carefully as he could so as not to wake his brothers (he couldn’t have them interfering in this) and stared hard at the outline of Megatron’s back on the other bed. He
could tell from the cadence of his breathing that the man was fast asleep. Everyone in the room was.

With a deep, shuddering breath, Starscream slid himself out of the double bed and crept around to the foot of it on shaking legs. He pulled up the edge of the sheet and found the hole he had made there last night. The razor was still inside.

The green light of the alarm clock glinted along the blade as Starscream pulled it out. If it was betrayal Megatron wanted from him, Starscream was happy to oblige.
Chapter 57

Chapter Notes

I think a lot of you know what’s coming in this chapter. If you don't, just keep my warning from a few chapters ago in mind as you proceed.

Megatron shifted as a warm weight settled on top of his stomach, pressing him further into the mattress. It would have been comfortable were it not for the two sharp points that then dug into him—Starscream, he realized. Much as he appreciated the Seeker’s backside, it always felt more like Starscream was digging his elbows into his commander than just sitting on him. Not that Starscream sat on him very often, so what was this about now? Was he here to try and make nice again?

Too sleepy to bother opening his eyes, Megatron lifted a hand to brush a strangely chilled knee, and icy fingers gripped his own throat.

“Don’t make a sound,” Starscream hissed down at him, and Megatron decided this situation was worth waking up properly for.

He blinked up at Starscream's blurry silhouette, trying to make his face focus in the gloom. A stripe of daylight that had snuck in around the edge of the curtains was falling across one side of the Seeker's face, somehow making the rest seem darker by comparison.

“Starscream, what—” Megatron started to murmur, but the Seeker pressed harder and this time Megatron felt the sharp edge of a blade dig into his throat the slightest bit.

“One more word, and I’ll gut you like the meat bag you are,” Starscream hissed at him, his voice strange—thicker than usual.

That was when Megatron’s consciousness finally caught up to him, and he realized what was happening.

“No!” he choked as he tried to grab at the young man's hands. Starscream increased the force on the blade the tiniest bit, and Megatron felt a sting of pain as metal bit into his flesh. He stilled, breathing evenly and trying to get a read on the Seeker's body language.

Of course, he was well-accustomed to Starscream’s random assassination attempts, but this was the first time his lieutenant had stooped to attacking him in his sleep. It was also the first time that Megatron had felt anything other than frustration and anger over the situation.

“Starscream, please, you don't—” he began, but the pressure increased, enough that Megatron was sure the boy had drawn blood.

“I told you not to speak!” Starscream snarled, leaning forward.

Megatron fell silent, barely breathing as he waited to see if Starscream would let up at all. His eyes still hadn’t adjusted enough to make out the Seeker’s expression, so Megatron just had to hope that this wasn’t anything more than an attempt to make a point. The ex-warlord took a careful, steadying breath and clenched his fists at his sides. If Starscream really wanted him dead, then
Megatron would have choked to death on his own blood without ever waking up, he told himself.

“Do you know how often I’ve fantasized about this while lying beside you these past few weeks?” the Seeker hissed, and Megatron could hear the sneer in his voice even if he couldn’t see it. “You thought you were safe with me just because I no longer had guns or claws with which to rend your flesh, didn’t you? It was nothing but a frail, helpless little human you invited into your bed; I wasn’t a threat to you or anyone else in your mind, was I?”

Megatron just blinked up at him. Starscream liked to monologue, and the longer Megatron let him, the more likely it was that the Seeker would accidentally create an opening or wake one of the others, who would doubtless come to their commander’s assistance. Besides, this was good timing in a way. What better way to prove his change of heart to the boy than by not losing his cool after waking up with a knife to his throat?

“You forgot that I am still myself,” Starscream went on. “I am still Starscream, the mech who led the Decepticons to victory at your side for the better part of four million years—the mech who led your forces for thousands of years while you were frozen helpless in an organic wasteland! I was the one who saved you! Did you forget that, too!?”

Yes, Megatron supposed he had forgotten in some ways. It was easy to forget while looking at this wasted, ailing young man that not too long ago he had been one of the deadliest and most competent warriors the Decepticons had to offer, but why had it always seemed to escape Megatron’s memory while they were Cybertronian? Why did he never acknowledge Starscream’s successes and strengths? He would have to have another conversation with Soundwave about that one later.

“Tell me, Lord Megatron,” Starscream started to speak again. “What did it feel like when the life literally oozed from your frame? I hope it hurt, because I want you to suffer as I have suffered!”

“And what have you suffered?” Megatron asked in a low whisper, recognizing his cue to join the dialogue.

“You,” the Seeker answered, leaning forward again. “You and your war and your incompetence!”

This time, his face came into clear view as the light of the alarm clock came across it, and Megatron finally saw the frantic, almost fearful look in his eyes. He wasn’t sure what precisely had Starscream so worked up right now, but he did know what Starscream’s eyes looked like when he was resolved to make a kill, and this was not it.

“If that is all, then you know nothing of true suffering,” Megatron grunted, more to play the part than because he believed it.

“That is not for you to decide!” Starscream snarled, pressing down on his blade a little more.

If there was one thing Megatron realized tonight, it was that Starscream had suffered in ways that Megatron himself had long failed to register fully. Perhaps the Seeker hadn’t spent his early years being beaten and starved and tortured by gangsters and enforcers, but he had spent the better portion of his adult life suffering exactly that at Megatron’s own hands. There wasn’t much resentment Megatron could conjure toward the Seeker for wanting to kill him at this point.

After all, if their positions were reversed, Megatron would have killed himself ages ago, and really he couldn’t understand why Starscream hadn’t. What bizarre psychological glitch kept stopping Starscream from killing the mech who’d made his life a living nightmare all these centuries? What kept him coming back? It wasn’t as if Megatron had never (at various times and always to
Soundwave’s despair) put himself in positions like this one that would have given Starscream every opportunity he needed to kill him before he ever knew what had happened.

“It didn’t hurt, you know,” Megatron told him.

“What?” Starscream sneered, letting up the pressure just the tiniest bit so that his commander could speak clearly.

“Death,” Megatron whispered. “Your spark burning out of your chest? That hurts, but death is nothing, Starscream. Death is the end of all pain.”

It wasn’t strictly true—Megatron had no memory of what had happened between the pain of losing his spark and the pain of regaining it—but he hoped it would steer the conversation away from a topic that only seemed to be agitating the Seeker. He reached a careful hand up to brush Starscream’s knee again. The skin was still almost disturbingly cold to the touch, despite the warmth that the Seeker’s legs were radiating into Megatron’s sides. The warlord didn’t get much time to ponder the matter, though.

“Don’t touch me!” Starscream gasped, and the knife slipped a little across Megatron’s throat as he flinched.

The older man winced against the pain and held his breath as he waited for Starscream to calm down again.

“I’m not your… your plaything!” the Seeker continued, his voice rising slightly.

Heart pounding in his throat, Megatron did his best not to swallow. The fingers gripping him (even colder than Starscream’s leg) were shaking now, and he only hoped that the boy’s hand didn’t slip again.

“This might be the wrong body, but it’s still mine!” the Seeker continued, his voice quavering along with his hands now. “You don’t get to just touch me whenever you want and make me… make me feel… It’s not yours!”

Bold words for a man currently restraining and threatening to kill another person, but Megatron couldn’t deny the truth of the accusations.

As Thundercracker had pointed out earlier, Megatron had been ignoring much of Starscream’s autonomy, especially since they’d ended up in these bodies. Of course, some of it (like confining him to bed or making sure he ate) had been for the Seeker’s own good, but perhaps he’d let that attitude of being the one in charge go a little too far. How many times had he invaded Starscream’s personal space just because he wanted to, despite the Seeker’s protests?

“That is a matter we can discuss later,” he promised, and Starscream let out a bitter laugh.

“Don’t you get it?” he snarled. “There is no later for you anymore! I’m ending this here, once and for all!”

So he said, but he only looked more confused than ever, and his whole body was starting to shake now.

“Do you really intend to kill me, Starscream?” Megatron asked, voice quietly strained.

“I will do whatever I deem necessary!” the Seeker hissed through gritted teeth, and something wet dropped onto Megatron’s face. It wasn’t until Starscream sniffed a moment later that Megatron
realized what it was—a tear.

“And why is this necessary?” the warlord asked, resisting an impulse to reach out and touch the boy again. Starscream’s resolve may have been broken, but Megatron didn’t trust the boy not to cut his throat by accident right now if he made the wrong move. He needed to calm him down, but he couldn’t even think of a time when he’d tried to calm Starscream down in any way besides shouting at him to come to his senses.

“You will be the death of us,” Starscream accused him, his voice shaking. “The death of me!” A few more teardrops plipped onto Megatron’s face and neck.

“So, you have taken it upon yourself to deal with me?” Megatron pressed, wincing at how the knife juttered against his throat with every shake of the Seeker’s hand. He could feel the slow trickle of blood as it ran down to the pillow now. “What do you imagine that will achieve?”

“I... Without you, I can... We’ll...” Starscream's watery eyes darted to the side, and his breath started to quicken. “I’ll be the one in charge!” He was starting to sound like Skywarp when he was plunging into one of his episodes.

“Why must you always put so much on yourself, Starscream?” Megatron asked before the boy could work himself up any further. “You are already struggling to keep yourself alive, and now you wish to place responsibility for others’ lives on yourself? Do you think that they would even follow you in your current state? Look at yourself—you're falling apart! Your own brothers would probably just laugh if you tried to lead them right now.”

“I would be fine if you were not around!” the Seeker insisted, his voice rising again without him seeming to notice.

Megatron saw movement behind Starscream, and did everything in his power not to let his eyes shift to the small, shadowy figure that had risen silently from the floor on the far side of the double bed. After a moment of confusion, he realized that it was Ajit. Megatron had heard Soundwave letting him back into the room shortly after they themselves had returned, and the boy must have fallen asleep on the floor. It was probably too much to hope that the street urchin could successfully disarm Starscream without startling the Seeker into killing his commander first, but stranger things had happened in the past few weeks.

“Would you?” Megatron challenged, turning his full attention back to the young man on top of him. In the corner of his vision, Ajit moved silently toward the couch, where Soundwave and Slipstream were sleeping. “Who would have carried you to the hospital when you passed out last week? Who would have saved you from the thieves the week before that?”

“My... Thundercracker would...”

Ajit had reached the couch now, and, instead of continuing on toward the bed, Megatron saw him reach over and gently squeeze Soundwave’s shoulder. It was just possible, the ex-warlord reflected as his intelligence officer started to stir, that Ajit Singh was an argument in and of himself in favor of preserving at least a select portion of the human race.

“Thundercracker has been busy with Skywarp,” the older man reminded him. “And you really think he would let you lead after what you've been doing to yourself?”

“Of course he would!” the Seeker snapped, edging toward his normal volume. “He wouldn't... He's my brother!”
“As Optimus Prime is mine.”

Soundwave had noticed what was going on now, and was carefully untangling himself from a groggy Slipstream.

Starscream stared down at Megatron, and then his eyes flicked over to the double bed, where his brothers still slept soundly. For a second, Megatron feared the Seeker would notice Soundwave starting to slink across the floor toward them, or Slipstream and Ajit watching transfixed from the couch, but he didn’t. He just took a long, shuddering breath in through his nose and held it for a moment.

“You have already lost so much, Starscream,” the ex-warlord reminded him. “Your frame, your rank, your health... Think of the things you have left.”

Starscream looked down at Megatron again as he let the air out in one long, shuddering breath. His tears had stopped now, and he gave a final sniff as he pulled the knife away from his commander’s neck.

Megatron breathed his own sigh of relief as he finally allowed himself to look toward the tall figure now hesitating at the foot of the bed. Soundwave relaxed visibly as the gleam of metal moved farther from his commander, and Megatron made a small motion to him that he could stand down; the situation was under control.

He could see now that Starscream’s weapon of choice had been the razor Slipstream had used to shave Soundwave yesterday, and felt a chill run up his spine as he realized what a narrow escape he’d just had. Megatron had inspected the blade himself when Slipstream was done with it, and had discovered for himself how easily the metal could cut through flesh without even noticing the injury.

“Give it here, then, you fool,” the warlord rumbled, reaching an expectant hand for the weapon as he started to sit up.

Starscream held the razor aloft and drew back from his commander, a desperate and confused expression on his face. He was likely trying to calculate what kind of punishment would come next, and Megatron found himself suddenly doing the same. He couldn’t let the Seeker go thinking he could get away with threatening to cut his commander’s throat in his sleep, but he honestly didn’t want to hurt him again.

While Megatron was turning the matter over in his head, Starscream slowly reached up to grip the razor’s hilt in both hands and pressed the blade firmly against the side of his own neck.

Cold, numbing terror—far beyond anything he’d felt when the knife was at his own throat—spread from the pit of Megatron’s stomach, sticking his tongue in place and freezing his arms at his sides. Even in the dim lighting of the room, he could see the blade indenting Starscream’s delicate skin, just under his jaw, and the Seeker suddenly looked less fearful and more...

He couldn’t be serious, Megatron tried to reassure himself. This was just one of his desperate schemes to avoid punishment. It wasn't particularly in character for vain, self-obsessed Starscream to consider taking his own life, after all.

But Starscream wasn't really himself right now. Could Megatron risk not taking him seriously?

“Starscream?” he tried, finally managing to unstick his tongue.

Soundwave had frozen behind the Seeker, and Megatron couldn't bring himself to shift, either. One
wrong move, and Starscream just might dig the knife into his neck and...

No.

No no no no NO!

Megatron reached up, knowing that if he didn't do something ...

But Starscream leaned back, pressing the knife a little further into his flesh, and Megatron froze again as a trickle of something dark leaked down the Seeker's slender throat. The warlord swallowed thickly, taking in Starscream's expression. His eyes had glassed over, like he wasn't looking at the same world as the rest of them anymore, and there was a hollowness behind them that Megatron was afraid might swallow him.

“Starscream,” he tried again, one hand hovering somewhere between the two of them, the other supporting himself half off the mattress. Neither of them felt like they were attached to his body.

“You're bleeding,” Megatron said quietly, knowing that it was perhaps the most useless thing he could say in this situation. “I won't hurt you, so please... just put it down.”

But he wasn't sure that the Seeker even heard him, and a shiver ran down his back as Starscream closed his eyes. The young man drew in a breath that seemed to pull all of time in with it, and Megatron knew.

This was not a trick.

The merciless flow of time returned, and before Megatron or Soundwave could move, Starscream had drawn the blade across his throat: quick, precise, and deadly. Just like Starscream.
Chapter 58

Chapter Notes

Here there be blood. You've been warned.

If you'd like, these are the two tracks that fueled this chapter:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZh_IVW5CdY
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36mlX318Q3w

Megatron had never hated his human form so much as in that moment when he lunged forward, only to find he was not fast enough. By the time his own hand closed over the knife and Soundwave’s arms wrapped round the Seeker from behind, there was already blood sprayed across the bed covers, up Starscream’s face, running thick and fast down his neck to spill into Megatron’s lap…

“No,” the warlord breathed as the thick, crimson gore continued its unforgiving flow and Starscream went limp in Soundwave’s arms. “Starscream, no! No, no, NO!! WHY?? WHY WOULD YOU…!!”

It didn’t really matter because he had, and Megatron was pressing his hands against the cut as Soundwave laid the young man back on the mattress, but hot, slick blood kept spurting between his fingers, and Starscream was still just staring with that blank look and he was so cold!

On the double bed, Thundercracker and Skywarp were starting to stir, and Megatron couldn’t bring himself to even look in their direction.

“Megatron!”

Soundwave shoved his hands aside, pushing a pillowcase against Starscream’s neck in their place, and then clamped one of his commander’s hands back down over it.

“Hospital!” the intelligence officer shouted at him. “RUN!”

Megatron got the hint. He scooped Starscream’s limp body into his arms, keeping the pillowcase pressed against his neck, and jumped over Ajit on his way to the door. He didn’t bother opening it; just kicked the whole thing clean off its hinges to ricochet off the far wall.

