Calibrated Loyalty

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Summary

It's hard to tell if freedom changed Starscream, or if he's always been this way. Out from under Megatron's iron grip, Starscream makes his way on his own. When hunting after the same energon source, Ratchet finds himself in debt to the Seeker, and his medic coding won't let things go until he repairs the former Decepticon. While the autobots have no reason to trust them, they are unable to touch him while under Ratchet's care, and are given no choice but to get to know Starscream. He's not really that bad...is he?

Notes

In this fic-
--Before the war Starscream was a scientist as well as being a fierce flier and wing commander of the seekers.
--Starscream has also had enough of Megatron's shit and the story starts after he's left the Decepticons, between Season 1 episode 20 and 21, before Bulkhead gets zapped.
--Cliffjumper is somehow alive let's pretend that he made it through the opener and was saved this'll be important later.
--This contains a lot of headcanon for Cybertronian courtships/relationships and some seeker stuff in particular. Info drops will be placed here and there through narration and also character explanations.
--Also contains eventual Starscream and Ratchet.
Freedom was the sort of thing a bot took for granted, until it was taken from them. Freedom was
the sort of thing a Seeker needed to feel in the air, under his wings and over them.

Freedom was the sort of thing that Starscream had forgotten the taste of.

When he broke the cuff off his wings, and he made the solemn swear to himself, his spark lept, he
was weightless, he jumped into the air, and he flew.

He flew until he couldn't recognize the land, until there were no city lights in the distance, and he
was left with only the stars above him and flat desert as far as he could see. Laughing for the first
time in what felt like eons, he didn't care that he got dirty when he fell back. It didn't matter.

He was free.

When he came online from his recharge, it was with a panic. Freedom had it's downsides. He was
alone, now, without a steady source of Energon, without allies, on a worthless world. He pondered
leaving it all, for a moment, but what good would that do? Any autobots or neutral would destroy
him on sight if they knew what was good for them, and while that would end his particular
problem of what to do, he'd hate to die like that. Pathetic. As for Decepticons...they wouldn't
accept his leadership for very long. As soon as they found out about Megatron, about this planet,
they would come, and he'd be turned over.

So, he was alone.

A bitter taste formed in the back of his throat, and he sat on the edge of the tall desert rocks. He
tapped his fingers on the plating of his thighs and scowled out over the sand and rocks before him.
Scrap. He hadn't thought this through.

"No!" He yelled, and his voice echoed. He stood up, hands clenching into fists. "I am Starscream,
and I will not deactivate like some worthless bit of scrap! I am commander of my own fate!" He
swept a hand before him. "I will survive...no... I will thrive! I will show them all!"

Freedom never tasted so sweet.
Being a bot on his own was far, far harder than Starscream had anticipated, but Starscream had never balked from a challenge, and he was not about to do so now. He searched his databanks until he remembered a handful of energon mines that were almost empty and he'd left, more than the one single one that Megatron had left him in. Perfect. One was close to what he'd begun to call his home base, even though it left a bad taste in his mouth.

He was living in a cave like some primitive, and he hated it almost as much as he hated Megatron, but it was all he had. He'd stripped what remained from the nearest mine, and he would have enough energon to last him a month if he kept himself barely fueled and rationed himself tightly.

Step one, find a safe place to roost, check. Step two, procure a source of energy, check.

The next step would be the most difficult. The next step would be to find something to keep himself repaired, operable, and in general good health. There was a town miles and miles away, but close enough that he didn't even have to change out of his root mode to get there. No sense in wasting energy with transformation and flight.

He stole modestly at first. Engines from a few cars. Bits and pieces here and there. Eventually he had a terrible, pathetic, excuse for an energon filter. Human tools were disgusting and terrible, so he made his own from them. With a modest amount of work, he managed to create a scanner, welder, and he beat large chunks of metal into a semblance of tools he would need for minor repairs.

Good, and just in time. He had to find new hunting grounds soon, only a few weeks after finding the first town. Luckily, there was another town, even if it was hours away, and larger, and there was a graveyard. No, wait, junkyard. That was what humans called them. He tore open the roof of human cars, pulled out padded seats and hoarded them.

And that was how he marked off step four - make a semblance of a berth. It was uncomfortable, but at least it was better than recharging on the ground.

Starscream tried to not look at his reflection in windows or sources of water or mirrors. He tried not to think of the thin layer of grime and dirt on his body. He tried not to think of his joints gumming up from lack of solvent.

Well, finding a way to clean himself that didn't involve human water was now step five on his list. On the way back to berth, sweet berth, a notice popped up on his sensors, and he dropped the chairs pads he was carrying, leaping into the air and into his alt mode.

A spike of energon and a site he'd been watching. Excellent. That meant the miners had uncovered the last dregs of energon. That meant it would be easy for him to get at it.

Unfortunately, Starscream wasn't the only bot that had noticed the signal.

When the warning popped up on the screen, Ratchet instantly snapped for Arcee. The others were on recharge or otherwise occupied, and only Arcee, who was recovering from a minor malfunction, was handy at the time.

"I can't go-" she said, instantly, as she walked over, but Ratcher interrupted her as he started up the
"I know. You're here to open the bridge when I'm done scouting." Ratchet scoffed, heading towards the green glow.

"Ratchet! Let me go wake up Bumblebee, or Bulkhead, or even Wheeljack-"

"Leave it Arcee. I'm just going to check it out. If we need to move, then you can wake them." Ratchet looked back at her, one hand already switching to his blade. "I'll keep in contact."

"...At the first sign of trouble," Arcee said, looking none too happy, and if Ratchet knew he as well as he thought he did, she'd be waking up Optimus as soon as the bridge closed.

"At the first sign of trouble, come save my aft," Ratchet said, and stepped through the gate.

Middle of the night, desert...it was cold, and his armor crimped up against his body almost instantly as the chill hit him. He shook it off, knowing he was fine, and he kept low. He crept up toward the mine, and ducked behind a rock when something flew overhead. Vehicons, guarding the air?

Wait, no.

That was Starscream.

Ratchet opened a channel to Arcee, and heard the static before the reply.

"Arcee here."

"Arcee. Starscream is here." There was a pause, and Ratchet wondered if the message had gotten lost. "Arcee, did you hear me? Starscream-"

"I heard," Arcee said coldly. "I'm waking up Prime-"

"Wait." Ratchet stared as he took a better look. Starscream was...filthy. His arm was hitching as he moved his shoulder.

"I'm not waiting!" Arcee hissed over the comm line. "If Starscream is there, it could be a trap-"

"He's filthy."

Silence again, then, "What do you mean he's filthy?"

Ratchet whispered. "It looks like he hasn't had a good solvent in...a month. Since-"

"Since the last time we saw him." Arcee paused. "Do you think he-"

"Left the Decepticons...? Possibly...I'm following him in."

"I'm still waking up Prime," Arcee said.

"Fine."

And Ratchet closed the line.

Starscream had already disappeared into the mine, weapon out, and Ratchet kept his swords out,
Then he froze when he felt the barrel of a gun against the back of his head.

"Do not move, autobot," Starscream hissed, quietly. A hand grabbed Ratchet and pulled him back, slamming him against the wall, and the gun was against his temple. "What are you doing here?"

"Likely the same thing you are. Investigating the energon signal." Ratchet kept calm the best he could, hoping that Optimus and everyone were already on their way. Stupid foolish medic.

Starscream hissed and the claw on Ratchet tightened, making a small screech of metal on metal. "Leave now, Autobot."

"Not going to deactivate me here, Decepticon?" Ratchet said, eyes narrowed at the seeker.

"I am not a Decepticon!" Starscream's voice was raised, and it echoed, and he ducked his head, looking over his shoulder, town the tunnel. The distant sounds of mining paused. "Scrap." He turned his attention back to Ratchet. "Leave, Autobot," he repeated, and pulled back. He snarled at Ratchet before running down the mine, farther in.

Ratchet stood there before twitching as he stepped forward off the wall. Against his better judgement, but in tune with his medic coding, he followed after Starscream. He was an idiot, and he was going to deserve every bit of the lecture that Optimus would give him later. Starscream had run, and the sounds of battle were getting closer, and he was about to turn what he assumed was the last corner when he was pulled back.

"Hang back here doc," Cliffjumper said, with a grin, and Bumblebee was behind him, weapons already out. "We'll take out those 'cons."

Bumble bee buzzed at them, 'if they don't take each other out first', and the two ran around the corner, into what Ratchet assumed was the fray, or what remained. Ratchet turned the corner, and stared.

Energon, harvest in carts and unharvested still in the walls. Vehicons laid in the dust, warrior caste and miner caste alike, optics gone dark, leaking their life blood onto the ground. Starscream had gotten to a high level. His fight was a dance. He grabbed a vehicon and spun it. Silver claws ripped into the chest, tightened around a spark chamber, grabbed and pulled. Spark and vehicon dropped. Starscream leveled an arm across the way. He fired.

Ratchet heard Bumblebee's whirr-buzz of warning too late. He turned, sword up, at the vehicon that had aimed at him, and there was a sharp whistle in the air. Ratchet hit the ground, looked up, just in time for energon to splatter across his face before he could shield it.

The shot sliced through Starscream's side. A second shot shredded the side of his wing. Bright blue flowed down his hip, down his leg. He raised his arm, fired his missile. The vehicon left nothing but pieces on the ground and a splatter of blue against the wall behind him.

Ratchet pushed himself up and grabbed Starscream's arm when the seeker began to falter, to help, but the seeker turned and hissed. If the hiss was at him, or at the pain in Starscream's side and
wing, Ratchet couldn't tell, but he kept his grip tight.

"Let go of me!" Starscream howled, taking a step back, but his struggle was weak, hardly even a play at it, and a shake was beginning to rack his frame. "Let GO!"

"You need medical attention!" Ratchet yelled, voice raised, and he pulled the seeker down behind cover while Cliffjumper cleared the last vehicon. "Ratchet to base, we need a ground bridge, medical emergency," he said, and Arcee's voice snapped back at him.

"Cliffjumper?"

"No." Ratchet's hands were already coated in blue as he tried to stem the flow, fighting for and against Starscream as the seeker pushed at him, weakly.

"Bumblebee?" The ground bridge opened up behind them.

"Starscream."

Arcee was silent, and it wasn't Ratchet that had spoken.

Optimus looked down at Ratchet and Starscream, having just stepped out of the bridge. He looked at Ratchet, working furiously.

"Ratchet-"

"Help or get out of my way, Optimus," Ratchet said, then cursed as Starscream's arms went limp and his optics flickered. "He has barely anything in his system. If we don't get him back, he dies." Ratchet looked back at Optimus.

"...Prepare your medical equipment." Optimus stepped forward, and kneeled, picking Starscream up. "I will bring him in."

Ratchet hurried through the bridge, though loathe he was to leave a patient, but there was no one else, only him. By the time he reached his medical bay and had booted up the initial systems, Optimus was through the bridge. Energon dripped past his fingers onto the floor, and Bulkhead's eyes widened as he came into the room in time to see it.

"Is that-" the wrecker asked, and Optimus nodded.

"Bulkhead, go help clear the mine and begin extraction," the Prime said. He knew Ratchet would need room, and the last thing any of them needed was arguments against saving anyone right now.

"Yes sir," Bulkhead said, warily, before running through the portal.

"Arcee, keep an eye on these screens." Ratchet booted up the final system and Arcee stood nearby, watching, as Optimus placed Starscream in Ratchet's care. Wires connected Starscream's failing systems to the observation systems, and the erratic data began to filter in. "I need energon and a solder, STAT."

"How is he alive?" Arcee asked, pushing a tube of energon and the soldering equipment over to Ratchet.

"Scrap if I know." Ratchet didn't even wipe off his hands before he picked up the solder and metal and began to stem the flow of energon as Starscream's optics offlined entirely. The spark sensor was pulsing and dimming at random intervals. "Hook the Energon up to a tube and hand it over." To her credit, Arcee managed to figure out what Ratchet wanted, and took the energon, holding it
up to let it run down the now attached tube, and handed the end to Ratchet.

The medic patched the energon into a line in Starscream's arm, trying to replace all that he'd lost. They'd need more, but this was a start. Ratchet kept an eye on the spark sensor when he could, doing what he could on Starscream's wing, and he had just pieced it back together and soldered the insides when he heard it.

The steady, empty tone of an offline spark that was no longer sending out any signals had always been the worst sound to him, and he looked up, staring at the screens. Not a single reading.

He'd failed yet another bot. Decepticon, yes, but that was one less of them in the universe.

He set his tools down, and felt a heavy hand on his shoulder. Several minutes passed, in silence.

"Ratchet-" Optimus started, but Arcee interrupted whatever he was about to say.

"Ratchet!"

Optimus and Ratchet looked up as there was a spike on the screen, and then sudden, fluttering, sharp beeps. "How?" Optimus whispered, staring, but Ratchet picked up his tools immediately.

"I will not turn a miracle away," Ratchet said, instantly, and began his work anew.

Starscream's spark dimmed and flared three more times before they finally finished, and it had been hours. Dried energon stuck to Ratchet's frame, coated his hands, and he pushed the table he had Starscream into the large, circular chamber to recover. It sealed behind him, and he narrowed his eyes at the screen. The seeker's spark still fluttered and spiked once in awhile, and he opened a line into the systems to keep an eye on it. When he finally turned away to find the excuse for washracks that they had, he was surprised to see Optimus there.

"Ratchet, report."

"He'll live. Probably." Ratchet looked back over his shoulder, then shook his head and looked back at the Prime. "He offlined four times. Entirely. His spark went cold. Then it all came back. I can't explain it, but it's drained his systems and they were already in rough shape. I need to wash up."

Optimus nodded and followed him, politely standing back when they were in the large, clear room. The room was plain, and it had been some kind of garage when the humans had used it, but they had installed a drain into the floor, effectively changing it into a much needed wash room for them. The mix of water and solvent cleaner came from a sprayer above Ratchet, and he shook his head at first at the cold water, until it warmed.

The medic sighed and raised his face to the mix, letting it wash the energon from his faceplates. It had started to itch long ago, but he hadn't had the time to remove it until now. Then there was the matter of his hands, more blue than orange or white now. He scrubbed at them quickly, roughly, until the blue was gone, until the floor was lightly blue with diluted energon.

With a turn of the knob, the mix was turned off, and Ratchet shook excess water off his hands, turning around. Optimus was still there.

"What happened, Ratchet?" Optimus let his hands rest at his side, and tilted his head, holding up a hand. "...Arcee is requesting permission to aid in clearing the mind. Medically?"

"Approved as long as she takes it easy. Leave the heavier lifting to other bots."
Optimus nodded and relayed, word for word, Ratchet's medical advice, before turning his attention back, fully, to Ratchet. "Apologies. What happened?"

Ratchet took a large cloth hanging from the wall, and dried off his hands, dipping into his joins to remove as much water as he could. The last thing he needed was to chance rusting. "Everyone was recharging, I went. Starscream was there. ...I don't think he's following Megatron any longer." He looked at Optimus, who seemed wary. "He wouldn't be attacking one of the Decepticon mines if he was, and do you really think he would have let me go? He would have snuffed my spark or taken be captive to gain favor." The medic scoffed and ran the towel over his face before hanging it back up. "Optimus, if this is a ruse, it's a damn impressive one."

"...We shall watch him," Optimus said, after a long silence. He'd been willing to give Starscream a chance months ago. What was one more? This wasn't Megatron's style, so chances were high that this wasn't some ploy.

"At least until he's recovered." Ratchet nodded. "He took that hit for me, Optimus. A decepticon wouldn't stop the autobot's only medic from being deactivated. Once he's recovered, my obligation is over."

"And it'll be entirely up to Starscream what happens from there." Optimus nodded, then looked thoughtful. "...Hopefully we can move him before school is over."

"Ah. Yes. I'll try to clear a room. It...wouldn't do for the children to see him like this. Or at all." Ratchet agreed. "No matter how this turns out, Optimus. I'm counting today as a win for us. We have Energon."

"Agreed." Optimus smiled. "Let us see what the next few days hold, old friend. But I do believe that you have made the correct decision."
The air was heavy around him, black, and he was floating but not flying. Waves of energy rolled past him and disappeared into the dark, but all he could focus on was the glowing mass before him.

Starscream stretched his arms out, but he couldn't reach it. It was so close. So close. His flightmates, friends, past lovers, teachers, students, everyone he'd ever failed, just beyond his fingertips, ready to welcome him into their arms. He strained against unseen forces, reaching out again.

The Allspark hummed before him, glowing with a thousand sparks, keeping them for itself, and it wasn't fair. He was weary, tired. His body ached, his mind was exhausted. If this was the end, so be it. He'd been prepared to die for decades now. Every time Megatron turned to him in a rage, or every time a mission went bad, or he made a misguided statement, he'd been prepared to die, prepared to embrace the Allspark and be done with it.

But he couldn't reach it.

It was so close, but something kept him from touching the arcs of energy that flared. "Please," he whispered. The orb before him flared brighter and he had to cover his eyes against the light.

"Starscream."

That voice was so familiar. Who...?

He reached out blindly, but he couldn't move. His hands were at his sides, and the world suddenly came into focus.

"Starscream." That voice again, and Starscream brought his optics online. The room was small, unfamiliar, and he was locked to a table. Stasis cuffs around his wrists and ankles and even his wings kept him still, and energon burned in the back of his throat for a moment in brief panic before he choked it down.

"Starscream, do you remember what happened?"

Starscream focused ahead of him, and set his mouth into a grim line. "Oh yes, autobot." He narrowed his eyes at Ratchet, and scoffed. "I remember very well. My side reminds me." He lifted his chin and scoffed. "...Why help me?" His voice as accusing. what did they want? Why did they not just leave him to die in that cave?

"I would ask the same thing." Ratchet kept an even stare on Starscream.

"Oh don't think anything of it!" Starscream hissed, and the high note of his words made Ratchet's audio static for a moment. "Since you are the only medic currently anywhere close that might even consider repairing me, it would not do to let you get deactivated. It is simply a matter of self preservation."

"Self preservation."
"That IS what I said. Perhaps you should check your vocalizer. It appears to be echoing my words!"

"Perhaps I should check yours," Ratchet said, lowering his data pad. "I'm certain that everyone would be better off not having to listen to your....screaming."

He hadn't meant it at as a real threat, but Starscream's mouth shut tightly and his wings twitched. Things were silent a moment, before Starscream spoke again, much more quiet. "I will attempt to control my vocal levels while enjoy your...hospitality, autobot."

"If you keep calling me autobot, I will call you decepticon." Ratchet scoffed.

"Call me whatever you want. It doesn't matter." Starscream scowled. Ratchet raised a brow. Proud Starscream, not caring? That wasn't usual. "I wouldn't expect you to understand." Starscream turned his head away. "Leave me to my stasis, Medic. I'm sure you have better things to do."

"I always do, but for now, Optimus has ordered you to be under observation at all times until I clear you to be removed from the base." Ratchet crossed his arms. "Less than ideal, but that is our only choice. On the off chance that this is some plan from Megatron..." He trailed off as Starscream began to laugh. "What?"

"You think Megatron would be smart enough to plan something like...this? Megatron is a prideful fool who puts his stock in his own brutality to intimidate and control." Starscream snorted. "No, this is no work of his, autobot."

"I have a name," Ratchet said, scowling.

"I know that," Starscream snapped. "Ratchet, medic of the autobots. Quite accomplished. Skilled. Possibly useful under the right circumstances. Attempt to capture alive, but if unable to, deactivation is acceptable."

"Possibly useful? I suppose I should be flattered." His tone indicated that he was not flattered at all.

"Oh you should be. You could have been brilliant under Megatron's leadership. Or mine." Starscream snickered, but it was empty, a mask, and Ratchet saw right through it, though he didn't comment. "...Well then, Ratchet. What do you and your autobot friends have in store for me? Dismantling? Interrogation? At this point, no information I have will be useful. Security codes will have been changed."

"That is not our intention, Starscream." Optimus' low voice startled Starscream, and the seeker tensed. How long had Optimus been standing there? Optimus came into view from behind Starscream, carrying a small ration of energon. Without a word he reached out and undid the stasis cuff on one of Starscream's hands, and placed the cube into the seeker's hand.

"Then what is your intention?" Starscream eyed Optimus, then the cube, before drinking. He paused at the first sip. Bitter. This was hardly refined, barely edible! How had the Autobots survived so far on this?

"I owe you," Ratchet said. "You took the blow for me. It's a matter of honor. Until you're healed, you're safe here."

"And after I'm healed?" Starscream raised a brow as he took another sip.

"That'll be your choice." Optimus kept his voice even. "We were willing to give you a chance before. I would give you another, if you have truly left the Decepticons."
"I won't ever be an Autobot," Starscream said, eyes narrowed. "Nor would your happy little team accept me as one."

"An ally, then, is just as acceptable." Optimus nodded. "None of us can survive on our own out here. I'm sure you are well aware of that, Starscream. I'm sure we could come to a mutually beneficial partnership."

Starscream was silent. Optimus was, of course, correct, but he wouldn't admit it. He had hardly been doing well on his own, and eventually he would be hurt, or a system would fail, and he'd be alone to deactivate. But...The Autobots? Why would they give this chance? After all that he'd done?

"...Why?" Starscream finished the cube and dropped the empty container into Optimus' hand. "I've killed more autbots than I can count. Why give me a chance?"

"Because you gave Cliffjumper a chance," Ratchet said, moving to re-initiate the stasis cuff. "One life doesn't forgive all the sparks you snuffed...but Optimus seems to think you might be salvageable."

Starscream sputtered, moving his hand back into the cuff for Ratchet. At the least, he had to pretend to be compliant for now. "A moment of weakness!" He said, turning his head in a huff. "I simply had no reason to kill him at that very moment. He was more valuable alive than dead."

"And so are you," Ratchet pointed out. When Starscream tensed, Ratchet glanced at Optimus, then back at Starscream. "Think about it." When Ratchet stepped back, he glanced at his hand. Dirt transfer left his hand a dull grey, and he looked at Optimus. Their optics focused and refocused on each other, and Optimus nodded. "I'll be back later so you can refuel again, and we'll hit the washracks."

Before Starscream could reply, the two were gone, and he heard the door open and close behind him.

It seemed like he had a few decisions to make. Oh, he would never be an Autobot. He was not so soft and weak, but perhaps a casual ally...they had plenty of things to offer him, and he doubted that one of them would lash out and dent him for every casual mistake he made. And Optimus was right. None of them would survive alone. Not out here, on this world.

Starscream was not giving up his freedom, he decided. He would just be accepting the help of others, and not freely. He would not take handouts or pity, he was far too proud for that. A mutually benefiting agreement was acceptable.

Decision made, he shut his optics off and looked inward, beginning self scans on his inner workings to check his repair. What he found was promising. His side and wind had been hit hard, but Ratchet was as skilled as Starscream had expected. The major injuries had bee fixed, lines reconnected and sensors attached to delicate wires, and his personal repair protocols would do the rest. He checked over the rest of his systems and realized, with a shock, that his weapon systems were still online.

Why would they even take the chance? Stupid, foolish, trusting autbots! No wonder so many of them were dead. He let out a small huffed breath and, after a long while of self reflection, disabled his own weapons as a show of good faith. He was still more than deadly with his claws and skills. He didn't need his rockets to destroy, but perhaps it would set the Autobots at ease. The last thing he needed was them seeing him as a threat.
It was hours before anyone returned, and he took the time to recharge, relaxed as much as he could with his wings closed together uncomfortably, but until he earned enough trust to have them free he would have to make do. His recharge was light, and as soon as the door opened he was back online, twisting his head to try to see behind him to see who had walked in.

"Don't you have better things to do than baby sit me?" Starscream scoffed at Ratchet.

"Yes, but you're also my responsibility right now." Ratchet eyed Starscream before reaching out. All the stasis cuffs went offline, even the ones on Starscream's wings, and Ratchet took a step back when Starscream sat up and swung his legs off the berth. The Seeker stretched back, and then curled forward, and his wings fanned out. Ratchet raised an arm and ran a scan over the delicate Seeker frame, then frowned. "Your weapons?"

"Call it a show of good faith," Starscream said as he stood. "I have deactivated them. For now. But do not think I am harmless." He examined his claws slowly and purposely, before eyeing Ratchet. "...Now I believe something about a wash was mentioned?"

Ratchet smiled to himself. One could always depend on Seeker vanity to get them to cooperate. "Fuel up first. Doctor's orders." Ratchet held out the cube he had carried in, and Starscream took it.

"There is something wrong with your filter," Starscream said as he took a sip. He made a face, then downed the entire thing in several chugs, to get it over with.

"And I suppose you think you could do better." Ratchet rolled his eyes, and then scowled when Starscream scoffed.

"I know I could do better, my dear Medic." Starscream stood and set the empty cube down, folding his hands behind him, and Ratchet realized what Starscream could have been under different circumstances. Even in the base of ones he'd called enemies for years, Starscream pretended to be comfortable, wings up and seeming almost relaxed. For all his bravado, Starscream could have been a force of one, a brilliant commander. He was strong and fierce and fast, Ratchet had seen his handy work up close before, and those claws looked deadly, but he was smart and had an aloof air about him, demanding respect instantly.

In another world, in some other universe, where Starscream hadn't been seduced by Megatron's dark words, he could have been an impressive autobot.

"In fact," Starscream said, finally breaking Ratchet out of his thoughts, "if you let me look at your filters-"

"Don't push it," Ratchet said, pointing at the door. "Move."

Starscream, for his credit, snickered and turned, wings twitching, but cooperated. Out in the hall, Ratchet took the lead, showing Starscream the way to the empty room for washing. They shared no words, and all it took was Ratchet to turn the water and solvent on for Starscream to take over.

Ratchet stepped back, crossed his arms, and shook his head as the seeker stood under the water-solvent mix. Trails of water and washed off grime began to roll off Starscream's armor, and the Seeker lifted all his panels, letting the water get under his armor and to the protoform itself. He closed the panels after a few minutes and shook himself, wings flicking before scrubbing over his face, body. It was amazing what a bit of cleaning did for a mech, and when Starscream turned the water off, he was standing taller, and he was looking good, and he knew it. That was the infuriating bit. There would be no standing him now.
"Much better." He examined his servos and smiled, satisfied. He looked back at Ratchet and scoffed, wings drooping slightly. "I suppose it's back to that room again."

"It is," Ratchet said, motioning at the door. "But if you're a good bot I'll get you a book or something."

Starscream's scoff at the mere idea of reading a human book was well worth it.

Chapter End Notes

Time jump of a few weeks in the next chapter, this one was a semi-filler. I suppose I should have condensed this one into the previous chapter but oh well, hindsight is 50/50.

Thank you all for the kudos. Seeing that people enjoy it really makes me happy, and I hope you all continue to do so!

this is unbeata'd so hopefully there aren't any glaring errors, but if you catch one please send me a message here or on my tumblr, squids-in-disguise, so that i can fix it and thank you properly. I know that I miss things plenty when rereading them, even after a few days, and sometimes i change my mind on things halfway through chapters and forget to take things out before then!
They made it three weeks before the children found out, and only because Ratchet forgot that it was the weekend. He straightened suddenly when he heard Bumblebee pulling into the building, and Starscream looked over his shoulder casually. "Scrap," Ratchet said, and it was too late to hurry Starscream back to 'his' room. Well. The children had to find out eventually.

So far, Starscream had shown no signs of going back to the Decepticons or even entertaining the notion of attacking the autobots. He hadn't brought his weapon systems online once in the time he'd been there, even when Wheeljack had shown up unexpectedly and pulled his swords on the former 'Con. If anything, Starsream had been...surprisingly helpful. He'd bothered Ratchet enough times about their Energon filters that Ratchet had snapped and told Optimus, and Optimus had agreed to let Starscream take a look.

Three hours later of watching their entire energon purification system get torn apart, a short requisition list, and another four hours later, and the first sip of purer energon made Ratchet's engines rev slightly. 'How?' Ratchet had asked, and Starscream had laughed, wiping oil and grease from his servos and simply replied 'I am a scientist, after all, an energon filtration system is child's play'.

Right. Scientist.

"What is here doing here?" Miko yelled, before she'd even climbed out of Bee's back seat. Raf seemed frozen to Bee's seat, and Jack slowly got out.

"Aah, the tiny humans." Starscream snickered, leaning over them, purposely standing between them and one of the overhead lights, and Bumblebee didn't transform until Raf hopped out.

"Why is there a con here Ratchet?" Miko narrowed her eyes at Starscream, and Raf answered for all of them when Bumblebee whirr-buzzed.

"He's not a Decepticon?" Raf looked at Bumblebee, then at Ratchet, then at Starscream.