Logically, he knew that he must have taken the stairs because he sure as hell hadn’t waited for the elevator, but he could never for the life of him recall how he’d managed to sprint down four flights of stairs while carrying Starscream without tripping. Most of that nightmarish sprint to the hospital was little more than a blur, but certain aspects managed to lodge themselves in his memory in ways that no encryption program ever could have erased.

He could perfectly recall the burning pain in his chest and legs as he forced his body to move past its human limitations, and there were vivid flashes of specific stalls he somehow leaped over and the looks on people’s faces as he passed them. There was also the way that Starscream felt so completely lifeless in his arms and the soft flutter of the Seeker’s breath against Megatron’s neck that gradually became fainter and fainter.
“Don’t let go, Starscream,” he wheezed between desperate gulps of air. “Not now. Please not now! Just hold on! I’ll fix it, I promise! I’ll fix everything! Just hold on!”

Starscream made no response whatsoever, and his body had never felt so small and fragile against Megatron’s chest before. Skin and bones -- that was all he was. Just a few bits of organic matter kept alive by happenstance that somehow contained everything that made the most horribly brilliant mech Megatron had ever known, and it was falling apart in his arms.

By the time he stumbled into the hospital reception room, Megatron was doing something he hadn’t since the day Orion Pax had become Optimus Prime -- praying.

At least, that was the best word he had to describe it. It was far from the grave, eloquent speeches of the temple priests or any of the trite little phrases he’d once spoken at appropriate times to make sure that Primus knew he hadn’t forgotten about Him, just in case He cared enough to pay attention. This was just Megatron’s own frantic thoughts aimed in the general direction of a god he wasn’t sure he’d ever believed in but had suddenly found himself hoping was as benevolent and forgiving and -- most importantly -- omnipotent as His reputation made him out to be.

People scattered in every direction as Megatron ran full tilt toward the reception desk, screaming all the way:

“HELP HIM!! SOMEBODY HELP HIM, PLEASE!!”

The woman behind the desk jumped up with a little shout and reached for a phone mounted on the wall beside her. Megatron decided she wasn’t any use and started searching desperately in the crowd for a doctor. One presented himself almost instantly and started tugging on Megatron’s arm as if he wanted the larger man to relinquish his hold on Starscream. Megatron shoved him away on instinct.

“JUST DO SOMETHING!!” the ex-warlord bellowed, clutching Starscream’s cold, limp body closer.

“We can’t unless you let go!”


“You CAN’T HAVE HIM!!” he declared.

“MEGATRON!”

He whipped around to find none other than Doctor Krishna running toward him, pulling a wheeled table of sorts behind her while another doctor pushed it from the other side. Relief flooded the ex-warlord as he surged toward her. This woman had saved Starscream twice already. Surely, she would save him this time.

“Save him!” he begged, thrusting the young man toward her.

She grabbed Starscream under the arms and hauled him onto the table, the other doctors moving over to help.

“We’ll do what we can,” she promised before turning to her colleagues and starting to bark out orders.
A flurry of action began as they wheeled Starscream out of the waiting room at a run with Megatron trailing along behind. Various doctors came and went on all sides, bringing tubes and syringes, and things Megatron didn’t even recognize. They pulled Starscream’s body this way and that and someone cut his shirt off while someone else climbed up on the table with him and started shoving the heel of his hands into the Seeker’s chest. The ex-warlord surged forward in fury to rip the man off, but several other doctors (or maybe they were nurses; who knew?) managed to intercept him.

“WHERE’S THE DEFIBRILLATOR!?” Doctor Krishna was screaming, and no one seemed to know, and Megatron wanted to scream with her because Starscream still wasn’t moving and nobody was doing enough! But the doctors were shutting the door that Megatron hadn’t even registered they’d gone through, leaving the ex-warlord firmly on the outside.

“You can’t be here for this!” one of them told him before the latch clicked shut.

He stared at the solid barrier in front of himself, mouth slightly agape as righteous indignation roiled inside him. They couldn’t do that! They couldn’t just shut him out! They didn’t know anything about Starscream! Would they know how to handle it when the poor sap woke up and started shouting at them for banging on his chest? Megatron doubted it.

He kicked the door as he’d done the one at the hotel, but this one was apparently of much sturdier construction. Several more blows did nothing to budge it, and the ex-warlord let out a roar of frustration before starting to pace up and down the hall, running his hands through his hair as he went.

That was when he noticed just how much blood was on him. His arms were both stained red almost up to his elbows, and the entire front of his shirt was a thick, dark sheen of gore. The sight of it sent a wave of nausea through him, and Megatron stopped pacing a moment to steady himself against the wall, breathing heavily.

It was okay, he told himself. It would be alright. Humans were hardier creatures than he’d ever expected, and this was Starscream they were talking about. No way could this be enough to kill him.

Just in case, he continued to pray, muttering the words aloud under his breath. If Primus listened to anyone’s prayers, it was a longshot that he would bother listening to Megatron of all people’s when he was at least fifty percent responsible for the destruction of the god’s physical form, but this was one of those times when there wasn’t much else to do anyway.

It was several minutes later when the door opened again and Doctor Krishna stepped out.

“Is he awake?” Megatron asked her, stepping forward eagerly. “Can I see him?”

She held up a hand, her expression unreadable as ever.

“Megatron,” she started, “he lost a lot of blood before you got him here.”

“What’s your point?” the ex-warlord scowled, weighing the costs and benefits of shoving her aside.

“With that kind of blood loss, the body goes into shock, and it is not uncommon for the heart to stop,” the doctor went on.

“So start it again,” Megatron huffed, wondering why she was wasting time telling him this if Starscream was still not fixed.
“We tried,” she said. “But after a certain amount of time, we have to make a call, and that time has passed. I’m sorry, but Starscream didn’t make it.”

The hallway was shrinking, and Megatron felt like the air had suddenly gone out of it.

“Do you understand what I’m telling you, Megatron?”

Doctor Krishna’s voice was strangely distant. In fact, everything felt distant like Megatron was watching it all from somewhere behind his own shoulder. He watched himself move like a stranger as he walked straight over the little woman and into the room beyond.

Starscream was still on that table, and the other two doctors were starting to disconnect the tubes and wires they’d put on him earlier. The Seeker lay with his head turned to the side to expose the gash he’d cut in his throat, which it seemed someone had been trying to fix. His narrow chest was perfectly still.

This wasn’t real. This couldn’t be real. Somehow it was a lie. That wasn’t Starscream. It was some other human they’d put in his place. Humans all looked the same, after all. This was a plot. A lie. Starscream always lied. This was a lie. It had to be a lie.

Megatron hadn’t registered stepping closer to the table, but now he was reaching out to touch a lock of dark hair, even darker still against the unnaturally pale, blueish tint that had crept into Starscream’s cheeks.

The moment his fingers brushed the cold, cold -- so damnably cold -- flesh on the Seeker’s face, he knew.

Starscream was gone.

He screamed. There might have been words. He wasn’t sure. He remembered gathering Starscream’s body into his arms, holding him tight and wishing he’d done so sooner as he screamed to the universe a grief that felt too massive for this human body to hold.

He had failed.

Four million years.

Four million years he’d had Starscream by his side. He’d thought he always would. He’d thought they had time -- that he had time to make it right.

This wasn’t right. This wasn’t how it was supposed to end. What was he supposed to do? What was he supposed to have done to prevent this? What wouldn’t he give to have Starscream open his eyes one more time?

What would you give?

It wasn’t a voice, but rather an undeniable atmospheric impression, like the whole universe had just focused in on Megatron in that moment to open the question to him. How far would he go to get Starscream back? To have just one more chance?

The rest of this day had been so surreal, that at first Megatron didn’t even question it -- he just
answered: “Anything.”

And then, he felt a sensation as though someone else was embracing him -- embracing his very existence -- as tightly as he was embracing Starscream, and Megatron realized that he wasn’t imagining this. *Something* much bigger than himself had taken notice of him and his grief.

Time did not stop so much as spiral down into an inconsequential factor as warmth and vitality flooded Megatron’s body, stealing his breath and burning in his chest as if someone had just dropped his spark back into this flimsy human frame. He thought at first that he was about to be consumed by the heat of it, and perhaps in some way he was because he couldn’t feel his physical body anymore, or Starscream’s.

Reality was spinning apart and opening around him, and there was nothing but the light in his chest and the infallible strength that held him secure in its grasp until suddenly there was a second light spilling into him.

It was warm and comfortable and right, but it hurt to touch even as it reached for him.

Starscream.

Megatron ignored the pain and latched onto him with everything he had left. He expected the Seeker to push back at him, but felt an outpouring of confusion and grief and aching need instead as, for a moment, he couldn’t tell where his own light ended and Starscream’s began.

*I don’t want to go,* rang out clear and desperate in his own thoughts. *Take me back. I didn’t want this!*

“I know; I’ve got you.”

Like an airlock depressurizing, the whole of it rushed away from Megatron’s awareness, and he was suddenly, finitely human once more, standing in the hospital room and holding Starscream’s bleeding, *breathing* body.

He barely had time to register any of what had just happened or even decide if it *had* happened before a shrill beeping interrupted his thoughts and one of the doctors shouted:

“Pulse! There’s a pulse! DOCTOR KRISHNA!!”

And people were pulling Starscream out of his arms, resuming the lifesaving efforts they’d given up on earlier. This time, they didn’t usher the warlord away, and he watched as the rising and falling line on the monitor screen grew steadier and steadier. The doctors started moving a little less frantically.

Starscream was still unconscious with some kind of breathing apparatus obscuring most of his face, but there was some small amount of color in his cheeks again. They’d started stitching the cut on his neck back together, and they were pumping warm, vibrant blood back into him.

Doctor Krishna turned, wiping some sweat from her forehead with a cloth.

“He’ll be okay for now,” she said. “I hope you know that what just happened was nothing short of a miracle.”

Megatron couldn’t answer with more than a nod. He was suddenly more tired than he could remember being in his entire existence, and he couldn’t tear his eyes away from the gentle rise and fall of Starscream’s chest.
He’d left, and he’d come back.

He’d been allowed to come back.

The ex-warlord let out a burst of strange, breathy laughter, and then fell dead asleep on the floor at the doctor’s feet. Just before the comforting darkness consumed him, he thought he felt the world focus in on him one last time.

*Remember: Lord Megatron always repays his debts.*
The Matrix stirred, and with it, Optimus’s spark.

The Prime’s optics onlined, and he sat up so abruptly that his helm collided with the balcony he’d been recharging beneath. There was a cry of shock and fright, human in nature and much higher-pitched than expected. It didn't sound pained, though, so Optimus ignored it for the time being to head for the hangar doors.

“Ah! Sir, you can’t… We can't let you out of the base!” the voice called.

“Megatron is…” Optimus started to explain, and then stopped as he realized he didn't actually know what Megatron was doing at the moment.

Some of the other Autobots recharging in the general vicinity were beginning to stir now, and their human custodian for the evening was hurrying along the balcony to come level with Optimus. She was a new one, and Optimus couldn't remember Lennox introducing her. Possibly, she was one of Galloway’s people, which was even more reason to ignore her for the time being.

Something had just happened to Megatron, and it had been big enough that the Matrix itself had reacted. Optimus could still feel echoes in his chest of some very un-Megatron-like emotions: terror, loss, grief, and then… love?

“What’s goin’ on, Prahm?” Ironhide grumbled as he flipped himself out of alt mode -- his preferred recharge state.

“That's what I want to know!” the human female put in as she finally reached him.

Optimus gave her a sidelong glance before sending a comm to his second.

::Something has happened to Megatron. For a moment, he seems to have lost control and let our bond open to its full extent.::

Ironhide’s optics cycled wide.

::Did you see where he is?: the older mech wanted to know.

“I can tell you're talking without me, you know!” the human spoke up. “I don’t care how old you are, I expect you to respect me the same as I respect you!”

Optimus turned his attention to her properly now. She held his gaze firmly. Not like she had any delusions that none of them would ever dare harm her, but like she’d decided she was willing to take the risk.

“What is your name?” Optimus asked her, leaning in a bit closer.


The Prime nodded.

“I meant no disrespect, Corporal,” he told her. “The matter at hand is simply a deeply personal one,
and if you respect me as you claim, then respect my choice to discuss it only with whom I see fit.”

The young woman set her jaw, but eventually turned away.

“Try to remember: the neighbors don't know you're here,” she told him as she walked back to her post.

“So, what's goin’ on, Prahm?” Ironhide murmured in low Cybertronian once she'd left.

“I am not sure,” his commander replied. “But it would seem that something very unusual has happened to Megatron. The Matrix stirred at the same moment he opened our bond. And no, I could not tell where he was.”

The other mech let out a noise somewhere between caution and surprise before continuing, “Now, when you say it were somethin’ ‘unusual’, is this like the kinda unusual that might bring us a bit closer ta winnin’ this thing?”

“He was… upset.” Optimus tried to recall the exact details of the feeling. “It felt… like…”

And then he realized he knew exactly what it had felt like. It had felt almost the same as when Megatron had learned that he had accepted the Council's offer to enter tutelage under Sentinel and eventually become the next Prime, except the relief, the acceptance, the love at the end this time… Optimus had never gotten any of that.

“It felt as though he thought that he had lost someone who meant everything to him, and then found that he hadn't,” the Prime summarized.

“Since when did Megs have anyone who meant anythin’ to ‘im?” Ironhide snorted.

“Even the most depraved of creatures have the potential for change, especially when he feels his end may be nearing,” Optimus mused. “Perhaps, Megatron's recent string of defeats has led him to reconsider a few things.”

“Mebbe,” his lieutenant conceded. “But who on Earth could the Slagmaker o’ Kaon have decided ta care about that much after all these years?”

“That,” the Prime rumbled, “is an excellent question.”

“STARSCREAM!” Megatron gasped, jerking awake so sharply he almost fell off the surface he’d been laid upon. Something tangled around his legs, and he kicked at the blanket until it came free. A sharp tug stung the crook of his elbow when he tried to get up all the way, and the ex-warlord finally stopped long enough to register his surroundings.

It looked like the same part of the hospital that he and Starscream had gone to when the Seeker had been here with his cold. There was an IV drip of some sort stuck into his arm.

“Finally awake, then?” a familiar voice spoke up behind him, and Megatron turned to find an unimpressed-looking Slipstream sitting on a chair beside the bed, arms folded over her chest.

“Where’s Starscream?” Megatron demanded. “What’s happened? How long was I asleep?”
“Upstairs in the intensive care ward, we got evicted, and about six hours, from what I understand,” she answered him.

Megatron blinked and opened his mouth slightly as he tried to process all this information.

“Intensive care ward?” He settled on the part he deemed most important at the moment.

“Skywarp and Thundercracker are both up there with him,” Slipstream told him in non-explanation. “Soundwave and the twins are looking for a new hotel. Apparently, the staff took issue with you kicking down their door and leaving blood all over their halls. Rather close-minded of them, if you ask me.”

It seemed a lot had happened while Megatron was asleep, but none of this told him where Starscream actually was. He started getting up and remembered the IV when it tugged at him again.

“Why was I hospitalized?” he wanted to know as he ripped it out, pressing his thumb firmly over the hole before it could start bleeding.

“They said you passed out. What do you think you’re doing, anyway?”

“Going to find Starscream,” the warlord growled, rising somewhat unsteadily to his feet.

“They won’t let you see him,” Slipstream scoffed.

“Any doctors who wish to keep me from him will have learn what the wrath of Lord Megatron truly looks like.”

“I meant Thundercracker and Skywarp, dummy!” the young woman laughed.

Megatron stopped moving toward the break in the curtains around them.

“They were a real mess, you know,” Slipstream went on. “Thundercracker said he really hasn’t noticed their bond much since we got like this, but then it snapped all of a sudden while we were trying to follow you. Of course, I didn’t really think much of it when Skywarp fell down in the middle of the sidewalk screaming, but then T.C. was just standing there staring at nothing, and I asked him what was going on, and he said… Starscream was dead, and…”

She trailed off with an odd, broken noise, and Megatron turned around to find her blinking back tears and looking a bit startled at herself.