"Your yellow and black friend is correct." Starscream patted Bumblebee on the top of the head, and the scout frowned at him, making a low buzz. "Such language in front of the little humanlings!"

"So like, you're a bot now?" Miko looked at Ratchet and, seemingly deciding that if Bumblebee and Ratchet were okay with this, she would be as well, grinned and began her barrage of questions. "Why do you wear heels? You're not as colorful as everyone else, why is that? You turn into a jet right? What's it like to fly? What's the farthest you've ever flown? What do you do-"

"Pits how do you shut it off?" Starscream said, and Ratchet scoffed.

"You don't. You'd do well to just answer her questions until she's done," Ratchet said, and Miko grinned.

"That's right." Miko nodded and dropped her backpack. "So come on, spill it!"
Starscream scoffed and looked at Ratchet before shaking his head. He kneeled, and only because he had to play nice. "No, I am not an autobot, I am not wearing heels these are my feet, I have no need for color-"

"Because you stand out enough as it is," Ratchet interjected, but Starscream only shot him a glare.

"Because that is the seeker way for the unmated and untrined, I do turn into a jet, flying is the most incredible thing, and I have flown between planets." Starscream waved a hand in the air. "I believe that covers everything."

"Not. At. All." Miko grinned. "Can you play video games?"

"Play...what?" Starscream narrowed his eyes at Miko.

"Well today will be an interesting one," Jack said, as Miko picked up her backpack and ran for the tv.

When Bulkhead and Arcee retured from their patrol they were welcomed by the oddest sight one could imagine. Jack and Raf were currently playing, and Miko was leaning over the railing, chatting with the former con as if he hadn't tried to kill any of them a hundred times before. Starscream was surprisingly subdued, curiously watching the screen.

"This...doesn't seem like Starscream," Arcee said, arms crossed, looking at Bulkhead. The wrecker shrugged, so Arcee looked at Ratchet. "Ratchet...?"

"I don't know any more than you do," Ratchet said, without looking away from his console. "Cliffjumper and Optimus are due back soon. You both know what that means."

"Movie time!" Raf said. Bumblebee buzzed loudly and excitedly, looking at Raf. "Miko brought The Lord of the Rings."

"Extended edition, of course." Miko grinned and ran over to a different part of the railing, closer to Bulkhead. "You're gonna love it Bulk! Strider is a total badass." She punched the air.

The rumble of engines alerted them to the arrival of Optimus and Cliffjumper, and the two transformed as soon as they stepped in. Arcee stepped over to Cliffjumper and rested a hand on his hand, examining a scratch and frowning disapprovingly. "Cliff."

"It's just a scratch, I'm fine," Cliffjumper said, laughing. "You should see the other guy."

"Ratchet, I see our guest has been introduced to the others," Optimus said, looking at Starscream, who glanced at Optimus and ducked his head. "I suppose it had to happen eventually. Will he be joining the others for... Movie Night?"

"Oh c'mon he has to join!" Miko said, grinning. "It's like team building or something!"

"I am not part of your team," Starscream screeched, voice raising to a sharp note and almost hitting static, and the humans covered their ears. The Autobots, to their credit, only winced, and Starscream scowled and crossed his arms, looking off. After a moment his wings shifted down and he stalked off without a word.

"Ow, what was that for?" Miko said, ears ringing.

"Ratchet?" Optimus looked at Ratchet, and the medic sighed.
"I'll go-" Cliffjumper started, but Ratchet shook his head and was already going off after the Seeker.

Why it had to be him, he didn't know. Well, actually he did know. It was a matter of health, and Starscream being there was all on Ratchet, and the Seeker was still under Ratchet's protection for the time being. Unsurprisingly, Starscream was sulking in 'his' room, and when Ratchet opened the door Starscream flinched.

"I didn't mean to...glitch," Starscream said, and each word sounded like it torn, forcibly, from his processors. Not quite an apology, but his screech truly wasn't intentional. "You know I used to have a pleasant voice."

When Ratchet raised a brow, Starscream squirmed and turned away, watching the wall. Wings shifted upward, and Ratchet guessed if he could see the Seeker's face he'd see the attempt of his usual aloof mask.

"I used to be quite nice. People actually enjoyed listening to me." Starscream lifted one hand to his throat and rubbed at the cables. He half turned, watching Ratchet. "One of the first...punishments I faced under Megatron's command. A shame I never did learn my lesson." He snickered, but stopped when Ratchet's face turned from curious to horrified. "Oh that's right Ratchet," he said, "Your scout is not the only one with a damaged voice box."

"Primus." Ratchet hadn't known. None of them had. "To his own people...?"

"To his own second-in-command." Starscream snickered again, laughter to cover the hurt. "And I was foolish enough to continue to follow him." When the words left his mouth, he flinched, and turned away again.

"...Why did you?" Ratchet asked, quietly. He took a few steps into the room, but was careful to give Starscream his space. "After all he's done to others, to you-"

"All he did when I was following him! What do you think he would do if he got his hands on me after I left?" Starscream hissed and turned on Ratchet, flexing his hands. "What do you think he would do to me now if he caught me? I imagine the damage that brought me here would be nothing compared to that!" His voice raised again, static clawing at the edges.

"...I understand." Ratchet spoke quietly, and watched as the Seeker relaxed, just barely. He'd seen the times on the battlefield, when Megatron turned on Starscream for some mistake. He'd seen what Megatron had done to countless mechs, including Bumblebee. He didn't want to imagine what Starscream had faced. "...Starscream. You are safe here. As long as you need to be."

"How kind of you, Ratchet." Starscream's voice was heavy with sarcasm, but under it was relief, and his shoulders relaxed.

"Yes. Now, come on." Ratchet motioned at the door. "If you miss the beginning of the film, the rest doesn't make sense. Human vids are unfortunately lacking in exposition." He scoffed. "They are also extremely short." When Starscream didn't move, Ratchet nodded. "You don't have to, but if you change your mind you know where to go."

Ratchet went back alone, and joined Optimus at the ground bridge controls. Movies weren't exactly his style, nor were they Optimus'. It was a chance for them to discuss recent events as they watched the screens for signs of decepticon attack or energon pulses. Behind them Bulkhead and Arcee were setting up the large projector for the movie, and Raf was typing away at his laptop. Miko and Jack were off somewhere, but they knew the base like the back of their little fleshy hands, so
neither of the older bots were concerned. When they showed up minutes later they had bowls of
the strange snaky substance that they declared was popcorn.

Raf hooked the projector up to his laptop, and after a moment the image of his desktop shined onto
the far wall. There some minor adjustments to the color and intensity before Raf was satisfied, and
he placed the movie into his desk tray, letting the computer begin to sort that out as everyone got
comfortable.

Bulkhead, of course, sat next to the projector and Miko sat on his shoulder, bowl of popcorn in her
lap, kicking her legs slightly as she waited. Bumblebee was on the other side, whirring soft
questions at Raf as the human started up the video program, and whatever the yellow bot said
made Raf laugh. Cliffjumper sat off to the side against the wall, and Arcee was speaking to Jack
who was sitting on the sofa.

"Go on Arcee, go sit with him," Jack said, settling back on the couch.

"You sure Jack?" Arcee glanced over her shoulder at Cliffjumper, and when Jack nodded she
shrugged, and went to go sit next to the red bot, their legs just barely touching. With everyone
settled in, Raf started the movie up, then sat down in Bumblebee's hand with his own bowl of
popcorn.

"This. Is. So. Awesome!" Miko whispered, grinning.

The movie was only a few minutes in when Arcee lifted her head slightly toward the door. She
seemed to be the only one to notice Starscream's sudden, silent arrival, and they stared at each
other before Arcee jerked her head to the side, a place where Starscream could sit, slightly out of
the way, and still see. She turned her attention to the screen, and Starscream scoffed slightly.

Starscream eyed the spot, and nodded slightly. Sure. He'd sit. But first... He straightened and
walked over to where Ratchet and Optimus were talking quietly, and Optimus noticed him far
before Ratchet did.

"Starscream. Have you come to watch the movies with the others?" Optimus rumbled quietly,
under the audio of the movie.

"To a point," Starscream said, and when Ratchet turned to face him, Starscream pointed at the
medic. "Do you really need both of you to watch the screens? They seem rather silent to me."

"I have things to do-" Ratchet said, but Optimus' quiet laugh stopped him.

"No. I suppose not. Ratchet, you could use a break." Optimus nodded and rested a hand on
Ratchet's shoulder. "Perhaps you will even enjoy yourself."

"Enjoy myself while watching...that?" He gestured at the screen, where some odd shorter-than-
usual humans with large feet were speaking.

Starscream snickered and reached out, grabbing Ratchet's arm. "Even you need to relax, medic, and
if you fail from overexertion, then who fixes you?" He gave the arm a small tug before going to sit,
well out of the way of the others. Bumblebee whirred quietly at the Seeker, and Starscream just
shrugged.

Ratchet scoffed and turned back to the screen, but the feeling of Optimus' eyes on him made his
pause and look up at the Prime. "What?"

"You want to watch it." Optimus sounded amused.
"Not particularly-"

"You want to watch it with him," Optimus amended, and Ratchet stared at him, vocals resetting. Before Ratchet could put up an argument, Optimus held up a hand. "Go ahead Ratchet. If nothing else, you sitting between him and the others will let Starscream relax."

"You don't know much about Seekers, do you Optimus?" Ratchet asked, and when Optimus just smiled, the medic scoffed. He hesitated, fingers over the keyboard, but he slowly lowered them, turned, and went to join the others. He sat down.

Optimus shook his head as he turned his attention to the screen. He knew enough about Seekers to know what was happening, and it wasn't necessarily a bad thing. As long as they were careful, he wouldn't interfere.

Besides. One didn't just interfere with a Seeker courtship.

Chapter End Notes

Miko is over excited about anything new, and she puts a lot of faith in the autobots to keep her safe, which is why she's so willing to just jump in and be chummy with Starscream. Raf and Jack are still wary, but they know that they're safe. Maybe later they'll all actually get used to each other. Who knows!
It was terrifying how fast Starscream began to fit in among them all. Oh they all didn't necessarily trust him, and he didn't seem to particularly trust them, but they all knew he wasn't a prisoner and there was no need to treat him as one. As he'd stated several times, as if he was trying to convince himself as much as them, if he truly was a Decepticon still he would have killed them all already, and taken Optimus' spark to Megatron as a gift long ago. It had been a full month, and Starscream's weapons were still offline.

While the children were there after school, Starscream tended to stay in his room on self imposed exile, and it took an impulsive visit from Miko to drag him out of his focus. He'd put in a requisition request of all things, Optimus had passed it to Fowler, and it had taken convincing for the human to deliver the items the next time he was there.

In the end, they had to say that there was no way that Starscream could make a weapon of the equipment, and even if there was, Starscream would have made a weapon long before then.

"Hey Starscream!" Miko said, cheerfully, as she walked into the room. When he grunted, she laughed and lifted her hand in a salute, dropping her voice. "Permission to enter sir!"

"Hmph. Granted." Starscream didn't look over at her, sitting in front of a large table he'd managed to find. A few small empty canisters of energon laid on the corner, and before him various tubes and class beakers were place, carefully, with small fires burning under them. It wasn't all energon in those tubes, Miko could tell, because it wasn't all that bright bright blue.

"What are you doing?" Miko waked over and looked up, and when Starscream knelt down she grinned.

"Science." Starscream smirked. "Would you like to watch?"

"Is it going to explode?" Miko crossed her arms, watching him carefully.

"It is very possible."

"Then yeah!" Miko's arms uncrossed and when Starscream lowered a hand, she crawled into it. He lifted her up onto the table and deposited her there, and Miko sat and watched as he used his hand to crush up some raw energon. "What are you making?"

"A secret." Starscream picked up a large iron pipe from the side of the table, and dipped it in something dark and thick, before rolling it over the small chunks of energon. He turned up the heat on several on the beakers, tapping his fingers on the tabletop. "What are you doing here anyway?" He asked, not moving his eyes from the chemistry going on before him.

"Oh, I wanted to invite you to movie night again!" Miko grinned. Over the course of the last weekend they'd somehow watched all of the 'Lord of the Rings' movies, and Starscream had found it confusing but, if he was honest, at least somewhat entertaining. "Wheeljack is here and Bulkhead and I convinced him to stay for it. We've got a real good one for tomorrow! It's called Tron Legacy. I think you bots will really get into it."
"Tron? Hmph." Starscream paused his tapping, then picked up the beakers and poured them all, one by one, into a larger beaker. He placed the iron rod he'd prepared into said beaker, and the rod was half in the liquid before he sealed it all. "I suppose learning more about...human entertainment would be...acceptable. Perhaps this will be done by then."

"What is it? It looks like you're making...rock candy." Miko squinted at it.

"It is candy," Starscream mumbled. "But it is not made out of rocks!"

"It's not actual rocks, duh." Miko laughed. "It's sugar! So what, you got a sweet tooth?"

"It is not for me." Starscream sniffed.

"Who's it for then?" Miko looked curious, and Starscream's wings twitched.

"No one," he said, quickly, and reached out. He picked her up and lifted her close to his face. "And you would do well to not mention this to ANYONE."

"Your secret is safe with me," Miko said, with a laugh. Starscream just made a face, and hoped she would be able to keep her mouth shut.

"Hey Doc!"

"What now," Ratchet muttered as he turned and saw Wheeljack. "What do you want?"

"What's with the box?" Wheeljack motioned at the box that was resting on the berth that Ratchet usually reserved for repairing the autobots.

Ratchet frowned. That hadn't been there when he'd started his work. "What?"

Bulkhead looked over the box, and lowered his head. "Well it doesn't sound like a bomb or something," he said, "and that's definately your name on it."

Ratchet pushed the two aside slightly as he went over to look at. Bulkhead looked over his shoulder, and Wheeljack peered around his other side, both of them confused, and Wheeljack amused. "Well? Open it!" Wheeljack encouraged, nudging Ratchet with his elbow.

"Yip yip yip, I'll open it when I want to," Ratchet said, picking it up. He looked over it before pulling the top of the box off, and did a double take at the contents. He hadn't seen candy in decades, but the sight was unmistakable. It took too much time to make, was too fragile, and took longer to eat than energon in its liquid form, even if it had the same nutrients. Besides, none of them knew how to make it. It was practically an art, and it had been somewhat expensive back on Cybertron.

"Someone made Ratchet candy? Aw man!" Bulkhead looked at Wheeljack. "Jackie!"

"Don't look at me, wasn't me. I haven't made the stuff since before the war." Wheeljack shrugged, then clapped Ratchet on the back. "Looks like someone's got an admirer."

"Yeah, but who? None of us know how to make it." Bulkhead seemed confused.
"No one but me, and since I didn't, that leaves..." Wheeljack motioned at Bulkhead, grinning.

"The only person that could would be... oh. OH." Bulkhead stared at Wheeljack, then grinned back at him, mouthing the name.

**Starscream.**

Of all people.

"Ha ha ha, nice!" Bulkhead said, and Ratchet's faceplates warmed when he heard the inmistakable sound of them high-fiving behind him.

"Way to go Doc," Wheeljack said, laughter in his voice.

Ratchet stared down at the candy, then turned, grabbed Wheeljack and Bulkhead's heads and slammed them together. It wasn't hard enough to hurt them, but enough to smart and send them reeling for a moment. "Not a word of this. To anyone." He hissed. "Get out of here." He let them go and grabbed the box, leaving the room.

The two wreckers just looked at each other and grinned.

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By the time they got all set up for the movie, Optimus was already watching the screens, alone. Starscream scowled slightly and glanced around. No Ratchet. His faceplates warmed and he rubbed at his chin. He'd made a carefully calculated choice-turned-error. Life was a glitch, and now he'd made things awkward.

Just another thing to add to the ever growing list of screws up that Starscream was famous for.

A gift of frivolous nature in tense times was clearly a gift, an offer, to beginning courtship, and Starscream sighed because he actually did like the Medic. It was a shame it would end before it started but Starscream couldn't blame Ratchet in the slightest. Who would want to accept the courtship of someone like him? Nothing to offer, a dark past, pathetic and weak. He beat himself down in his head, frame tense and tight.

He was worthless now, even if he'd tried to show that he wasn't. Anything he'd done or said to Ratchet was lost in the grounder. This had been his final chance to show his interest, and Ratchet would likely be avoiding him now. Starscream couldn't blame him. Who would want a former Decepticon, and Starscream of all people, courting? In the middle of a war? On a strange planet? The candy he'd made was likely dumped in some trash somewhere. Starscream didn't think Ratchet would laugh at him, but the fear made a cold pit in his spark as he imagined it anyway.

That in the front of his mind, the movie started, and it was very easy to understand why he was so surprised when Ratchet suddenly sat next to him, box under his arm. He actually yelped, and then bit back any comment when a few glowing optics actually looked at him. Miko actually hushed him loudly, and Wheeljack chuckled softly as eyes turned back to the movies.

"Sorry I'm late," Ratchet said, quietly, and Starscream crossed his arms and looked in the opposite direction.

"Why should I care?" Starscream mumbled. "It's Miko you should apologize to." He glanced at Ratchet, and then slowly turned to look at him fully when he realized that Ratchet had the box.

"...Thank you for the present." Ratchet opened the box and the energon candy glowed dimly. He
spoke quietly, under the movie. This conversation was for them alone. He took out the stick, and offered it to Starscream, and it was then that Starscream realized that, somehow, Ratchet had cut it in half without damaging the integrity of it. The seeker in him was mildly insulted that Ratchet was returning his gift, or at least half of it, but another part of him knew that Ratchet really didn't know what he was doing...and, well, he had kept half.

Perhaps it was just the grounder way. Or Ratchet's.

Starscream took his half and lifting it to his lips, breaking off a bit of the crystal between his denta and chewing. Hm. He hadn't tried any of this before gifting it, and it was less than perfect. He'd have to do better next time, but given what he'd had to work with, he was pleased.

"It's good," Ratchet said, quietly. They sat in silence, watching the movie. It was good, for a human movie, and the music appealed to Starscream. Ratchet would have to examine the movie more in depth at a later date, but at the moment he was a small bit distracted by the Seeker by his side.

The movie was halfway over when Ratchet reached over and nudged Starscream with the back of his hand. The seeker looked at him, and Ratchet stood up, motioning for him to follow. Curious, Starscream stood and followed the medic, glancing back at the other bots. If anyone noticed their disappearance, they didn't make any motion.

Of course Wheeljack noticed the moment they stood and stepped away, into the lift that would take them to the roof, and the wrecker nudged Bulkhead. The two shook in silent laughter. Miko shushed them loudly.

When the sky came into view, Ratchet realized that he should have taken Starscream up much sooner. Starscream's wings lifted, and a heaviness seemed to fall off his shoulders, and the seeker closed his optics and inhaled, deely.

"...Sky," he whispered, lifting his hands. He paused, then looked at Ratchet, and scowled when Ratchet laughed. "What?!"

"Go on then." Ratchet looked up at the stars overhead. "You need a good flight. Just stay in range."

It was the best gift that Ratchet could give at the moment, unprepared as he was, but he had no idea of knowing just what that meant to Starscream. The Seeker grinned at Ratchet and ran, leaping off the edge of the structure. He let the freefall take him for just a few moments before transforming, flying into the sky in a tight loop. He hadn't flown since he'd arrived, and he made up for it, spinning in the air, through high clouds, up and up until Ratchet was just a spec below.

He fell back, into another free fall, controlled, and planned his next move. It wouldn't be good to now show off in front of a potential courtship. If Ratchet had been a flyer, Starscream would be flying around him to show off an encouraging him to join. As it was, he could only do so much, but he could still show off. There was a reason that he was the wing commander of the Seekers that remained.

He engaged his thrusters and flew in a slow circle, almost seeming to hover, in the air over Ratchet,
and was pleased to notice that the medic was watching him and likely had been the whole time. Starscream would not disappoint, and he flew a slew of patterns and tricks he'd known to be particularly useful and impressive in the past. One particular twisting loop had sealed the deal for him long, long ago.

When he finally landed, he did it smoothly, transforming and running a few steps on the ground before coming to a completely stop, and he turned to face Ratchet, wings fluttering lightly. The dim lights caught his best angle, and he preened slightly as Ratchet clapped.

"Incredible." Ratchet lowered his hands. "I don't think I've ever really watched someone flying."

"Then you have been at a great loss." Starscream smoothly walked over to Ratchet and smirked. "Impressed?"

"Quite." Ratchet chuckled softly, then shook his head. "...We need to talk." When Starscream's wings twitched down slightly, he reached out, resting his hand on Starscream's shoulder, lightly, and just for a moment. "Don't worry. I just...need to know what this is."

"Very well." Starscream took a small step back and put his hands behind him, looking as if he were discussing a business arrangement and not...whatever they were. He deliberately was right out of Ratchet's reach, and for good reason. It had taken a long for Starscream to accept any touch for any length of time without tensing, and Ratchet suspected that all touches had been medical or punishing for a long time.

"I don't want you to pursue me...anyone, just because you feel you need to. For safety, or because it's expected, or you owe us." Ratchet seemed just as business. "This is my medical and personal opinion. This has to be something that you want because you want it."

"You think I - because you helped me?" Starscream hissed, wings going up and making a face. "That's not why I'm doing this!"

So what if, perhaps, at first, it had been. Get in with their good graces with small gifts, attach himself to one of them to ensure his safety, but that had disappeared after the first few days when no punishments came, ever, even with his...abrasive nature. Then it had become real, pure interest, watching the Medic.

"Relax," Ratchet said, softly, and Starscream slowly did so. "I just wanted to make sure. ...On a personal level, there's something else you should know about me."

Starscream narrowed his eyes and gave a small huff. "And that is?"

"That if you're just in this for my spike or valve or interfacing, you're going to be disappointed." Ratchet shrugged. "You're an attractive bot, but I need more than a pretty chassis in front of me to get revved."

"Are you calling me pretty, then?" Starscream let his wings twitch in a flirty manner, and though that was lost in Ratchet the tone of Starscream's voice was not. The mood changed with those words, acceptance of the courtship, minds set at ease. It was only the first step, an agreement to let this run it's course.

"Oh you're gorgeous and you know it." Ratchet scoffed. He offered a hand, and Starscream took it with a snicker. They found themselves sitting on some spare containers that had been left and could support their weight, their thighs barely touching, speaking quietly long into the night.
--Starscream was really popular in college, because he made the best energon candy. I had him mentioning this to Ratchet at the end but I but it because it seemed to take away from the mood.
It was another few days before, finally, Ratchet completely cleared Starscream as being fine to go. Still, Starscream lingered for another full week before finally leaving. It was a miracle, somehow, when Bulkhead got zapped and was writing out mathematical formulas, and Starscream pinged the base. The seeker had been so very surprised to see Bulkhead talking about mathematics that were almost over his own head.

"Good, you're here," Ratchet had said as soon as Starscream stepped out of the ground bridge, and he handed the seeker a large, heavy plate of metal with equations on it. "Make yourself useful."

And Starscream did, even when it came down to the unfinished formula. He relished the challenge, transcribing the equation into a large board he'd been presented with. Synthetic energon? A chance to be above the Decepticons in something?

His heart soared.

That could give the autobots the edge they needed to overthrow Megatron.

Not only that, but it allowed him to continue showing his brilliance to his courtmate, and he smirked when Ratchet checked on his work or complimented how he was doing. He lost all track of time and worked until he dropped to recharge at his desk. Ratchet walked in and spotted him, repeating his name several times, softly before shaking his head. He reached out and touched the Seeker's back, between his wings, and Starscream tensed and shot up, wings going up in alarm.

"It's just me," Ratchet said, hand immediately pulling back when the Seeker spun to face him.

"...Never just you," Starscream said. When Ratchet offered a bit of energon, Starscream took it. Ratchet rested a hand, carefully, on his back, stroking it gently, and Starscream sighed, leaning into the touch, then over, and he rested his head against Ratchet's wide shoulder for a brief moment before sitting back up. "Do you have any idea of old these equations are?" He turned his attention back to the screen and drank from the cube. "They are older than both of us combined, I think."
"And it's incomplete." Ratchet frowned. "Do you think-"

"I can finish it?" Starscream scoffed. "With your aid, perhaps. It is worth a shot. Shall we get started?" He looked back at Ratchet and the medic shook his head, pulling up a large crate to sit on beside Starscream.

For the most part, Ratchet sat there while Starscream spoke his way through figuring things out, running simulations or trying to patch the missing pieces together. A few times Ratchet managed to point out something obvious, and got to watch Starscream hiss because he hadn't noticed it, but each time Starscream would reach out and find Ratchet's hand to give it a small squeeze.

Together they managed to make a small test sample, and Starscream grinned as the initial response seemed promising. "I need to leave," Starscream said, resting a hand on Ratchet's arm. "Open the ground bridge for me."

"You don't need to leave," Ratchet said, before he could stop himself, and Starscream laughed, going to the bridge controls.

"Do you miss me so when I'm gone?" Starscream teased as Ratchet opened the bridge. Ratchet scoffed, and Starscream drew close, a small rev in his engine and a tease in his voice. "Poor sweet Ratchet, missing his little Seeker."

"Oh, are you mine?" Ratchet raised a brow, and Starscream's wings twitched.

"If that is how you wish to put it."

"You're the one that said it like that."

"Oh you idiot, just kiss me." Starscream crossed his arms, stubbornly, but relaxed when Ratchet laughed. The seeker reached out and curled a finger under Ratchet's chin, tilting his head and bringing their lips together in a shallow, chaste kiss. It was brief and Starscream pulled back slowly, smiling. "Well then, have your little fleshlings chosen another movie for tomorrow night?"

"They have. I'll see you then?" Ratchet asked, and Starscream ran his thumb over Ratchet's lips and nodded an affirmation before leaving through the green portal.

It was later that day when Starscream pinged the base and got no reply that he instantly began to worry. Ratchet was usually all too hasty to at least giving him a confirmation that he'd received the ping. His worries were somewhat lifted a moment later when the gate opened, but it wasn't Ratchet at the commands when he stepped through.

"Optimus Prime," Starscream said, tensely. "...Where is Ratchet?"

"I believe he is in the garage with Bulkhead," Optimus said. "...But Starscream, I must warn you. He has been acting very...oddly."

Starscream narrowed his eyes, but Optimus continued before he could asked.

"He, against my advice, has taken the Synth-en into his own system-"

"That idiot!" Starscream screeched, and was off without another word, leaving Optimus staring
behind him. A small shake ran through the base, and Starscream's feet click-clacked against the floor in a hurried way as he found the source.

"How's it going," Ratchet said, winking at Arcee, and the femme looked shocked. Behind her, Bulkhead. And a giant hole in the wall.

"Ratchet!" Starscream yelled, hands clenched into fists. "What are you doing?" The sharp pitch made the other flinch, but Ratchet didn't seem to notice.

"Starscream!" Ratchet strolled up to the con and revved his engine. "Just the 'bot I wanted to see. C'mon, let's go somewhere-"

"We won't be going anywhere, what were you thinking?" Starscream raised a hand, poking at Ratchet's chest plates. "Testing, on yourself, a compound just fresh out of the lab, without supervision - What are you doing?!"

Ratchet wrapped his arms around Starscream and spun, and Starscream was pinned against the wall. "Pits Starscream, you talk so much. Look at me. I'm fine. I feel great." His voice was a purr, and normally that would make Starscream melt into his hands, but the fact was that his spark was cold and had sunk. He was pinned. He was trapped. Ratchet's hands were roaming over his chest, his sides.

His Ratchet wouldn't do this. Ratchet knew that Starscream needed a way out at all times.

"Get your hands off me," Starscream hissed, and he dug his claws into Ratchet's forearms, only to be cut off when Ratchet pressed a kiss against his lips.

This was not his Ratchet.

Starscream went pliant for only a moment before he grew angry, and he bit down, hard, on Ratchet's lip and tasted Energon. Ratchet pulled back, startled, and Starscream twisted, swinging a leg into Ratchet's side, enough to get out. Another kick to Ratchet's chest, right over his spark chamber, and the Medic fell.

"I thought that's what you wanted!" Ratchet yelled from the floor.

"Not like this!" Starscream hissed. "In front of others, against my will! Never like that!" His wings went up, anger and disgust rolling off his frame. "If you ever, ever touch me again, medic, the autobots will not find all your pieces!" He was off before any of them could get a word in.

"Bridge!" He snapped at Optimus, and the Prime stared at him. Impatient, itching to be out of there, Starscream pushed past him, typed the coordinates in, and opened it himself, transforming and flying through.

"Cliffjumper to Starscream. Come in."

Starscream hissed out loud, sitting in his own 'base', and tried to ignore the comm, but it came again.

"Cliffjumper to Starscream. Come in."
Starscream huffed and wrapped his arms around himself. "What?" He replied, finally.

"Can you get back here?"

"Leave me be, Cliffjumper, before I regret not offlining you."

"Starscream, it's Ratchet. He's asking for you. Hurt bad."

Starscream's spark fell. The lines were silent for several minutes, before Starscream responded.

"Open the ground bridge at these coordinates in a half hour. Starscream out."

When Starscream was through the ground bridge, the base was silent, and all the autobots, save for Cliffjumper, was gathered in the corner. Cliffjumper turned the bridge off, and nodded at the group. "He's over there."

Starscream's hands twitched with a sudden desire to be anywhere else, but he made his way over, slowly, carefully, and Ratchet noticed him before the others.

"Starscream," Ratchet said, starting to sit up, but Arcee pushed him back down with a 'woah there'. Ratchet let out a small huff and looked at them. "Could you all...find something else to do. I need to speak to Starscream. Alone."

"You heard the mech. Let's go," Arcee said, softly. No one seemed happy to leave but they did, though most just moved to the other side of the room.

"...Ratchet," Starscream said, stiffly. "What-"

"I'm sorry." Ratchet looked at Starscream, frowning. "...I shouldn't have taken the Synth-en. It was foolish. I just...didn't want to feel useless." He held up a hand and clenched it into a fist. "I hurt the entire team, and I hurt you." His hand shook slightly, then fell, and he closed his eyes. "...I am sorry, Starscream. For touching you without permission. For kissing you. Could you ever forgive me?"

"...The Synth-en?" Starscream asked.

"Will not be used anytime soon, until we can perfect the formula. As it is there are more pressing matters." Ratchet's voice went static a moment with weariness, and he had to stop to reset it. "If you cannot forgive me, I fully understand. What I did to you was unacceptable."

Starscream watched him, then shook his head. "You are correct, it was." He shook his head and moved next to the medical berth. He reached down and curled a hand into Ratchet's. "But I suppose I can find it in my spark to forgive you, since you have clearly learned a lesson."

Ratchet's hand gave Starscream's a gentle squeeze. "...I have learned several."

"Good. Rest, then." Starscream rested a hand over Ratchet's helm. "Tomorrow, you may make it up to me."

Ratchet fell into recharge, his hand still holding Starscream's and his spark light with knowing that he hadn't completely ruined whatever they had going.
This chapter is shorter and not quite as eventful as others I feel, but it was important to address. At this point on, the fic is going to start going off of main canon. The next chapter (or two - it may or may not be split upon editing) is going to be longer and cover the ending of season 1 of TFP and is going to start and end on a sweet note so eyyyy.
Self-Actualization Part 1: What a man can be, he must be.

Chapter by hero_of_derp

Chapter Notes

Season 1, Episode 23, after they catch the cons stealing but before EVERYTHING entirely goes to shit. This starts off fluffy, gets bad, but the next chapter will have some fluff so hopefully that'll help everyone out some.

"Shh."

"Don't shush me!"

"Shh." Starscream repeated. The Seeker grinned at Ratchet and then glanced around the corner, and Ratchet scoffed at the idea of sneaking around like a pair of newsparks trying to avoid the nurtherers to get out and into trouble. Pits. That was exactly what was happening.

Starscream nodded and his hand gripped Ratchet's tighter, as he pulled the medic along, across the empty room, and toward the ground bridge controls. Ratchet had no choice but to follow. Okay. That was a lie. He did have a choice, but he liked the feel of Starscream's hand in his. He couldn't remember when that had happened. It had only been a few months, and the seeker was such a constant that everything before felt like a different life.

Huh. In a way it was.

Ratchet didn't bother trying to figure out where Starscream was sending them. The seeker would want it to be a surprise. When the bridge opened, Starscream grinned back at Ratchet, and walked backward, leading them through the green portal. Wherever Starscream had taken them, it was unfamiliar, woody and rough, but the trees were tall and sparse enough to let moonlight filter through the branches.

Ratchet pulled at Starscream's hand lightly, stepping close to the other bot, and he reached up with his free hand to tilt Starscream's face down towards his. There was a questioning look, a silent asking of permission, before Starscream smirked, and they kissed. It wasn't their first kiss since the Synth-en incident, but it might as well have been, the way it sent little jolts of electricity up and down their frames.

Primus, it was good to get away from the base for this. As soon as the others had caught on, Arcee had snapped, grabbing Ratchet. She'd been fine with Starscream being there. But courtship? She'd questioned his sanity. It was Starscream, she'd said. Of any bot in the universe, Starscream? After the things he'd done?

Ratchet had ended the conversation quickly. It was his life to live. He could accept and court Starscream in return if chose, and Arcee was either adult enough to accept that as truth, or she was not adult enough to be accepting Cliffjumper's continuing interest.

And that had been the end of that, at least for now.
Ratchet made a small sound when Starscream pulled back. "Starscream-?"

"Catch me," Starscream whispered, and pulled his hand back, dancing out of reach, that infuriatingly attractive smirk back on his face.

"A chase? Not fair when you can fly and I'm on the ground." Ratchet narrowed his optics at the seeker, his spark surging once with the thrill of the idea of a chase. More seeker courtship, all more important with Ratchet regaining Starscream's trust. The idea was to prove that the courtier, Ratchet in this case, was good enough to be of equal to the courtee, Starscream. The game was not entirely about catching, but proving the strength and determination to pursue. A failed chase wouldn't necessarily end a courtship but...

Ratchet was very, very determined to catch Starscream.

"Fair?" Starscream scoffed, and without a word, ran. "A hunt is not about fairness!"

It was then that Ratchet realized that Starscream had chosen this location carefully. He'd likely scouted for weeks. Neither of them could use alt modes here, because of the trees and the uneven ground, which meant they'd have to rely on their own feet and skills and stamina. Starscream had granted them equal ground with this place. With a quiet laugh, Ratchet ran after him.

The game was a greater challenge than Ratchet anticipated. Starscream was making him work for this, which meant the Seeker was taking this seriously. This was no chance fling, no casual event. This was a serious game, and Starscream was difficult prey. It didn't help that Ratchet was not particularly skilled at tracking and chasing.

He got close several times, though he had a serious feeling that Starscream was letting him and once his fingers actually skimmed over Starscream's wing before the Seeker could dance away again, staring at Ratchet, dating him, from behind a tree.

In the end, Ratchet was the one that lost. He didn't catch Starscream. Predator turned prey when Starscream seemed to come from nowhere and grab Ratchet from behind. Arms wrapped around him, one clawed hand teasing at his throat, and lips purring by his audial inputs.

"I win," Starscream whispered, and Ratchet turned his head slightly toward him. Starscream's hand came off his throat and rested on his chest, and he laughed softly. "You are rusty."

"I'll show you rusty if you let me go," Ratchet said, a faux threat, and Starscream laughed, stepping back. Ratchet turned and reached out to grab Starscream, pulling the seeker into a strut melting kiss. There was full willingness this time. The medic's arms wrapped around a slim waist, and Starscream's hands came to rest on his shoulders. Mouths opened, glossa met, and Starscream shuddered.

Ratchet ignored the faint sound of metal on metal as they moved against each other. He held Starscream a touch tighter, his hands roaming the expanse of the Seeker's back as sharp servos ran over his shoulders.

Starscream broke the open mouth kiss, pressing a smaller, shallower kiss against Ratchet's lips. "I do like how broad you are," he said, voice a purr, and Ratchet revved his engines in response as those narrow fingers explored his chest. Starscream leaned forward for another kiss, hands still exploring as Ratchet pressed himself against Starscream's mouth.

Primus, Ratchet wanted this, but pits, he wasn't ready. Not ready for himself, and he realized just how long it had really been since he'd been with another bot. On top of that, what he'd done to
Starscream? And now he was being a tease, and that wasn't fair to Starscream.

Ratchet pulled back. "Starscream, I'm not-" A servo on his lips silenced him, and Starscream chuckled softly.

"I know." And it was so odd to think that so much understanding could come from a bot like Starscream.

A quiet thunk echoed in the woods as Starscream rested their forheads together, and all was peaceful for a moment, until Ratchet tilted his face upward. He gave Starscream a small kiss, before pulling back. "We need to get back to base. It's almost morning. We maybe...we would have time for a quick recharge..."

"I, unfortunately, will have to meet you later." Starscream's voice was quiet, but there was no disappointment in it, and Ratchet let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding. "Another time?"

"Another time," Ratchet agreed. Starscream's hand lingered in his a moment too long when he pulled back, and Ratchet watched the seeker charge into the air with a running start, switch to his alt form, and weave through the trees up into the sky.

"Ratchet to base," Ratchet said. "Ground bridge at my coordinates."

"Late night?" Cliffjumper asked, amusement in his voice.

"Just watching the stars," Ratchet said, quietly, and Cliffjumper laughed.

Everything happened at once. Rafael got hurt, and he focused all his attention on saving the human. It was all they could do to save him, and terror filled his spark every second that Rafael had been on that table, weak, helpless, slipping way from them. Just as things were looking better, they got worse.

Optimus' spark had almost been snuffed out. Dark Energon pouring from the Earth. Every aspect of the world was being changed. They had to deal with, of all beings in the universe, Unicron.

Worst of all, Starscream was ignoring his pings, his comms, everything, and the pain stabbed at his spark. He knew none of them were safe, not entirely, that surviving all of this would involve them clawing for every second of life, bit he had no idea where Starscream was, what he was doing, if he was even okay.

Then, suddenly, Unicron was real, attacking, and Megatron was aiding them. It was all too surreal. His world was spinning.

He ran his hand down his face, and closed his eyes. He pinged Starscream, again, in secret. Still, no response. When the team left to the core of the world, he had no choice but to stand by and monitor the life signs of his team until they were lost.

He tried to ping Starscream. One last time.

When he heard nothing, he gave up.

The world was going to the pits.
And then, they lost Optimus.

How many people could Ratchet lose in one day? His spark spun and ached, cold, and he felt as if it was shattering. Optimus was in Megatron's claws, lost and confused, unknowing of what had happened.

Starscream... he had no idea. For all he knew, he was dead, broken somewhere, and Ratchet would never know.

Finally alone, he let himself pass into a self indulgent melancholy, running his hands down his face. They had faced such loses in the past, friends and enemies alike, that he had almost thought himself immune to the feeling of grief, but this just proved that he was still quite alive. He told himself not to mourn until he knew if they were head, but his body did not listen.

At least, not until there was a ping on his sensors, and a pair of coordinates.

From Starscream.

He stared at the screens before him, and his fingers moved before he could reset his processors. The ground bridge opened, and Ratchet turned. His spark leapt when Starscream walked through. The seeker looked almost defeated, wings low, feet dragging. He was hunched over, trying to make himself small under Ratchet's shocked gaze.

"Starscream," he breathed, as the ground bridge shut off.

"I am sorry," Starscream whispered, just as quiet, and for a few long seconds the only sounds in the room were the computers whirring and beeping quietly. Then there was the sound of heavy footsteps as they both rushed forward. Their embrace was desperate and tired. The danger of death hung over their heads like dark clouds, and holding each other was a moment of reprieve. Their grip on each other hard enough to dent.

"I was worried," Ratchet whispered against Starscream, and the seeker tensed.

"I heard him. Unicron. I-"

"You were exposed to Dark Energon. Primus." Ratchet pulled back, hands on Starscream's face. "I didn't even think - are you okay?" He turned Starscream's head this and that way, looking over him.

"I'm fine. Now." Starscream shook his head, but Ratchet could tell that he had been afraid. He was still afraid. Starscream lifted his own hands, touched Ratchet's face. "I couldn't hurt any of you. And I didn't trust myself to be strong enough to deny him." His exhale was shaky. "But he's gone."

"...A lot has happened," Ratchet said quietly. He took Starscream's hands in his. "...Stay here? Tonight?"

"Tonight," Starscream agreed, quietly, linking their fingers together.

They only pleasure they took in each other was the solace and peace of tangled limbs and listening
to each others recharge, and it didn't last but a few hours. It was hard to tell which nightmare woke them up, as they both awoke tense and lost.

"We should get up," Ratchet mumbled, and rolled over, resting his head on Starscream's chest, and the seeker under him hummed in agreement, but neither moved for a long while, until Ratchet spoke again. "...Miko had the most ridiculous idea." His fingers traced the edge of the deceptiton insignia on Starscream's chest. He should have been angry at the icon that remained, but he was too weary today.

"All of her ideas are rediculous."

"You're not wrong." Another long pause. "...Help me."

"You have my hands." As it to prove it, Starscream rested his hand over Ratchet's, squeezing it gently. "Up, my dear Medic. This is war, and there is no time for dawdling."

Starscream's skills proved invaluable once again, as they sat in front of the circuits to the ground bridge. "If you bypass this-"

"-and overload the systems?"

"Let me finish!" Starscream hissed. "If you bypass this and connect it to here..." He gestured at Ratchet.

"That might work, if we can prevent it from feeding back over here. We'll need to make backup to handle the charge." Ratchet pushed himself up and went to open another panel a few feet away. "That might work, if we rewire this."

"Well you work on that, I'll get on this." Starscream reached into the panels began to work, pulling wires and typing on a portable keyboard they'd dragged over.

"...Ratchet? Starscream?" Raf adjusted his glasses as he saw them, and both lifted their heads to look at him. "Are you...turbocharging the ground bridge?"

"Tinkering," Ratchet said, quietly. "No need to get anyone's hopes up just yet."

As soon as the bridge was back up and running, before the updates were completely linked in, Starscream left. Further tests would have to be done, but there was a noticeable increase in the efficiency of the power draw of the bridge. Starscream gave Ratchet a short kiss before he'd left, and the feeling of it lingered on the medic's lips for ages after the bridge was closed.

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to explain that Starscsream doesn't know that Optimus is missing yet. Ratchet didn't mention Optimus' disappearing, because part of him is reminding him that Starscream is a neutral, not an autobot, and he needs to stay out of it for now.
I feel like this chapter is kind of choppy, but it was that or it was going to drag on and on and on and...idk I just want to write sappy courtship flirts. sobs. what happened it got all serious.

Next chapter will be up tomorrow!
Self actualization pt 2 - What a man can be, he is

Chapter by hero_of_derp

Chapter Notes

lots of direct quotes from season 2 episode...2 I think? And from here on we've got some canon splits.
I feel like this chapter is unimpressive too, and kind of boring until the end e_e. Also my headcanon is that amica can be used as a term of affection as well as a title (as in amica endura).

It was child's play to sneak in behind the vehicons, and even easier to creep through the ship. Perhaps he would pull some circuits on the way out, file some glitches into the mainframe, or upload one of those charming human viruses. He found the Energon vault easily, and the guards, and he took in a deep invent before turning the corner, standing up as tall as he could make himself. The vehicons seemed shocked. The drew their weapons. Well, this would be interesting.

"Starscream!"

And how dare they address him so?! "That's Commander Starscream," he hissed, stepping forward, hands behind his back. He leaned into the Vehicons space, and they looked at each other as he leaned over them. "What's your malfunction? Lower those weapons immediately!"

"I'm...sorry sir, but Lord Megatron ordered that you be taken into custody, should you ever return to the ship." They actually sounded apologetic. What a shame.

"Clearly, there has been a mistake." Starscream raised a brow. The vehicons looked at each other again, and looked back at him just in time for Starscream's hand to rake across the visor of the first. It snapped, and the weapon discharged automatically in alarm. The light above them was shot out, and Starscream grabbed the other bot, thrusting his hand through the armor of his abdomen, gripping, and pulling out wires.

Messy. Loud. And not at all what he'd wanted. The bodies lay on the floor, sparks coming off broken wires and metal, and he stepped over them, walking into the vault. He gathered as any cubes as he could carry, and the way back would be slow, but as he left the vault shadows on the wall heralded more troops coming his way. With a whispered curse he looked, spotted a door he knew to be an empty room, and trotting towards it. Good. He could hide out there.

The doors opened and he stepped through, glancing over his shoulder. He wondered how long it would be until they passed, and as he looked back, something caught his eye.

Well, technically someone.

Optimus Prime turned to face him, staring blankly.
"No," Starscream whispered, and he dropped the cubes. His weapons onlined and he leveled his arms towards the Prime. Oh, that was no good, but it was an automatic reaction. He was startled! The Prime would understand. "Optimus?!

Why? Why was he there? It couldn't be? Had Megatron captured him against his will? And he hadn't offlined the Prime? Confusion buzzed in his mind.

"Please, I mean no harm!" Optimus' voice was different. Younger. Lighter. Without the years of decisions he'd made behind them, and Starscream's thoughts faltered.

"Oh?! Then what are you doing here?!!" Starscream hissed.

"Research." Optimus seemed as confused as he was. "For Lord Megatron."

"Is this some...kind of joke?" Starscream's processors were running as fast as they could. None of this made any sense at all.

"I...do not understand," Optimus admitted, and Starscream lowered his weapons. No, he didn't understand either. "And why did you call me 'Optimus Prime'?"

"Why...wouldn't I?" His confusion only grew. What was happening?

"Because my name is Orion Pax. I am...far from being a Prime." Optimus - no, Orion's head drooped slightly, his body turned, and Starscream's wings flared at the sight of a Decepticon emblem on the Prime's shoulder.

...Of course. Optimus was out-conning the cons! Brilliant, entirely brilliant. And in that moment, it clicked, and Starscream played along. "You...reminded me. Of someone I once knew. That's all," he said, quickly, dismissively.

Who would have thought that Optimus had it in him? Something had happened, and Starscream would ask them later. But there was Optimus, pretending to be who he was before a Prime, when Megatron had been known by Megatronus. Beautiful, beautiful autobots and their unexpected schemes!

"You are Starscream." When Starscream nodded, Opti - Orion continued. "Lord Megatron told me you had been...terminated."

Starscream snickered. "Lord Megatron says many things, only some of which are true."

"You...do not suggest that our leader would speak falsehoods?"

Oh Optimus was good. What an actor! His life had been wasted on a Prime, instead of on tall screens and entertainment. What a show for Soundwave they were giving!

"You have no idea." Starscream started to laugh, shaking his entire frame. Orion approached him, the last of Starscream's giggles wracking his body.

"You speak in many riddles Starscream. Please, tell me what it is that you know." Orion was speaking, and Starscream stared, then rubbed his chin, thoughtfully. Could he really not...no, impossible. Why wouldn't he remember?

"And in return?" Starscream smirked.

And then the doors opened.
"Starscream! Surrender!" The Vehicons yelled, weapons powered up, and Starscream yelped, ducking behind Orion.

"Hold your fire!" Orion pleaded, but Starscream was around him in a sparkbeat, leaping into his alt mode, and was off in a flash of light and head from thrusters.

"Remain in the lab," one of the vehicons hissed, already stepping away.

"But I-"

"Lord Megtron's orders." The vehicon slammed the door panel as he kept walking away, changing into his own alt mode to chase after Starscream, and leaving Orion alone and confused.

It was easy for Starscream to outmaneuver the vehicons. He, who had taught them all they knew, but not all that he knew. He knew the Nemisis like the back of his hand, and he fired one of his rockets, giving him a way out. He twisted and turned in the air, spun around, and laughed.

Then a fluke happened.

Starscream was hit.

With a cry, Starscream went down.

He hit the ground hard, and skidded through dirt, crashed through trees, and when he finally came to a halt his wings were dented, his body was throbbing, and his leg. Primus, his leg. He tried to stand. They would be pursuing him. He had to move. His leg failed him and he fell. No.

No.

He crawled. He had to move.

He was too late.

The woosh overhead alerted him to the presence of the vehicons searching. He crawled by a rock, and raised his remaining rocket, other hand turning to a gun. He would face them head on. He had his honor left.

The vehicon circled a few times before landing, but he had no weapons drawn, even when Starscream aimed his own. The vehicon watched him, then raised a hand to the side of his visor. "...Starscream is gone," he reported, out loud, and Starscream lowered his weapons, confused. "Returning to base. ...Yes sir." He removed his hand and turned to go, pausing only when Starscream spoke.

"Why?"

"...You're needed. Sir." The vehicon nodded, transformed, and left.

Starscream slumped against the rock, body weak. He changed his arm back, putting his weapon away, and gripped and his leaking leg, before pinging Ratchet his coordinates. 'I have obtained information regarding your leader. Bring medical kit. Come alone.'

A nice puddle of glowing blue had formed under his leg when the ground bridge opened up, and Starscream lifted his head. His wings tensed when Bulkhead stepped out right behind Ratchet. "I told you to come alone!" He hissed. He was weak. Vulnerable. He hated Ratchet seeing him like this, much less another autobot.
"Where is Optimus?" Ratchet asked. When Starscream didn't answer immediately he kneeled down, leaning into Starscream's face. His voice was angry, his jaw was tense. "Has Optimus been harmed in any way?!"

"H-he's fine." Starscream hissed slightly, leaning away, gaining space between then. "He's on Megatron's warship-"

"Which is located where?" Ratchet demanded. His voice was cold.

"Now? Who knows." Starscream chuckled weakly. This wasn't them right now. This was an autobot and a neutral. Courtship was pushed aside for the business. It had been foolish for Starscream to expect any different. "It's a ship! It moves! It took me months to track, only to get fired upon!"

"You wouldn't go to the trouble of calling me here unless you had real information to trade," Ratchet said, and Starscream felt a stab at his spark.

"...He doesn't know he's Optimus anymore." Starscream's voice was tense, as was his frame. Tension made his protoform ache, pain was shooting from his leg to his spark.

"Tell us something we don't know," Bulkhead grumbled, and Starscream went from angry to red hot furious.

"You knew! You didn't tell me!" He shrieked, and Bulkhead winced at the tone as Starscream voice fell into static. "Why didn't you tell me anything-"

"You're not an autobot-" Ratchet started, but Bulkhead interrupted them both.

"Unless you know where Megatron's hiding his space bridge, you got nothing," Bulkhead said, turning back to the bridge. Ratchet glanced at Bulkhead, torn between two sides of his spark, his duty and his courtship, and he was about ready to say 'frag it' and drag Starscream back to the base when Starscream sputtered, reset his vocals, and spoke.

"Space...Bridge.... Do you mean to tell me that they actually finished building it without my supervision?"

"Do you have coordinates?" Ratchet asked, instantly, and a sigh of relief overcame him when Starscream smirked, nodded, and motioned at his leg.

"It hurts most right here...Doctor." Starscream sat back against the rock.

"Bulkhead, return to base." Ratchet said. "I will contact you when I'm finished."

"Doc," Bulkhead started, but Ratchet silenced him with a glance. Ratchet didn't move until Bulkhead was gone and the bridge was closed, and then he turned on Starscream.

"You...pit-damned...foolish...." he hissed, closing in, and Starscream flattened himself against the rock before reminding himself who was in front of him. Thinking for a moment, the words held no malice, just frustration, and Ratchet settled himself in front of Starscream. "Leg," he said, holding up a hand, and Starscream gingerly lifted his leg and placed his ankle in Ratchet's hand.

They sat in silence as Ratchet worked, the only noises being the small whir of tools and the occasional grunt of pain from Starscream, but when they were finally done Starscream relaxed against the rock. It was a field repair, far from pretty, but they could fix it properly later when this was all finished.
What they could repair now, was...them.

Ratchet ran his fingers over the bump of metal he'd left, rubbing softly over Starscream's legs.  
"Starscream, I-

"-do not need to apologize for being business like about business." Starscream stretched his leg out to nudge Ratchet with his heel, before sighing. "But if you are still sorry, you may keep rubbing."

"He's my leader," Ratchet said, quietly, his head falling slightly. "We have to get him back. I don't know what we'll do without him."

"You will falter. You will pass to the Allspark. That is what will happen without him." Starscream sat up and leaned forward, and voice softened. "You are faltering. Right now...Amica." He lifted a hand and tilted Ratchet's face back up. "Listen. You cannot afford to let your feet drag. Your leader is lost, not gone. You must help him. You will help him. In doing so, you will help yourself."

Ratchet scoffed, softly. "You make it sound so easy."

"Well someone has to!" Starscream pulled Ratchet forward into a kiss, gentle and sweet and reassuring. "You are strong," he whispered against the medic's lips. "You must lead them now. Until your Prime returns. You, dear medic, is who they will look to. You are the most experienced. The oldest." He punctuated each sentence with a tiny kiss, on his lips, on his forehead, on his cheeks. That was the only comfort he could offer to Ratchet right then. "...I will...attempt...to find the ship. Perhaps I can cause a distraction."

"You are always a distraction," Ratchet said. His fingers crept up Starscream's thigh, lightly.

"Always. But for now, stay focused." Starscream patted the side of his face and put his hand over Ratchet's hand, pulling it off his thigh. "Now then. Listen carefully." He linked their fingers together. "I will tell you the location of the space bridge, and then you and your merry gang can go forth and save this miserable world and your idiotic, self sacrificing Prime."
Chapter Notes

Things are going to still be rough for a little longer for the bots.

There was a new hostility in the air, and Starscream set his jaw to avoid snapping words he would regret. While before they seemed to at least tolerate him, Starscream could feel a tenseness in the air. None of them wanted him there. None of them, except Ratchet.

They seemed all too bitter at his disappearance during Unicron's awakening. Bitter that he didn't help them save Optimus. Bitter about a past that he couldn't change if he wanted to. Ratchet had tried to explain to them why Starscream had disappeared, why he didn't help. Starscream had told him not bother.

Now, weeks later, he could feel the glares from behind him. Arcee was the problem, mostly. She clearly felt the strongest about Starscream being there, and rightfully so. She glared at him in the halls, she glared at him while he was speaking with Ratchet, she seemed more than willing to ask Ratchet the most pointless questions to interrupt their conversations. Even Bulkhead seemed less willing to let them be alone, but a glare in his direction was usually enough to make him nervous and back off. Bumblebee just whirred quietly. Cliffjumper didn't seem to care.

It was odd to think that the only one who seemed willing to forgive him was Optimus, and that was only after Ratchet had told him in confidence all that Starscream had done for them, between telling them where the space bridge was and, possibly, directing Orion to find his way there as well.

Starscream had been entirely prepared to face difficulties in this courtship, and he was facing them now. So be it. He would not be chased off. He would just...change the venue.

Their courtship continued far away from the base, whenever time allowed, back at the base when it was empty, or on the roof when all else failed. It was odd to think that Optimus was actually encouraging it, letting Ratchet know whenever everyone was gone or coming, or even letting Ratchet off his watching shifts early, taking command. The Prime was an unlikely ally in this. Starscream had fully anticipated that Optimus would have encouraged Ratchet to break off from the Seeker, but he seemed to be doing the opposite.

"Miko missed you at movie night," Ratchet said, snapping Starscream out of his thoughts. Ah. Yes. He'd skipped the last several.

"Well as soon as I stop anticipating a blade in my back perhaps I will return," Starscream muttered.

They were on the roof again, away from the praying stares (glares) of the other bots, and it was only some sort of miracle that Arcee hadn't stormed up and complained of some imaginary pain.

"Starscream-"

"This was a terrible idea," Starscream said, suddenly. He hunched over himself, wings drooped,
and tried to make himself look small. He hide his face in his hands, his next words muffled. "I
ever should have made that candy."

Ratchet stared at him, then reached out and pried one of Starscream's hands off his face. He held it tightly and pulled it to his chest, squeezing gently. "Do you really mean that?" He actually sounded hurt, and Starscream felt a pain in his spark.

"...No," Starscream said, quietly. "But if I keep saying it, maybe I will."

"Then stop saying it."

"Your flock hates me, Ratchet. They'll never accept this. I thought..." His voice was reduced to static and he had to stop and reset, closing his eyes. He couldn't meet Ratchet's eyes. "I thought. Maybe. If I proved myself. They might tolerate me. I'm not asking for acceptance. I've done too many things. But if they could at least stand me...that I can take."

"We've all been fighting each other a long time. A few months isn't going to change decades of experience and personal opinions." Ratchet spoke softly and moved closer, still holding Starscream's hand. "And now, with everything going on, things are just a bit tense."

"Do you think we should stop it?" Starscream asked, softly. "Until this is settled. Maybe when the Decepticons are gone-"

"This war has been going on for an eternity. You think you can wait another thousand years?" Ratchet reached out and turned Starcream's face, gently, towards his. "Because I can't. Primus help me, but I can't. Not now that I have you."

Starscream pulled his hand from Ratchet's and wrapped his arms around the medic's neck, pulling them closer together. "No. I don't think I could either. This has all happened, right now, for a reason. A few hundred years ago I still would have killed you."

"Romantic," Ratchet muttered. "But just a few years ago we would have done the same. More or less." He sighed, weary, homesick for Cybertron. In another life, maybe they would have met in better times...