“Anyway, he didn’t die,” she continued a bit shakily as she wiped at her eyes, “But we really thought… Primus! Why are all my relatives such idiots!”

“They have their good points,” Megatron found himself saying for some reason.

“Yeah, well,” Slipstream snorted, looking up again. “T.C. and Warp are both crazy sensitive right now and not at all interested in letting anyone close to their brother. Skywarp hissed at the doctor who went in to change Starscream’s IV earlier.”

“Is Starscream… How is he?” Megatron wanted to know.

The young woman shrugged. “He was still asleep when I went to check on them ten minutes ago, but the doctors said he’s gonna be okay. Something about you holding him and calling his name and him miraculously coming back to life.” A bit of a smirk twisted her features while Megatron’s
own darkened.

“Who told you that?” he snapped, moving toward her slightly.

“Relax; I’m not gonna tell anyone else,” the young woman sighed. “Soundwave told me what happened… and he told me some of what you talked to him about in the hall. When you came back. It seems I owe you my cousin’s life, and my discretion doesn’t seem such a hefty price to pay for that.”

There wasn’t even a hint of deception in her dark gaze, and Megatron found himself nodding in agreement.

“Thank you,” he rumbled awkwardly.

“Oh, don’t thank me just yet.” The smirk was back. “You’ve still got a lot to make up for, and don’t think I won’t be milking what I know for everything it’s worth.”

“And what exactly do you know?” he demanded, narrowing his eyes at her.

She just winked, and Megatron felt a strange sense of unease settle in his stomach.

“No, if you really want to see Starscream, I’m sure I could arrange something to get tweedle-dee and tweedle-dum out of the way for you,” she went on. “Consider it part two of repaying my debt.”

Debt…

Those last words he’d heard before passing out played through Megatron’s mind again, and the unease intensified sharply. He was fairly certain that what he’d experienced back there had been a brush with the divine. The monumental load of theological questions this raised aside, if Megatron’s understanding of the situation was in any way accurate, then he currently owed said divine a massive debt. What would Primus consider equivalent exchange for such a valuable life?

“Megatron? Do you want to see him or not?”

He pulled himself away from worries of future credits coming due and back to the present matter: enjoying what he’d been given.

“Yes,” he said firmly. “Yes, I want to see him.”

Slipstream entered the ward first, and Megatron watched from around the corner as she came back out a few minutes later, arm in arm with a sleepy-looking Thundercracker.

“...be just fine for ten minutes,” she was saying loudly to her cousin, and her gaze flicked briefly to Megatron’s hiding spot. “I’m sure the doctors will wake Skywarp up if anything happens, and he can come get you. It won’t do Starscream any good if you start starving yourself too for his sake, though.”

“I know, I know,” the other Seeker grumbled back at her. “I just wanna be there when he wakes up…”

“Then we’ll make this quick. Ten minutes. No more, no less.”
They disappeared down the hall, and Megatron slipped through the open door and into the long ward.

The intensive care ward was surprisingly noisy. There were machines beeping, doctors conferring, and patients’ families worrying over their loved one’s condition or celebrating what progress they’d made on every side. None of the beds had any more privacy than a curtain between each.

Megatron hurried down the line, peering in past each curtain until finally he caught sight of Skywarp curled up in an armchair. Tucked up in the bed beside him, covered in a broad assortment of wires and tubes, was Starscream.

An unfamiliar sensation tugged at Megatron’s chest when he saw the Seeker. There was some sort of clear, plastic mask strapped over Starscream’s nose and mouth, which clouded with condensation for every blessed breath he took. The doctors had also put some sort of stiff, tall collar around his neck that came up under his chin and would have made Megatron laugh under any other circumstance. Right now, he was too fixated on just how alive Starscream was.

He stepped forward, sparing Skywarp a glance to ensure the boy really was asleep before allowing himself to reach out and brush his fingers over one of Starscream’s soft, warm cheeks.

Whether human or Cybertronian, if there was anything more beautiful than Starscream, Megatron didn’t care to know at that moment. For one mad, desperate instant, he felt the urge to lean down further and press his lips to the Seeker’s forehead, but he recalled how Starscream had voiced complaint at Megatron’s taking liberties with his body. The last thing he wanted was to cause the boy any further stress. At the moment, he was content just to watch him—to see his chest rising up and down and those little puffs of air in the mask.

He was so focused on reveling in Starscream’s life that Megatron almost didn’t notice the Seeker’s eyelids beginning to flutter until there were two slivers of perfect blue staring up at him.

“Starscream?” he breathed, dropping down closer to the other man’s level.

Starscream’s gaze focused on his face, and Megatron felt a curious sense that as he looked into the Seeker’s eyes, he could almost feel impressions of the other floating within his own consciousness. He reached cautiously for one of the younger man’s hands. The fingers twitched at his touch and then curled loosely around his.

“I’m sorry, Starscream,” Megatron found himself whispering, and he wondered if he would ever be able to say it enough. “For everything. I’m so, so sorry.”

“I know,” the Seeker murmured, his voice so weak that Megatron read it on his lips more than he heard it. “He told me... He asked me... if he should answer you, and... I felt you.”

Megatron blinked down at him for a moment as an unfamiliar fire started burning in his chest. It wasn’t like rage or zeal or the thrill of battle, but something much softer and safer that made him want to be as close to Starscream as he possibly could.

Without further hesitation, the warlord gave in and leaned down to press a kiss to the Seeker’s forehead.

Megatron inhaled deeply as he buried his nose in wonderful, fragrant Starscream, the young man’s skin soft and warm on his lips.

“So long as I live, you will never feel so lost again,” Megatron sighed against him.
He felt something wet trail down his cheek, followed by the unsteady touch of cool fingertips.

“Can you give me your trust one last time, Starscream?” he asked.

There was a rustling sound, and Megatron pulled back slightly to see Starscream had pulled the mask from his face. His eyes were almost fully open now, and Megatron could have happily spent the rest of forever charting their depths. Apparently, Starscream had other plans, though, because just then the Seeker grabbed a handful of his commander’s beard and pulled until the older man’s mouth was mere fractions of an inch from his own.

“When you beg so prettily, my lord, how can I refuse?” the Seeker whispered, and then he tugged Megatron down the last little bit.

The other man stiffened in surprise for a moment as warm, slightly rough lips pressed against his own, and then smiled as he began to press back, all thought of maintaining his honor as Cybertron’s Lord High Protector and leader of the Decepticons shoved from his mind as he kissed Starscream as fervently as he could figure how.

Things wouldn’t stay this way, Megatron knew. Starscream would get his health back and start being Starscream again. The hints of anger Megatron could feel at him for being so stupid would surface, and the warlord would have to figure out how not to act on them. They would have to deal with Starscream’s little assassination attempt, and his eating problem, and whatever underlying issues had driven him to decide that taking his own life was the best solution for his current problems, and a million other things.

But right now, none of that mattered. Because right now, he and Starscream had finally found a moment of perfectly consummate understanding, and Megatron intended to enjoy it for however long it lasted.

Chapter End Notes

:D
If you want music for this (and actually for a couple of future scenes) it was Vienna Teng’s "The Last Snowfall."
Chapter 60

Consciousness felt strange, like simultaneously attempting to ride an updraft while avoiding a downdraft. Starscream let himself bob in the awkward area between sleep and waking, his body somehow both too small and far too large and heavy, while he tried to make sense of his memories from the last... How long had it been now?

Something terrible had happened, he remembered that. There was a horrible knot of despair and desperation lurking on the edge of his memories, followed by a whirlwind of pain and fear... And then nothing but a vague sense of warmth, safety, and light, all of it somehow tinged with what was unmistakably Megatron.

Megatron...

Starscream remembered being angry with his commander. He remembered the bathroom and the hot water. Parts of his shoulders and legs still stung in a distant way, so it had definitely happened, but somehow he was more certain than he could explain that Megatron had made it up to him—that the warlord fully intended to keep making it up to him from here on out.

Still, Starscream had a feeling that he had tried to do something to get back at him before he'd known that. There was a flash of green light on metal on the edge of his memory, and Megatron staring at him, face full of more horror than one man’s face should be able to hold.

Frustrated at these strange new flaws in his mental faculties, Starscream started trying to roll over to get back to sleep, only to find he couldn’t move his neck. It felt as though someone or something was holding his head firmly in the one position, and when he tried to force it, a sharp pain shot through his neck and down his left arm.

And then he remembered.

Starscream’s eyes flew open, and he inhaled too suddenly. The pain in his neck intensified, and the Seeker let out an agonized whimper.

He remembered wanting an end. The fear, the uncertainty, the helplessness, the pain... It was all too much; he was so alone, and so much less than he had always hoped. His first instinct had been to try to put an end to Megatron, but that had been wrong. That had been the anger speaking, and the anger wasn’t the problem. Getting rid of his commander wasn’t going to solve anything, but he’d thought in that moment of desperation that putting an end to himself just might.

A hand brushed Starscream’s shoulder, followed by a touch on his face, and a distantly familiar sensation pulsed through his core, one that spoke of steadiness, security, and belonging.

“Star?” Thundercracker’s voice roused him further into consciousness. He cracked one eye back open to see his brother peering down at him anxiously.

“Oh my god,” the other man breathed. “Oh my god, Warp! Warp, he’s awake!”

There was a squeak and a rustling sound, and then Skywarp appeared in Starscream's field of vision as well.

“Star!” the boy wailed, his hands flying to his mouth. “We thought you were dead! Don't do stuff like that!!"
Starscream had thought he was dead, too. He remembered dying. That steady stream of fleeting life he had asked Megatron about; he’d felt it. There were indistinct recollections of being somewhere else—somewhere that was so alive that it wasn’t—but he couldn’t sort them out. All he had left was that overpowering sense of Megatron, and a firm conviction that the choice to return had been his own.

The Seeker managed an indistinct noise and flicked his eyes around what he could see of the rest of the room. It wasn’t much to come back to.

“Where’s Megatron?” he tried to ask, the words coming out in an indistinct mumble that Thundercracker somehow managed to decipher anyway.

“He’s not here,” his brother assured him. “You’re safe, Star.”

Starscream was too tired to bother correcting the underlying assumptions in that statement, just as he was too tired to put much thought into why they needed correcting in the first place.

“What were you trying to do, Starscream?” Thundercracker was asking him now, and Starscream didn’t think he’d ever seen so much sadness in his brother’s eyes. “What did you think killing yourself was going to accomplish?”

There was that familiar sensation in his chest again, and this time he almost recognized what it was.

“I wasn’t…” The younger Seeker considered the emotional and physical effort necessary to fully explain what had been going through his head in that moment—what had been going through his head for almost a month now, if he was honest—and decided it wasn’t worth it. “I just wanted to go back,” he settled for. Thundercracker could take that how he wanted.

“Go back where?” Skywarp wanted to know. “Starscream, this isn’t a dream. You can’t just wake up.”

“I thought it was worth a try,” Starscream mumbled, closing his eyes again. “But it wasn’t.”

“Oh, Star,” Thundercracker sighed, running a hand through his little brother’s hair. “I shouldn’t have let him hurt you. Not just this time; I never should have.”

“Wasn’t much you could’ve done,” Starscream pointed out.

“I should have tried.”

“I wouldn’t have let you.”

“Starscream, you’re my baby brother, and I don’t care who is hurting you—Megatron, Optimus, or even you —protecting you from it is my job,” Thundercracker insisted, and Starscream let his eyes flick open again as that warm sensation pulled on him.

“Don’t hurt yourself, Star,” Skywarp put in, carefully taking one of his brother’s hands in both of his own. “I know it feels like it’ll make things better, but it just… Well, it just hurts, and we don’t wanna see you hurt anymore.”

Starscream stared up at them.

*Think of the things you have left,* Megatron had told him, and the Seeker had taken it as a taunt to remind him that he had nothing left. Only now did he realize that his commander had been making
a genuine attempt to remind him that he did still have things worth holding onto.

His brothers were still here. He could feel them. Not just the warmth of their touch on his weary, broken body, but that warmth and security deep in the core of his being—he’d finally recognized it. It was the bond with his brothers, and the more he focused in on it, the more he realized he’d been wrong about them this whole time.

“We love you, Star,” Skywarp told him, and for once, Starscream believed it.

Tears started leaking out of the corners of his eyes, and he winced as a sob pulled on damaged muscles in his neck.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “L… love you, too… I’m sorry…”

Thundercracker leaned down to embrace him, followed by Skywarp, both of them careful not to put any further stress on his injury.

“We’ve missed you,” his older brother murmured, taking his free hand and giving it a squeeze.

Starscream squeezed back.

Starscream breathed in the stale, humid air with relish. He thought he could feel his exposed skin burning already in the searing afternoon sun, and there were a few cows wandering unattended through the packed street. For once, none of it bothered him in the slightest because, for the first time in over a week, he was outside.

The previous nine days of hospitalization had almost been enough for him to forgive every single other ill that humanity had to offer. The first 24 hours or so after he’d fully regained consciousness, he’d spent with his wrists and ankles cuffed to the bed railings because there was no way he would have willingly allowed them to pump another human’s blood into him. And the other thing—a catheter, they’d called it—he didn’t care if he was too weak and dizzy to get out of bed and use a toilet, that was going too far!

It wouldn’t have been so bad if he could have slept through the entire thing like he’d wanted to, but there were doctors and nurses coming in at least once an hour to check his vitals or change his wound dressing or try and get him to talk about how he’d acquired his injury. Between that and the extensive family of the man sharing his hospital room, Starscream felt like he hadn’t gotten a proper sleep in over a month.

Oh, and Thundercracker had flat-out refused to let him see Megatron the entire time.

“Frankly, I find the fact that you want to see him after everything that just happened more than a little disturbing, Star,” his brother had told him, and Starscream had mumbled some choice advice at him about where he should keep his opinions.

Maybe Thundercracker would have relented if Starscream had explained to him why he wanted to see their commander, but there was no way on Earth or Cybertron that he was going to share that with anyone else. Not when he himself could barely remember what events had transpired to create the aching need he felt to be around the other man in the first place.
That was all behind him now, though. At long last, he was free to recuperate in whatever manner he saw fit.

As soon as Thundercracker had let go of his arm to sign the outtake forms in the lobby, Starscream had near bolted for the front door, ignoring his brother’s exasperated shouts to “get back here” and “take it easy.” He didn’t know what the spoil-sport was so concerned about; it wasn’t as if he could move at more than half Thundercracker’s own normal walking pace without his head swimming discomfitingly.

Skywarp had followed him anyway, and Starscream leaned gratefully on his younger brother’s arm now as he tilted his head back the fraction of an inch he could manage before his bandages stopped him to delight in the setting sun’s warmth. He closed his eyes and sighed with content, ignoring the nausea starting to rise in his stomach at being upright for so long.

“Are you gonna be okay walking?” Skywarp worried, shifting to hold his brother’s arm with one hand and his waist with the other. “The new hotel is kind of far away. T.C. said maybe we’d get a cab.”

“I’ve been lying in a bed for nine days; I want to walk on my own two feet for once,” Starscream told him.

“Besides, if he falls, I’ll be there to catch him,” a deep voice rang out, and Starscream’s eyes snapped back open.

Megatron was striding toward them out of the crowd with Slipstream a little ways behind him. The ex-warlord had trimmed most of his facial hair sometime in the last week so that Starscream had a perfect view of the stupidly massive grin stretched across his stupid, beautiful face.

The moisture sapped out of the Seeker’s mouth, rather the same way that crowds of humans had once fled before him, and his nausea suddenly increased to the point that his vision went black for a moment.

“I don’t need you to—” he started to say, but was cut off when Megatron closed the distance between them in two easy strides and pulled him into a crushing embrace.

Starscream stiffened for a moment, and then let himself melt into it, leaning into the older man’s broad chest and inhaling his familiar scent. A large hand swept through his hair while stubble scraped against his cheek, and a hazy memory swam to the surface of the Seeker’s consciousness—one full of hair and Megatron and… tongue?

“Get a room already, you two,” Slipstream muttered from somewhere in the background.

“Okay, that’s enough already!” Starscream snapped, starting to push at his commander. “Are you trying to suffocate me!?”