Or not at all.

"How long do you think we can keep this up?" Starscream asked, pulling back enough to look at Ratchet. "If not for the autobots, or the decepticons, or being here, or if you get tired of me-"

"Tired? Of you?" Ratchet scoffed. "You are far from tiring. Ocasional infuriating. Stubborn for sure. But far more than that."

Starscream sighed and leaned back slightly. "Oh do tell me all about my finer features. I enjoy listening to you prattle on so. And I don't...hear of my redeeming qualities often."

More accurate was that Starscream needed reassurance, particularly now, unsure of where he stood in Ratchet's eyes. Normally, a courtship wouldn't survive in the face of adversity from a flock, but the autobots weren't a flock proper like what Seekers had. There was a chance that this could last, but he wanted to hear it from Ratchet himself.

"I do not prattle," Ratchet muttered. "And as for your better features, I will remind you. As often and thoroughly as necessary." He placed an arm on the small of Starscream's back and pulled the Seeker closer, his thumb gently stroking over plating. "You are, of course, stunning to look upon. In Vos you no doubt had Seekers falling at your feet for a chance to court you."
"Oh yes," Starscream purred. He leaned against Ratchet and shifted slightly, head on Ratchet's chest and his legs over his lap. "A great many. But they weren't worthy."

"And I am?"

Starscream reached up and patted Ratchet's face. "No, shush. You were complimenting me. That is for another time."

Ratchet chuckled softly and pulled Starscream's hand off his face, holding it gently. He pressed a kiss to Starscream's palm. "Then there's your hands. Skilled in more than one way. Taking things apart, putting things together...and more, I am certain." He held Starscream's hand away to better examine it. "Graceful and deadly. Slightly dented. We could fix that."

"Oh you are such a mood killer!" Starscream sighed and pinched Ratchet's hand.

"Okay okay." Ratchet laughed and lowered his voice. "You have the most handsome wings I've ever seen, and you know how to use them. You are a wonderful flyer. It takes my breath away."

"Mm...Go on." Starscream closed his eyes.

"And when you are relaxed like this, you look so peaceful. I wish I could give you this forever." He lifted Starscream's hand to his lips, kissing it gently. "Let's see, where was I..."

When Starscream lingered at his goodbye in front of the ground bridge, Ratchet almost offered to let him recharge in his berth, but as the words were about to pass his lips a throat cleared behind them.

Ratchet looked over his shoulder and saw Optimus. Starscream pulled his hands from Ratchet, turned, and left through the portal without another word, and when the energy faded away Ratchet found himself staring at the far wall, with a sigh.

"He's waiting."


"Starscream. He's waiting for a present." Optimus watched Ratchet, then sighed and placed a hand on his chest. "The Matrix gifted me with much knowledge, Ratchet. Even though I have limited knowledge of Seeker culture, what Starscream is facing now is difficult for him. Even I know that much."

"Being a neutral, of course-"

Optimus shook his head. "It is more than that. Seekers have tightly knit cultures, Ratchet. Flocks, Trines. And he doesn't have the support of either."

"What are you getting at Optimus?" Ratchet went to the screens to busy himself. He tried to take his mind off everything that had happened, off of Starscream, off of the world, off of everything but work.
"If I had to guess, Starscream is under the impression that your Flock, that is us, dislikes him enough to encourage you to discontinue your courtship." When Ratchet turned, ready to sputter out a counter, Optimus held up a hand. "I know you old friend. If you were so easily influenced he would not be welcome back here. But does he know that?" Optimus let his hand rest back at his side. "Did you ever give him a gift in return for the candy?"

"...No. I did not." Ratchet frowned slightly, then went back to his computer. "The proper thing to do would be some rediculous finery. Especially with a Seeker. But here, things are few and far between of that caliber."

"I have faith you will figure it out." Optimus stepped over to Ratchet and rested a hand on his shoulder. "If you truly like him, you will."

"...All that will have to wait," Ratchet said as something appeared on the screens. "An autobot signal has been activated."

"Let's check it out." Optimus raised a hand to the side of his face. "Everyone, disrupt recharge and prepare for scouting," he said, as Ratchet began to plug in the coordinates for the ground bridge. "Further instructions to follow."

Ratchet turned on the ground bridge, and started for it. "Let's see what new pit we're walking into now."

The 'new pit' that they had entered was even worse than the last. Did nothing on this planet go right? First, the Spark Extractor, of all things, and then Bumblebee's T-cog went missing.

When Starscream pinged him, for the first time Ratchet had to reply with something other than an affirmative.

'Now's not a good time, Starscream.'

He never got a reply back.

'Now's not a good time, Starscream.'

Well that was a dissapointment. He had a grand gift for them. He was going to tell them that he'd found Mech's base. This left him with two choices. Wait until Ratchet contacted him again....or play the hand his life had dealt him.

Forging deals and alliances were what Starscream was good at. He had played countless bots before. Growing up, at his classes and institution. He'd even played Megatron to a point. How else had he survived all those years with the decepticons? By making himself more useful alive than dead to the cause.

Playing this human would be sparkling's play, easy. Think of the information he could get. And the
fact of the matter was he no longer had any other leads on Energon. With no way to track... well. He'd been rationing himself again, and his small reserves were dwindling.

Besides. All he had to do would be to get some information, perhaps destroy these humans before leaving, but in the end what he needed to get was the T-cog out of the grotesque husk that they were creating. It was under constant watch, and possibly rigged entirely wrong. He couldn't risk grabbing it and getting it, or himself, destroyed.

So, it would be a waiting game of the most dangerous time.

When they'd discovered several mines, and when MECH was getting too close, Starscream 'accidentally' drew some attention to the area around the hanger in which MECH was working. He was fine when there was an 'accidental' sighting of him nearby. He only hoped that his appearance would get Fowler involved, and the Autobots. They could come, Bumblebee would get his T-cog back, MECH would be destroyed, and for his part in the matter they would trust him more.

He would practically be a hero!

Unfortunately, as was often the case, his plan backfired spectacularly when only Bumblebee showed up. The MECH soldiers were brutal, and Starscream was somewhat lucky that he had been knocked into a wall. He wouldn't have to fire on the Scout.

But he had to get them out of there.

The MECH soldiers ran, and Silas had the audacity to order him, and Starscream made a show of picking up his T-cog, onlineing his weapons and holding it up until he was sure that no MECH were left.

"Do try to keep ahold of this, Scout," Starscream hissed, shoving it into Bumblebee's hands. "Now then." He tapped at the side of his face. "Pretend that I put up a fight. One good hook here should do it. We must make it look good."

And he'd tensed and flinched hard enough that he'd barely felt Bumblebee's fist when it made contact. He felt his jaw plate shift, and he stumbled to the side, catching his balance. "...good one," he muttered, feeling his jaw. "Do not emerge until the others arrive."

Bumblebee whirred at him.

Starscream jetted off. It was hardly even a jaunt to meet with MECH and Silas again, and he landed, chuckled softly. He hadn't even straightened up to standing when Silas made his first demand.

"My T-Cog."

"Yes, that." Starscream rested his hands on his hips. "Unfortunately, it was destroyed during the ferocity of battle." He raised a hand, examining his claws, and paused when Silas's eyes narrowed. "A temporary setback, I assure you," he said quickly, holding his hands up. "Other Autobots, other T-Cogs. Even a Vehicon would do. We shall find a replacement soon enough."

"Not soon enough," Silas said, and Starscream heard the sound of weapons powering up only a
second before his world went dark and painful.

When Starscream awoke, it was all at once, pain running rampant through every sensor in his body. He ached, wings stiff from being flat on the ground under his weight. He managed to roll over, the effort exhausting, and pushed himself to his feet. He staggered, grabbed a tree for balance, and looked up in time to see a ground bridge open in front of the building MECH had been using.

For a moment he imagined Ratchet coming to his aid, but it wasn't Ratchet that stepped through. "Autobots," he said quietly, and stepped back. He glanced around, made sure he had enough room to transformer, and initiated the program. His work was done. He could leave.

Instead of lifting into the air, his body shifted, then went back to normal. Instead of flying, he stood solidly on the ground. He paused, and tried again. Same result.

"No," he whispered, looking at his hands. He tried once more, and when it failed his hands flew to his side. The sharp pain suddenly made sense. "My T-Cog." Terror rose in his body. He needed to get away. He couldn't fly, so he turned and ran, panic taking over.

Had to get to a safe place. Had to comm Ratchet. Had to - NO.

No. Ratchet couldn't see him like this. He was worthless now. His wings weren't worth the metal they were made from. Without a T-Cog, he had nothing of worth.

He ran. Alone.

Bumblebee whirred softly when the autobots arrived, cradling his T-Cog, bright and in perfect condition.

"Hold on. You're saying Starscream was here? And he gave you your T-Cog back? Just like that?" Arcee stared in disbelief.

"He's not really all that bad-" Cliffjumper said, but she turned on him.

"Not now, Cliffjumper," she said, frowning.

Optimus turned, and raised a hand. "Ratchet...Open the ground bridge and prepare for surgery," he said. "It seems that Starscream has aided us once again."

"Mrs. Darby, I need some help."

"Yes Rachet?"

Ratchet looked....uncomfortable. All in all, it was somewhat amusing to the nurse. "It is...a matter of opinion." A slight shift appeared in his frame and he pulled two somethings out of the subspace in his chest. He held them in his palms, open, to Mrs. Darby. "Which is...prettier? More graceful?"
"Oh Ratchet, they're beautiful."

In each hand was small carved crystal. At least, they were small to him. They were about the size of Mrs. Darby's head. He'd found them while helping to mine a particularly stubborn energon deposit ages ago, collecting and keeping them only for the unusual formation, and he'd spent the last few hours carving delicate glyphs into them, after smoothing and shining them. Primus bless his hands. They'd served him well once again.

Each crystal was carved into an almost tear drop shape, and etched into the surface was something he'd had to dig in long near-forgotten memories for - the skyline of Vos itself. It's meaning would be lost on a human or someone that wasn't a Seeker from Vos, but that wasn't what he was worried about. What he was worried about was that each one had a glyph raised up above the city, and he didn't know which was more appropriate.

"But which is...better?" Ratchet seemed honestly torn, and it only got worse when she laughed. "What?"

"They're both beautiful Ratchet. What are they for, though?"

"I am...currently...pursuing someone. Ah...Romantically." Ratchet shifted slightly, and his fingers started to curl back up. "Nevermind, it's not important."

"Oh it is important! Good for you." She reached out and rested a hand on one of his fingers. "Okay okay, I'll help, but you really should just go with your gut. I'm sure I don't know...whoever it is as well as you. What is this one?"

"Ah. That is promise."

"And the other?" Mrs. Darby's fingers passed over the other crystal.

"Protection."

"...That's a...pretty serious pair of words, Ratchet." Mrs. Darby smiled. "I mean, most people give flowers."

"Flowers." Ratchet paused, and shook his head. "No that wouldn't make any sense."

"Well, what are you trying to say?" She crossed her arms. "I mean, that's where you usually start with a gift." She paused, then laughed. "Back when I was dating Jack's dad, long before he came along you know, when I was still in school, I broke my favorite mug. His dad glued it back together for me. Didn't hold liquid at all, but it was important to me."

"This isn't anything like a mug. I don't think you could make a mug for....Hum. Maybe if it was big enough. Thought I don't think it would be that very effective for drinking Energon from..."

"The point is, Ratchet, sometimes it's just about doing something nice for someone."

"I've already done that!" Ratchet groaned. "I need to give a physical gift. That's how it goes. First a chase, then a gift. Until then nothing progresses and it's been too many days."

"I really don't understand," she admitted, and Ratchet sighed. He placed the items back in his subspace.

"Let me explain...plainly. Cybertronian courtship is long and involved. I am currently involved in a rather... speedy version." He grumbled. What a shame that was. He would have enjoyed courting...
Starscream over the course of years, decades even, properly, without the slight hurry that they were doing now. He would have loved to take Starscream out, to show him off to his inner circles. Pits, he would have even gone out dancing for the bot. "There is a structure to each step. Specific acts and gifts."

"Well that doesn't sound too different than humans dating."

"Trust me, it is. Humans are often only...dating one person at a time. Cybertronians are capable of courting and being courted several at once, though they do get thinned until only one or two remain. Some have more."

"And then they get married to one?"

"Married...no. And not always one. Enduring...marriages are very rare among our people. When you live as long as we do, it takes a lot to bond to one for forever. Some courtships will result in a bond, but it might be hundreds of years before a bond becomes conjux endura. Even then, it's not uncommon for Cybertronians to have other partners. Conjux Endura is not always a matter of physical being, but of the spark."

"That sounds...complicated."

"It is." Ratchet sighed and flexed his hands. "There are many little subtleties with every step, and each one is different. Some may linger on stops, while others may skip steps entirely. I have been somewhat...neglectful with my part."

"...Promise."

"Hm?"

Mrs. Darby laughed. "To answer your question. Promise. That's the one. Promise to do better. Give them what they deserve. If you're serious about them, then that's it." She grinned. "So who is the lucky bot?"

"I would prefer to not say," Ratchet admitted. "You understand."

She laughed. "Well whoever it is, they're a lucky bot. Alright. C'mon Jack!" She called. "It's time to go home!"

Ratchet smiled to himself and turned away, closing his eyes and sending out a questioning ping to get Starscream's attention. When he got no answer, he sent another. And then another.

No answer.

Great. That only meant one thing. Starscream was angry about something, and all Ratchet could do was to sit it out and wait for Starscream to calm down.
Complexity

Chapter by hero_of derp

Chapter Notes

Takes Place during Crossfire, then between that and Nemesis Prime.

Also, they're just going through a really rocky spot, but they're healing by the end of this. The next few chapters will be more healing and less drama. WOO.

Weeks of not hearing anything, and then, suddenly, a familiar message.

"I have obtained information of great interest to you," Ratchet muttered, voice bitter. "Bring medical kit." He looked at Bulkhead.

"Hey I'm staying out of this," Bulkhead said holding up his hands as Ratchet activated the ground bridge with a bit more force than was necessary.

Ratchet was furious. Furious and worried. The last thing they had heard of Starscream involved MECH, and then he'd just gone off the map. Was he offline somewhere? Being torn apart? Had he escaped? Several recharge cycles had been lost as Ratchet looked for something, anything, to indicate where Starscream was, even the internet.

Nothing. Until now.

Sure, on Cybertron there were times when a courtship was silent for weeks, because bots were busy, but this was not Cybertron. This was a world where things constantly went wrong.

Bulkhead went through first and cleared it, before Ratchet stepped through. He gave a mental sigh of relief that seeing Starscream alive, and he was mostly intact. That meant that Starscream had been avoiding him. On purpose. Their courtship had been going so well, Ratchet thought, as he straightened. What had happened? What had changed?

"Make it fast," Ratchet said, with perhaps more coldness than intended. Even Bulkhead winced.

Starscream sat in a puddle of his own energon, holding the leak on his side. "It would appear that, like myself, Airachnid has gone rogue."

"What's it to us?" Ratchet's hand tightened on his medical kit, noting that Starscream was filthy again. Memories scanned back to before this had started. In the mine, filthy again, optics slightly dimmed.

"She is planning to retaliate against Meg...." Starscream paused, then sighed. "...Megatron. I could provide you with her current location-"

"I don't believe you," Ratchet said, quietly, and the words made Starscream's spark feel like it was tearing in two.

"Wha- Why wouldn't you?!" Starscream's voice hit that terrible note again, that near-shriek. "I
helped you! I gave you coordinates to the ground bridge, letting you save Orion-

"And then you worked with MECH to steal Bumblebee's T-Cog!" Bulkhead pointed at finger at Starcream.

"His cog was already stolen! I worked with them to get it back! And he did! H-He got it back! I gave it to him!" Starcream hissed, wings going up in anger. When Ratchet scoffed and turned, walking back towards the ground bridge, Starcream scrambled to his feet. He grabbed his injured side and almost slipped in his own energon, but he limped forward. "I admit! Aligning myself with those vile humans was a colossal error in judgement, but I am alone! I do what I must to survive."

"You are not alone! You could come be with me, with us, at any time!" Ratchet snapped, half turning, and he tensed in alarm when Starcream's leg failed him and he fell to his knees.

"I may as well be! It doesn't matter anymore." Starcream looked at them, then fell forward on his hands, and stared at the ground, ashamed. "I am now the one missing his T-Cog."

That made both of them turn. "...You're grounded?" Bulkhead asked, disbelieving.

"Thus of even less threat to you than before." Starcream glanced up between them, then his eyes stayed on Ratchet. "...And of even less worth. But Airachnid and her insecticon, they-

"An Insecticon? Here?" Ratchet and Bulkhead looked at each other. How?"

"Well I would have asked but I was too busy squeezing through a narrow crevice trying to keep that vermin from chewing my leg off... while Airachnid watched." Starcream's voice took on a near growl, before he sighed. "...Please. Just a patch," he pleaded.

"...Bulkhead. I'll meet you back at the base later," Ratchet said.

"Ratchet-"

"Go Bulkhead. I still outrank you." Ratchet pointed at the portal and Bulkhead sighed. The Wrecker pointed at Starcream before stepping through, and the bridge turned off after a moment. "Lay down on your side." Ratchet turned to Starcream and knelt down, opening his kit.

Starcream laid down on his side, bracing his fingers against the ground. He flinched when Ratchet reached toward him. "Ratchet-"

"Just...don't talk. Please." Ratchet took a deep breath to steady himself. "...I'm going to fix you. Then we're going to talk."

"...Don't hurt me. Please," Starcream whispered, flinching, and Ratchet knew how much pain and distress Starcream must have been in to revert back to that.

"I'm a professional," Ratchet said, and that calmed Starcream enough to actually let the medic tend to his injury.

"You are angry. Rightfully so."

"I'm not...Okay. I am angry. But I'm just...oh pits." Ratchet looked at Starcream. "Just...be quiet until I'm finished. Then we can talk."

"...Fine," Starcream agreed, and did his best to focus off on the trees and not the sharp pains in his
Ratchet worked quickly, muttering to himself, but Starscream, to his credit, stayed silent the whole time. He even managed to stay still, for the most part. "Okay. That's what I can do in the field. If you came back-

"No," Starscream said, almost instantly.

Ratchet was too tired to fight with him, so he let it drop and sealed the wound closed. "...There. Now...we need to talk." He closed his medical kit and pushed himself to his feet, and held out a hand.

Starscream stayed laying a moment before slowly taking Ratchet's hand and pulling himself up. He forgot how well his hand fit in the medics. He didn't want to remove it... "Ratchet-

"Is it all because of your T-Cog?" Ratchet said, instantly. "The reason you haven't commed me back at all?" His voice dropped. "Did you think I wouldn't want you?"

"I am useless like this!" Starscream tore his hand away and stepped back, gesturing at himself. "I am worthless! Worse than worthless! I am completely grounded! What use is a seeker without wings?" He covered his face with his hands, hunching over himself. "What kind of courtship can continue like this?! Who would want to attach themselves to this?!"

Ratchet's spark dropped. Starscream honestly, truely, believed every word he was saying. Seeker pride? Or had the years burned him so much that he believed his only value was in his flight?

"Ours can! I do!" Ratchet snapped, his grip on his medical kit hard enough to dent. His words had more bite than he'd intended, and he cooled himself down, looking away. "I thought you weren't interested anymore, and you were trying to let me down in some weird seeker away."

Starscream snorted, and oddly enough that was a good sign. "A seeker does not keep a courtmate guessing if it's over."

"Except that's exactly what you did! Primus." Ratchet ran a hand down his face. "I didn't know if you were even online. If MECH had you dismantled. If Megatron had gotten his hands on you. I was worried sick!"

"I was ashamed, Ratchet." Starscream's hands twitched with the need to comfort his courtmate, and he was startled when Ratchet dropped his medical kit. "Ratchet?"

"Chase me," Ratchet said, issuing a challenge, and Starscream's wings perked. "If you can catch me - " he paused as a comm came in from base. Optimus was ordering him back, and he gave a heavy sigh. It would have to wait."...I have to go." He picked up his medical kid and pointed at Starscream again as the ground bridge opened. "But the next time I comm you-

"...I will chase." Starscream's wings twitched. "...And I will catch you."

"Good." Ratchet watched Starscream, and then turned through the portal before he couldn't leave.
"You just fixed him up and sent him on his way?!"

"Hello Arcee," Ratchet said tensely, dropping his medical kit as he walked to the screens. "Coordinates check out?"

"They do," Optimus stated.

"After all the things he's done-" Arcee said, even as Cliffjumper tried to calm her.

"Starscream's intel has proved credible in the past," Ratchet said, feeling perhaps a tad too defensive.

"We shall see if that continues," Optimus said, effectively ending the argument for now. "Open up the ground bridge. Bumblebee, Bulkhead, Arcee, Cliffjumper. You all will be with me. Ratchet, remain here, and man the bridge."

"Yes sir," Ratchet said.

They were greeted with quite the view when they stepped through and entered the cave. Megatron and an Insecticon. The battle was brutal. "There's Airachnid!" Arcee said, instantly, and she ran off the edge, transformed in air, and was on her. The two femmes disappeared into a tunnel, the echo of battle chasing after them.

"After her-" Optimus started, but then Megatron turned, and part of his attention was on them, for a brief moment, until the Insecticon was dead. Then they had his full, undivided attention.

"We have no choice. Autobots, roll out," Optimus said, before jumping off the edge.

While they fought below ground, Arcee was pulled above ground, wrapped in Airachnid's disgusting web. Airachnid pulled back to strike, to finally finish their rivalry, and Arcee's world spun as something whizzed by them and took the other femme with it.

"How right you were, Airachnid," Starscream hissed, and Arcee tried to get free as the Seeker slid down the incline. One rocket was gone - that had been what took Airachnid out. He began to walk towards Airachnid, ignoring Arcee for the moment. "Payback is sweet!" He raised his other arm, firing the other rocket, and let out a mighty screech when Airachnid tunneled underground to avoid it. Starscream ran over to the whole and growled when it was completely empty. "Pits," he cursed, softly, and then turned to look at Arcee. He walked over to the tied up bot and circled, slowly.

"You don't care for Ratchet," she said, accusing, and Starscream stopped, midstep.

"Excuse you?" Starscream hissed, moving to stand directly in front of her.

"You heard me." She narrowed her eyes at him. "I don't trust you. You're a con. And whatever you're planning for Ratchet, whatever you want out of it, I'm not going to let you have it. Even if that means I have to offline you myself. I won't let you hurt him!"

Starscream started at Arcee and...laughed?

Yes, that was laughter.

Arcee started at him, confused. "What - why are you laughing?!"

"Oh pardon me." Starscream laughed again, and wiped coolant from his eyes. "Oh I haven't heard something that funny in quite awhile." He knew it was part stress, part anxiety. What she'd said
hadn't really been that funny. "Dear Arcee-"

"Don't 'dear' me!"

"I believe in a similar predicament, you let me go free." He flexed his claws and, with a swift movement, sliced through the webbing that was holding her up. She fell to the ground, still tied up, and struggled a moment. "Listen well, Arcee. Because you know nothing of me."

"I know enough. I remember what you did." She glared at him.

"Good. Then you know what I am capable of." He prodded her with a toe. "And know that if I truly wanted to hurt your medic, I would have, long ago." He paused, then corrected himself. "Well, besides what I have already unintentionally done. But nothing like what you are accusing me of." He shook his head, then clasped his hands behind him. "I know you will never accept me. Good. Every flock should have one that is wary. But I ask you this, Arcee. If I make him happy, and if he makes me happy, what does it matter what insignia he wears or I wore?"

"Because you'll go back to Megatron, and you'll betray us."

"Not this time." Starscream turned. "I will call this even," he said, starting to walk away. "Your friends will be by soon to let you out, I am sure."

"You're really serious about this!" Arcee called, and Starscream paused enough to look back. "Starscream, don't-"

"Don't what? Live my choices with another fully consenting bot? Make you medic happy? Ask yourself Arcee. Have you ever seen him smile so? It seems to me that many of his gears that concern smiling were rather rusty. And he does have a lovely smile." Starscream lifted his chin. "If he will have me back, I would see more of that smile."

"And if you hurt him-"

"If I hurt him, believe me Arcee." Starscream turned away. "When I am finished with myself, you may have what's left." He stalked off before Arcee could respond proper, Optimus speaking to her over their comm lines.

Starscream barely heard her reply of 'alive, but in need of assist', and scoffed to himself. "Aren't we all."

Starscream got the ping early the next morning, a request for his coordinates, and he recognized the message as being from Ratchet. He gave his coordinates, and a short moment later the ground bridge opened up before him. He stepped through, trying to make himself small, and it closed behind him when he was in the base.

"Don't get comfortable," Ratchet said, already putting new coordinates into the computer. "We're going somewhere else."

"Very well," Starscream mumbled. The bridge opened to it's new location, and Ratchet grabbed onto Starscream as he passed him to go through it. Starscream went along with it, and when they emerged was somewhat startled.
This place...it was near the mine where all this had started. "Ratchet. Do you realize-" he turned and realize that Ratchet was already gone. His wings shot up. That sneak! "Ratchet!"

"A chase is not about being fair!" Ratchet yelled over his shoulder, turned, and disappeared from sight behind a rocky outcropping.

Starscream hissed and burst into a run, arms swinging at his sides. He paused when he got to the spot that Ratchet disappeared at and glanced around, creeping forward slowly. His wings rested tight against his body, barely moving, except to feel the slight changes in air movements that his sensors constantly read. He kept his eyes on the ground, following the trail. This would be easier than he thought!

At least, that was his impression until the trail doubled back. Three separate times. when did the Medic learn this? That was ridiculous! It was almost an hour before he found Ratchet waiting for him at the entrance to the mine. Ratchet had his arms crossed, leaning against the side. "Took you long enough," Ratchet said, and Starscream's wings twitched.

"You - this place -" Starscream sputtered, and Ratchet laughed. The sound washed over him like high grade energon. His engine purred slightly as he walked up to the other mech. "I did not catch you." His wings slouched slightly.

"Then you'll just have to try harder next time." Ratchet nodded and pulled off the side of the cave. He watched Starscream, then reached out for his hand. He turned it palm up, then placed something in it. "Here. I meant to give this to you earlier."

"What is...oh..."

Ratchet was certain that that was the first time in his life that Starscream had been entirely, completely speechless, and it was flattering that his gift was the one that caused it. It was silent for a few minutes, and only the sound of the wind blowing by them broke the silence until Starscream spoke.

"Did you....make this?" Starscream raised a finger on his other hand to trace the outline etched into the crystal. "Vos..of course you did." He scoffed. "Who else would have hands steady enough for this. Who else could remember what it looked like." He ran his finger over the glyph. "Promise."

"We are far from perfect. Pits we're probably about the farthest you can get." Ratchet kept his voice even, not wanting to scare Starscream. "But Starscream. I like you. We just...need to work on helping each other. On being open. On communicating. This is my promise to try." He covered Starscream's hands and new gift with his other hand, effectively holding him temporarily. "If you come into the cave with me, I can think of a few ways to start on that." His hand slid up from Starscream's, up his arm, his touch gentle and teasing.

Starscream started at Ratchet, then stepped forward. It was a surprise enough for Ratchet to stumble back into the wall, leaning on it for support while Starscream rested one hand by his head. "...You do not know what this gift means," Starscream whispered.

"It means I'm returning your first gift," Ratchet said and shrugged. "Which means-"

"That we are exclusive. Entirely. I didn't expect.." Starscream tucked the crystal away in his subspace. His mind spun, waves of pure giddy excitement running through and consuming every processor he had. "Primus you are serious!"
"What made you think I wasn't?" Ratchet scoffed.

"But I lost the chase!"

"And?" Ratchet raised a brow. "You found me eventually. And I'd like to give you your prize."

"I thought you did, what are you..." Starscream paused, and suddenly covered his face with a hand and stepped back, leaning against the wall next to Ratchet. "Oh I cannot believe this," he hissed, sliding down the wall to sit.

"What's wrong?" Ratchet was concerned now, kneeling down.

"You are willing, and while normally I would be all over you...I find myself not ready." Starscream whispered, as if it was some shameful secret, and his face burned with embarrassment. "Hold on, just give me a minute to get the nerve."

"Starscream." Ratchet reached up to take Starscream's hands. He tugged on them gently, until Starscream lowered them, and he leaned forward, pressing a kiss to the Seeker's forehead. "You have been patient with me. I will be for you." He rested their foreheads together. "...Will you at least come back to the base with me? I will recharge better knowing you're in the berth with me."