Megatron pulled back, leaving his hands in the Seeker’s hair.

“How are you?” he asked.

“Fine. I’m perfectly fine. I wish you people would stop asking that,” Starscream huffed, folding his arms across his chest to hide a sudden shiver.

“You look pale,” Megatron observed, hands moving down over his shoulders to his slender biceps now. “And I’m told you’ve lost another kilo while you were in the hospital.”
“Because he couldn’t swallow for a few days,” Skywarp spoke up before Starscream could start to panic. “They put a thing under his chin to catch the dr—”

“Skywarp!” Starscream interrupted through gritted teeth.

“Well… Anyway, the doctors gave T.C. a… a renegagement plan for him,” the boy finished.

“Renourishment,” his brother corrected. “And it’s full of meat. I’m not doing it. We can figure out something else.”

The hands on his arms squeezed slightly, but it was a comfort rather than a threat.

“We can talk about it later,” Megatron promised.

“Oh, come on! You can’t be that soft on him, Megatron,” Slipstream snorted, coming up beside her cousin. “If you tell him ‘later,’ he’ll make sure it never comes.”

Starscream scowled at her. He had seen Slipstream several times in the past few weeks, and she’d been… weird. She kept acting like she actually cared about his well-being and trying to lecture him on various things that she labeled as “self-destructive behaviors.” She also kept trying to butt into whatever was going on between himself and Megatron.

“So what happened in the ICU?” she’d wanted to know the first time she’d come to see him. For some reason, she’d seemed confused when all he’d mentioned was talking to his brothers.

“The meat really isn’t that bad, Starscream,” she was saying now. “It’s actually pretty tasty, and it’ll make you feel better. Besides—”

“Slipstream,” Megatron cut her off before Starscream had a chance. “We will talk about it later. For now, let’s just get Starscream back to the hotel.”

The young woman huffed and rolled her eyes. “Pushover.”

“Are you just going to take this kind of disrespect, Megatron?” Starscream gasped, and then felt his eyes nearly bulge right out of his head when his commander just shrugged.

“She’s not wrong,” the ex-warlord told him.

“What the frag happened to you guys while I was in the hospital?” the Seeker demanded.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Megatron smirked, flicking his nose affectionately.

Starscream’s stomach swooped, and he suddenly wasn’t so sure he could handle being around his commander after all.

“Where’s T.C., anyway?” he muttered, shrugging the other man’s hands off his shoulders. “I want to go sleep somewhere that doesn’t smell like antiseptic already.”
Chapter 61

“So, we’ve spent most of the last week in two groups: one to help look for Dipti and one to keep getting money for your hospital bills and stuff,” Thundercracker was explaining as he carefully guided his brother down the street. “We decided it was better not to tell you about it so you wouldn’t stress.”

“Hospital bills!?? What about the passports?” Starscream wanted to know.

“Oh, we made our last payment on them a few days ago,” Skywarp joined in the conversation. “Remember that day when we took your picture?”

Yes, Starscream did remember. Slipstream had come in with some makeup and a scarf and gone to great lengths to make it look like he wasn’t in the middle of recovering from a traumatic neck injury.

“You made the last payment that day?” he guessed.

“Yup. We’re supposed to pick them up tomorrow, actually,” Thundercracker explained. “And don’t worry about the hospital. We figured it out.”

“I still don’t understand why we’re helping the humans,” Starscream muttered, faltering slightly and catching himself on his brother’s shoulder.

“You want to sit down again?” Thundercracker offered. “There’s a bench up ahead here.”

Starscream nodded slightly, rubbing a hand over his bandaged throat as he righted himself once more.

“As far as the whole Ajit thing goes, I’m not sure what that’s about either,” his brother explained as they continued. “Megatron was talking about how it’s important for us to repay our debts, but since when has he cared about paying debts if it won’t profit him in the long run?”

Starscream hummed in agreement and glanced ahead at their leader’s back. The older man was walking a few yards ahead of them with Slipstream, a combination whose development Starscream felt more than a little uneasy about. There were too many sensitive pieces of information his cousin might choose to divulge to Megatron—might have already divulged to him during Starscream’s absence. But it seemed that talking to Slipstream wasn’t the only thing that had mysteriously changed about his commander in the last week.

Almost as if sensing the Seeker’s thoughts focusing on him, Megatron chose that moment to glance back over his shoulder, his dark eyes sweeping up and down the smaller man before locking gazes with him. His face crinkled in an encouraging smile, and Starscream’s stomach fluttered unpleasantly before he turned away to hide the blush creeping into his cheeks.

“Is he making you uncomfortable?” Thundercracker asked quietly when Megatron had also turned around again. “You don’t have to have anything to do with him if you don’t want to.”

“No, that’s not it,” Starscream hastily assured him.

“Him and Megatron already made up, T.C.,” Skywarp spoke up. “They were hugging while you were paying the bills.”
“Were not!” Starscream snapped.

“He hugged you and you hugged him back,” his younger brother insisted. “Soundwave says humans hug when they make up after a fight.”

The former Air Commander wrinkled his nose but decided it was probably best to let Skywarp think that was all there’d been to that hug. He could almost believe that was the case himself if wasn’t for everything else in Megatron’s behavior. Something had shifted between them—some unspoken alteration in the nature of their relationship—and Starscream wasn’t sure he was ready for it.

“Well, it’s alright if you’ve made up with him, but I’d feel better if you didn’t spend too much time with him, Star,” Thundercracker decided to put in. “I know it seems like he’s trying to do better, but who knows how long it’ll last?”

Starscream caught himself before pointing out that he could say the same of his brother. If he offended Thundercracker right now, he might end up having to lean on Megatron all the way home, and the elevated heart rate just might send him back to the hospital.

“How come you’re not the one he’s leaning on?” Slipstream needled her commander as they walked.

“I don’t want to stress Thundercracker anymore than necessary,” he replied, well-versed in dodging her attempts at provoking him by now.

Perhaps Starscream was right that he’d let her get too familiar with him in the last week, but he’d needed some replacement for his former second’s sarcasm and wit or he might have “sunk into melancholy” as Soundwave had put it.

“So, you’re not avoiding him?” she pressed.

“Did it look like I was avoiding him?”

“No, it just looks like you’re afraid of his brother, a man half your size,” Slipstream snorted.

Megatron gave her a sidelong look. “I have no fear of Thundercracker; I am merely attempting to respect his right to protect his family.”

Soundwave had said it would be most conducive to Starscream’s mental health if he were encouraged to strengthen his ties to his brothers, and so Megatron had been staying out of their way as much as possible. The upside to this was that Thundercracker took it as his commander taking some of what he’d said in their previous confrontation to heart, which had helped begin the process of repairing the rift in their working relationship. They’d already gotten to where the oldest Seeker had invited Megatron to come with them to pick Starscream up from the hospital, and Megatron was optimistic that the more he demonstrated his new resolve to cherish Starscream, the more the other Seekers would settle back under his command.

Besides, he reflected as he glanced back at his elite trine again, Starscream did seem happy with them—for him, at least.
“What did happen between you two in the ICU?” Slipstream asked suddenly, and Megatron snapped his attention back to her.

“It’s not important,” he lied. “He was barely conscious at the time.”

The fact that Starscream didn’t even remember that Megatron had come to see him in the ICU had come as an unpleasant surprise. What else had the Seeker forgotten? Did he remember how he’d survived his brief trip into the Allspark? Or was the experience recorded in his memory the same way Megatron’s first brush with death had been—a blank space he couldn’t fill but knew had contained something. Starscream being as recalcitrant as he was, Megatron wasn’t optimistic about ever fully knowing.

Still, he took some comfort in the fact that, whether the Seeker remembered it or not, he had kissed him. Clearly, there was at least a part of Starscream that wanted Megatron in the same way his commander wanted him. All Megatron needed to do was follow Soundwave and (sometimes, if it wasn’t too ridiculous) Slipstream’s advice on how to nurture that part.

“You know what I think?” Slipstream asked, and Megatron grunted, knowing she would tell him anyway. “I think he’s waiting for you to make a move on him.”

“To what?”

“Make a move. You know? Do something to show that you’re interested in him,” she clarified.

“I think Starscream is well aware that I take an interest in him,” Megatron frowned.

“No, like, romantically,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“He has plenty on his plate without my putting a burden like that on him,” the ex-warlord huffed.

“He’s not made of glass, you know,” Slipstream drawled. “It’s not like he’s going to snap and fall to pieces again just because you got too close to him. In fact, I think it’s upsetting him more you not being near him. Look.”

She jerked her head back in the direction of the Seekers, and Megatron turned to see that the three of them had sat down on a bench beside the road. Starscream was peering at him over Thundercracker’s back while his brother was bent rustling through his bag for a water bottle. As soon as he saw his leader looking back at him, the former Air Commander blushed and turned away, wincing and grabbing at his neck as he did.

“See?” Slipstream murmured smugly when Megatron turned back to her.

“I see that the heat is starting to get to him,” he grunted. “Come; let’s take a break.”

“Okay, but if you need me to lure his brothers away from him again, just say the word,” the young woman smirked.

Megatron rolled his eyes and headed back toward the other three. It was a tempting offer, but he had a ways to go before he was desperate enough to rely that much on Slipstream’s assistance again.
The new hotel was a much farther walk than Starscream had expected, and he found himself starting to sway and stumble more and more the farther the sun sank down the horizon. By the time the street lamps were flickering on, his head was throbbing and his stomach roiling in protest at the exertion.

“We’re almost there,” Thundercracker assured him when he nearly face-planted in a flowerbed. “I can carry you on my back the rest of the way if you like.”

Starscream declined the offer because he doubted his brother actually could. Megatron on the other hand… But the last thing he needed right now was to wrap his legs around Megatron’s waist, even if it was from behind.

They’d entered one of the wealthier areas of the city, full of souvenir shops and cafes and other kitschy attractions aimed at tourists. There weren’t so many cars on the roads, and colorful, decorative lights hung in strings between the buildings. The street lamps here were shorter, made of what looked to be cast iron, and gave a softer, more yellow glow than the usual ones. It gave the whole place a comforting feel that Starscream couldn’t quite put into words.

Flowerbeds, full of large, colorful blooms, sat outside the shops and cafes, their edges lined with flat, gray rocks tall enough for people to use as seating. There was one larger flowerbed, positioned in the middle of the walkway, filled with short, slim trees that Thundercracker was heading for now.

“I don’t need to sit again,” Starscream lied, tugging on his brother’s arm.

“Well, I do, and this spot is nice and quiet,” the other Seeker replied as he settled himself down on one of the stones. Skywarp took a seat beside him and then held out a hand for Starscream. The middle Seeker hesitated a moment before joining them.

“How long are you going to be?” he wanted to know. “I want to get to the hotel and sleep already.”

“Not long,” Thundercracker promised.

“You can sleep on me if you want,” Skywarp offered, patting his lap.

Starscream actually considered it for a moment when a sharp pain stabbed through his head, but his pride hadn’t sunk quite that low yet. He gave his little brother a dirty look to communicate this.

And that was when he heard it.

At first, Starscream thought that it was some sort of animal and nearly shot straight up again for fear the creature was somewhere behind him. Then, the long, high-pitched noise shifted into a lower one. When another, sharper sound rang out with the first, Starscream realized what it was—music.

Music that sounded nothing like he’d ever heard before. Music that wasn’t pounding out of speakers in a club or developed on highly sophisticated Cybertronian computers.

Intrigued, the Seeker cast aside his fatigue and got back to his shaking feet. Thundercracker called after him, and Starscream waved at him irritably as he moved toward the sound. He needed to know how what on this planet could be making such pleasing, melodic sounds. After a few steps, Skywarp joined him, taking his arm with an encouraging smile.

“It’s over this way,” his brother told him, and Starscream allowed the boy to lead him farther down the narrow road.
Eventually, they came to a stop in front of a cafe, and Skywarp nodded to something on the pavement against its side. Starscream followed his cue and found three humans—scruffy, scrawny, young-looking, and no different from any of the other of Patna’s less fortunate residents—seated there, playing on three instruments made predominantly of wood.

Wood! Starscream never would have considered it could make any noise at all unless it was banged against something or snapped. He let go of Skywarp to move closer, studying the wooden instruments to see how the humans were creating and controlling their sounds.

One of them was using his fingers to adjust the lengths of several metal wires pulled tight across his instrument, which he then plucked. Another was simply blowing into a long cylinder of wood while opening and closing different holes along its length. The third was using his hands to strike the cloth-like material stretched over the tops of his wooden drums. None of them had any power source beyond the humans’ fingers and lungs, so far as Starscream could see. All of it was so strangely organic, and yet somehow almost beautiful.

The Seeker suddenly regretted not bothering to make any study of Earth music before. At the time, he’d thought it was no more than a cheap imitation of Cybertronian music, sounding the way it did because it was rendered on such substandard computers. But music from trees!? The sounds had been entirely organic this whole time! How did that work? He couldn’t let the humans have the satisfaction of knowing something he didn’t.

Next to him, Skywarp threw a couple of coins into a pile of change the humans seemed to have been collecting, and Starscream frowned in confusion as he noticed it. They were performing for money in the middle of a dirty street? Regardless of how innovative their instruments were, Skywarp shouldn’t be giving money to anyone with that little pride. Starscream made to retrieve the coin and was stopped by a hand on his shoulder—a hand too heavy and warm to be one of his brothers’.

“Leave it,” his leader’s deep, unusually gentle voice spoke in his ear, and Starscream’s breath caught in his throat. “Come sit with me.”

It wasn’t an order but a request, and one that Starscream couldn’t find it within himself to refuse. He allowed Megatron to help him up and steer him back to the opposite side of the flowerbed he and his brothers had been seated on earlier.

The sky was darkening rapidly now, and between the colorful lights of the buildings, Starscream could see the brighter stars of distant galaxies peeking through the Earth’s atmosphere to twinkle mockingly at him. His stomach sank as he remembered that he’d probably never get to visit any of those stars again: he’d never visit another planet, never again see a supernova or the birth of a new star...

The lights blurred and shifted slightly as he thought of the ruins of Cybertron hundreds of thousands of light years away and how, decayed and broken though it was, he’d never see his home again.

A thick arm wrapped around his shoulders, and he found himself pulled against Megatron’s warm side.

“What’s wrong?” the older man asked.

“Nothing,” Starscream mumbled, wiping the tears that had filled his eyes. “Just these… the pain medications. They mess with my emotional chemistry.”
Megatron glanced up at the stars as well and let out a heavy sigh.

“We’ll go flying,” he murmured, tucking the Seeker’s head beneath his chin. “As soon as you have your wings back. We’ll leave this planet and fly around as many solar systems as you want.”

“What if we never change back?” Starscream whispered, fisting a hand in the other man’s shirt.

There was a long pause, and then: “Why did you choose to come back to this, Starscream?” his commander asked in a deep rumble so soft that Starscream barely heard it. “Do you remember?”

The Seeker twisted the fabric in his fingers, staring ahead at Skywarp and the musicians without seeing them for a moment while he processed the question. He wasn’t entirely sure what Megatron meant, but there was an answer on the edge of his thoughts all the same.

“Because any chance is better than no chance at all,” he said, content to let Megatron make of that what he would.

His commander said nothing for a moment, and then gave the Seeker a small squeeze.

“Trust me,” he rumbled, his voice reverberating through Starscream’s chest and somehow soothing the ache in his head. “I know you never have and I’ve hardly given you reason to, but trust me. I will get your wings back.”

Starscream pulled away so that he could see the other man’s eyes. Something about this felt achingly familiar, and he couldn’t think why. He just knew that whether it was the strangely melodic music or Megatron’s warmth and strength enveloping him, the awful sinking feeling was starting to fade away.

“You’re wrong,” he said softly after a while.

Megatron frowned, and Starscream swallowed hard.

“I do trust you.”

He had to turn away again almost immediately when he saw Megatron’s expression shift from confusion to what was unmistakably affection. The larger man closed the distance between them again, and the hand on his shoulder slid down to encircle his waist. Starscream quickly fought for something to change the subject with.