"Just recharge," Starscream said, quietly, and when Ratchet nodded, Starscream looked off. "I suppose that would be acceptable. And... I would greatly enjoy that." Starscream tilted his head to press his lips against Ratchet's softly. "Let's go, then."

"Ratchet to base. Requesting a ground bridge at my coordinates," Ratchet said as he stood, and pulled Starscream to his feet. "Two inbound."

"Coming right up doc," Cliffjumper said. "Good timing."

When the bridge appeared, Ratchet lead Starscream back through. He only gave Cliffjumper a passing nod before leading Starscream to his berthroom. Inside, he turned to speak to Starscream, but the Seeker just pressed a finger to his lips and nudged him back toward the bed.

"No words, amica," Starscream said, and twitched when Ratchet kissed his finger.

"Amica," Ratchet agreed, amused, and lead Starscream to the berth. He laid down first and scooted to make room for Starscream, but the Seeker just ended up half on him anyway out of choice, stretched out, wings relaxing and twitching.

All things considered, it was the best recharge either of them had in weeks.
Gaining Permission

Chapter by hero_of_derp

Chapter Notes

Takes place at the beginning of Nemesis Prime.

Starscream woke up first, and he sat up slowly, looking down. Funny. He'd never really looked at Ratchet when they were recharging. He seemed so much younger when he wasn't scowling at screens or hyperfocusing on his work or yelling at Bumblebee to be more careful. He was a handsome bot, but the thousands of battle had taken a toll on him. Starscream leaned over and pressed a kiss against Ratchet's forehead, and the bot mumbled, but didn't stir.

With a small chuckled Starscream rested his head back on Ratchet's chest and flopped his arm over his waist. His wings fluttered slightly in pure contentment. Things were so different here. There were no lazy moments in the Decepticons. There was work to be done. Plans to be made. There were no stolen moments with lovers, laying in bed, listening to the quiet whirrs and clinks of their recharge.

Starscream lifted his head when he heard a quiet rumble, thinking Ratchet had awoken. What he saw, however, were still offline optics and lips moving. Oh. Ratchet was sleep talking.

"Cute," Starscream whispered, and finally got up. He stretched, and walked for the door. He could get energon, wake Ratchet up, share breakfast maybe. However, when he got to the door it opened, and Optimus was there, about to knock.

"..Starscream."

"Optimus." They stared at each other a moment. "Ratchet is still asleep."

"..So I see. I was hoping he was awake. I can speak to him later when I return from patrol."

Optimus turned to leave.

"Return?" Starscream watched him go. He glanced back at Ratchet, then followed after the Prime as he walked down the hall. "Patrol for Energon, or 'cons?"

"Either." Optimus nodded, and looked down at Starscream. "Thank you for your aid in returning Bumblebee's T-Cog."

"Save your thanks," Starscream said, with a wave of his hand. "If you're just on patrol for energon, let me offer another bit of information." He smiled. "I know where there is an energon mine. I can't reach it by myself, and MECH hasn't likely touched it yet. If we get there first..."

"We should be able to get it." Optimus stared at him, the nodded. "Very well."

"Excellect! Let's go. I need to speak to you anyway. I do hope you have that charming trailer of yours for me to ride in." Starscream nodded.
"I can drive as fast as you can fly. I can keep up." Optimus nodded.

"...but I cannot." Starscream patted his side, acting as if it was nothing. "You see I am in the state your scout was previously. They took my T-Cog. Now, get your trailer." He gestured at Optimus. "And we will go check out the mine."

They were on the road shortly, Starscream sitting in the trailer, arms crossed, and trying to not slide around everytime Optimus turned. Starscream fed Optimus coordinates via a comm link as he drove, and it was an hour before the terrain changed to completely off road. Another half hour later and Optimus came to a stop. Starscream pushed the trailer open and crawled out as Optimus transformed, and the Seeker stretched, looking up at the sky. The sun was just staring to rise, far off in the distance. There was plenty of time to speak to Optimus and get back before the others stirred.

"We will speak inside as we search for the energon," Optimus said, nodding and gesturing at the small cave before them.

"Going to be a bit tight for you," Starscream mentioned. "Luckily for you, it's bigger inside." He walked around the prime and into the cave, looking over his shoulder in time to see Optimus duck to follow.

"What is it you wanted to speak about?" Optimus asked, when they had been walking for a few minutes.

"I'm not about to join the Autobots if that's what you're thinking," Starsream hissed instantly, and Optimus just shrugged. Starscream used a claw to chisel a small stone out of the side of the cavern. He turned it over in his hand and activated some little used sensors, holding it up. "We are getting close," he said, dropping the stone and walking on.

"Then this is about Ratchet."

"...Yes. This is about Ratchet." Starscream kept walking on, hands behind his back. "You have been...particualrly supporting of this courtship."

"Ratchet is one of my oldest and dearest friends, as well as my team's medic. I am not his parent." Optimus sounded amused, oddly enough, as he followed. "Who he chooses to court is his business, as long as it does not interfere with the team."

"Hasn't it, though?" Starscream stopped and turned to face Optimus. "Why accept me courting him?" Starscream narrowed his eyes. "Why give me the chance at all?"

"The Assalt on the Ark." Optimus watched Starscream carefully. "Do you remember it? It was long ago. But you listened to reason then."

"I could not fight both you and Metroplex!" Starscream scoffed. "Retreat was the only reasonable thing to do."


"Stop it."

"You could have been great, if Megatron had not beaten you down." Optimus' smile faded. He looked...sad. "You tried to stop Megatron, according to Jetfire's report. But he went in and got the Dark Energon anyway."
"Stop it."

"...Is that why you joined the Decepticons?"

"Stop it!" Starscream's yell echoed and he clenched his hands into fists. "I failed in protecting the Dark Energon! I was a pathetic overseer, instead of wing commander, the rank mine by right! What else was I supposed to do when he offered me a position? I would be of use again!" Starscream began to pace. "He was right, don't you dare deny it. There had to be a change! Even you believed it, as Orion!" He pointed an accusing finger at Optimus. "You followed him to Iacon, and instead of him being a Prime it was you. He hated you for taking that from him. But thank Primus you did." Starscream narrowed his eyes, and Optimus opened his mouth to speak but Starscream continued. "His methods were wrong. He wanted a platform for power. I see that now. Maybe your way, the autobot way is better. But back then I...." Starscream glared at the ground.

"Do you know how many times I defied him to save sparks? Do you?" Starscream was shaking now. "Do you know how many hits I took to distract him? And it was me, always me!" He pressed a hand to his chest, then waved it through the air, violently. "Do you know how Seekers I lost under his command?" His voice hit static, breaking, but he spoke through it. "How many friends? I lost my Trine! They followed me, and I lost them."

"You are not the only one to lose people in this war-" Optimus started.

"I know that! But how many of your precious autobots were lost to your own side?" Starscream hissed. "You know what it is like. To give orders that send those to death," he said, quiet now, almost whispering. "But you had that choice. I did not, and Megatron only carried the burden that he had lost a battle. I had to carry the weight of those sacrificed." His voice trailed off, and they stood in silence for what felt like an eternity.

Optimus hadn't known. He hadn't meant to bring up such dark, buried feelings.

"Starscream...I am sorry." Optimus had stepped over to Starscream without the seeker noticing, and he rested a hand on Starscream's shoulder. "I long for the day that this is over and that we may all heal. Together, ideally. None of that was your fault."

"I know that!" Starscream pushed Optimus' hand away with an annoyed sound. "You asked to begin with! Don't get all touchy with me like I'm one of your squishy autobots." He crossed his arms. "All I wanted to know is if you will give me your consent."

"My consent?" Optimus raised a brow as Starscream started to walk again.

"To continue my courtship with Ratchet." Starscream paused when they reached a dead end, and he tapped against the wall thoughtfully. "To a more...physical level. As the equivalent of his wing commander, I require it from you."

"Ah." Optimus smiled. "He gave you his gift, then. I will admit. I have not seen Ratchet as happy for many years. You have your differences, but...in the end, he smiles. He is happier than I have seen him in many decades."

Starscream paused, then turned, and pointed. "Do you give me your consent or not?"

"It is not my consent to give." Optimus shook his head. "But I am happy to see my friend happy."

"...I'm taking that as a yes." Starscream scoffed, then pointed at the wall. "This is structurally sound. If you'd be so kind to open our path?" He stepped back slightly.
Optimus stepped forward, and a few punches later the wall revealed a large cavern, glowing blue with energon.

"Splendid!" Starscream looked in as Optimus entered the cave. He reached up, tapping at a bit of crystal energon. "Perhaps I should...make some more candy," he said thoughtfully. He broke off a bit, examining it, and turned when he heard Optimus do the same. "It seems like a rather good, pure source." He opened his subspace to store it, and paused when his fingers nudged against the crystal gift he'd been given. He was still carrying it around like the love-struck fool he was. Pits he was pathetic!

Oh well. He could deal with pathetic.

But the fact of the matter was that, currently, he was in no rightful state to seduce Ratchet. He needed to find a better place. Perhaps...Oh. Yes. There was that. If he could get close...

"Starscream."

"Hm?" Starscream looked over at Optimus, raising a brow.

"The reason I trust you with Ratchet. You may have been a Decepticon. But I believe you have attempted to save every life you could, Decepticon, Autobot, and neutral alike."

Starscream stared at him, then scoffed. "Do not forget. I am a power hungry fool as well. Now, if I could ask one more favor of you."

"And what is that?"

"Drop me off someplace, and give Ratchet my regards. I have...business to attend to before I can visit again."

"Very well." Optimus nodded, and they made their way out of the cave.

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter today, filled with a ton of headcanons and made up stuff! Reading over Starscream's tfp wiki page gave me a lot of ideas, and a lot of stuff came in here. If you're interested, definitely go check it out.
Spontaneity

Chapter by hero_of_derp

Chapter Notes

Takes place after Armada before Flying mind/Tunnel Vision/hunting down ALL THE RELICS.

ALSO WOO IT'S THE SMUT CHAPTER THEY'RE GONNA DO THE DO AFTER LIKE 11 CHAPTERS WOW WTG BOYS. I will be updating the warnings and tags on this fic shortly after posting this. If sticky smut isn't your thing, feel free to skip this chapter! Nothing particularly plot worth happens

When the words popped up on his screen, Ratchet actually laughed.

"What's so funny?" Bulkhead asked from the corner, watching Jack and Raf play a video game while Miko...well, Miko was in detention and Bulkhead would pick her up later. Otherwise she would simply sneak out and get into even more trouble.

"It says, 'I have information which you may find interesting'," Ratchet read off the screen. "'Come alone. Do not bring medical kit.' And coordinates."

"...Need me to come with?" Bulkhead asked.

"No. As humans say...third time's the charm." Ratchet shook his head. "Besides, with what today is..." He looked thoughtful, putting the coordinates into the computer.

"What's today?" Jack asked, looking over.

Ratchet started up the ground bridge and flecked some dust off his armor. "In human terms... Date night." The sound of Bulkhead laughing following him through the portal.

Saying he was in awe of the downed ship would be an understatement. It wasn't everyday that one saw a decepticon ship up close, unless it was trying to destroy you. Even damaged, broken, crashed, it was an impressive feat of engineering. It seemed to have been retrofitted as well. Those looked like solar panels on the roof of it, with haphazard wires connecting all of them in a mess, and leading into the ship.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Starscream said, waiting just a few yards away. His wings were up, obviously proud. "Not bad for scrap. I know. You may say it."

"I've never seen one up close." Ratchet looked at Starscream and held out a hand. "Give me the grand tour?"

"Of course." Starscream took Ratchet's hand, leading him towards the ship. "She is the Harbringer. You and your autobot team shot her down, if you recall. She is unfinished, but I have hope for her."

"Think she'll fly again?" Ratchet looked up as they got closer. Primus, the ship was huge, far
bigger than the Autobot outpost.

"Not anytime soon, unfortunately. She is too damaged, and this planet lacks the resources to pull her up and to an orbit to work. At the least, she makes for a fair base in the meantime." Starscream waved a hand before them as they reached the door to what Ratchet assumed was some kind of airlock. It opened with a small hiss, and Starscream lead Ratchet inside.

The lights were dim in the hallway, but as they entered the space under a light, they all came on in the immediate area. Motion sensors? Where had Starscream gotten those? It made sense. Saving energy like that would help to heat and light the place at night, not early in the evening as it was now.

"Were those solar panels up on the roof?" Ratchet asked as Starscream tugged on his hand, starting down the hall. "Those wouldn't have anything to do with some solar panels missing from that army base, would they?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Starscream insisted, still leading Ratchet along. There was a slight incline to their path, the natural slope of the ship, and it took a few minutes before Ratchet realized that they were passing by door after door.

"...Starscream? The tour?"

"I am beginning the tour. See? This is a hallway. How nice. Look, there's another." Starscream looked back at Ratchet, still walking. "Is that good enough?"

Ratchet laughed and stopped walking, tugging back on Starscream's hand. "Starscream, where are you taking me?"

"If you would follow me, you would know already." Starscream turned and reached out, pushing back on Ratchet's chest. When the medic didn't move, he pressed again. A step back, and Starscream followed. Then another, and another, until Ratchet was against the wall. Starscream's engine purred as he pulled his hand from Ratchet's. "But instead you keep talking." He raked his claws across Ratchet's frame, lightly, enough to tease but not do any actual damage, not even a scratch. "Do I need to shut you up?"

"I thought you enjoyed my prattling on."

"In the right situation." Starscream moved his hands up Ratchet's chest to his shoulders, leaning down. "Very well...let me tell you. I need your help with something."

"Oh? And what might that be? Personal or medical?" Ratchet dared to rest his hands on Starscream's waist.

"Ohhh I'd say a bit of both." One of Starscream's hands moved to Ratchet's shoulder, under the plating, and his fingers teased at the wires. The sensation shot a wave of pleasure down his spine. How long had it been? "You see, dear medic, I am concerned about the integrity of bits and pieces of this ship. In particular, the berth. I believe it needs a good solid...stress test."

"Well, as a medic I should investigate that. It's a matter of health. Can't let your health deteriorate because of an...unsatisfying recharge." Ratchet pulled Starscream against him, rubbing his thumb in small circles over the small of his back. "Starcream. You're doing this-"

"Because I want, not because I feel...pressured. Or obligated." Starscream purred and leaned in to kiss Ratchet, his fingers teasing the wires of his shoulders again. "And what I want...is to pull you to my breath and give you a good, hard fragging, overload a few times, then maybe have you bend
me over one of the consoles in the bridge and frag me until I can't walk."

Ratchet grinned, his fingers sneaking against a seam in Starscream's armor. "In that case, lead the way."

Starscream snuck another fast, hard kiss before pulling back. He grabbed Ratchet's hand and pulled him, his pace much faster now that he knew what was ahead. His spark fluttered, giddy. This was happening. So much had changed in the months since he'd left the Decepticon ranks. He'd had nothing. Now he had a base, a lab, a courtmate, and he was about to have several good overloads. Pits. When was the last time he'd had a good berthmate?

Well there had been that one time with Knock Out and Breakdown and while nice enough, they had been rather focused on each other. Though they had done that nice little thing with both of their glossas and his spike. The image of Ratchet's glossa made his spine tingle, and when he door to his berthroom opened, he turned, wings up, fanning.

It was clearly what had been the captain's quarters, the largest berthroom that remained on the ship. It was empty, understandably, and only held the berth, lined with the padding from Starscream's former hole-in-the-wall (literally) cave base, and some additional bits of pillows and padding he'd found around the ship. There was a desk in the corner, covered in bits of experiments and machinery. The screens on the wall weren't lit, likely to conserve energy.

"Well here it is," he purred, engines revving slightly.

"Let's take a look, then." Ratchet stepped closer to Starscream and leaned down slightly, wrapping his arms around the Seeker, right under his aft and lifting. Starscream screeched, unprepared, as Ratchet lifted him. Ratchet glanced around the room and spotted the berth.

Starscream recovered and wrapped his arms around Ratchet's neck, leaning his face down to capture Ratchet's lips in a deep kiss, open mouthed and sloppy. One hand toyed with the cables by Ratchet's neck, and he broke away long enough to whisper, "berth."

Ratchet had already made a mental map of the room, and he carried Starscream over. He dropped the seeker onto the padded surface. Seekers certainly did like their comfort. Old terrible romance stories told of Vosian lovers with piles of pillows and luxurious curtains, and Ratchet had to wonder how much of that was true.

Starscream scooted up the berth and sat up, spreading those long, graceful legs. "So, my sweet medic, what do you like?" He asked, raising a brow.

"I like what I see right now," Ratchet said, crawling onto the bed after Starscream. He wasn't as graceful as the seeker, but he did well enough, and he followed Starscream when he pulled him up into a quick kiss. When Starscream broke it, Ratchet went for his neck, nuzzling against it, and kissing.

Starscream gave a quiet moan, gripping Ratchet's shoulders. "Hard? Soft? Do you like-nn, right there - being spiked or spiking? Plugging?" He broke off to gasp slightly as Ratchet found a small sensor mode hiding among cables and wires. "Oh fffrag Ratchet."

"I like lots of things," Ratchet purred, and moved down. He ran his fingers and tongue over Starscream's chest, finding small sensors on his sides. "I was going to say I was in a mood to get spiked but..." Ratchet pulled back slightly and looked down at Starscream. "You being under me gives me ideas."
"Mm." Starscream used his leverage on Ratchet's shoulders to pull himself up slightly, and he bent his knees, resting them on Ratchet's hips. "I like the ideas that big sexy brain of yours comes up with up. Care to elaborate?"

Ratchet chuckled softly and kissed Starscream, open mouthed and deep, and the kiss pushed Starscream back down. Starscream clung to Ratchet's shoulders before one hand slipped down between them and twisted. Clawed servos rubbed at Ratchet's interface panel, and Ratchet grinded his hips against Starscream's hand. Ratchet finally broke the kiss, only to press his face against the side of Starscream's and whisper.

"Well, it involves you, me, and this berth...so far so good." One hand moved down Starscream's side and to his thigh, and he pulled it against himself a little tighter. Starscream rumbled and wrapped his legs around Ratchet's hips, shifting slightly. "The next step involves me down between your legs. Then I think you on my spike." He ground his hips against Starscream's as the seeker shuddered under him, and when he pulled back there was a confused and shocked look on Starscream's face. "...Something I said?"

"You want to go down on me?" And Starscream hated the stataic in his voice, but he couldn't help it. Most encounters among Decepticons, in his experience, were always simply fast arousal, a spike in a valve or mouth, perhaps a mouth, clean up, and done. The thought of Ratchet's lips against his valve made him tingle, and he felt the trademark dampness against his modesty panel.

Ratchet stared at Starscream. "I would like to, but if that makes you uncomfortable-"

"It's not that!" Starscream's claw dug into Ratchet's shoulder and the medic winced. "Sorry. It's just...mm..." He gave Ratchet's hips a squeeze with his thighs. "I haven't had...that....since I joined the war."

Ratchet licked his lips, and the motion made Starscream's engines rev a little faster. "Well, with your permission then." He chuckled softly at Starscream's eager nod, and he leaned down to kiss Starscream's lips before making his way down.

Starscream's legs slipped off Ratchet's hips and flopped to the side, opening himself up wide for Ratchet. He wiggled his hips, impatiently, but Ratchet made no move to hurry his trail down Starscream's body. His fingers moved down Starscream's sides, igniting his sensors, until he finally reached slim seeker hips. He pressed his lips to the panel, and Starscream's engines hitched slightly.

"Open?" Ratchet asked, fingers moving into his hip joints and toying with the plating and wires. Ratchet didn't need to ask twice. The panel slid open, revealing both valve and spike housing. A few drops of lubrication were already leaking from the valve in anticipation, and Ratchet caught it with the thumb that wasn't busy in Starscream's hip joint. He looked up at Starscream, and the Seeker was watching him intently. Without breaking eye contact, Ratchet lifted his thumb to his lips and licked off the drops.

Starscream shuddered.

Ratchet ran his glossa over his thumb before lowered it to Starscream's valve, pressing it in and rubbing slightly before his mouth moved closer. He breathed over Starscream before his thumb pulled the lips of the valve apart slightly, and he leaned down to kiss the newly exposed tissue.

"Oh..." Starscream shuddered again and his head fell back. The first wave of hot pleasure shot from his valve to his spark. His back arched slightly as Ratchet began to lick, and he felt like he was melting. When Ratchet moved one of Starscream's legs over his shoulder he was completely
compliant, and he moved one hand to the top of Ratchet's helm lightly. When Ratchet put his hand over Starscream's, Starscream worried that he'd gone too far, but Ratchet just gave it a squeeze and a press, and moved closer to Starscream, his glossa reaching just a bit deeper.

Oh. That was permission.

Heat waved over Starscream's body as he held Ratchet's head and tilted his hips into the touch, and the encouraging rumble from Ratchet made his give a shuddering sigh. His spark was fluttering, his body tingling, and he felt so relaxed, completely given over to Rachet in that moment.

Who would have known that this was interfacing could be like?

Starscream could feel the slow build of overload beginning, unrushed, not some coupling between shifts or battles, and he groaned when Ratchet slipped a finger into his valve. "Ratchet...Nn...." He turned his face to the side and moved his hips again, the prickling warmth getting sharper and hotter.

"Relax," Ratchet said, pulling back slightly. He kissed Starscream's valve before slipping another finger in. "There's no rush." He looked up at Starscream, and he liked what he saw, the usually tense Seeker tense for a whole new set of reasons, almost trembling, his valve spread around his finger. "We have all the time in the world."

Starscream looked at him, then his head flopped back again with a groan as Ratchet started to move his fingers. "This is not...the usual...nn...seeker way."

Ratchet shrugged and smiled. "It's the Ratchet way. Are you objecting?"

"Ohhhh no." Starscream gasped as Ratchet's fingers found a sensitive set of nodes. "Not at all. Frag." He dug his other hand into the padding of the berth. "If I had known... fragging you was going to be like this I would have turned over sooner."

Ratchet laughed. "What, should I add my to my resume? May seduce Decepticons to the autobot side?"

"No, but the Decepticons should add 'highly skilled at the act of interfacing', to their warnings about you." Starscream's left over Ratchet's shoulder tensed. "Nn don't stop. Ratchet, I'm so close..."


"I am in you," Ratchet said, with a false innocence, and Starscream huffed loudly.

"You know what I mean!"

Ratchet chuckled and pulled his fingers back, and leaned back enough to see the lubrication leaking from Starscream's valve. He ran his thumb over the lips as his own panel slid back. He was wet too, and a few drops fell onto the berth. He shifted forward on his knees and his spike pressurized. He held the base of his spike, teasing Starscream as he rubbed the head against Starscream's valve, smearing lubrication over it. He pulled back, stroking his hand up his length and then back down,
slicking his length. He did it again, watching as Starscream trembled under him.

And then Starscream kicked him.

"Autobot tease!" Starscream actually yelled, his foot in the middle of Ratchet's chest. "Spike me!" He kicked Ratchet again, lightly, and was pulling back for another kick when Ratchet grabbed his leg. Ratchet pulled Starscream's leg over his shoulder with one hand, scooting him up slightly onto his thigh. Starscream's head rolled back again, optics closing and letting out a low, hitched moan as Ratchet pressed in.

"Primus," Ratchet muttered as the valve enveloped him, and he moved his hands to Starscream's hips as he pressed forward, gently, not very far, before pulling back again. Starscream groaned at each tiny thrust, each one just a bit deeper, and gasped when Ratchet entered all the way. His valve gave a new rush of lubrication and tightened around Ratchet. Ratchet pulled his hips back before moving them forward again, and Starscream's back arched as Ratchet's spike ran against what felt like every node in his valve. He filled Starscream so well!

"Ratchet-!" Starscream was cut off with another sobbed gasp, and he flailed his hand around on the bed, trying to find Ratchet. Ratchet grabbed it, and their fingers intertwined, both hands tensing as Ratchet found a deep and fast pace to thrust into Starscream. The seeker spike pressurized suddenly, laying hard against him, and Ratchet paused in his thrusts to slick his fingers from his own valve. He began to stroke Starscream, resuming his movements, and Starscream didn't last long.

Starscream tensed, and his claws dug scratches into Ratchet's hand as he overloaded, valve clenching around Ratchet and spike ejecting transfluid. He opened his mouth but only a roar of static came out, and the sensations around his spike and seeing Starscream's reaction was enough to push Ratchet over the edge.

Ratchet overloaded with one final thrust, filling Starscream with his transfluid, and he didn't realize he'd offlined his optics until he opened them to look down at Starscream.

Starscream was a mess in the best ways, trembling, inner fans working overtime to try and cool his body. His spike was beginning to depressurize, creeping away from the puddle and splatters on his form. Starscream's hand was still holding it's tight grip on Ratchet's, but his other hand was covering his face, optics offline, mouth openly panting to try and help his fans. His leg was shaking on Ratchet's shoulder, and Ratchet gently lowered it before pulling out with a wet noise.

"Starscream," Ratchet said, static at the edge of his own voice as he leaned forward, and he gently pulled the hand from Starscream's face to replace it with his own. Starscream onlined his optics and looked up at Ratcher, before grinning.

"I think I like the Ratchet way," Starscream purred, though his voice hitched slightly. Whatever he was planning to say next was swallowed in a kiss, and Starscream gently pressed into it, giving a small shaky sigh.

Ratchet pulled back and flopped down next to Starscream, his own fans overworking themselves. "Don't suppose you have a washrack before we recharge?" He mumbled.

"I do, but the water is cold." Starscream made a face. "The heater is offline still." He stretched, feeling weak in the limbs, before rolling onto his side and watching Ratchet. "Oh my sweet medic, your age is showing."

"Excuse me?" Ratchet turned his head.
"You're so tired already." Starscream walked two fingers across Ratchet's chest. "Look at you. Poor Ratchet. You look exhausted, having to recharge already."

Ratchets engine revved and he grabbed Starscream's hand, pulling him against him. "I'll show you exhausted."

Starscream laughed, and the seduction began again.
The explosion had him reeling as he fell for what felt like an eternity through ice, then through water, and Starscream was amazed that he'd survived it. But, then again, the Apex armor was near indestructible...and incredible.

He sank farther and farther, and the only reason he could see was the dim glow of the Apex armor, and only for a few yards before him. Scrap. He was in a heap of trouble this time. "Starscream to Ratchet," he said, but paused when only static reached him. "Starscream to Ratchet," he repeated.

Nothing.

Of all things, the armor, the water, the ice, the cold...whatever it was, his signal wasn't getting through.

So he walked, fueled by anger, watching the sea floor ahead of him so that he wouldn't slip into some underwater crevasse to disappear for forever. He was lost with his own anger and his own thoughts. He wanted to throttle the Prime almost as much as he wanted to shoot a rocket through Megatron's chest. After all he had done for them! He had helped them get Optimus back, he had helped them get better Energon, he had helped them time after time, and how did they repay him?

By sending him under a glacier!

His anger seethed, but began to ebb by the time he managed to get a signal out, nearly a week later. A week later of walking endlessly. Low energon reserve warnings pinging and ignored. According to his mental map of the globe, he was close to land. Just a few more days, and he'd be able to land bridge out of there.

So he sent a ping to Ratchet, and a short moment later, actually received an open comm line.

"Starscream! You're alive!"

Starscream growled slightly. "No thanks to your Optimus Prime!"
to Ratchet the medic waved him off. Whatever it was it could wait, he'd insisted, and he'd gone so far as to pull his medical rank, and he was glad to wait when Miko and Wheeljack both raced off for revenge. Frag it all.

"And on top of everything else, not a word from Starscream," Ratchet mumbled as he checked out the gears of Bulkhead's leg.

"I'm sure he'll call soon," Bulkhead said, then flinched. "Ow, Ratchet-"

"Oh relax. I'm all finished." Ratchet shook his head and put his tools away. "That's all I can do for now Bulkhead. The rest is up to you."

"If that is the case, maybe now we can speak," Optimus said, grimly.

"Fine Optimus. What is so important that you have been pester ing me about it for days?" Ratchet turned on the Prime and rested his hands on his waist. "Well? Spit it out."

"We should speak in private, Ratchet." Optimus seemed uncomfortable.

"What, is it your health? We thawed you fine." Ratchet brought up his scanner, beginning to run it over Optimus' body. "You're fine, so--"

"Starscream was in Antarctica," Optimus said, quietly, and Ratchet's scanner turned off. "He went...under the ice. With the Apex armor. ...I am sorry. Dreadwing set up bombs, and he fell."

A pressing weight pressed down on his spark and Ratchet stared at Optimus, and didn't realize until that very moment just what the Seeker had come to mean to him. The thought of never seeing Starscream again made his legs weak and he stumbled back against the berth that Bulkhead was on. He gripped the edge, staring at the floor, tiny tremors running through his body.

So many things unsaid. So many things undone. His eyes couldn't focus, and his vision kept blurring, a desperate whirl coming from inside his chassis as his body tried to calm him.

In the end, Optimus leaning down to give him a comforting hug was the only thing that kept him from entirely breaking down right there. After a moment he shoved their leader away, and stomped off, quickly, before he could break down. As soon as he got to his room it was another story, and he hit his knees, curled around himself, and wept.

If Arcee was happy for the apparent loss of Starscream she had enough tact to not say anything at all. Everyone else, however, was distant but smothering. They were all constantly in his space, constantly asking him how he was, if he needed help. The third time he snapped at Bumblebee, the scout didn't talk-whirr at him for three days.

In fact, after he snapped at Bumblebee, everyone seemed to give him his room. He was just so...tired. Tired of losing people in general, not to mention a courtship that had been going...rather well, all things considered. Middle of a war, rushed, bots on different sides... It was unfair that they'd only met now, this late in their lives.

In another life, maybe...
He couldn't think of it. He couldn't dwell. He'd lost people before, what was so different in this....?

His spark throbbed constantly. Everywhere he looked, he thought of Starscream. They'd shared meals, they'd shared a berth, they'd shared a console. There was no place where he was free of Starscream. The mission and watching Bulkhead's rehabilitation were the only distractions he had, and even then thoughts of sleek seeker wings plagued his mind whenever he had spare moments.

Primus but he had been in deep, and he only now realized just how deep.

It was a week and some change, and he'd finally decided to swallow his sadness down and grieve later, when this was all over, when he was able, but a ping showed up on the console screen before him, and he stared in disbelief.

"Is that-?" Bulkhead asked, staring.

"It can't be," Ratchet said, his hands and voice shaking. He opened a comm line. "Starscream? You're alive!"

"No thanks to your Optimus Prime!"

Ratchet pleaded with Starscream for the Seeker to come directly to their base, but Starscream refused, stating he would not be instantly delivering the apex armor into their clutches. Instead, it was another several hours before Starscream pinged that he was ready for pick up, and when he stepped into the base he was still dripping water, and he wasn't wearing the armor.

Ratchet grabbed him and enveloped him in a tight hug and a deep kiss, clutching at him hard enough to dent, and the Seeker grumbled but accepted the attention. "Really Ratchet, I am fine! A bit waterlogged-"

"And freezing cold! Come on." Ratchet pulled back enough to grab Starscream and push him over to his medical bay area. Medic coding and courtmate coding fought against each other. Heal him, then cuddle him, he had to remind himself more than once. He'd warm up faster with a warm body next to him, another part of him said, and then another part added 'or over him' and Ratchet suppressed the shudder.

"He really is alive," Cliffjumper said, looking at the human kids. "I thought for sure, y'know, under the antarctic, he'd be down for the count, but I guess not. Seekers, huh."

The children, of course, just shrugged, and the lot of them watched as Ratchet fussed over Starscream. Starscream seemed content to let him, though he rolled his eyes, and he followed Ratchet's direction. Look at the light. Hold still for this scan. Open your plating so we can get some air into your joints and get them dry. Drink this energon. It seemed to go fine, until Optimus walked into the room.

"Ratchet, I was told that Starscream-" Optimus started, Arcee close behind, and a loud screech from Starscream cut him off.

Starscream was almost off the table, and it took all of Ratchet's strength to hold him down.

"Starscream get down, you still have water in your systems-" Ratchet tried.
"YOU OWE ME AN APOLOGY!" He screeched, and everyone winced.

"Optimus doesn't owe you anything," Arcee snapped, crossing her arms.

"You can say that after he BLOWS YOU UNDER AN ICE CAP INTO THE SEA!" Starscream yelled, and then turned his head too fast to yell at Ratchet. Their helmets crashed together and Starscream stopped struggling long enough to hold his head. Ratchet staggered back a step, rubbing at his own helm.

"Ouch," Bulkhead mumbled, sitting off to the side. If nothing else this was a nice distraction for him. It took his mind off his leg, watching Starscream yell, Optimus stay still, and Ratchet try to calm the Seeker while Arcee made it worse. Bumblebee just stood off, looking around in a panic and whirring.

"You attacked him right back!" Arcee shifted her weight to the other side. "And you took the Apex armor!"

"And I will be keeping it," Starscream hissed. "I can put it to far better use than you!"

"Doing what, fragging Ratchet?" Arcee snapped, and the room went silent.

"Arcee," Cliffjumper said, quietly, but Starscream started to laugh.

"Oh dear Arcee-"

"Don't 'dear Arcee' me-"

"I don't need anything but this to frag your dear medic." Starscream gestured at his body, and stood up from the berth. Ratchet grabbed Starscream's arm, but Starscream shot a glare at him and pulled back. "If you want it back, I am open for negotiations-"

"Negotiations? Bu - Starscream, really!" Ratchet tried to coax Starscream back onto the berth. "It will be safer here. You are one bot-"

"I am one bot who has survived on my own far longer than you!" Starscream hissed. He pulled away. When Ratchet reached for him, Starscream flexed his claws. "Don't," he warned. "I am going back." He walked over to the groundbridge, glaring at Arcee as he passed.

Arcee made a move to follow him. "We're not finished-"

"For now, Arcee, we are." Optimus said, mouth set in a grim line. "Starscream is free bot."

"And remember that," Starscream spat as he activated the groundbridge and stalked through it. The gate closed shortly, and Ratchet sighed.

"I can't believe you're with him," Arcee muttered, glancing at Ratchet.

"Arcee. Come on." Cliffjumper took Arcee's arm, tugging her toward the doors. "Let's go on patrol. Get rid of some of that charge." She went, eventually, transforming into her two wheeled alt mode and racing off. Cliffjumper followed quickly.

Bumblebee whirred and his door wings drooped.

"No Bumblebee, I believe we should give Starscream some time before we begin...negotiations." Optimus sighed and looked at Ratchet. "However, Ratchet, if you wish to follow Starscream on...personal choice, you may."
"No Optimus. It's fine." Ratchet sighed and rested his hands on the berth that had help Starscream a few moments earlier. "He needs to cool off."

"In that case, I may trust negotiations to you." Optimus nodded.

"Is that a good idea? I am an involved party. And don't say 'we all are', because you know that's not what I mean." Ratchet pointed at the Prime and narrowed his eyes. "We are involved, romantically."

"I know, Ratchet. And you are the only one who he will listen to." Optimus sighed. "Which is why it must be you."

Ratchet threw his hands in the air but, in the end, did go.

Ratchet waited several hours before daring to test Starscream's anger, packing some Energon and a few stray tools into his subspace and activating the ground bridge. He knew the way around the Harbringer like the back of his hand by now, and checked Starscream's usual haunts. The bridge was empty, as was his berthroom, which left just his lab, and the moment Ratchet stepped into the lab, a tool was thrown at his head. Ratchet ducked. "Starscream!" He yelled, and narrowly avoided another tool thrown at him.

Starscream stilled, holding a third tool in his hand, then dropped it. "You would have ducked," he hissed, and sat down heavily on his stool, going back to work. "What do you want?"

"I'm supposed to negotiate." Ratchet rolled his eyes and walked over, cautiously. When Starscream didn't pick up anything to throw, he figured it was safe. He stood behind Starscream and looked over his shoulder. "What are you working on now?"

"The remote for my groundbridge." Starscream held it up and looked at Ratchet. "It was damaged when your dear Prime dropped me under a fragging glacier and I had to walk for a week and a half to get to land again!"

"He didn't have a choice! And he wasn't the one that dropped you, Dreadwing did." Ratchet held his hands up. "Starscream, please. You have to know that the Apex armor will be safer with us."

"Will it?" Starscream hissed. "No, not this time Ratchet. I will not turn over my prize of the day." He poked a claw at Ratchet's chest. "This is my victory. My win."

Ratchet stared at him, then sighed. "...I'll do that thing that my glossa you really like."

Starscream stared back, mouth opening and closing, not working until he reset his vocals. "Are you trying to use sexual favors to influence my decision? Oh Ratchet, I never knew you were so...underhanded." He drew close to Ratchet, almost close enough to kiss, then shoved Ratchet back. "But that won't change my mind. As it is, I feel rather safe in that armor, and as I cannot fly I need every advantage I can get."

"Well if you'd let me replace your T-Cog-"

"You are my amica, not my surgeon!"
"I could be both, Starscream! Primus." Ratchet groaned and leaned back against a nearby counter. "Why won't you let me help you?"

"Oh because I love walking around in the dirt like a grounder!" Starscream said, glaring. "Why do you think, Ratchet? I don't..." He cut himself off, then crossed his arms and turned away. "I don't want you to see me. Like that."

"Starscream..." Ratchet softened his voice. "It's an easy surgery. It would take almost no time. You'd have full function within a few days. Look at Bumblebee, he's completely recovered."

"I don't want you to see me like that!" Starscream repeated. "I am keeping the armor....At least for now."

Ratchet sighed again and shook his head, knowing that was the best he was going to get anytime soon. He pulled away from the desk and went to Starscream, resting his hands on the seeker's waist. "Ok, ok..." He pulled the Seeker back against him, gently. "Keep it for now." He rested his head on Starscream's wing, and closed his eyes. "I'm just glad you're okay. When Optimus said you went under-"

"-when he and Dreadwing put me under-!"

"I thought I lost you." Ratchet let the weariness melt away. The grief. The mourning. It felt like a dream, but he had Starscream, right there, and relief washed over him. "I mourned," he added, almost a whisper.

They stood silently, just resting, and Starscream turned. He placed his hands on Ratchet's face, tilting it towards his. "My sweet Autobot," he mumbled. "You have fallen hard and fast, haven't you." He sighed and leaned in for a kiss.

"I have," Ratchet said, when their kiss, tender and slow, broke.

"As have I, damn you." Starscream closed his eyes and leaned against the Ratchet. For awhile they could stand together and pretend that, in the end, things would turn out okay. Even if they were both experienced enough to know that wouldn't be the case.
Finding a new autobot was a miracle. They were a bot down, and when they'd found the image of the escape pod on the internet, they had to investigate, even if it was a Decepticon.

"Maybe we should bring Wheeljack," Arcee suggested, and Ratchet shook his head.

"Even if Bulkhead were fine, after that revenge stunt? No," He shook his head.

"I can't believe I'm about to say this...but fine. What about Starscream?" Arcee narrowed her eyes. "At the least, if it's a 'con then he could convince them to hold fire long enough for us to offline them."

"And he's got the armor. Even if it's an autobot, he can stand up to it." Cliffjumper nodded, and Ratchet shook his head again.

"So it's Wheeljack, who disobeys orders, or my courtmate, who is none-too-pleased at the moment?" Ratchet rolled his eyes. "Brilliant."

"I believe we can handle this without Wheeljack or Starscream's help," Optimus said. "Still..If it is an autobot, they may be in distress. Ratchet, bring your medical kit."

His medical kit, Ratchet thought as he went to fix it, had seen more use in the past half a year than it had in quite a long time.

The new autobot, while young and impressionable and hot headed as any bot that Ratchet had seen in a long time, was still a gift for them. He would calm down in time, they were all sure. He just needed guidance and, luckily, he looked up to Optimus with so much enthusiasm, perhaps too much, that any word given was law. Hero worship was putting it mildly.

In the end he was eager to please and happy to learn. It would just take him time.

Still, Optimus had suggested that Starscream wait a bit before coming to the base. Reluctantly, Ratchet agreed. The young autobot was young and much less...forgiving than the others. He would likely take the news badly. It wasn't every day that the Decepticons former second in command turned neutral, after all.
Unfortunately, they wouldn't have the luxury of waiting.

When Rafael informed them of the red Energon, Optimus pulled Ratchet aside, quietly, where Smokescreen couldn't hear them. "Ratchet. I feel that it may be best for us to enlist Starscream's help on this particular mission. He among us has the most experience with Energon."

"Agreed." Ratchet sighed. "I will comm him... in private, away from...new audials."

"Very good, but not necessary. It is time for our newest team mate to get his alt form anyway," Optimus said, giving Ratchet's shoulder a small pat before going to give the team his orders. Ratchet made his way to the main panels again, waiting until Smokescreen and Jack had left to open a comm line to Starscream.

"Ratchet to Starscream."

"Starscream here, what is it?" Starscream hissed. "I was just about to send you a message."

"We have discovered-"

"Red energon? Yes, I saw it as well. I suppose you're going to be wanting my help, then." Oh Ratchet could hear the smirk in his voice.

"That would be why we're calling."

"So professional Ratchet. Very well. Send me the coordinates, and I will meet you there."

"Sending them now."

"Why do we need his help again?" Arcee muttered when they ground bridged there and Starscream was waiting, armor in hand. Bumblebee whirred, and Arcee sighed. "We could handle this ourselves, easily-"

"Except I seriously doubt that, Arcee." Starscream slapped the armor against his chest, and it engulfed him. "Do you know just how volatile red Energon is? The wrong energy frequency and it blows up. It is rare for a reason. Now then. Are you climbing up, or am I?" Starscream pointed up.

In the end, it was them, and Optimus commed Ratchet to send in Cliffjumper for back up, that Starscream was there, and they needed help. Unfortunately for them, their newest team mate gravely misunderstood, and raced through.  

"Oh Primus - Rafael man the bridge!" Ratchet said, before running after Smokescreen. "Smokescreen!"

"So you're Starscream?" Smokescreen said, barreling through the gate. "I thought you'd be taller!"

"Smokescreen, stand down!" Optimus ordered, but the younger bots weapons were already powering up. "Smokescreen!"

"Listen to your prime, autobot!" Starscream hissed, as Smokescreen clipped something onto his
wrist. "Before you make a mistake!"

"Smokescreen, don't!" Ratchet called as he arrived, and Cliffjumper was just two steps ahead of him, racing for the younger bot, but they were all too slow.

The phase shifter activated, and Smokescreen charged Starscream. He jumped up, and Starscream didn't even brace himself until the foot passed through his armor, hit him, and they both passed through and out the back. Smokescreen landed on his feet looking all too pleased, but Starscream was tossed back and skidded to a halt on his wings.

Now his wings were worthless and sore.

"Where did he get the phase shifter?" Ratchet demanded, looking at Cliffjumper, who rubbed the back of his head. "Smokescreen!"

"Aww c'mon, that was a great plan!" Smokescreen said, looking at Ratchet, and onlineing a weapon to point at Starscream. "We got him, didn't we?"

"Smokescreen, Primus' sake, lower your weapon!" Arcee yelled. "You're pointing it at Ratchet's courtmate!"

"..Wh..what?" Smokescreen looked up at Arcee above him. Then at Starscream. And then at Ratchet.

Ratchet had reached him by then, and he grabbed Smokescreen's arm, pushing it up so it wasn't aiming at Starscream. "And if you had listened, this wouldn't be happening!" He snapped. Ratchet let Smokescreen go and went to Starscream, helping him up. "Starscream-"

"I'm fine!" Starscream jerked away, dusting off his chest. "Hmph. Takes more than a kick to cause me any harm, though I may have some choice words for your new friend."

"You and Optimus both." Ratchet looked up as the three above them retrieved the shipping container that held the red energon.

"Oh, but not you?" Starscream raised a hand and ran a claw over Ratchet's lips.

"I'm afraid my words would not have the same impact as his own personal hero." Ratchet shook his head, took Starscream's hand, and kissed his fingers gently before dropping it. "You're sure that you're okay?" He asked, quietly.

Starscream chuckled and nodded. "Yes, sweet Ratchet." He raised his other hand and patted Ratchet's cheek. "I am fine. Nothing my own systems aren't already repairing." He lowered his hand.

Ratchet have a quiet sigh of relief. "Alright then. Back to business. Do you think you can bring some of your equipment to the base to refine the energon?"

"Two groundbridges would be too much for the energon, I think, so that can be arranged." Starscream shrugged and looked up. "Bumblebee! Be careful with that!" A high pitched whirr was his only answer. He lifted his hand and pressed the button on his remote for his groundbridge, and it opened with a swirl of green. "I shall meet you at your base in, oh, an hour or so then. And I expect this to be worth my time."

When he left, Ratchet turned on Smokescreen. "Now then, Smokescreen, we need to discuss protocol."
"I still can't believe that a decepticon is working for Optimus!" Smokescreen whispered, watching as Starscream and Ratchet set up something in the med bay. Wheeljack was nearby, splicing a shocking amount of cables together.

"That's not...exactly how it works." Cliffjumper nudged Smokescreen with his elbow. "Listen, kid, it's really complicated, but Starscream's not such a bad guy. Give them a break, alright? Arcee has enough bitterness about Starscream being here for everyone."

"I heard that," Arcee said from across the room, and Cliffjumper laughed. The two wheeler walked over, leaning against Cliffjumper. "...But Cliff is right. Starscream may be a real fragger, and nothing he's done has made up for the past but....He's helped a lot. And....he makes Ratchet happy."

"Oh Arcee, you do care!" Cliffjumper grinned, then laughed when Arcee punched his shoulder.

"I just don't get it. He's a con." Smokescreen frowned, but instantly brightened when Optimus walked into the room, and excitedly went to go speak to him. Cliffjumper and Arcee both shook their heads.

Starscream glanced over at Smokescreen and looked back at the filtering system he was setting up. "...Watch that one, Ratchet," Starscream said, focusing back on his world. He frowned. "...Blind hero worship is a dangerous thing."

"Optimus isn't Megatron," Ratchet said, almost instantly. "Where do you want this?" He held up a converter.

"I know that! And right there for now. Bring me the smolder." Starscream waved at the table. "This should work if we can control the energy output. Red energon is very volatile. Most natural mines of it explode, you know."

"You know, you're pretty smart for a 'con," Wheeljack said, grinning as he stood and brushed his hands together. "I thought Shockwave was the sciencey one."

"I am full of surprises. I used to do this for a living, you know." Starscream's wings twitched. He tightened a bolt on the filter, then nodded. "There, finished."

"And you made it all from scrap. Pretty impressive." Wheeljack nodded, the corner of his mouth twitching into a smile.

"Oh, I know I am," Starscream said, facing the Wrecker. "But you may say it as often as you like."

"Ha!" Wheeljack grinned. "Not bad on the eyes, either." When Wheeljack winked and wandered off, Ratchet stared, then looked at Starscream.

"Starscream-?"

"Oh I wouldn't do that without you, amica," Starscream said with a low chuckle, and he pressed himself against Ratchet. "Why, are you interested in interfacing with the Wrecker? While I watch? You know Wreckers. They're up for anything."
Ratchet sputtered slightly. "With Wheeljack! Primus, that would be-"

"A strut melting view. Unless you wanted to watch. Or wanted him to watch." When Ratchet twitched, Starscream grinned. "Oh no! Don't tell me. You little voyeur!" Starscream chuckled softly, his clawtips tapping over Ratchet's chest. "You like to watch, hmm? And be watched? You kinky thing you." He drew close. "Oh Ratchet, one of these days we will indulge every little fantasy you have. I look forward to seeing all the different sides of you."

"You are the worst," Ratchet muttered, but closed his eyes when Starscream kissed him. "Why are we doing this again?"

"Because we are simply full of bad ideas." Starscream glanced around the room. "Think the world could be disaster-free long enough for us to have a few minutes in your berth?" He asked, and Ratchet answered by grabbing Starscream's hand and dragging him off. As soon as they reached the room and the door was closed, Starscream had Ratchet pinned up against the wall and was doing terrible things against his neck with his lips.

"Primus," Ratchet muttered, his head falling back.

"No, just Starscream, but if that is how you wish to refer to me, I accept," the seeker said, one hand snaking between them, to Ratchet's interface panel. "Any objection to a quick one?"

"None at all," Ratchet said, engine revving, eager and ready to rid of the charge beginning to roll through him. Starscream hit his knees in front of Ratchet and tapped his panel, and Ratchet let them open, his spike pressurizing, his valve wet, and it wasn't fair how fast Starscream could do this to him.

Starscream took Ratchet's spike in hand, and pressed a kiss against the head, before swallowing him slowly. His intake relaxed when he reached the base, his hand flattening against Ratchet's hips, and a low groan shook Ratchet's frame over him. They had done this before, several times already, and Starscream was a fast learner, knowing just what to do to set Ratchet off.

Ratchet was a fast learner too, and he balled his fists at his side. He kept his hands off Starscream's helm, and he wouldn't even touch Starscream until Starscream lead him to do so. Even when Starscream looked up at him, almost grinning around his length, red optics bright, he didn't move, until Starscream pulled back.

"So patient, my medic," Starscream purred, and took Ratchet's hand. He lead it to a wing, and then took the other and lead it to his helm, before mouthing at his length again. "I shall reward that."

"Frag," Ratchet said, static creeping in his voice as he shuddered, and his hips canted forward slightly as Starscream moved back down his spike again. His head fell back, his optics offlined, and he fell into pure sensation, warmth around his spike and, oh primus, fingers in his valve.

Starscream wiggled his fingers in Ratchet's valve, each movement getting a little deeper, and he curled them against a inner node and Ratchet's legs shook. Ratchet's fingers dug into his wing, and Starscream wondered, distantly, if Ratchet understood the gravity of letting him touch Starscream's wings. Well, that was for another time.

He added another finger to Ratchet's valve, and he curled them all again, pressing against another node, then another. He kept Ratchet guessing with his movements, and Ratchet arched off the wall slightly.

"Starscream."
Starscream pulled back, looking up at Ratchet. "Already? Tsktsk my dear Ratchet. We simply must work on your endurance." He nuzzled against the spike before him and wrapped his lips around the tip, sucking. He got a small warning before Ratchet overloaded, and he used his free hand to keep Ratchet's hips against the wall as transfluid filled his mouth and slid down his intake. Starscream swallowed it all, save for the few drops that slipped out of the corner of his mouth. He pulled his fingers out of Ratchet's twitching valve and ignored the lubrication running down his hand and arm and dripping onto the floor.

Ratchet moved his hand from Starscream's helm to the side of his face, fans working hard, panting to intake air to attempt to help cool his body. "Starscream..." He had to reset his vocalizers, and he stepped forward, knocking Starscream off balance and onto the floor with a yelp. He hit his knees and grabbed Starscream's legs, pulling them over his shoulders and diving between the seeker's legs, swiftly returning the favor.
"You're making a joke."

"I'm not!" Ratchet was actually grinning. Much had happened in the last few days, while Starscream had been gone, and while they'd stayed in comm contact, Ratchet had too much to say, and it was best that Starscream just came to be caught up.

They were sitting Ratchet's berth room, and Starscream was sitting sideways in Ratchet's lap, looking up from a data pad that was connected to the sensors watching the red energon. Privacy and productivity! It didn't get much better than that.

"The Star Saber, a message from Alpha Tiron, what even is an Omega key?" Starscream raised a brow as Ratchet's handpatted his thigh. The medic was more excited than Starscream had seen, well, since his return from an assumed death.

"I don't know but, Starscream, it's the best chance we have to get Cybertron." Ratchet laughed, light hearted, and he nuzzled against the side of Starscream's face. "Can you imagine it? We'd all be home."

"Ratchet," Starscream said, turning off the data pad and leaning back to look at Ratchet properly. "Try to not get ahead of yourself."

"How can I not? Imagine it Starscream. Even Vos could be reborn, just as it was-" Ratchet was cut off when Starscream pressed his hand over his mouth.

"Not as it was," Starscream corrected. "Our planet will never be the same, Ratchet. We have lost too much and too many. Though, if we are lucky, all of us will have learned a lesson." He scoffed. "But do not make the mistake of thinking that everything will be as it was." He removed his hand from Ratchet's lips, and pressed a kiss against them.

"How can I not be excited though, Starscream?" Ratchet said when Starscream leaned away. "Think of it. No more being on Earth, no more fighting and scavenging-"

"You think there won't be more fighting?" Starscream rolled his eyes. "Ratchet, do you know anything of the universe? There will always be fighting. There always was. But think of it. We have no government, we are all only warriors now. There's no one to command, and the sides won't agree on what path to take. There will be more fighting until one side gives up or come to a tense agreement."

"Do you really think that?"

"I know that." Starscream scoffed.

"We have a Prime-

"Which means nothing to Decepticons and, likely, the neutrals. Do not forget, dear Ratchet. Autobots fought as well. I am sure there are, will be, neutrals that blame you as well as Megatron
for the destruction of our world. As for scavenging... Cybertron only had so much Energon. We will still have to search elsewhere for it."

"Can't you just let me have this?" Ratchet groaned. He'd been so excited, still was, but Starscream was right, and that put a small damper on his mood.

"Oh you can have it Ratchet. I just don't want you to be disappointed. And as it is, how are you supposed to give Cybertron new life from here?" Starscream raised a brow, then sighed and tugged Ratchet down for a kiss. "I'm sure you all will figure it out."

"You know how to bring a bot down." Ratchet sighed.

"Then allow me to raise your...spirits," Starscream said, shifting in Ratchet's lap so that he was kneeling. He gently placed his hands on Ratchet's chest and pressed Ratchet down to the berth, leaning over to kiss him, when the speaker in the room came on.

"Ratchet please report to the ground bridge," Optimus said. "I have decoded the location of the first Omega Key."

Starscream's head hit Ratchet's chest with a dull thunk, and Ratchet groaned, but cleared his throat to answer. "On my way Optimus," he stated, and when the line was dead he looked at Starscream. "Duty calls."

"You can make it up to me later," Starscream said, pulled Ratchet to his feet, and they went out together.

Unfortunately, Ratchet wouldn't have a chance to make it up to Starscream for some time. While they retrieved the first Omega Key, losing the Star Saber in the process, they lost the second one to Knock Out of all people. The autobots retrieved the third one, admist an explosion trap planted by Dreadwing. That left them with two of four, the last one being decoded. While they had the advantage, none of them knew how long that would last, or what would happen if they did not find the fourth one and get the second from the Decepticons.

Starscream kept an audial turned to the conversation going in front of the ground bridge as he sealed the cube of red energon, the first of several doses that the crystal had given. He wasn't an autobot, but apparently had gained enough trust to be there as the autobots argued. He had made himself useful, that was the truth, and, really, that was what Starscream was best at.

"A couple of victories aren't going to make you a legend," Arcee lectured to the beaming Smokescreen. "You need to remember, that not every mission ends in success. Not for me, not for Bee, not even for Optimus."

Well, she had a point, Starscream mused as he set a new chunk of energon to filter.

"We've gained relics, like today, and we've lost some. We've also lost friends. We've even lost a world! But this time we get a do-over. We have a chance to bring back Cybertron, but we all have to be in sync. We ned to be a team. This isn't about you or your destiny."

"But I got it back!" Smokescreen frowned.
"Arcee, you have made your point," Optimus said, turning from the console, but the two wheeler shook her head.

"He needs to hear this Optimus. Today was a win, but he can't let that go to his head." She looked back at Smokescreen. "You might actually become a great warrior one day. And I hope you do. But that begins and ends with putting the team first, not your scorecard."

"There's nothing I wouldn't do for you guys!" Smokescreen gestured at them.

"Then stop being a hero, and start being an autobot," Arcee finished.

Smokescreen stared at Arcee. "You know what - fine! Maybe I'm just not good enough to be an autobot." He turned and transformed, racing off.

"Good job Arcee," Cliffjumper said, and Arcee shook her head.

"Next time Optimus tells you to stop, maybe you should listen," Ratchet said.

"Someone had to say it," Starscream said, and they looked at him. "Oh come now. Arcee was much nicer about it than I would have been. There weren't even any blows thrown."

"Great. Starscream agrees with me. What a joy." Arcee huffed and crossed her arms.

"I'll bring him back," Bulkhead said, but Optimus held up a hand.

"Smokescreen is young. And has much to learn. Right now he just needs to clear his thoughts." Optimus looked towards the exit, then went back to his decoding.

"What he needs a good smack to put him in his place," Starscream muttered. "It worked for me, didn't it." He paused as he adjusted the filters coding. "..Perhaps not the best example."

"What was that?" Ratchet asked, looking at Starscream.

"Nothing, just thinking aloud." Starscream raised his chin and his wings as he picked up the red energon cubes. "Here, this is finished."

"And so is this," Optimus said, stepping back with a smile. "The coordinates for the last Key." He smiled back at his team.

Starscream placed the cube down and went to stand next to Ratchet as the medic spoke. "...Is it?"

Optimus turned, and frowned as it was not coordinates that appeared on the screen, but pits of a picture, slowly unscrambling itself. "Perhaps it's a layer of...secondary encryption," he said, but it seemed to be figuring itself out without any input from him.

They were silent, watching as the image focused, and they stared.

"Smokescreen?!" Bulkhead explained.