“The humans have the stupidest names for their constellations,” he muttered, shrinking in on himself as he felt his leader’s chest vibrate with a small chuckle and the hand on his waist moved around to rub slow circles on his stomach.

“Yes, they do,” his leader agreed. “Orion being one of the more idiotic.

Starscream took hold of Megatron’s hand with his own to stop it giving him a heart attack while he tried to think how best to press into this rarely-tapped territory of his commander’s past.

“Orion was Prime’s name once, wasn’t it?” he asked quietly.

There was a moment’s silence before Megatron squeezed his hands back and answered: “Yes, it was… once. I do wonder if it is fate or merely an unfortunate coincidence that this of all planets would have a people who named a constellation after him.”

“Probably a coincidence,” Starscream supposed. “If anyone should have a constellation named
after him, it should be me.”

Megatron chuckled again. “The Starscream constellation. Yes, I can see it now.”

Starscream would have whipped around if it wouldn’t have hurt so much. “What?” he snapped defensively instead. “Any constellation of mine would be far more notable than any of yours.”

Megatron snorted. “Very well. When I have conquered this planet, the first improvement I will make will be to name a constellation after you.”

“Not going to destroy it, then?” Starscream wondered.

“Well… not all of it,” his commander shrugged.

“Careful, Megatron,” the Seeker snorted as he nestled into the other man’s shoulder, trying to find a position that supported his neck properly. “You’re in danger of becoming as soft as this fake body of yours.”

“Not soft,” Megatron contradicted, running a hand through his hair. “Just… a few shifting priorities.”

Starscream didn’t remember falling asleep, but he woke to the sound of quiet, familiar voices and Megatron’s warmth.

“...carry him?” his commander’s voice gently shook him a little farther into consciousness.

“Probably for the best,” he heard Thundercracker reply. “Poor thing hasn’t even eaten in hours.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t mind,” Slipstream put in.

“We have food at the hotel. He can have some when he wakes up,” Megatron murmured, and Starscream quickly did his best impression of a very much not awake Seeker as he felt his commander start to lift him, keeping his head supported against one broad shoulder so he wouldn’t put too much stress on the younger man’s neck.

“What if he still won’t eat?” Skywarp asked nervously.

“Now that he knows what being in the hospital long term is really like, I’m hoping he’ll feel more motivated not to end up there again.” Thundercracker replied.

Now safely nestled in Megatron’s arms, Starscream wrinkled his nose ever so slightly at that and felt his commander still. The others’ voices faded slightly before Megatron spoke again in almost a whisper.

“Starscream?”

The Seeker cracked one eye open for a second and then sighed.

“I don’t wanna walk,” he muttered.

“It’s fine; we’re almost there,” Megatron assured him, starting off after the others.
Starscream shifted slightly in his grasp and reached up to grip the other man’s shirt front, enjoying the warmth against his chilled fingers.

“Are you cold?” his commander asked sharply.

“Just sore,” Starscream replied.

There was a pause, and then something warm, moist, and a bit scratchy pressed against his knuckles. Starscream opened his eyes again and confirmed his suspicions that it was Megatron’s lips.

The other man turned to face him, and Starscream had an intense feeling of deja vu. He reached up to touch his commander’s cheek and flexed his fingers, the sensation of gripping wiry facial hairs bobbing in his memory.

“Are you coming?” Thundercracker’s voice called from up ahead, and Starscream quickly dropped his hand again.

“Go back to sleep,” Megatron instructed, lengthening his strides. “You need rest.”

Yes, Starscream supposed as he nuzzled into his leader’s warmth, he probably did.
Starscream woke hot, sore, achey, and far too groggy to do anything about it. He gave a vague whimper of discomfort and tried to reach a hand up to his neck only to find his arms were trapped by the familiar heat source he was pressed against—Megatron.

For a moment, he was able to overlook his discomfort in favor of enjoying the simple fact that he was… Well, home wasn't the right word for it, but he didn't have anything better. The Seeker shifted in his commander’s arms, whining again. This time, there was an answering hum, and the limbs entangling him started to move, tightening reflexively on their prize.

Much as Starscream was sure he would normally appreciate being cradled against the other man’s hard, perfectly-defined muscles, right now he mostly wanted his pain meds and the toilet.

“Megs…” he mumbled. “Megs, let me go; it hurts.”

Almost instantly, his commander was releasing him, rolling him onto his back, and looking him over with sharp, dark eyes.

“Where?” he demanded. “Where does it hurt?”

“My neck, stupid,” Starscream grumbled out the corner of his mouth. The left side of his face was often numb in the mornings ever since his incident. Sometimes, like right now, there was an obnoxious tingling in his left arm and fingers, too.

“Why? What do you need?”

“To pee! Let me up!” He pushed weakly at the larger man with his good arm, and Megatron finally relented, still looking uncharacteristically worried.

Everyone else seemed to be up already, milling about the room or (presumably) getting breakfast. Skywarp greeted his older brother from the other bed with a cheery wave, which Starscream responded to with an irritable pout as he shuffled toward the bathroom.

This new hotel room was slightly smaller than their old one, but also cleaner. The floor was carpeted in a grayish brown material that was unexpectedly rough on Starscream's feet. There were two twin beds and no couch, and the Seeker found himself wondering where Slipstream, Soundwave, and the twins had been sleeping. He couldn't remember seeing them in the room when they'd returned last night, but then he barely even remembered Megatron laying him down in their bed, either.

It wasn't until Starscream was about to pass through the bathroom door that he realized Megatron was following him.

“Where do you think you're going?” the Seeker demanded.
“With you,” his commander yawned.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” Starscream reiterated, gesturing pointedly at the space beyond.

“I know,” Megatron assured him.

“So… what? You’re planning to watch me pee now or something?”

“More or less.”

Starscream blinked at him in confusion, and the warlord sighed, running a hand through his hair.

“Starscream, the bathroom is where you've been purging your meals for the last however long, and it's also where you got… I'm not letting you in there alone until I’m satisfied you aren't going to use the time to hurt yourself again.”

The Seeker just continued to gape at him.

“Well? Are you going to the bathroom, or not?” Megatron prompted.

“You don't honestly expect that I'll put up with having one of you creeps staring at me every single time I have to relieve myself from now on, do you!?” Starscream shrieked as best he could with part of his face still numb.

“Yes,” his commander replied simply. “Either me, Thundercracker, or Soundwave. Your choice.”

“No!” He tried to slam the bathroom door behind himself and found Megatron's leg in the way.

“Starscream, come on! It's not as if we've never seen you naked before,” his commander grunted, forcing the door open again.

“It's not the same!” the Seeker insisted. It wasn't just that he didn't want anyone watching him in the midst of the shamefully human business of relieving his wastes, but also that the bathroom was the only place he’d ever managed to find privacy since becoming human. If they took that away...

To his mortification, Starscream felt tears starting to well up in his eyes as he pulled futilely at the bathroom door.

“Just… I just want to be alone for five minutes!” he despaired, trying to wipe his face surreptitiously on his sleeve.

“Yes, and that's exactly what worries me,” Megatron replied.

“Starscream, don't be difficult,” Thundercracker called from the bedroom. “We're only doing this because we care about you!”

“Then trust me!” Starscream snarled.


Starscream's stomach was churning viciously as he stared his commander down. After everything he'd been through in the last week—after everything Megatron had promised him—this was how they were going to treat him!?

He pushed past his commander and back into the bedroom.
“Starscream, what are you doing now?” Megatron asked wearily as the Seeker stopped in the center of the room and turned back to him.

Well, if he insisted so on bearing witness…

Starscream looked his commander square in the eye, folded his arms, and peed.

“Well, that lasted all of one day,” Thundercracker sighed as he watched his brother spray himself down in the bathroom.

“What?” Starscream sniffed.

“You and Megatron being civil with each other.”

The younger man glared and kicked water in his brother’s face. Thundercracker gave him a warning look.

“I could switch with Megatron, you know,” he said.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Starscream muttered, but he kept the water to himself after that.

Starscream’s tantrum had gained him nothing but humiliation, the stress of which had brought on a throbbing headache. When they heard Megatron shouting, the twins had come running in from the neighboring hotel room (which it turned out shared a wall with theirs and was connected by a door), followed by none other than Ajit of all people. All three boys had found Starscream’s soggy state unequivocally hilarious, and Ajit had suggested the Seeker ought to wear diapers, like the ones human spawn used before learning to control their bowels.

“I wish you’d stop making things so difficult for yourself,” Thundercracker sighed as he turned off the water and reached for a towel.

“I don’t know what you mean,” his brother muttered.

“Yes, you do,” the older man insisted.

He wrapped the towel around Starscream’s shoulders and then prodded him toward the closed toilet. The Seeker sank down on it while his brother went to get the bag of supplies they’d gotten for cleaning and dressing his wound.

When he opened the door, Starscream caught a glimpse of Megatron holding a heated conversation with Soundwave (at least, Megatron’s side of it was heated), who was in the middle of trying to scrub Starscream’s mess out of the carpet by the looks of it. The warlord looked up when he heard the door open. Their eyes met, and something in Starscream’s chest twinged when Megatron turned away sharply.

“Okay, let’s get that dressing changed,” Thundercracker called as he returned, closing the door behind himself again.

“How long until this goes back to normal?” Starscream wanted to know. “I don’t like the pain pills. They make me feel weird.”
“The doctor said you can switch to something less heavy duty if you don’t like them,” his brother reminded him.

“Then give me those ones today!” the former Air Commander demanded.

“After you eat something.”

Starscream wouldn’t have thought that eating could get any worse than it had already been, but humanity never did cease to disappoint in just how far its horrific depths could send him. Since he couldn't chew much with his injury, his food choices were limited, but since his brothers had gone and spilled the beans on him to the doctors about the purging thing, they’d said he had to eat a wide variety of foods to replenish his body's nutrient stores. What all this boiled down to was a diet of meat minced into sawdust and soaked in broth, rice and vegetables cooked into mush, and various mashed legumes and roots. Skywarp cooked it for him on an electric hot plate, which Starscream supposed was at least better than it coming from a kitchen whose conditions he hadn't been able to inspect.

“It's not that bad.” Skywarp tried to assure him as Starscream stared down another plate of unappealing mush. “I put lots of tasty spices in it—lots of garlic, too, because me and Soundwave did research and it said it'll help you not get throat infections.”

“Where did you do research?” Starscream wanted to know.

“At an internet cafe,” his brother answered, as if this should have been obvious. “They have one in this part of town.”

“An internet what!? ”

“Yeah, you pay a couple thousand rupees and you can use a computer for, like, eight hours,” the boy shrugged. “Didn't you know? We all went.”

Before Starscream could press for more information on this fascinating new concept, the door conjoining their two rooms flew open again and the boys were back with Slipstream in tow this time.

“Go away!” Starscream hissed at them.

“What you’re eating, Captain?” Ajit wanted to know, sliding in beside the Seeker despite his warning glare. “Looks like dog food.”

“I'll have you know it's quite delicious,” Starscream sneered, finally scooping up a bite. It actually wasn't as bad as he'd feared. “Anyway, I'm not talking to you right now. You were exceptionally disrespectful this morning.”

“When you make mess like a baby?” Ajit smirked at him.

“At least I know where my little brother is,” the Seeker hissed back, and Ajit's face fell abruptly.

“Star!” Skywarp scolded. “Ajit lost his sister because he helped save your life.”

“Why, though? Why would you risk yourself for someone you barely know? I know you're only,
like, five years old, but you gotta know better than that!"

"Twelve!" Ajit contradicted. "I'm 12 years old!"

"You aren't ever," Starscream scoffed.

"Come away from him, Ajit," Slipstream called from the other side of the room. "He's just cranky because Megatron yelled at him earlier."

"Am not!" her cousin protested. "It's a fair point! Has anyone bothered figuring out what this kid's motivation is!?"

Ajit let out a string of Hindi, and Starscream narrowed his eyes suspiciously. He didn't understand the words, but he'd recognize a proverb in any language.

"When you live in river, make friends with crocodile," the boy translated.

Starscream blinked, and Slipstream let out a burst of laughter. They'd had a similar saying on Cybertron: when you live in the Pit, make friends with the hounds. A lot of bots had cited it when joining the Decepticons in the early days, including Starscream.

"I still think it's suspicious," the Seeker muttered, spooning up another mouthful of Skywarp's not-quite-unbearable mush.

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"Why does he have to be so difficult!?" Megatron despaired over his own breakfast in the cafe across the street. "I didn't think he was going to change into a completely different person or anything, but I thought he might be… I dunno… different after what happened."

Soundwave hummed sympathetically.

"Well, perhaps he will be when he isn't dangerously anemic, sleep deprived, drugged, and suffering chronic pain," the intelligence officer suggested.

"He's a Decepticon. He's dealt with worse," Megatron grunted.

"Not while also enduring the pitfalls of faulty human brain chemistry, he hasn't," Soundwave pointed out. "Besides, you were also planning not to lose your temper at him so easily, and look how that went?"

"He peed on the carpet," Megatron ground out, tightening the hand on his fork until he felt the metal start to bend.

"You were fully aware of his potential for misbehavior when you fell for him in the first place," the intelligence officer reminded him. "But we have other things to talk about right now."

"I didn't fall for anything," his commander growled, jabbing the bent fork across the table at him. "I just… I care about him. A lot. That's all."

"Megatron, the passports," Soundwave insisted.

"What about them? We're going to pick them up at three, are we not?" he frowned.
“You are overly driven to distraction of late, my lord,” the other man observed.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” his commander snapped.

“If you had been receiving money from a group of people you considered inferior to yourself for some time, and it came time that the goods you owed them were due and the money was going to stop coming, would you deliver the goods?”

“Of course not,” Megatron scoffed. “You can get more if you show them the goods and then tell them something came up in the delivery process that…. You don't think the humans are smart enough to figure that out, do you?”

“I think we've made the mistake of underestimating human intelligence one too many times,” Soundwave replied.

The other man groaned and ran a hand through his hair.

“I suppose we ought to bring backup,” he mused. “Or would that look like we're trying to start a fight? What if we bring Slipstream? She looks non-threatening enough.”

“No,” Soundwave said a little too quickly. “Those men have no honor, and Slipstream should not be exposed to them.”

“Slipstream doesn't have any honor either. She'll be fine,” Megatron insisted.

“Then why have you always brought me to deal with them instead of Starscream, your second-in-command?”

The warlord didn't answer at first.

“I suppose… the two of us will suffice, provided we are amply prepared,” he muttered.

“We could bring Thundercracker,” Soundwave suggested.

“Do you remember what happened the last time we left Starscream in Slipstream's care?”

“I'm sure she has learned better.”

“I thought the same about him.”

Soundwave sighed in defeat. “The two of us will have to suffice, I suppose.”

“I suppose we're just lucky Starscream is anemic, exhausted, drugged, and in pain,” Megatron mused. “He might not even notice we’re gone.”
Chapter 63

Starscream very much noticed when it was time for Megatron and Soundwave to leave, and he was less than amused.

“You aren’t even trying to hide it from me anymore!” he raged while his commander was preparing to leave. “It’s like you’re just throwing it in my face that I’m not strong enough to come with you!”

“You’re not,” Megatron agreed. “I’m glad you can recognize that.”

“I am!” Starscream insisted, stamping a foot. “You’re the one who doesn’t think so!”

“I don’t think so either,” Thundercracker put in from one of the beds.

“No one’s asking you!” Starscream sneered back.

“Well, since I outrank you right now, I actually do get a say,” his brother returned.

Starscream just glared at him, too shocked that Thundercracker would dare to pull his stolen rank on him to come up with a satisfactory comeback.

“Until you get your strength back,” Megatron put in, taking one of Starscream’s hands in his own, and the Seeker gave him his attention once more. “You’re not demoted right now, Starscream, you’re on mandatory medical leave.”

“Since when have we ever!?” Starscream demanded, tugging his hand back. “You can’t just go making things up to get out of a stupid decision!”

“Lord Megatron?” Soundwave called from the doorway. “We need to get going.”

Megatron heaved a sigh and ducked back into the bathroom. He emerged, dragging a comb hastily through his dark locks.

“Just stay here and get some rest, Starscream,” he said. “We won’t be gone long.”

The Seeker said nothing this time, focusing on not gritting his teeth instead as that hurt too much, as he watched his commander make his way over to the door. Megatron cast one last glance over his shoulder when he reached it, and Starscream stuck his tongue out.

“Your current maturity levels inspire only the deepest of confidence,” the warlord told him drily before following Soundwave out into the hall.

Starscream went to throw himself down on their empty bed and screamed into one of the pillows.

He knew he was being childish and unreasonable, but he didn’t care. Megatron had been keeping this whole thing with the passports from him since the beginning. Even before Starscream’s health had started to decline, his commander had chosen to confide his plans in Soundwave and Thundercracker and literally everyone else except him. Why?

He didn’t have long to wallow because Frenzy came running out of the other bedroom then, shouting at the top of his voice: “Boss! Boss! Soundwave, come quick!!”

“He’s not here!” Starscream shrieked back.
“What do you need?” Thundercracker put in more helpfully.

“There’s something wrong with Rumble!” the boy cried, snatching hold of the oldest Seeker’s hand and starting to drag him back through the door. Skywarp went dithering right after them.

Starscream pushed himself up and frowned. Who did Frenzy think he was, coming in here and stealing his brothers away like that? And why wasn’t Slipstream taking care of the twins?

Wait.

Why wasn’t Slipstream taking care of the twins?

Starscream leapt nimbly from the bed and made his way to the doorway of the other room, peering in to see Thundercracker kneeling down by one of the beds, where Rumble was groaning and clutching at his stomach. Slipstream wasn’t in there. The bathroom door was open, and the light off, so she wasn’t in there, either.

Something pulled lightly on the end of one of Starscream’s long sleeves, and he glanced down to see Ajit there. The boy put a finger to his lips and smiled conspiratorially before nodding toward the front door. Slipstream was there, beckoning to the both of them.

The Seeker narrowed his eyes. He could alert Thundercracker to the both of them right now and get them in trouble. It would be nice to see someone other than himself being punished for once, and it might help to elevate Megatron’s opinion of him.

On the other hand, how better to prove to his commander that he wasn’t a useless dead weight than by going out on hijinks with Slipstream and Ajit without incurring any damage to his person?

Starscream shot one last glance at his brothers, sparing some admiration for Rumble’s acting, before slipping away.

“How’d you get the twins to cooperate?” he asked when Slipstream had shut the door behind them.

“I didn’t,” she confessed. “Rumble really is sick. I told him I was going to get Soundwave, and it’s not technically a lie.”

Starscream nodded appraisingly as they started down the hall. His cousin hadn’t gone quite as soft as he’d feared.

“And what’s your angle on all this?” he directed at Ajit. The boy gave him a blank look, so he simplified, “Why are you sneaking away with us?”

“Look for Dipti more,” Ajit explained.

Fair enough.

“And what makes you think Megatron won’t just send us all back in disgrace as soon as we catch up with him?” Starscream demanded of his cousin.

She let out a tinkly little laugh. “By the time we catch up to them, they’ll have no choice but to either bring us along or miss their appointment, and if you made it that far, then Megatron will have to admit you’re well enough to go the rest of the way.”

Starscream liked the sound of this plan more and more, but there was still one part of it that rang highly suspicious to him.
“Why would you take my side on this?” he wanted to know.

“I owe you a few,” she offered by way of explanation. “Besides, rebellion is more fun in groups. Why do you think I joined the Decepticons in the first place?”

“Because all the academies kicked you out?” Starscream muttered under his breath, but it was a good enough answer for now. This wasn’t the time to be inspecting the paint on a gift ship.

As convenient as it was to have Starscream mildly incapacitated, Megatron couldn’t wait until the Seeker came back to full capacity again. It was difficult at times to remember that the whining, pants-wetting brat he was dealing with right now was also the cunning strategist he’d recently spent a whole week conning humans with and four million years before that beating down Autobot tyrants.

The Seeker was so heavily on Megatron’s mind as he and Soundwave made their way through the city that he thought he was imagining it at first when he heard a familiar squeal somewhere behind him in the crowd. They were more than halfway to the meeting place by then, and he reasoned that there was no way Starscream could have followed them all the way here in his current state. It wasn’t until Soundwave turned around that he realized how wrong that assumption was.

“Oh dear,” the intelligence officer murmured.

Megatron closed his eyes and sent a tiny prayer up to Primus before turning around himself.

He barely even had to search before he caught sight of Starscream standing about half a block back, clutching at his bandaged throat with a pained expression. It looked as though he had just walked into one of the other pedestrians.

“Oh dear,” Soundwave remarked beside him.

Thick, tarry anger started bubbling up in Megatron’s chest, but then Starscream looked up, nervous blue eyes finding and locking onto his commander’s, and the warlord gritted his teeth against it. He wasn’t going to hurt him. He was angry, yes, but whatever pains Starscream was suffering right now, Megatron was not going to be one of them.

Just how desperate to defy him was Starscream, though, that he would come all this way on his own while so physically and emotionally compromised? But then Megatron noticed Slipstream and —more surprisingly—Ajit standing not far from the Seeker, and things became much clearer.

He surged forward through the crowd, not stopping when he nearly knocked over several smaller humans. Starscream fidgeted, one foot moving back as if he was debating making a run for it. Megatron sped up to reach them before he could, and the Seeker visibly steeled himself for an argument.

It wasn’t Starscream that Megatron had a bone to pick with today, though.

“What were you thinking!?” the warlord demanded, rounding on Slipstream.

The young woman folded her arms and glared back.
“I told you before; he’s not made of glass,” she said.

“He’s injured and weak!” Megatron bellowed, jabbing a finger in Starscream’s direction. “And where we are going is not safe for any of you!” He turned his attention down to Ajit, who shrank back slightly. “I know these two are maniacs, but you I expected better of,” the warlord huffed, and the boy’s gaze turned down to his feet.

Finally, Megatron turned back to Starscream, who was now blinking at him somewhat stupidly, doubtless caught off guard by the fact that he wasn’t the one being scolded for once. Megatron took advantage of his surprise to take hold of his wrist and start pulling him back up the street.

“Let go! I’m not going back!” Starscream hissed, clawing at his commander’s fingers with obnoxiously sharp nails.

“Yes, you are! It’s dangerous, Starscream!” the older man insisted, ignoring the stares they were starting to garner from the other passersby.

“That’s never mattered before!” the Seeker argued, digging in his heels.

“Because you were thirty feet tall and covered in armor before, Starscream!” Megatron snapped, whirling around on him. “You complain so much about these human bodies and how useless they are, but you can’t seem to get it through your head that it’s all you have now! You don’t have armor, you don’t have guns, and you don’t have wings, so just let me protect you! For once!”

Starscream recoiled from him slightly, his face clouding with hurt, and Megatron realized his mistake a second too late. This time, when the Seeker tugged, the other man let his hand swing free.

“I didn’t mean…” he tried, but Starscream’s eyes had already hardened.

“No, I know exactly what you meant,” the Seeker spat.

“I can’t have you getting injured any more,” Megatron said quickly.

“I’m more than capable of taking care of myself, human of Cybertronian!” Starscream insisted. “And maybe I wouldn’t have felt the need to start hurting myself if you hadn’t been smothering me so much!”

“That’s insane!” Megatron roared, throwing his hands in the air.

“Because that’s what this is really about, isn’t it!? You think I’m crazy!” Starscream accused. “That’s why you haven’t trusted me with anything from the beginning of this! Well, I’m not! There’s nothing wrong with my brain! I’m just as sane as I’ve ever been, so you can stop whispering behind my back!”

“Starscream, no one’s…” Megatron started, and stopped when he realized just how much of a lie that would be. “None of us think it’s your fault,” he tried instead.

The Seeker let out a roar of frustration and dropped down into a little ball on the sidewalk. Megatron’s heart leapt into his throat as the image of Starscream doing the same the morning before he’d tried to kill himself flashed through his memory.

“That came out wrong,” he said hastily, dropping down beside the smaller man. “I don’t think you’re crazy, Starscream, I just think there’s something wrong with your human body. I know you’re still as smart as ever, and—” He cast around in his thoughts for something positive to say to
the Seeker that wasn’t also mortifyingly personal. “—when you aren’t trying to undermine my orders, you still come up with some brilliant strategies.”

Being nice to Starscream, and in front of witnesses no less, felt like he was laying his spark bare to the whole street, but it was preferable to the risk of losing him again.

After a moment, the Seeker lifted his face from his knees, blue eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“What do you mean, there’s something ‘wrong with my body?’” he demanded.

“I don’t know; you’re the scientist here,” Megatron grumbled.

Starscream opened his mouth to retort, and Soundwave cut him off.

“We need to leave,” the intelligence officer announced, and Starscream jumped slightly as if he’d forgotten that the others were there. “We are already late.”

Megatron growled in frustration and ran both hands through his hair before reaching one out to take hold of Starscream’s. He didn’t have time to bring the Seeker back to the others, and there was no way he trusted him to get home without incident under Slipstream’s watch right now. Besides, when it came down to it, he could protect Starscream from other humans more easily than he could protect the Seeker from his own emotions, it seemed.

“What about us?” Slipstream wanted to know, indicating herself and Ajit.

“You come, too,” Megatron told her. “Ajit can translate if need be, and if we’re short on money, we can probably sell you to the thugs to make up the difference.”

Soundwave and Slipstream did not look amused, but Starscream gave a little snort of laughter, and that was all that mattered to Megatron right now.

As they made their hurried way through the city, Starscream noticed a gradual decline in the amount of pedestrians sharing the sidewalks with them. The scrubby bushes and larger trees that had been shading the road at intervals disappeared entirely, and they began to enter a part of the city that, if Starscream had been pressed to describe it, he would have said looked like it was dying.

The buildings here were darker here, as if the sun never quite reached them, and looked like any of them could come crumbling down at a moment’s notice. Everything smelled of damp and smoke. It was a different sort of putrid stench to that of the slums. Where everything there had been ripe, this was stale, stagnant, and decaying.

There were people crowded into them almost as tightly as in the ramshackle shanties of the slums, nonetheless, but this place lacked the bustle and activity of the slums. Starscream heard no children’s laughter or haggling merchants. Men stared at them from doorways with eyes that burned
like holes in their faces, and women watched from windows, their eyes moving without seeming to truly see. Many of the buildings had pictures of women plastered over them, too.

They came upon a group of men smoking at a table outside one of the buildings, and Megatron gave a low growl of frustration before tucking Starscream against his side.

“Stay close,” he muttered.

“I don't see you saying the same to Ajit,” the Seeker complained, squirming in his commander's grasp.

“Because I don't need to,” Megatron snapped back, and Starscream glanced over to see that his former protege was already practically plastered to Megatron's pant leg.

Behind them, Starscream could hear Slipstream and Soundwave having a similar argument. He continued to resist feebly up until they passed a building that had several girls clustered outside of it, more dishevelled and gaunt-looking than even many of the slum-dwellers had been. They stood leaned against the walls and watched silently with sunken, strange eyes as the group passed, and something about them was… wrong. Starscream wasn’t sure what, but he found himself pushing himself into Megatron’s side, no longer willing to pull away from him, as he saw another group of such girls up ahead, this time with a man standing in their midst.

Megatron led them to a tall, black, grotty-looking building with several dusty cars parked outside it. A group of human men was gathered outside the entrance, and sent angry sneers their way as they passed. Starscream fisted his hand in Megatron’s shirt.

“Where are we?” he whispered.

“You should have stayed with the others,” was all the answer he got.

They might have passed peacefully into the building had the humans not spotted Slipstream. There was a sudden outbreak of whistling and shouting, and one of the humans even came forward to reach for her. Soundwave threw the young woman behind himself, his intimidating stare enough to ward the human off. It didn’t silence the jeerers, though. Starscream heard his cousin mutter something to the intelligence officer about being able to look after herself, but noticed that she didn’t move away from him as they proceeded.

The stained door of the building opened when Megatron approached it to reveal a dark, scruffy-looking man who said nothing as he stepped aside to allow them through. Megatron all but dragged Starscream with him, and Soundwave kept his arm wrapped possessively around a protesting Slipstream as he followed. Ajit stayed in the middle, trying to seem as small and insignificant as possible.

Starscream took in one breath and immediately regretted it as a combination of cigarette smoke and the stench of stale sweat and other bodily fluids filled his lungs. The urge to cough welled up, and he gripped his commander’s arm with one hand, pressing the other to the bandage on the side of his neck as he ducked his head.

Megatron caught him with a noise of frustration as the coughing fit that finally escaped him nearly sent the Seeker to his knees with pain. Someone laughed, hoarse and harsh, and Starscream couldn’t even see who through the tears.

His commander grabbed the front of the younger man’s t-shirt and pulled it up over his mouth and nose, creating some filter from the oppressive air of the building, and Starscream seized hold of it.
himself. He breathed carefully, willing down the nausea that was trying to rise up.

“It’s fine,” he muttered hoarsely, brushing away the large hand that was trying to caress the side of his neck.

“Perhaps Starscream should wait outside,” Soundwave suggested from behind them.

“No!” Starscream croaked, thinking of the men they’d seen outside—of the gang of men who had cornered him in the alley almost a month ago now, of the man who’d grabbed him in the club a few weeks ago…

He didn’t realize until Megatron’s grip tightened on his hand that he’d let the fear show on his face.

“Come on, then,” his commander growled before he could think of something to excuse it away. “Let’s make this quick.”

They ascended two flights of rickety stairs, the air seeming to grow more stagnant and smoky the higher they climbed. Even with his shirt over his face, Starscream had to stop and choke painfully several times. Each time, Megatron stopped and let him catch his breath before continuing.

More women—slim and under-dressed—peered at them from several doorways with that same hooded, unfocused look to their eyes as the ones they’d passed on the street. Any human males they encountered sneered distastefully or stared with hard expressions, usually with something smoking sticking out of their mouths, until the Decepticons turned the corner. Most of them let their gaze slide quickly past Megatron, Starscream, and Soundwave, their attention far more taken with Slipstream. The Seeker was doing her best to remain hidden behind her comrades now, but to no avail.

Eventually, someone ushered the five of them into a room at the end of a narrow, dingy corridor that stank exponentially worse than the stairway and halls had. The windows were blacked out with what looked like old newspapers, and it was difficult to see through the heavy veil of smoke. Starscream squinted against the tears welling up in his eyes and started clamping his shirt more tightly over his mouth when Megatron stopped short beside him, seizing the Seeker’s upper arm and shoving him behind himself.

Starscream gave a yelp of surprise at the rough handling, and accidentally inhaled a mouthful of smoke. He pressed his face into Megatron’s back until the coughing stopped and his head stopped spinning, and when he peeked out again, he saw immediately what had brought his commander to a halt.

There were several human men standing or sitting around a table in the middle of the room, and at their front, grinning from ear to ear like a sharkticon, was the man in the purple silk shirt who had tried to knife him—the one Ajit called Johar.

“Well, well, well,” the man chuckled. “Captain America, we missed you!”
“What is this, Kabir?” Megatron demanded, and a man seated on the far side of the table shook his head and tapped his cigarette on the end of an ashtray as he got to his feet.

He was fat, balding, and wore a crisp, white shirt open over a tank top that strained around his girth. He didn’t look like anyone Starscream could imagine respecting, but seemed to be the leader here, nonetheless.

“It is shocking, Troy, I know,” he tutted as he came around the table toward them, and it took a moment for Starscream to realize that ‘Troy’ must be the name Megatron had given these humans. “I was under the impression that we were friends, you and I, but lately I have heard such upsetting things about you.”

His bloodshot eyes flicked to Starscream, who sneered back as he felt what must have been Ajit’s hand grip the hem of his shirt.

“I can’t imagine what,” Megatron replied levelly.

“You know Johar here, I am told,” Kabir said, indicating the man who was still grinning predatorily in Starscream’s direction.

“Our paths may have crossed,” the warlord answered through gritted teeth.

“Do not play games with me, Troy,” the human warned. “I had wondered who it was that took such good care of Johar and his men a few weeks ago, and then I hear news that you are looking for his niece all over the city? I was curious, so I showed Johar your passports, and he recognized your little friend there right away.”