"Is this that hotshot's idea of a joke?" Arcee said, narrowing her eyes.

"I think, more likely," Starscream spoke up, and the team looked at him, "is that the answer is inside him. In here." He tapped the side of his head.

"Or maybe he knows where the key is," Cliffjumper said, and Arcee turned.
"What, and he never bothered to mention it?"

"I have to agree with Starscream on this one," Bulkhead said. "The kid wouldn't keep information like that from us."

"Unless he is the key itself, without knowing it," Ratchet added.

"Whatever the case he could be in grave danger," Optimus said and raised a hand to his radio. "Smokescreen, return to base immediately." When there was no response, he tried again. "Optimus to Smokescreen."

"He may have deactivated his comm link," Ratchet said, and Optimus turned to the medic.

"Locate his position and prepare the ground bridge. We cannot let him be alone, especially if the decepticons have decoded this last image as well." Optimus nodded. "Autobots. Be ready."

When they found him, they arrived just in time to watch Soundwave drag Smokescreen through a ground bridge. When the team arrived back at base, they were shocked to see Starscream and Ratchet both working.

"He was likely taken on board the Decepticon warship," Starscream said, eyes darting over screens, fingers a flurry on the keyboard.

"Tracing his signal though the shielding will be impossible." Ratchet looked at Starscream, then at Optimus.

"Continue monitoring all frequencies," Optimus said, frame tense. If he'd left Bulkhead bring Smokescreen back before, if he had stopped Arcee from talking...no. No time for regrets. He shook his head. 'Far more than Smokescreen's fate may be at stake.'

"I have a few ideas," Starscream said, opening up a new program and hastily typing away. "I do recall a few weakness in the Nemesis that we hadn't the resources to repair."

"If the Decepticons have Smokescreen, they likely have already decoded the final entry," Ratchet said.

"I can do nothing from here," Starscream said, frustrated. "I must go back to my ship."

"Since when have you had a ship?" Cliffjumper said, and Starscream's wings twitched.

"That is none of your concern," Starscream snapped at Cliffjumper, then looked at Ratchet. "Here, a remote link to the computer on board. Do try to keep it open while I sync our systems." He left the program open and went to the ground bridge, typing in the coordinates and starting it up. "Keep in touch." Starscream left quickly, and when the bridge closed, Arcee spoke up.

"...He's really helping, isn't it." She looked to the side, frowning, feeling like this was all her fault.
Starscream was back onboard the harbinger and immediately went to the bridge. He opened the partner program of the one he'd set up in the autobot outpost, and a progress bar formed on the screen as a connection formed between them, piggy backing on various human signals. The ship itself was a huge conductor for the signals, strengthening them, making the program that much faster.

In the end, hours later when the two were synced, it didn't matter. Smokescreen escaped, returned to base, and was entirely full of himself....and rightfully so. It was no easy task to escape Megatron's clutches. Starscream knew that much.

"Oh good. Then before you all celebrate, might I have a word with Optimus and Ratchet?" Starscream asked over a comm. "I will send the coordinates of where to meet."

At the base the two looked at each other and nodded. "We will meet you there shortly," Ratchet said, as Optimus ordered the Omega Keys put away in their vault, before the Prime and Medic went through the new groundbridge.

Starscream was a bit late, showing up a few minutes later in a ground bridge flurry, and almost dropped to the ground when both of the autobots turned weapons on him. "It's only me!" He hissed, and the weapons lowered.

"Sorry," Ratchet said, swords changing back to hands. Starscream approached them slowly, and took Ratchet's hand, giving it a small squeeze before retreating, and he faced the two autobots.

"What is it, Starscream?" Optimus asked, curious now.

"I think it's time that I betrayed the Autobots," Starscream said simply, reaching into his subspace and pulling out a cube of red Energon. "Don't you?"

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter today because I thought that little cliffhanger was a nice place to end because I'm a terrible person.
I promise that Starscream isn't a bad guy, he's not going to betray the autobots. and that he does have a plan.

Of course from here on out it's heavy canon divergence. There's a lot of plans coming up!
"What?!" Rathet said, taking a step back, and one of Optimus' weapons onlined.

"Oh relax, it wouldn't for real." Starscream waved a hand in the air. "But Optimus, how do you plan on getting yourself and your merry little gang to Cybertron to actually use the Omega Keys?"

When Optimus didn't answer, Starscream nodded. "As I thought. Here is my proposal." He shifted the energon in his hands. "I take the keys as a gift to Megatron, get into his good graces, feed you information from the inside, and when Megatron goes to use the keys himself, you attack. Megatron goes down, we get Cybertron, and this war ends all in one swoop." He smiled, satisfied with himself as the two autobots just stared. "Well?"

"Are you mad?!" Ratchet yelled. "Going back to Megatron? what's to say he won't just offline you and take the keys?!"

"Ha! He wouldn't. I am far, far too useful alive, even as I am." Starscream chuckled, but it died. "You autobots can't do this for much longer. You can't afford not having someone on the inside. The timing is right. Megatron will be desperate now, I will seem like a gift on a crystal platter, and it will give you all the information you could, or would, ever need."

"We cannot ask you to do this, Starscream," Optimus said. "The risk is too great."

"You're not asking me. I am offering," Starscream stated, resting his hands on his hips. "And yes, the risk is great, but so are the rewards." He held up a hand, rubbing his thumb and index servo together. "It will not be easy by any means, but if I survived thousands of years under Megatron's ridiculously tight grip, I can survive for a few days."

"It would be dangerous-" Optimus started, but Ratchet stepped forward.

"Absolutely not!" Ratchet grabbed at Starscream. "Starscream what are you thinking? Going back there? To that? Do you understand what he'll do to you if he finds out?"

"I understand it better than most, Ratchet." Starscream peeled Ratchet's hands off him, and held them, tightly. "Listen, Ratchet. This is the only option you, any of them, any of us....This is the only option we have."

"Starscream, it's dangerous," Ratchet whispered. "I don't want you going out there, getting hurt."

"Dangerous is what I do best." Starscream pressed a kiss against the top of Ratchet's head and looked at Optimus. "Well, what do you think, Prime?"

Optimus was quiet for a long while before finally speaking. ".I cannot ask you to do this, Starscream. But if you are offering, I accept your aid."

"Optimus!" Ratchet said, looking at the Prime.

"Excellent," Starscream said in the same instant. "Very well, there are a few things we need to set up, then. The rest of your team can't know about this. It must seem real, so if we face each other
they must fire on me. Second...you both will have to act convinced and possibly surprised that I
lured you here, then turned on you. As far as they know, all of this would have been an act."
Starscream looked back at Ratchet, frowning slightly. "Even us."

"Starscream-" Ratchet started.

"But it wasn't. Not for a minute." Static crept at the edge of Starscream's voice as he lifted his
hands to Ratchet's face. "Never was it false, Ratchet. You must remember this, no matter what
happens. Understand?"

"Starscream..."

"And you, Optimus." Starscream looked at Optimus. "You must keep him safe. If Megatron finds
out, he will undoubtly target Ratchet first. To harm you as well as keep me in check."

"I will protect Ratchet. He is my friend, and a member of my team." Optimus nodded. "But
Starscream, you are the one I am worried about. If Megatron does find out, I doubt we have the
resources to save you, and if you are on the Nemesis-"

"It will be cloaked so you can't even attempt. I am fully aware of this." Starscream waved a hand in
the air, but it had started to shake.

"Starscream, there has to be another way," Ratchet said, quietly.

"But there isn't, my dear medic." Starscream pressed a kiss to Ratchet's forehead. "Now then, when
your team asks, I lured you both into a false calm, then attacked and raced through the
groundbridge when you called for it to reopen, drinking the red energon."

"This is a colossally bad idea, Starscream," Ratchet whispered as Optimus called back to the base.
"Starscream..."

"Promise me," Starscream said, face inches from Ratchet's as the groundbridge opened. "Promise
me that you will still love me when this is over?"

"Always," Ratchet said, grabbing onto Starscream. He held him tightly. Their kiss was desperate,
longing, and both knew it could be, and likely was, the last they would share for a long while.
They both made it count.

As soon as Starscream pulled away, he punched the side of Ratchet's head. The medic went down.
"Starscream-" He started, but Starscream had pulled a cube of red energon from his subspace and
downed it. Ratchet reached down Starscream and time slowed for the seeker, Ratchet seeming to
freeze in place. Optimus was standing, a bolt of energon just leaving his gun but aimed off at the
side and not at all toward Starscream, going slowly before freezing in place as well.

"Do remember me as I was, Ratchet," Starscream mumbled, and he reached into his subspace. He
pulled out a small datachip and he placed it in Ratchet's hand before walking through the open
bridge. He knew exactly where to go, exactly how to open the vault, and he slashed it open, pulling
it apart. Omega keys in hand, he went back through the portal, passed by Optimus and Ratchet, and
ran.

All any of them saw was a blur racing by, and by the time Starscream slowed enough to open his
groundbridge and not have to wait an eternity, he was far, far away, and completely off their
sensors.

It was time for the show to begin.
The Harbinger and Nemesis were still connected, and it was easy for Starscream to ground bridge onto the ship. Avoiding the patrols were easy. They hadn't changed, all this time, and he found himself on an empty bridge. Good. Perfect. This was going well already.

He leaned against the panel, watched front door, and waited until it slid open. Megatron himself was walking in, speaking over his shoulder to Dreadwing, the brute. "I cannot allow Optimus Prime to be the one to revitalize Cybertron. We will locate the autobot base, invade it, and retrieve the Omega Keys."

"Oh been there, done that," Starscream said, and Megatron faced him, and glared. "Please pardon my unannounced visit, Lord Megatron," he said, bowing lowly. Dreadwing drew his weapon and aimed it at the seeker, but Megatron stopped him. "I have come bearing...a peace offering." He held up the keys and fanned them out. All four keys within his grip.

Megatron didn't stand a chance against such a gift.

"Few gifts of this caliber come without a price," Megatron said, approaching Starscream. "So tell me, Starscream. What do you want in return?"

"Only to be a Decepticon once more, my lord." Starscream knelt and bowed over himself, laying the keys out before him.

"Dreadwing is my first lieutenant now," Megatron stated, gesturing at the blue mech.

"I accept that much has changed during my absence," Starscream said, looking up. "I only wish to serve you, my one true master, in any way that you deem fit." He tried to make himself small, helpless, and eager, all the things that Megatron liked to see in his followers.

"I am impressed by your accomplishment, Starscream," Megatron admitted, "and know that I will put your offerings to good use, whatever the outcome."

"Outcome? Of...what?" Starscream asked, nervous now.

"See to it that Knock Out is extracted," Megatron said, looking at Dreadwing. "I will escort Starscream to the medical bay myself." He took Starscream by the arm, roughly pulled him his feet, and lead him out of the room.

Oh frag. Starscream hadn't anticipated this. A corticol-psychic patch? He only hoped that Megatron would skip over a large amount of his memories, or assume that he was acting a part to secure his life.

Thankfully, the only memories that Megatron focused on concerned himself. Starscream's self coronation. His assassination attempt. Plotting with Airachnid and his clones. Megatron leaving him in the cave.

He really did need to stop thinking out loud.

"I don't want to play this game anymore!" Starscream said, voice echoing in his own mind. "Take the keys! We can pretend I was never here."

"No, Starscream. There are only two outcomes based on what I find here in your twisted, little mind." Megatron loomed over him. "If you are not worthy of rejoining the decepticons, then you will perish by my hand."

"Is that really necessary?" Starscream laughed nervously. "A good trouncing usually straightens me
"Not this time. You have not learned before. I doubt you will do so now." Megatron turned, watching more of Starscream's memories.

It was incredible that Starscream bluffed his way through every memory. It was by the grace of Primus that Megatron did not examine all his memories. This was Starscream's great act yet, and it would be his masterpiece of Deception.

Starscream knew how to play the game. He knew how to handle those who hated him, more so now than ever. and he would survive this.

"I knew it. I knew this would happen!" Arcee yelled. "I told you he would betray us!"

"Arcee that's enough," Cliffjumper whispered. They both looked at Ratchet, who was sitting on a berth in the med bay, and all of them went silent.

"He probably used the keys to buy his way back in with Megatron," Arcee said, quietly.

"What, without selling to the highest bidder?" Smokescreen asked. "I mean, that seems like the kind of thing he'd do. Try to sell them back to us."

"We'll probably get another message," Bulkhead said, shaking his head. "I have obtained information blah blah blah bring medical kit', you know?"

"Probably." Arcee placed her face in her hand when the comm signals pinged. "You've got to be kidding me."

"..It is not Starscream," Optimus said, turning to the console. "...It is Dreadwing. And he wants to meet with us. Autobots....roll out."

Starscream sat in the medical bay, fingers laced together, and he rested his lips against them. Elbows on knees, feet on bottom of the berth, staring at the door. His mind worked, and he perked when he got a small, dim message on private comm, disrupted from distance and the shields of the Nemesis.

'We-001ve sp--e br-dge.'

His side ached from the T-Cog replacement, but his spark soared. Ratchet was safe. The autobots had a way to get to Cybertron. Dreadwing was dead on the floor near him, by Megatron's hand, and the warlord had left, leaving Starscream alone.

Part of his mind was already plotting, and he was so engrossed with his own thoughts that he didn't hear the door open, didn't hear the foot falls nearing him, and didn't notice the vehicon until he touched his shoulder.
"Commander Starscream?"

Starscream jumped, glared, and hissed. "Do not call me that," he warned. "I am in no command right now." He crossed his arms, angry enough about that.

"I am sorry comm- er, Starscream. Sir." The vehicon shifted nervously. "Just...wanted to see you with my own optics. Heard you were back."

"Yes, well." Starscream stood. "There was no need. Here I am." He paused, then narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

"Why what, sir?"

"Why are you checking on me? Did Megatron send you?" He hissed, walking towards the vehicon, who backed up quickly, holding up his hands.

"N-no sir!" The vehicon tensed when he was back against the wall, and Starscream narrowed his eyes.

"...You...are the one who reported me dead." Starscream's eyes widened, then narrowed. "Why?"

"S-sir. There are those of us who...would prefer following you to Megatron," the vehicon sounded terrified, and within good reason. Soundwave heard everything that went on the ship.

"Are there now," Starscream stated. "..hmph. Dangerous fools." He leaned down, close to the vehicon's audial. "Are there truly? Those that would follow me to the end of this war?" When the vehicon nodded, Starscream chuckled. Oh, this was too perfect. "Fractures in the ranks...bring them to me, then. Slowly, over time. Only those you can trust. The end is within our sights."

He stepped back and the vehicon nodded and left quickly, leaving Starscream alone again.

This was going to work out better than he'd hoped! Yes...the vehicons were an unused resource and, damn his own hide, but Break Down had shown him that they were more than just empty drones.

It was about time they took ahold of their own destiny. They had a spark just as well as he did, and he, the decepticons, everyone, had wronged them. Pits, did they even have names? Megatron never addressed them. Neither had Starscream.

Well, that was due to change.

Starscream looked forward to single handedly turning the Decepticon world on it's head.

Chapter End Notes

Starscream's about to find out that when he actually puts his mind to things and doesn't just, y'know, YELL his plans out loud, that they can go surprisingly well.

also, judging by my outline, we have about... 6 or 7 chapters left, then the epilogue. And then there's some one shots I have planned that take place after, and maybe some little mini sequels that take place in this same universe. :3
While the Decepticons had all four keys, there was still what to do with them, and if Megatron had any idea he was keeping it a secret. It held his focus and, thankfully and more importantly, it held Soundwave's.

"Listen," Starscream whispered to the newest batch of vehicons that were now under his command. "For one mistake means the end of all of us. If I hear of betrayal, you will regret ever coming online." He narrowed his eyes, and none of them faltered. "...I have come to the epiphany that you all have been grossly wronged. Should we win this battle, when it happens, you will, all of you, be free to do as you will. We will remove the Decepticon symbol."

"With all due respect sir," one said, stepping forward. "We wouldn't know what to do with that freedom. We'll follow you to the end."

"Your name is?"

"...My serial is X900223, sir."

"...Well that won't do. I want all of you to think of names for yourselves. Of course, do not refer to each other as such just yet, but...you are bots. You have minds. And it is time you began to use them."

"Sir," they all said, saluting, and Starscream waved them off.

"Wooooah, Starscream, what's this, some orgy?" Knock Out asked as he walked in past the leaving vehicons. "And you didn't invite me? I'm hurt."

"I'll invite you next time," Starscream said with a scoff, and looked at Knock Out. Knock Out....now he was a reasonable bot. Almost as ambitious and bloodthirsty as Starscream. Certainly receptive to the right ideas, put in the right way.

"Ha! We'll see." Knock Out grinned. "Anyway, our esteemed Lord and Master wants us to figure out the keys. So." He gestured at the door. "Shall we?"

"I've been meaning to speak to you anyway," Starscream said, standing up and walking out with Knock Out.


"Possibly." Starscream snickered. "I will tell you once we are with the keys."

They walked in silence until they reached the lab, and the guards outside nodded at them. Starscream noticed the subtle scratch in paint of one of them. That was one of his. Oh good.

"You know Starscream, it's a miracle you're back." Knock Out picked up a scanner and flicked it on. "It'll make everything more normal around here. Though if I were you, I would have stayed away. Megatron has been rather testy as of late. Can you believe it? He even mussed up my finish."
He scoffed.

Starscream chuckled softly. "I believe it. Knock Out." He lowered his voice. "What would I say if I told you that I was up to my usual tricks?" He raised a brow.


"You have noticed the discord in the ranks, have you not?" Starscream took the scanner from Knock Out. "I have it in my mind to make use of that, and I have those that would follow me."

"Well if I had to choose between you and Megatron..." Knock Out grinned and winked. "Your finish is much better. What is even growing on his face? Moss? Such a travesty!"

"I have your support then?" Starscream smirked and began to run the scanner over the keys. "Good. Let's get to work, then."

When, in frustration, they hit the keys together, and then connected, revealed their destination...well, things went fairly fast from there. Starscream didn't have time to even attempt to contact the Autobots before the space bridge was activated, and he was standing on the deck of the Nemesis. He only hoped that the Autobots could find a way to the same place they were going, and win this battle.

It was entirely possible that it would be their last.

On the bridge they waited, and Soundwave fed various reports into the screen for Starscream to look over, and it was with a heavy spark that Starscream agreed to Soundwave's plan when Megatron called for reinforcements.

Frag, he was too deep, too fast, but he couldn't chance his cover until this was over. He ordered the vehicons out, ones that weren't his, just in case they were destroyed, and waited.

He wanted the end to come, wanted this to be other. He wanted to be through with this. He wanted to be in Ratchet's arms and recharge for a hundred years.

The hurt in his spark only grew as they traded the humans for the keys, and as he handed over Jack, Arcee whispered. "I will offline you myself for this", and Starscream didn't blame her in the least. Well, it meant that his cover stood, at least. As far as the team, minus Ratchet and Optimus, knew, he had betrayed them all.

Hate. He could deal with hate. He had dealt with that for a few thousand years. What were a few more days of it?

He tried to think of some way to get out of the situation that was swiftly growing worse. Now the Omega Lock was in their hands, and the Autobots were at the end of Vehicon guns, and they were sending the Omega Lock's power to Earth. Earth would be destroyed, and this was all his fault.

It was a relief when Optimus attacked, and Starscream could have died with glee at seeing Megatron's arm cut off, only to be replaced with a cold shock in his spark when Optimus lept over him and destroyed the Omega Lock. The feedback send a wave through the area, knocking everyone down. When the smoke cleared enough the autobot's space bridge was closing, and Starscream's frame was tense. It wasn't supposed to go like this.

"He will pay," Starscream hissed, and tensed when he heard Megatron laughing.
"No matter," Megatron said. "There is no place they can hide now. Soundwave! A ground bridge." Megatron grinned and shoved Knock Out away when the medic tried to examine his missing arm. "Let us go see what remains...and put a final end to the Autobots."

A chill settled around Starscream's spark but he faked the enthusiasm to skip through the bridge when it came, and they were back on the Nemesis. Among the chaos, Starscream got a message out, hidden in all the other signals and waves going out.

'Get out' Starscream sent as he and his legion of Seekers stood in place on the top deck. The message was too late. It was all he could have done. But it wasn't enough.

"Miss them," Starscream ordered, only to his seekers, knowing full well that they would follow his every order without question. When the Autobots retreated, he flew around, firing false shots at Fowler, hitting a few Insecticons.

There was a static shock of a message back from Ratchet. 'We're leaving. 5 minutes.'

Starscream swirled in the air. 'You have 3. Get to the Harbringer. Starscream out.' Starscream turned his attention to his seekers, only to see one fall. He looked up. Wheeljack. Slag it all. He had to handle this himself. He twirled in the air and few at the ship, firing his missiles, knowing full well that if they didn't hit Wheeljack, someone else would. When the Wrecker went down, he circled once before landing on the ship.

"Wheeljack, listen carefully," Starscream yelled as he landed on the front windshield. "You must allow yourself to be taken captive."

"Fragger!" Wheeljack yelled, scrambling out of his seat. The back of the ship opened and he stepped out, swords already drawn. "Knew you'd turn on us all!"

"Idiot!" Starscream jumped back as Wheeljack swung at him. "Listen! You are the only way I can get crucial information to the Autobots."

"The scrap are you talking about?" Wheeljack's mask slid into place.

"I am a double agent, you idiot!" Starscream glared, and Wheeljack's sword lowered a fraction. "I am the only thing keeping you autobots alive right now. Only Optimus and Ratchet know. You must keep the secret as well."

"I've had enough of your lies, Starscream," Wheeljack said, and turned slightly when two Vehicons landed. "Three on one. I can handle that."

"No need," Starscream said, pointing at the vehicons as they readied their weapons. "Stand down! Wheeljack, you have no reason to trust me, but you also have no choice." Starscream looked up as the Nemesis's main cannon was prepared. "I will arrange for your escape, but right now you must trust me."

"And why should I?" Wheeljack glared at him.

"If we wanted you dead, we would have shot you already. You are more useful to me, and to the autobots, alive. That, Wheeljack, is why."

They stared at each other, and finally, Wheeljack put his swords away. "..Alright. What do we do?"

"First, we take your prisoner. From there, we think on our feet." Starscream waved the vehicon's forward, and they each took an arm. "Do try to act the part of injured autobot. Listen and observe."
It was good that both Wheeljack and Starscream were both excellent speakers and excellent multitaskers.

"If you do not speak, I will force your words in other ways," Starscream hissed, tracing the tool over Wheeljack's chest, in the same pattern, until Wheeljack realized it as the alphabet. H. When he nodded slightly, Starscream added another letter. A. R. B.

"You can try," Wheeljack said. "Don't you remember how our last little dance went?" Wheeljack smirked. I. N. G. E. R. Harbinger. He nodded, and Starscream tapped twice against his chest.

"Oh dear autobot, this time is very different. How different, you cannot begin to comprehend."

"Try me." Wheeljack grinned, and cried out as the tool shocked him, hard, but not as hard as it could have been.

"Oh I will, Wheeljack." Starscream tapped out coordinates next.

"Okay, c'mon, seriously. Are you gonna stop tickling me anytime soon?" Wheeljack asked, grinning, and he choked slightly when Starscream grabbed his neck and pulled him back, resting his lips next to Wheeljack's audials. His claw scratched against Wheeljack's neck slightly, and Wheeljack felt something get embedded against the cables, stuck to them and hidden.

"I can only do so much inside," Starscream whispered. "It will be up to you and the Autobots to make the final move. You are a resourceful bunch. I'll do what I can from here. You all can handle the rest." Starscream pulled his knee up, roughly hitting Wheeljack in the torso, and the wrecker coughed and hung limp a moment.

"We'll get nothing from this one," Starscream announced, turning to his vehicons. "He is worthless. Put him in the smelter." He scoffed and lifted his head, marching out and leaving Wheeljack to his 'doom'.

It was easy for Wheeljack to escape, especially when the vehicons gave him an easy out, and it was shocking to realize that the decepticons were much more splintered than they thought. If Wheeljack had to guess, a good portion of the vehicons were pledged to Starscream already. Weird thought, Starscream actually doing shit right, actually having some pull among the Decepticon ranks. It had only taken him, what, the entire war to get his shit together?

As Wheeljack drove down the road towards the coordinates Starscream had given him, he laughed. Well, it was nice to know that Starscream was on their side. And wasn't that still just about the weirdest thing. Even Starscream was tired of Megatron's shit, he guessed. He didn't know what that would mean for the autobots in the or hell, what it would mean for Starscream and Ratchet, but there it was.

He saw the Harbringer long before he came up on it, and he transformed when he saw the distant cloud of dust kicked up from someone approaching. When it was closer he realized it was
Bulkhead and Bumblebee, and he strolled toward them.

"Jackie!" Bulkhead said, switching into his root form at a run, and he grabbed the other Wrecker. "We thought you were scrap!"

"Ha, well I'm not. C'mon Bulkhead, you think I'd let those cons get me?"

"Shoulda known." Bulkhead laughed and set Wheeljack down. "C'mon, let's get inside before they spot us."

They all exchanged greetings inside, all grateful to see each other, and Wheeljack tapped Ratchet on the shoulder, jerking his head to the door before leaving.

"Rafael, watch the screens for any sign of Optimus or Smokescreen," Ratchet said, before following Wheeljack. "Wheeljack, what is it?"

"Here." Wheeljack held out the small chip. "Gift from your boyfriend."

Ratchet sputtered. "Wheeljack-"

"Don't know what's on it, but he told me. I'm in on the big secret." Wheeljack winked. "He's playing Megatron for us, right? Don't worry, I won't tell the others."

Ratchet frowned and turned to a console in the hallway. He plugged the data chip in, and what showed up on the screen was a shock. "Detailed map of the Nemesis. Flight plans. Scans of Megatron's citadel...? This is..." Ratchet's fingers twitched. 'This is worth it', he was about to say, but nothing, nothing was worth Starscream's life on the line.

"Pretty heavy stuff." Wheeljack whistled. "That'll come in handy. Anyway, he's getting a nice big following too. Vehicons, those seekers. Said he's getting that red bot with the shiny finish too. Looks like we're not the only ones tired of Megatron's scrap."

"Don't tell anyone about this for now," Ratchet said quietly, shutting down the console and taking the data. "We can't let the others know-"

"Let the others know what?" Miko asked, looking up at Ratchet, and Ratchet jumped.

"I - you - Miko! How long have you been standing there?!" Ratchet demanded.

Miko shrugged. "Long enough to know that something's going on."

"It's not important," Ratchet said, walking off quickly. "I have..business elsewhere!" He said quickly, and Wheeljack shook his head.

"Don't worry about it lil Wrecker." Wheelajack laughed. "Ratchet's just testy, you know, with his courtmate turning on us and all." He kneeled down. "Listen, Miko. Be nice to Ratchet alright? This is hard on him."

"Alright alright." Miko sighed and crossed her arms. "...It just sucks, you know? He seemed so happy." She looked up at Wheeljack. "And I mean, even Starscream did."

"I dunno want to tell you kid." Wheeljack shook his head and shrugged with one shoulder. "Bots change, and Starscream has been through more than most people. Try not to worry about it right now. We need all hands on deck."

"All hands." Miko held up her fists. "Let's show those cons. Wrecker style."
“Wrecker style,” Wheeljack agreed, grinning.

Ratchet stumbled into Starscream’s berth room and slammed the door closed behind him. The lights were dim, but blinked on when he entered, and Ratchet leaned against the wall, reaching into his subspace. He pulled out the small chip that Starscream had left him with, and walked over to the personal console in the room, plugging it in.

The console came to life, and Ratchet watched the static. He’d already watched this file three times. Another one, seven times. Others he hadn’t touched yet, but he would, eventually, he was sure.

The static cleared and Ratchet saw himself, looming over the camera, faceplates flushed and vents loud. A hand came into view, patting his cheek, tugged him down into the camera for a kiss, then back, and Ratchet moved again, head thrown back, moaning Starscream’s name.

All from Starscream’s point of view. Copies of Starscream’s memories that he’d recorded and saved, and shared with Ratchet.

The screen went static, to quiet laughter, and Ratchet focusing on the screen, on Starscream’s face, before Starscream had looked down at their hands. Just sitting. Holding hands. Laughing quietly at some story one of them had told.

Memories of their best times. Primus his spark ached.

Static again. Memories chopped up fast and shaky. Sitting on the roof of the outpost, talking, holding hands.

Static. Ratchet just waking up before the camera zoomed on his face as Starscream leaned in for a kiss.

And there was an ungodly amount of video of Starscream watching Ratchet’s aft as he walked away.