“And now you bring my nephew here!” Johar laughed, spreading his arms wide. “Ajit, come out and say hello!”

To Starscream’s surprise, Ajit actually did step out from behind Megatron’s bulk, taking one hesitant step at a time until he could face his uncle.

“What is Dipti?” he demanded, sounding for the first time like he really was the twelve years old he claimed instead of the nine or ten Starscream had always thought him.

Kabir nodded to one of his lackeys, who turned back to what Starscream had assumed was a pile of rags lying on the floor behind the table, but it made a whimpering noise when the man started to pick it up.

“Dipti!” Ajit cried, darting forward only for Megatron to snag him back again. “That’s my sister!” the boy insisted, trying to break free, but the warlord maintained his hold.

Johar took the girl’s arm and dragged her to stand out in front of him, and Starscream finally saw that it was, in fact, Ajit’s sister. She was far filthier than he’d ever seen her, and someone had shorn her hair off unevenly so that it looked like a greasy tangle of rubbish atop her head. There was none of the bubbly, energetic air about her that Starscream remembered, and her eyes had that same hollow look as the women in the halls.

Behind him, Soundwave made a sharp movement, and out of the corner of his eye, Starscream saw Slipstream raise an arm to still him.
“As you can see, the girl is alive,” Kabir said.


“We would be more than happy to hand her over to you,” the human continued as if there’d been no interruption, “on one condition.”

Ajit looked hopefully to Megatron, but the pit of Starscream’s stomach started to churn unpleasantly. He was pretty sure he knew what that condition would be if Megatron was in Kabir’s position right now if—there was someone who had escaped his own justice.

“We have the money,” Megatron announced quickly, pulling the heavy wad of cash from his pocket. “It would be no problem to get more—however much you want for the girl.”

Kabir’s eyes flashed with greed, and he motioned at one of his underlings. The man stepped forward, pulling something from the back of his pants that he kept trained on Megatron as he moved forward. It wasn’t until he reached them that Starscream realized what it was—a gun.

The Seeker felt as though all the blood in his body had turned to ice as he watched the barrel of the gun sway slightly in front of his commander’s chest. One shot; that was all it would take to rip Megatron away again. Starscream couldn’t tear his eyes away from the weapon the whole time it took for the human to take the cash and return it to his master’s open palm, though Megatron’s gaze never left Kabir’s face.

“It is a good amount,” the human agreed, leafing through the bills. “You do have a way with money, my friend.”

For a second, Starscream was foolish enough to think that there just might be a possibility they’d get out of this, but then, as usual, the other bomb dropped.

“But so do I,” Kabir said, tossing the cash in the general direction of the table without looking. The bills scattered, some of them making it to the table while others fluttered onto the floor and chairs. No one made to pick them up. “Money is easy to come by in this town, Troy. What I need is respect, you understand. If people think it is okay to start disrespecting my men, then they start to think it is okay to disrespect me.”

“I agree,” Megatron nodded, but Starscream saw the muscle that twitched in his jaw, always a danger sign. “I also tend to react poorly to anyone who disrespects my men.”

“But I have oh so many more men who could be disrespected than you do, Troy,” Kabir grinned greasily.

“What do you want, Kabir?” the warlord finally demanded.

As expected, the gang leader extended one thick, stubby finger in Starscream’s direction. The Seeker’s chest tightened as all eyes in the room turned toward him (except the man with the gun, who was still watching Megatron).

“The little one,” Kabir stated simply. “Leave him here with us, and you may have the passport and the girl; no trouble, no questions asked.”

“No.”

Megatron answered so quickly that Kabir seemed to have a hard time registering that he’d even spoken.
“Perhaps I should be clearer, Troy,” the human tried. “Either—”

“There’s no need to clarify, Kabir,” Megatron interrupted. “You’re not getting him.”

Starscream tightened his grip on the back of his commander’s shirt as Kabir’s oily smile fell and the man started to shake his head. The Seeker jumped when something grabbed hold of him from behind, and then relaxed when he realized it was Soundwave, pulling him more securely between himself and Megatron. For once, Starscream didn’t protest, even when Slipstream grabbed hold of his arm like she too was trying to protect him.

“That was my friendly offer,” Kabir said. “Now the not so friendly one: leave him here, and we will let the rest of you walk away unharmed.”

Slipstream’s grip tightened, and Ajit gave a little whimper of fear, but Megatron didn’t budge. The gun aimed at the warlord’s head cocked, and an image flashed through Starscream’s mind of his commander out on the floor with a smoking hole through his forehead, human eyes blank and unseeing. The sense of terror and loss that came with it wasn’t imagination but memory.

“I’ll stay!”

Starscream wrenched himself free of his cousin’s grasp and darted into the middle of the room before he had time to rethink it or any of the others could stop him. Everyone was silent for a moment, and then Kabir’s smile returned.

“Starscream, what are you doing!?” Megatron demanded, surging forward only to meet the business end of the lackey’s gun.

That was a good question. What was he doing!? Starscream asked himself as Johar let go of his niece to seize his prize by the arm and tug him close. Was he—Starscream, of all people—actually sacrificing himself for Megatron right now? Why!? Judging by their expressions, all of his comrades were wondering the same thing, but the gun was pressed to the center of Megatron’s chest now and, for whatever reason, the thought of it firing scared Starscream more than anything else in that room.

“Star, don’t do this,” Slipstream breathed, her hands coming up to her mouth.

“You should be thanking him!” Johar laughed, giving the young man in his grasp a rough shake. “He saved your life, bitch.”

Starscream let out a wry laugh, trying to shove down the treacherous fear creeping up in his stomach as he held his head high.

“You see? I told you I wasn’t the one who needed protecting,” he smirked.

“Oh, for the love of… Are you kidding me right now, Starscream!?” Megatron bellowed, and the Seeker’s smirk faltered at the utter desperation in his commander’s voice and eyes.

He didn’t have long to reflect on it though before Johar seized a handful of his hair and wrenched his head backward. The Seeker shrieked in pain and reached back instinctively to try and free himself, only to have something cold and metallic shoved under his chin—another gun. He stilled, gritting his teeth against the continued pain.

“Since your friend was so good as to volunteer himself, I will show some goodwill of my own,” Kabir was saying. “Your passports, as promised.”
Starscream watched out the corner of his eye as the man received several small, dark blue booklets from one of his underlings and tossed them in Megatron’s direction. The warlord made no move to catch them, his dark eyes fixed on Starscream instead as the passports pattered to the floor. Soundwave stepped forward to lay a careful hand on his shoulder, and Megatron simply snarled at him.

“And the girl?” Soundwave asked Kabir.

The man shrugged and gestured to the girl on the floor where she’d fallen.

“We have no further use for her,” he said.

Ajit sprang forward then and fell upon his sister, speaking to her in rapid Hindi. It seemed to take her a moment or two to recognize him, but when she did, she let out a sudden shriek and threw her arms around him. After a moment, Soundwave darted out and grabbed both children, pulling them back into the group. Megatron made no move throughout the whole thing.

“Did you want to stay and watch what I do with him?” Johar taunted, wrapping an arm around Starscream’s chest to pull him flush against himself. The Seeker stiffened at the sickening sensation of a strange human’s warmth on his back. “It looks like someone’s been working on him for me already, though.”

He took the gun away from Starscream’s throat for a second to reach for the edge of his bandage instead, and that was when all hell broke loose.

The man holding the gun to Megatron’s chest had allowed himself to be distracted by what Johar was doing with Starscream—a fatal mistake. The warlord seized hold of the gun with one hand and the man’s upper arm with the other. He brought the arm down over his knee. The elbow snapped, its owner screamed, and before Starscream could finish registering what had just happened, the gun discharged.

Something warm and wet hit the side of the Seeker’s face as behind him, his captor went limp. Starscream had just enough presence of mind to grab Johar’s gun from his deadened fingers as the man slid to the ground in a heap, blood oozing from the blackened circle in the middle of his forehead, and then combat instincts kicked in.

The man to Starscream’s left had pulled out a gun, which he was pointing in Megatron’s general direction. The Seeker reached across him and shoved the man’s arm up so that the weapon fired at the ceiling before nestling his own gun under the man’s chin and pulling the trigger.

The recoil left his hand and arm almost entirely numb, but he managed to keep his wits about him enough to hold onto the dead man’s body so that it shielded his back as he swung round and fired the next shot at a man who’d been in the middle of trying to swing a chair at him. He hit that target in the chest, and this time the pain of the recoil sent his vision black for a moment.

When it came back, Megatron was at his side, helping him up from his knees and taking the gun from his still tingling fingers.

“You reckless idiot,” the warlord growled, almost affectionately, as he set the Seeker back on his feet.

“Told you I didn’t need protecting,” Starscream smirked through the pain, cradling his left arm close to his body.

He glanced around the room to see that his comrades were the only ones left standing. Ajit was at
his sister’s side, white-faced and trembling as he pushed her face into his shoulder, whispering something in Hindi. Soundwave was hanging half out in the corridor, still firing shots. As Starscream watched, he tossed one gun aside and held out his hand for the loaded one Slipstream pressed into it.

“Stay here,” Megatron ordered, running a quick hand through Starscream’s hair before starting for the door.

“But—” Starscream began, and his commander turned back to him sharply.

Before the Seeker had time to make any other protest, the warlord grabbed hold of his sleeves, used them to cross Starscream’s arms across his front, and then turned the smaller man around. After a brief moment of confusion, Starscream realized his commander was tying the sleeves together behind his back.

“Hey!” he squawked, trying futilely to tug free of the prison.

“Stay. Here,” his commander repeated, and then he and Soundwave were both gone.

Immediately, Starscream stumbled to the door, only to have Slipstream intercept him with a hiss of annoyance.

“Untie me!” Starscream snarled, still struggling, but his cousin only wrapped her arms around him.

“Just stay put for once in your life, you suicidal maniac!” she shrieked, and Starscream would have had something to say about that choice of words if it weren’t for the genuine fear in her voice.

He relented and allowed her to pull him back closer to Ajit and his sister to wait as they listened to the sound of gunshots and shouting and the occasional scream from within the house. All Starscream could do was pray that the guns were Megatron and Soundwave shooting at humans and not the other way round.

After several minutes, it fell silent.

“Untie me,” Starscream repeated in a low voice.

Slipstream started working on the knot without question; they were vulnerable and unarmed, and there was no way of knowing who was going to come through that door. Between the two of them, they managed to wrench the legs off a chair. Starscream took up stance by the door while Slipstream convinced the two children to move with her to the wall where they wouldn’t be in the immediate line of fire if anyone came in. It must have been some human maternal instinct welling up inside her, or perhaps habit from watching over the twins so often, because Starscream couldn’t understand why she would bother with them otherwise.

The seconds ticked by and the silence stretched. Blood pulsed painfully through the veins on the side of Starscream’s neck as his heart rate only seemed to increase. Why hadn’t the other two come back yet? Should they go out and look for them? He imagined that if the humans had killed or captured Megatron and Soundwave, they would be heading back this way to finish off him and Slipstream next, and there was no sound of voices or pounding footsteps coming their way.

The door clicked open, and Starscream jumped forward, swinging the chair leg toward the intruder’s head on instinct without bothering to check who it was. Megatron ducked out of the way and caught his arm with an annoyed click of his tongue.

“What are you doing?” he snapped, wrenching the improvised weapon from the Seeker’s grasp.
“You’re bleeding!” Starscream gasped, all else pushed from his mind as his eyes fell on the thick cascade of red soaking through a swatch of fabric tied round his commander’s upper right arm.

“It’s a graze,” Megatron said simply before starting to turn the smaller man this way and that in front of him. It took a minute for Starscream to realize he was searching for injuries.

“I’m not hurt,” he snapped, tugging away. “And I wasn’t worried about you, or anything; I’m just saying don’t get it on me.”

“My blood is the least of your worries right now,” his commander snorted, and that was when Starscream properly registered just how sticky certain parts of him were. He swiped at the side of his face and nearly gagged when his sleeve came away covered in drying blood.

Soundwave came ducking in the door too at that point, still clutching a gun in one hand and breathing heavily. He went straight for the children, brushing a hand over Slipstream’s head on the way.

“We need to go,” Megatron announced, moving to gather the passports that Kabir had dropped on the floor earlier.

Starscream scrambled to help him, going for one of the booklets that had been kicked under the table during the fray, and stopped when something else caught his eye. Underneath the table was an open duffle bag full of more money than he had ever seen. Ever.

“Holy slag,” he whispered to himself, almost forgetting the passport as he reached for it.

“Starscream!” Megatron barked impatiently.

“Megatron, look at this!” the Seeker called back, unable to shift the bag himself with his neck throbbing as much as it was.

His commander dropped down beside him and Starscream smirked slightly when the other man’s mouth almost fell open, but then…

“Leave it,” Megatron said, wrapping his good arm around the Seeker’s waist and starting to pull him back out from under the table.

Starscream nearly choked on his own spit.

“What!” he demanded, struggling in the other man’s grasp.

“We don’t need it,” Megatron grunted.

“Yes, we do!” Starscream argued, hooking a foot around one strap so that the bag came with him when his commander pulled him out. “We need all the money we can get!”

“You are slowing us down,” Megatron growled.

“ You are slowing us down by arguing with me!” the Seeker shrieked, hooking both feet around the bag’s strap now.

“Starscream is right,” Soundwave, now holding Dipti close to his chest, cut in across whatever Megatron had been about to say next, and for a moment Starscream wasn’t sure he’d heard correctly. “Our funds are running low, and the risks associated with taking the cash are not as great as the benefits of not taking the time to gather further funds for airfare and other expenses involved
in finding the Allspark.”

Megatron’s jaw set, and Starscream turned a smug smile on him.

“Fine!” the warlord snapped, grabbing the bag to sling over one shoulder and then pulling Starscream to his feet. “Grab the children and let’s leave before the human police arrive!”

They rushed out into the hall, stepping over several more bodies. Starscream tripped on an uneven bit of flooring, and Megatron helped him up. The Seeker let out a squeal of surprise when his commander did not help him back to his feet but rather continued lifting until he’d swung the smaller man over his free shoulder so that he was left staring down at the blood-stained floor.

“Mega… Megatron!” Starscream gasped, scrabbling for a handhold as the other man started moving again abruptly. There was no reply, and Starscream’s stomach dropped unpleasantly as they started thundering down the stairs at an alarming rate. He buried his face in Megatron’s back and gritted his teeth against the stab of pain that came with each jarring step.

They finally reached the bottom, and sunlight broke on the hallway as Starscream heard Slipstream burst through the front door, scolding Ajit to keep up with her. Megatron on the other hand paused in the entryway, and Starscream pushed himself up a bit to see what the hold up was.

Car keys. Hung by the door.

“Take them!” Starscream snapped, smacking the other man’s back.

“How do we know what car they go to?” Megatron wanted to know.

“I’ll show you; just grab them!”

Keys in hand, Megatron followed the others out into the harsh daylight, and dropped Starscream without ceremony on the street outside. The Seeker stumbled before regaining his balance and harrumphed with displeasure when there was no one there to right him.

“What do we do with these?” Megatron was calling, pacing up and down the line of cars parked in front of the building.

Soundwave, who had made it partway down the street already, turned and started back when he saw what his commander was holding.

“Press the red button!” he called.

Megatron looked down at the remote attached to the keys and then followed the suggestion. The car just in front of him started to honk, its lights flashing. Starscream jumped at the initial noise, and then darted for it. He snatched the keys from Megatron’s startled fingers, and managed to hit the unlock button before they were seized back.

“Get in,” Megatron ordered, pulling open the passenger side door and shoving Starscream through it.

The car was a decrepit-looking thing, splattered in so much dust and dirt that its original paint wasn’t even distinguishable. The inside was swelteringly hot and reeked so strongly of human and cigarette smoke that Starscream had to suppress a gag.

Soundwave reached them then with Slipstream close behind, and wrenched the back door open to push Dipti into the seat ahead of himself. The girl screamed and only tightened her grip on him,
and so the intelligence officer ended up scooting into the back seat with her still wrapped around his front. Ajit followed him in, but Slipstream went for the passenger seat.

“Move over,” she sneered at her cousin.

“It’s a one-person seat!” he snapped back, folding his arms petulantly.

Megatron slid into the driver’s seat beside him then, and grabbed the back of his shirt with a growl of frustration, tugging the Seeker over so that Slipstream could squeeze in beside him on the cracked upholstery. It was such a tight fit that she almost shut the door on herself and the apparatus in the middle of the two front streets dug into Starscream’s hip.

“There’s no room! I’m injured!” he complained, trying to push her off himself.

“We won’t have enough seats once we get the others anyway, so either share or I’ll shove you in the trunk with the money,” Megatron growled as he shoved the key into the ignition.

Starscream crossed his arms and huffed in annoyance. His muttered complaints were drowned out though when the ignition caught and the car roared into life. Megatron pressed his foot down on one of the pedals, and they jerked forward abruptly, smashing into the car in front of them before the warlord realized his mistake and let off. Starscream’s body jerked forward with the momentum, and he yelped as his forehead collided with the dashboard.

Bright lights popped out in front of his vision, and a rushing sound filled his ears as a large hand tried to cradle his face but was pushed away by two smaller ones. Someone pulled him over sideways, and he stayed there without protest for several minutes, fighting down nausea as the car started to jerk forward again.

“...down on the clutch, off the ignition,” Soundwave’s voice finally filtered through the rushing. “Move the gear stick up, and then switch your feet again.”

The jerking got less and less frequent as they went, and eventually, Starscream managed to lift his head off of Slipstream’s lap without feeling like he was going to be ill.

“You okay?” Megatron asked, glancing sideways at him.

“Fine,” the Seeker lied as he squinted through the windshield. “Where are we going?”

“Back to the hotel to get the others,” came the reply. “And then we’re leaving this slaghole of a country.”
“We stole a car!?” Rumble exclaimed excitedly when he and his twin came out to meet them, not looking the least bit ill anymore. Starscream scowled at him, reflecting on the injustice of his quick recovery.

Megatron reached out through the driver’s side window, grabbed hold of the boy’s shirt, and dragged him up to eye level in one swift movement, causing him to drop the plastic bags full of clothes that he’d been carrying.

“Keep your mouth shut, or I will shut it for you!” he snarled, the effect enhanced by the blood still smeared on his face (they’d found tissues along with a map of the city in the glove compartment, but much of the blood was too dried to properly remove without water by that point).

Rumble nodded frantically, and his commander dropped him back to the sidewalk. The boy scurried to pick up the things he’d dropped and then leaped into the back seat, Frenzy following after. There was a synchronized gasp from the both of them, followed by twin shrieks of, “Dipti!”

Starscream winced at the noise.

“Shut up!” he screeched over them as they shouted encouragingly at their friend, who had started to cry.

“You’re not helping!” Megatron snapped at him.

Thundercracker and Skywarp appeared then, both laden with more large bags of supplies, which they shoved in the back of the car before coming around to join the children in the back seat. There was some shuffling, the end of which saw Rumble and Frenzy spilling out into the space between the two front seats and still talking rapidly.

“Thundercracker, we are going to have to have words about this one,” Megatron shouted over the noise, indicating Starscream in the passenger seat.

“Apologies, Lord Megatron,” Thundercracker returned. “We had a situation after you left.”

“I threw up!” Rumble announced at the top of his voice.

“It went everywhere!” Frenzy added.

Megatron turned a disapproving frown on the both of them.

“Where is your creator?” he wanted to know.

The boys made noncommittal noises.

“He went down first with Slipstream,” Thundercracker supplied. “They said they were coming back to the car.”

Starscream snorted derisively and leaned back in his seat. “So much for reliable old—” he started, and was cut off by the sound of the trunk slamming shut. His door opened, and Slipstream was suddenly shoving him aside again.
“Out of the way, pip squeak,” she said.

“I’m taller than you!” Starscream protested, shoving back when she tried to ram him into the gear stick. “And what is that smell!?”

“Enough!” Megatron growled before Slipstream could retort, reaching across the both of them to grab the door and slam it shut.

There was more shuffling in the back as Soundwave got in. Somehow, they managed to arrange themselves, and Megatron started the car again.

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They couldn’t take Dipti and Ajit with them, however much Soundwave clearly wanted to. The two children didn’t have passports, there were serious complications involved with bringing minors across international borders without their legal guardians, and the car simply wasn’t big enough. Once they’d stopped at the hotel to pick up the others, they were crammed in so tightly that it was a miracle the car could still move. Megatron drove them then, with Soundwave reading from the glove compartment map, back out toward the slums.

It was a strange thing to see the ramshackle shanties again after all these weeks. The warlord recognized the streets they drove down: the fruit stand whose owner had set all four of his sons on Starscream a few days after they arrived, the one shanty whose walls were papered in nothing but film posters, the outhouse they’d utilized. All of it so horrifically familiar.

There was no road that led directly to Ajit’s home, but Megatron stopped the car as close to it as he could and climbed out. It took longer to extract Ajit and his sister from the jumble of bodies squashed into the back seat, partly because Dipti wouldn’t let go of Soundwave, and when Megatron turned around, Starscream was standing expectantly outside the passenger door.

Megatron opened his mouth to tell the Seeker to get back in the car, and one of Starscream’s eyebrows went up as if to say, “Are we really doing this again?”

“Fine,” the warlord snapped, adjusting the child in his arms. “You come, too.”

Ajit grabbed hold of Starscream’s hand, which the Seeker amazingly didn’t protest, and started pulling him ahead. They followed the boy to a group of wooden shacks on the riverbanks. The sun was setting now, and Megatron had to shield his eyes to see properly over the glare from the water as Ajit ran into one of the homes, shouting at the top of his lungs.

Moments later, a tall, surprisingly clean woman emerged, her large eyes locking onto the child in Megatron’s arms like a targeting system. She crossed the dirt between them faster than should have been physically possible and dragged her daughter back down into her own arms, screaming and sobbing as she collapsed on the ground with the child. Ajit joined her, and the woman reached up wordlessly to take hold of Megatron’s pant leg. The warlord watched the family in silence, finding himself unable to move as the mother’s tears of joy and relief cut through him.

“Thank you,” the woman finally choked. “Thank you, sir. My daughter… I can never repay.”

Megatron glanced up at Starscream, who was hanging awkwardly on the edge of the scene, and then shook his head.
“You owe me nothing,” he told her, and he reached into his pocket. The wad of money he pulled out was easily ten or twenty times what he’d handed Ajit the last time they’d parted ways—enough that even with his limited knowledge of human economics, Megatron knew it would change their lives. Starscream’s mouth dropped open when he saw it.

“Take your children and leave this place,” Megatron said as he pressed the money into her hand. “They deserve better. Keep them alive so I can ensure they get it someday.”

The human woman looked at the money and drew in a sharp breath.

“I can’t…” she started, but Ajit said something to her in Hindi and she instead closed her hand over the money.

“Come, Starscream,” Megatron called to his lieutenant, and the Seeker hurried to his side. They’d almost made it to the end of the lane when Ajit called out after them: “Captain!”

Starscream whipped around. “I told you that’s not my name!” he shouted back.

“Maybe someday it will be!” the boy returned, waving forcefully. “See you in America!”

“With that much money, you’d better make it over there!” the Seeker shouted back before turning around and rolling his eyes. “I passed ‘captain’ before his species even crawled down out of the trees,” he muttered, folding his arms.

“Captain Starscream does have a nice ring to it, though,” Megatron mused, wrapping an arm around the smaller man’s shoulders. “You were a captain when I met you, were you not?”

Starscream huffed and leaned into him.

“Was it all well?” Soundwave asked over the twins’ chatter when Megatron and Starscream climbed back into the car.

“They’ll be fine,” Starscream shot back as he climbed over Slipstream to take the central position on the front seat once more.

“We’ll need to purchase a larger map somewhere,” Megatron mused as he started the car again.

“A map?” Rumble repeated.

“Where are we going?” his twin wanted to know.

“South,” their commander answered.

“Can we get out of this city first?” Starscream put in. “I don’t want to look at it for another second.”

Slipstream echoed the sentiment, and Megatron nodded. Behind them, Soundwave spread out the city map once more and began to direct them out of the slums toward the major roads.

When they entered the downtown area again, Starscream reflected that Megatron’s driving had
already improved enough that he was hardly any worse than the other Patna drivers. He didn’t hang on the horn constantly like the other humans on the roads, either, but that may have been because he didn’t know where it was.

They might have made it out of the city without any incident if Frenzy hadn’t chosen to comment as they were passing through a major intersection that Megatron’s driving was not as good as Barricade’s. Their incensed leader turned around to glare at him, mouth opening in reproach, before Starscream, Slipstream, Soundwave, and Thundercracker all shouted at him in alarm to keep his eyes on the damn road. He faced forward once more just in time to avoid driving straight into a lamp post.

Sooner than Starscream had expected, though, the tall buildings began to disappear and the world opened up in front of them. Brown fields stretched away in either direction, dotted with the occasional roadside store or distant farmhouse.

Starscream twisted himself around in the front seat and looked out the back window at the city receding behind them. The sun had gone down far enough by now that the lower portions of the buildings were already wreathed in artificial lights while the pink and gold of the sky still glinted off the upper stories of the taller buildings. From here, there was no sign of the filth and drudgery that they’d encountered in those streets. No sign of the miles of putrid slums that stretched out around the city.

From here, it was almost beautiful.

“Sit down; you’re squishing me,” Slipstream complained, prodding his side, and Starscream twisted back around to settle in beside her once more.

His cousin huffed and pulled her hair out from between him and the seat before finally falling still. In the back seat, his brothers were talking quietly. It sounded like Thundercracker was comforting Skywarp about something again. On his other side, Megatron was staring fixedly at the road ahead of them, heavy brow furrowed in concentration. He glanced sideways ever so slightly when he noticed the Seeker looking at him.

“What?” he grunted.

“Nothing,” Starscream answered, leaning over to rest his elbow on the middle console so that his hand hung over into Megatron’s seat.

After a moment, his commander took one hand off the wheel and slipped his fingers through Starscream’s. The Seeker squeezed lightly, a strange warmth spreading through his chest.

Ahead of them, the road went on as far as he could see, the odometer in the dashboard ticked away each mile they moved farther from Patna, and for the first time since becoming human, Starscream almost felt free.

Chapter End Notes

And that’s a wrap! On Volume I, at least. There’ll be a brief epilogue, and then I’ll be starting up Volume II sometime in January. I’ve got a couple of plot threads I need to figure out what exactly I’m gonna do with before I dive into that one. It’s gonna be posted as a new fic, so make sure and keep an eye out for it. You can subscribe to me
as an author or OFAM as a series (I'mma go set it up to be a series instead of just a fic right now, don't worry) to get an email notification when I upload it. Until then, thanks for enjoying this crazy, crazy rollercoaster journey with me so far! See you next year. :)


It happened again; this time while Optimus was in the middle of conducting a morning training drill. The shock of it stopped him dead in his tracks so that the soldier who’d been attempting to divebomb him from one of the trees hit harder than expected and bounced straight off his left shoulder. Fortunately, Sideswipe was close enough to catch the human before its delicate body could collide with the forest floor.

“What gives, Prime?” the frontliner asked as he set the dazed human back on its feet. “You almost broke this one.”

“I’m fine!” the soldier snapped in an increasingly familiar female voice. “I think your commander just has a fondness for knocking me on my ass.”

Underbrush crackled as a police car came speeding into their clearing, and Lennox and Epps hopped out before the vehicle flipped into a transformation sequence. Optimus was still too consumed by the swirl of foreign emotions in his spark to properly notice any of them.

“Megatron…” the Prime murmured, a servo coming to the center of his chassis.

It wasn’t as strong as the first time had been, but after all these millennia, any activity over their bond was about as subtle as his brother’s fusion cannon, especially when the emotions leaking through were not rage and hatred but once more that protective desperation and something that Optimus hesitated to call love, given the source.

“Prime!”

The red-and-blue mech pulled himself out of his reverie to find his comrades—human and Cybertronian alike—staring up at him with variations on confusion and concern in their expressions.

“I am alright,” he addressed Sideswipe, the one who had spoken. “Simply… Something startled me.”

“Something about Megatron, perhaps?” Lennox wanted to know, and it was only then Optimus was aware that he’d spoken the name aloud.

“The… Matrix has spoken to me,” the Prime invented. (In fact, this instance of communication from his brother stood significantly apart from the previous one in that the Matrix had not reacted to it at all.)

Regardless, the assembled company gasped, tensed, or otherwise expressed some level of awe or anticipation at the announcement. Excepting the female soldier who had run into him earlier, who simply raised a hand.

“Faireborne?” Optimus read off the tag on her fatigues. They’d met several times now as she was a new member of Lennox’s team and not Galloway’s as Prime had initially assumed, but somehow her name never stuck.

“Sir, I don’t recall anything about matrices in my briefing reports,” the young woman said.
“Would’ve been one of the Cybertronian Artifacts,” Lennox explained before Optimus could. “The one we were retrieving in Egypt.”

Faireborne looked blank for a moment, and then wrinkled her nose in distaste. “The one that the Whitwicki kid pulverized and then put in his sock?”

“The Matrix of Leadership is a sacred relic containing the wisdom of our people’s most ancient and noble leaders,” Optimus cut in before this conversation could go further. “It may not have been the most dignified of containers, but it was quick thinking on Sam’s part to preserve the Matrix’s remains as such. It saved my life.”

“And it talks to you?” she wanted to know.

Optimus bent down closer to the human’s level and pressed his servo over his spark chamber once more.

“Yes, it does,” he answered solemnly. “Apart from saving my life, Sam Whitwicki also unintentionally transferred the wisdom and power of the Allspark, a portion of our creator himself, into the Matrix. It now not only contains the wisdom of my forebears, but also acts as a conduit through which Primus can communicate if I am willing and able to listen.”

The young woman’s face pulled into a pained expression. “Sorry, but I’m an atheist,” she said.

“Considering what I have learned of the nature of religion and spiritual teachings on your planet, I am not surprised,” Optimus told her.

“Just think of it as more science that we don’t understand, Corporal,” Lennox spoke up. “It’s a bit of a head spin, all this Cybertronian lore stuff, but if you don’t believe in a Cybertronian god, then at least believe your captain that I’ve seen some pretty crazy shit working with these guys.”

Optimus wasn’t sure how he felt about miracles that most Cybertronians would give their lives to witness being referred to as “crazy shit,” but at least Faireborne seemed content with the explanation,

“Yes, yes, yes,” Prowl cut into the conversation. “Primus, Matrix, philosophical debate; heard it a million times. Can we cut to the chase and find out what the message is already?”

Optimus straightened up slowly, both to resume a more authoritative position and to give himself a second to sort out his own thoughts. The Matrix may not have reacted this time, but it most definitely had the last time Megatron had let their bond slip open, which could only mean that this sudden shift in his brother’s moods was somehow vital to Cybertron’s future. Much of the feelings and impressions Optimus had gotten would need time to find any kind of coherent meaning behind, but there was one thought on Megatron’s mind that the Prime had seen quite clearly.

“We have been warned,” Optimus spoke at last, “that Megatron and his forces are headed toward this country once more.”

Somewhere in the distance, a bird started to sing while the assembled company stared up at the Prime. Eventually, Lennox heaved a sigh and rubbed a hand over the back of his neck.

“Well, shit,” he remarked. “Guess we’d better roll out the welcome mats.”

Chapter End Notes
Happy New Year, everyone! Again, I can make no promises about when volume II will start going up. I'm thinking to finish up Bundle of Sky before I start it so that I don't have quite so many things competing for my attention. :P

In the meantime, how many people would be interested in purchasing an actual, physical print copy of OFAM with, like, bonus material and/or illustrations by myself et al included? Just something I've been thinking of. Let me know in the comments if you're interested and, if so, about how much you'd be willing to pay for something like that (it'll have to be AT LEAST $25 (plus shipping, which will vary depending on where you are) because that's just the base cost for me to get the books).

See y'all in volume II!

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