Image after image, recording after recording, ending with Ratchet’s face in Starscream’s hands and the steady rumble of the seeker’s own engine, the slight scratch of his voice. ‘You know I love you.’

Ratchet balled his hands into fists. He had to be strong. Just a bit longer. With Starscream working from the inside and them from the outside, it would be almost no time until they took Megatron down, for good.

Then he could wake up every morning next to that insufferable seeker.

He sat there awhile, listening to the audio, before turning it off, retrieving the data chip, and storing it back in his supspace.

They had a war to win.

Chapter End Notes
Wheeljack has joined the party!
Starscream was....well apprehensive would be putting it mildly. Afraid was closer. How could he not be? This was a Predacon. A creature that, by all accounts, could and would tear him apart without any hesitation. And yet as soon as it had spotted Starscream, it had walked over, sniffed him, and proceeded to accept him.

Then, since it had found Starscream 'agreeable' and would be useful as a military acquisition, Megatron had ordered it under Starscream's command.

And that was how, after it had returned from a failed hunt for Wheeljack, and after the Autobots failed to take Darkmount, and after Optimus' surprising return, Starscream found himself standing on the deck of the Nemesis, staring up at the Predacon.

For a brief moment when Optimus had shown up, Starscream had been shocked, then full of indescribable glee. It this was the Autobot plan, it was a good one, and he took the hit from Ultra Magnus without even a flinch.

Still, things went to scrap. Like they always did. Why did he even bother to hope for anything else at this point? He was glad he didn't give the command for his vehicons and seekers to attack. It would have been a waste, and his head would have been in Megatron's hand, for good this time.

Still, it had been a win for the Autobots, and Starscream was gladdened for it. One step closer to the end, one step closer to being done with this. A shame, though. Darkmount had been such a nice tower. Lovely and high. A bit dark for his tastes, and not as graceful as what Vos had been, but still better than anything he'd seen since.

Starscream's attention was pulled back by a quiet growl. Oh. Right. The Predacon. He scowled at the beast, and fanned his wings. "Do not growl at me Predacon," he said, and the beast growled again, bearing teeth, before stretching out towards Starscream. He sniffed at him, then suddenly bumped against his chest.

"What do you want?" He growled, pushing the beast away, but the Predacon returned, sniffing at his chest. "What?!!" Starscream stepped back, then paused, and reached into his subspace. "What this?" He held up the small, solid cube of pink. He'd made it earlier in his quarters, a sour piece of candy that he'd craved. He'd eaten the rest, and a few pieces were all that remained. The Predacon perked slightly, and sniffed again, before opening it's mouth.

"...Seriously?" Starscream snickered and held the cube out. "Fine, try it then."

The Predacon took it surprisingly gently, and tossed it back into his mouth. It actually squeaked and reared slightly, wings twitching, before looking for more, sniffing around Starscream's body.
"Oh you like that do you?" Starscream turned the beast gently away. "Well I suppose I know how to get you to listen, now. There will be more, if you can follow orders. Understand?"

The Predacon flopped onto it's belly, tail flicking, wings fanned.

"I will take that as a yes." Starscream reached out, and patted the end of the Predacon's nose. "Good. Then...stay. Here. On the deck." Starscream pointed at the deck under their feet. "Understand? Stay."

The Predacon sighed deeply but didn't move, and Starscream made a mental note to make more candy. He twitched when another thought occured to him. Humans trained many kinds of animals to total loyalty. What did they do? He'd have to search the 'internet'.

When his next shift ended, rather uneventful really, he sat in his room, having already set up the candy on the far side of his desk. He read over various human articles, and scowled. Though violence and intimidation seemed to be the Decepticon way, he could see the advantages of praise over punishment. The evidence was clear and staggering.

It would make him seem...weakened. But he would figure a way to twist it to his advantage, especially if it worked and he gained the Predacon's loyalty. Yes... The Predacon would be a powerful asset for him. It was terrible that he'd have to sic it on the Autobots for now, to keep his cover, but there was much more that he could do.

Ha. Candy. Who would have thought that the skill of refining energon into sweets would do so much for him? At university it had been an easy way to gain favors from bots who needed a boost in their morale and were too busy to make it themselves or didn't know how. Now a days, not only did it gain him a courtmate, but a powerful weapon.

He pushed away from his console and crossed his ankles. By all accounts things were going well. The Decepticons were steadily losing, bit by bit, and the support of the forces under Megatron were dwindling. Each wave of battle, each lost mine, created a desperation in Megatron's actions, careful cracks in his mask.

Starscream rubbed at the side of his face. He had been the target of a lash of anger recently, but it was nothing compared to the beatings of the past. Oh yes, he could take a few hits and many more. Each failure he gave Megatron was a success for the Autobots.

For Ratchet.

He put a hand over his spark and closed his eyes.

Soon, he promised himself.

Soon.

His new duties involved less actual work and more...taming of the Predacon and overseeing and approving company registers. His off time was spent with the Predacon, with the added responsibility of bringing more vehicons over to his side. It was by some miracle that Megatron or Soundwave hadn't discovered his plotting. Starscream marked it up to the warlord being preoccupied with other things.
Or perhaps they thought he was just up to his usual tricks, doomed to fail.

"Predacon," Starscream announced, pulling a small candy from his subspace, and the Predacon perked. "Today we are going to try flight." He tossed it at the Predacon and ran for the edge, falling off it. He let himself soar in free fall before transforming and zooming back up. "Predacon! Follow me!" He called.

The Predacon looked up from his treat, now gone, and let out a roar before leaping into flight after Starscream. Starscream went slowly until the Predacon caught up, and then he flew ahead. He planned on putting the Predacon through its paces, see exactly what it could do, and it seemed more than happy to keep up with him.

Happy and able, Starscream noted, and eventually putting the Predacon through its paces turned to a simple flight, weaving through clouds. Condensation gathered on his wing tips but he flew on, and noted that Predacon took the position behind him and to his right. Good. He wouldn't have to teach the thing formations. It seemed to go on instinct or had learned it from watching the seekers and vehicons, and he didn't question it. It wasn't trying to challenge him and though he would have to discipline outbursts, he hadn't seen any.

A ping on his scanners caught his attention, a signal coming from...oh.

That same mine.

He changed his flight plan before he could stop himself, and the Predacon followed his cue. Good. It would keep following him then. It was a rather short flight, but he grew nervous the closer he got. It was a trap. It couldn't be Ratchet. But his spark fluttered all the same, and part of him had to find out who was waiting.

He changed into his root mode above the ground, flipping through the air and landing, weapons already onlining, only to lower when he saw Ratchet there.

"Ratchet," he breathed, and for a moment he forgot the world entirely as Ratchet motioned inside and ran into the darkness. "Wait- Predacon!" He spun around as Predacon landed and roared, and he stepped between it and the cave. "Stand down!" He demanded, and Predacon growled. "Predacon!" He repeated, and his wings raised, almost rattling.

Predacon growled again, then whined and lowered its head.

"Good. Good." Starscream reached out and pressed his hands against his nose. "Predacon. Stay out here and guard. Understand?" He pulled the rest of the candy form his subspace, holding it up. "Understand?" He repeated.

The Predacon whined softly and flicked his tail. When Starscream dropped the candy on the ground the Predacon began to eat, settling in front of the cave, and looking up and around between bites. That seemed like guarding to him, so Starscream left him, and ran into the mine.

He made it two turns before were hands on him and he was against the wall. His hands scrambled against the other bot, knowing full well who it was, and he offlined his optics as Ratchet kissed him, letting a low moan shake through his body. His spark fluttered as his claws gripped Ratchet's shoulders.

"Frag I miss you," Ratchet whispered when the kiss was broken. "Primus I'm glad you're okay. You are okay, aren't you?" He pulled back, hands feeling over Starscream's body. Ratchet scowled as his fingers met a small dent in the seeker's side.. "He hasn't...?"
"Nothing that hasn't been fixed," Starscream said, and grabbed Ratchet's face. "Ratchet, right now, just-"

"Just need you," Ratchet finished, and pulled Starscream flush against him. He had Starscream pinned against the wall, and he pressed one leg between the seeker's, thigh rubbing against his interface panel as his hands slipped all over Starscream's body. Fingers dipped into seams and joints, teasing and warming the body before him.

Starscream whined into the kiss, rubbing his hips against Ratchet's thigh. His spark fluttered as he leaned into the touches, arching against Ratchet when the medic found a particularly sensitive spot.

Ratchet broke the kiss to turn tender attentions to Starscream's neck cables, his frame heating with the tiny whines and moans that he pulled from the seeker. Starscream's head hit the wall behind him with a dull thunk and his inner fans started to work a bit harder to keep him cool. His fingers dug into Ratchet's shoulders when Ratchet slipped a hand between them, cupping it over Starscream's interface panel and rubbing over it gently.

"Ratchet please," he mumbled as it clicked open, and those fingers starting rubbing directly against his valve. He was already wet, his body as eager to join with Ratchet as his mind was.

"I wish we had time to do this properly," Ratchet whispered against Starscream's neck, one finger slipping into his valve. "When this is all over, we're not leaving our berth for a week."

"Only a week?" Starscream shuddered. "We really need to work on your endurance."

Ratchet laughed softly against Starscream's neck and nipped at a cable. He pulled back and fell back, pulling Starscream atop him. Starscream's wings fanned as he sat up, one hand on Ratchet's chest and the other sneaking down his body. Ratchet's interface panel snapped away, and his spike was already pressurizing as Starscream rubbed over it.

"How much longer can we do this?" Ratchet muttered, optics shuttering offline as Starscream stroked his spike. It had felt so long, and only been a few days. A few agonizingly long days. The seeker left Ratchet's spike long enough to stroke his own valve, gathering lubrication. Ratchet's vents hitched as Starscream smeared the lubrication over the length of his spike.

"As long as we need," Starscream whispered. He gave Ratchet a few more strokes before shifting over him. Their lips met in a rough kiss that softened after a few moments. "I wish this wasn't necessary, Ratchet," Starscream whispered, lips inches from Ratchet's. "But it is. For just awhile longer, amica." He sat up and sank down on Ratchet's spike slowly, easing back up a few times until Ratchet was entirely in him.

Ratchet raised his hands and rested them on Starscream's thighs, stroking up and down as Starscream's valve twitched around him. "Just a little longer," he whispered, and groaned as Starscream began to move his hips. Starscream leaned over him, rolling his hips in circles.

Neither of them lasted long, not like this, together for the first time in what had felt like forever, desperate for each others touch, and when they were both spent they just laid together, holding hands, giving each other small, lazy kisses. Starscream was pondering making the move for another round, and damn the consequences, when a voice snapped them both to reality.

"Trine leader?"

They broke their kiss and Starscream scrambled up, hands switching to guns, ready to offline whoever had stumbled across them, only to stare. He didn't recognize this bot.
"Who-" Ratchet started, standing, just as startled as Starscream.

"I am sorry to interrupt your coupling," the new bot said, a deep rumble in his voice, and Starscream kept staring. That was so familiar...

"...Predacon?" Starscream suddenly managed to get out, and Ratchet glanced at him.

"I would prefer Predaking," the Predacon said. Predacon. Predaking, Starscream reminded himself. Well this was a new and unexpected development.

"Starscream, no one can know-" Ratchet said, and Predaking tilted his head.

"...Secret courtship," Predaking stated, then nodded. "I will keep the trine's secret." He spoke with such conviction that Starscream was almost ready to believe him, but trine, what? What was he talking about?

"Trine?" Ratchet asked, sparing Starscream from having to ask.

"Trine-Starscream," Predaking stated, bowing slightly, resting a hand over his chest. "Trine leader provides, Trine leader protects. Trine leader leads in flight."

"And this morning when we flew..." Starscream stared. He hadn't thought a trine bond could be created with a Predacon. If he'd known, he wouldn't have flown alone with the Predacon. But...well, there they were and, looking in at himself he could feel the bond already there, in the back of his mind, unfinished, but started, and part of his coding was already singing and demanding to find a third for them.

On one hand, it meant that Predacon - Predaking, he reminded himself again, would be loyal to him above all. On the other hand it meant that he had to be even more careful, and he had to be wary of what he told Predaking. Where did the cons loyalties truly lie? With him or with Megatron?

"Starscream what is happening?" Ratchet mumbled as Predaking walked over to them. Primus, but he was tall, and he used his height, looking over Ratchet, before beginning to circle.

"He's judging," Starscream mumbled, and suddenly smacked his hand on Ratchet's back. "Stand up straight!" Ratchet immediately straightened, standing still.

"...Strong," Predaking finally decided, after a few circles around them.

"He is a strong courtmate," Starscream said. "Predaking, this is a secret. Do you understand?"

"I understand." Predaking nodded, accepting it as truth, while the seeker and medic struggled to accept Predaking standing before them.

Suddenly, Starscream snapped. "Of course. Evolution."

"Evolution?" Ratchet asked, and Predaking tilted his head at Starscream.

"Did you never find it odd that Predacon fossils were often found in multiples of three?" Starscream looked at Ratchet. "I was just thinking of what that femme Airachinid said, that she and the insecticons were related. What is to say that Seekers are not the descendants of Predacons?" Starscream smirked. "I certainly did not teach Predaking about trines."

"It is in my coding," Predaking said, proudly. "I did not have to be taught."

"Another bit of evidence for my theory." Starscream pressed a hand to his chest, proudly, before
waving it in the air. He paused, then looked at Ratchet. "...Ratchet. We need to go-

"I know," Ratchet said, quietly. He held out a hand and Starscream took it, curling his fingers around Ratchet's and nuzzling against the medic's face.

"It won't be long now. I promise." Starscream whispered, giving Ratchet a small kiss. "A few more weeks, at the most."

"Promise me you'll be careful," Ratchet said, squeezing Starscream's hand.

"I will keep him safe," Predaking said, and the two looked at him.

"Because of the trine," Starscream said, and laughed softly. How long had it been since he'd been any part of a trine? Ages. His school trines had always been shallow and passing, as they were, never strong enough to bond. Young bots experimented and until a certain age no trine was true and deep. Even when Starscream had reached trining age, he'd only ever found one other, but he was gone and Starscream had long ago settled with that fact that he would always be alone.

"Because of the trine," Predaking echoed.

Predaking made it a point to mention, though their bond and it startled Starscream to hear a voice in an long-unused part of his head, that Starscream should clean up before they returned, and they managed to find a lake. As Starscream scurbbed off transfluid and lubrication, he entertained questions from Predaking, and the bot had an endless amount of them, while revealing how he had come across this form.

So upon the first battles, and listening to Starscream, deep forgotten code had awoken in the predacon, and he had done his own research into his past, and into the past of Cybertron, though the databases were clearly biased.

"I would examine both sides before calling myself a decepticon," Predaking sneered as Starscream waded out of the lake. "Surely things could not have been so bad."

"They were, for some." Starscream flared his armor and shook himself, trying to get as much water out as he could. "After this war is finished, it won't matter." He waved a hand in the air. "You would do your best to not declare your loyalty to either side."

"I will be loyal to you, trine leader." Predaking nodded, changing into his alt form. He waited until Starscream had changed and gone airborne before following, wing beats disrupting the air behind them.

This was all an unusual beginning of a trine, but Starscream could work with it.

Chapter End Notes

You guys get today's chapter early because my nephew woke me up with crying.
Gotta love 18 months old, right?
And Predaking loves energon candy and you can't change my mind about that.

also happy to report that last night I finished the fic, so there should be NO problem with updates coming every day! It ended up being 4 chapters after this one, and then a little epilogue. And then there's a small one- or two-shot mini sequel I have planned, and some random various one shots.

Also sorry Starscream/Predaking is like my new favorite trine pairing.
The beginning of the End

Chapter by hero_of_derp

Chapter Notes

Sorry for no update yesterday. I wanted to give the servers a chance to settle before adding in a new chapter to the craziness!
This sort of skips over the stuff that happens with Thirst and goes into Evolution, and on.

The only good things to come from combining different Energon was that they got rid of the insecticons, Airachnid (as Starscream found out later), Silas, and a large number of vehicon forces that were still loyal to Megatron.

Of course that also meant some of his forces had fallen, and he had taken several personal blows, the focus of Megatron's anger.

It had been his fault that Knock Out hadn't reported to Shockwave about this. It was his fault for taking this initiative. It was his fault that the decepticon forces were halved.

Starscream shuddered against the wall as Megatron turned, speaking to Soundwave, the beating apparently done for now, and he wiped at the energon that had come from his broken lip plates with a shaky hand. He was sore, hurt, but a part of him was glad, realizing all at once that now, after this, his forces outnumbered Megatron's.

The end was in their grasp. Whenever the autobots made their final move, their final gamble, Starscream could put his forces to work. It would be easy now. His forces against what remained of those loyal to Megatron. That would be a smooth battle. The only things that remained, the only ones that would be a problem, were Megatron himself, Soundwave, and Shockwave.

Scrap. That was still a lot to take care of.

"Starscream," Megatron growled. "Follow me."

"Yes master," Starscream said, instantly, bowing and following Megatron out. They walked in silence, and Starscream glanced at vehicons as they passed. That one was his. So was that one. He could tell from the subtle scratch they'd all placed on their arms, in the same place, something that could easily be labeled as just a fault of battle or day to day wear.

That one wasn't his, but he was speaking to two that were. How excellent.

Megatron lead them to the deck of the Nemesis and changed into his alt for, taking off, wordlessly expecting Starscream to follow. Predaking looked up at Starscream as he changed, wings flexing, but Starscream sent 'no' over their trine comm, and the predacon settled back down.

Then Megatron landed outside a cave, Starscream was immediately on edge. The last time he'd been in a cave he'd been left for dead. Oh. No. Was he found out? Was this the end? Maybe he should have brought Predaking along.
"M-my lord Megatron," he said quickly, following the warlord into the cave, on edge. His wings were tense and up tight. "Who could have foreseen that my alternative supersoldier experiment would encounter technical difficulties?"

"Resulting in the loss of the Insecticon hive and over half our remaining troops!" Megatron turned on Starscream, voice raised, and Starscream whimpered slightly, mentally prepared for another beating if he didn't say the right thing.

"Oh forgive me master! My intentions were true!" Starscream hit his knees and bent, forehead touching the ground, wings trembling. "Please reconsider my termination!"

It was a shock when Megatron merely rolled his eyes and turned, walking on. Only then did Starscream look past his assumed demise, into the cave. Oh. "Shockwave's off-site laboratory." He made a mental note of the coordinates. "...Most impressive."

Oh, good, so he wasn't about to die.

Protoforms of predacons lined the edges in large tubes, and the yellow glow made Starscream's tank churn slightly. 'Predaking, I think it is time you made your debut', he said over their bond, and he felt only a acknowledgement that the other bot had gotten the message.

This would work well, or not at all. On one hand, it would cement Predaking's loyalty. On the other hand, if the new predacons fell under Megatron's command, they would prove deadly.

"Starscream, aid Knock Out in moving the synethtic energon to the corner," Megatron ordered as Knock Out arrived with the crates.

"Right away, master," Starscream said, going to help the other con, but stopped when the ground shaking alerted all of them to Predaking's arrival.

"Starscream!" Megatron snapped. "Control your pet, won't you?"

"Of course master- " Starscream said, only to be cut off as Predaking transformed with a whirl.

"I am no pet," Predaking announced, lifting his chin, defiant and proud.

"It can transform?" Megatron growled, looking at Soundwave as Predacon walked to one of the glowing tubes.

"The ability to transform is a fundamental part of Cybertronian biology," Shockwave said. "We simply possessed no evidence that the Predacon species ever reached that stage, since they became extinct in the great cataclysm."

"I will no longer be alone," Predaking said, looking up at his undeveloped bretheren. "Megatron--"

"Lord Megatron," Starscream corrected, and Predaking looked confused for a moment before nodded when he received another burst of a message 'pretend he has your loyalty'.

"Lord Megatron," Predaking amended, "I would ask to lead the Predacon forces when they are ready." He glanced at Starscream, who's wings twitched in approval. "I will lead them in the destruction of our enemies."

Starscream smirked. That swear was meant more to him than Megatron, but Megatron took it for him.
"Your vision is boundless," Megatron said, warily. "Let us return to the Nemesis to...further discuss this."

It was very soon that, in private, Megatron stated that they would have no choice but to terminate the Predacon clones. Their combined might was much more than what remained of the decepticon forces. How much more Megatron had no idea, but Starscream kept that to himself. They were so close to the end, it was almost unfair.

The next time he lead a patrol, he took Predaking and a few seekers with him, ones he knew were loyal to him as their wing commander, and ones that were trined together. One of them he had known from Vos itself. Their flight plan took them to the Harbringer, notably empty of Autobots, but Starscream much preferred it that way for what he was planning.

"What we will do is what I suggested to lord Megatron," Starscream stated. "Let the autobots destroy the Predacon clones."

"You cannot!" Predaking said, rising up, but Starscream calmed him with a look.

"That is what Megatron will think. Calm yourself." Starscream shook his head and looked to the Seekers. "You three will remain here to watch the clones. I will, unfortunately, report you as missing in action. Autobots found us and shot us down. So sorry."

"Yes, Commander Starscream," one said, saluting.

Starscream stepped up to a console and smiled as he typed into it, sending a message to Ratchet over the internet. Email. What a hilarious thing. "I will arrange the specifics, but you will all need to set up containment protocols so that the Predacons can finish without being stunted or damaged. Moving them here will have to be fast, so that we may blow the mine when we are finished."

"...They will not be destroyed," Predaking said, and when Starscream nodded he visibly relaxed.

"To the contrary." Starscream looked at Predaking as he awaited a response to his message. "I believe under your tutelage they will thrive, with help from our dear friends here." He looked to the seeker trine standing. "After all, two of you were nurturers on Cybertron, were you not?"

"It has been a long time since we taught newsparks, commander," the smallest one said.

"I have faith in you." Starscream nodded, then turned and folded his hands behind him when a land bridge opened. "And here are our conspirators."

Optimus stepped through first, then Ratchet, and Starscream wasn't surprised to see Wheeljack, but was started when Ultra Magnus stepped through.

"You bought that one?!" Starscream demanded, and Ratchet walked over, grabbing Starscream's hands.

"He is Optimus' second in command. He's been clued in," Ratchet said, quietly.

"While I doubt your honesty...you have yet to cross the autobots," Ultra Magnus said, eyes narrowing. "If Optimus trusts you, I will...for now."
Starscream scoffed. "Why Arcee, you got a new frame."

"What?" Ultra Magus asked, staring, and Optimus struggled to hide a small smile.

"Anyway," Starscream said, before anyone else could say anything. "Allow me to save all our afts again." He took his hands from Ratchet's and turned, bringing up an image on the screen of his console. He'd made it earlier, a rough layout of the lab. "Here are the Predacon clones," he said, motioning at the sides. "If we open a ground bridge here," he motioned at the center, "it should take only a few minutes to move them out while we set up bombs here and here. My seekers will already have the appropriate set up here to transfer them."

"Megatron is already counting on an autobot attack," Predaking stated. "I'm certain he will be telling me that the autobots destroyed my brothers, and use my anger. I will not let him." His last words turned to a growl, and Starscream waved a hand at him. He huffed, but calmed, crossing his arms.

"Little does he know that you will only be destroying the cave." Starscream chuckled and looked back at the autobots. "Agreeable?"

"It is a good plan," Optimus admitted, nodding, and looked at Ultra Magnus. "Magnus?"

"It is acceptable," Magnus admitted. "What will happen to the Predacon clones?"

"They will grow and mature here." Starscream's wings hitched up. "They will follow under Predaking's command."

"And as Starscream as my trine leader, they will be under his," Predaking added.

"This is ridiculous." Ultra Magnus looked at Optimus. "Optimus, what's to stop Starscream form turning on us with his Predacon army?"

"Much has happened, Magnus," Optimus said, trying to be soothing. "I have gotten to know Starscream, and I have faith that he will not turn on us."

"Not unless you give me a reason to," Starscream said, and leaned against Ratchet, examining his claws. "As of now, I have no reason to do so. As long as our interactions are favorable, that won't change." He turned and wrapped his arms around Ratchet's neck. Making Ultra Magnus squirm, uncomfortable with such public affection, was a terribly fun thing. "So I don't think it'll be a problem." He leaned in and gave Ratchet a kiss. "Will it?"

"No," Ultra Magnus said, looking away pointedly, and Starscream grinned.

"Brat," Ratchet muttered.

"Your brat," Starscream whispered.

Generally, the plan went smoothly, even if Shockwave decided that the best thing to do was to attempt to blow the lab sky high. Wheeljack managed to stall the self destruct long enough for them to open the ground bridge, get most of the Predacon pods through, and close it.

Boom. No more lab, and Predaking mourned the loss of his siblings that didn't make it. Wheeljack
had only stalled the self destruct so long, and they hadn't managed to move all the tubes out. It was
awkward, trying to comfort a creature that was ancient, but Starscream did what he could. In the
end, Starscream just tossed candy at him and tried to ignore Predaking eating his depression when
he was summoned to the remains of Shockwave's lab.

Cybermatter changed the whole game.

This was their new chance to cyberform a new world for them. All they had to do was finish and
perfect the synth-en and reconstruct the Omega Lock. No small task, which was why Starscream
was ready and happy to let the Decepticons do the work, cement the loyalty of his troops, and
inform the Autobots of the new plans. He sent a seeker patrol to deliver a report to the seekers on
the Harbinger, and listened.

Soundwave, if he knew all or anything of what Starscream was up to, had remained quiet this entire
time. No reports to Megatron. No confrontations. Perhaps they felt it was just his usual failed
plans. No. Not this time.

For now, however, he had no room to plot further than his immediate next step. Shockwave had
given him a list of things needed for the Omega Lock, and his energy, his time, was spent focusing
on requisitions. Human technology. Pathetic, that this was that they'd come to.

It was getting more difficult to recharge alone, and his spark hurt. He rolled onto his side and
attempted to force himself to recharge but...nothing. Nothing came. He sat up and looked at the far
wall. Well, if he couldn't rest, he'd plot. So he stood, and began pacing the length of his room.

He had to trust that the Autobots were almost ready. The Nemesis hadn't moved from it's orbit
around the Earth now, relying on their bridge to move around on the planet below them as they
rebuilt the Omega Lock. Once it was rebuilt and Shockwave finished the Synth-en recipe, they
would have all they needed. Cybertron would be theirs, Starscream would take command of the
remaining forces, and all Cybertronians could come home. He paused, and then fell back into a
chair at his work station.

Home.

Where was home now? Vos was destroyed, and he had no desire to return to the rubble and face
old ghosts. Not to mention that even in it's golden age Vos hadn't been grounder friendly in terms
of it's buildings.

With a shudder he realized that he was thinking of Ratchet as a permanent factor in his future. The
thought didn't alarm him, but it was shocking to realize how far they'd come. Another shudder
wracked his body and he curled around himself. Home was where Ratchet was. The thought made
him feel lost and cold suddenly.

Primus he missed the other mech in ways he had no words for. He didn't dare whisper Ratchet's
name out loud, less Soundwave hear, but he wanted to. He listed his head when there was a ping at
his door and he stood, settling a false mask of calm on his face. "Enter," he said.

"Trine leader," Predaking said, stepping in, and he frowned when the doors closed. "...You are
distressed. Can I aid you?" There was a low, suggestive tone to his voice, but also a small bit of
need and lingering sorrow for the loss of his brothers.

"No," Starscream said, fully aware of what Predaking was offering. No. If Ratchet had been a
seeker, or even a flier, he would have considered Predaking's offer. While Ratchet had shown at
least a small interest in other bots joining them in the berth, that was a mutual decision to make,
and as far as Starscream knew they were only for each other.

Of course if Ratchet had been there, Starscream would have asked him if it was alright for the seeker to take Predaking to his berth. But Ratchet wasn't there. So it wasn't an option. And that was that.

Predaking nodded. "There has been a development."

So, right to business then. "And what that might be?" Starscream raised a brow.

"The Autobots have captured Soundwave."

Megatron seemed all too pleased with himself, and Shockwave seemed inclined to agree. Kidnapping Ratchet was the best solution to finishing the sythentic energon formula. Meanwhile, Starscream's spark was pounding. No no no.

He couldn't let Megatron get his hands on his mate. His Ratchet. He flexed his claws, and spoke to cover the noise and desire to rip Megatron's spark chamber out right there for the very suggestion. "Attempting to abduct the one Autobot who rarely leaves their base, a base we have yet to locate?" Starscream scoffed. "That may prove to be a challenge. Would it not be best to simply get the last item we need for the Omega Lock? I'm sure between Shockwave and Knock Out's minds they can resolve the problem of the forumla." He grinned, and it fell when Megatron started to laugh.

"You forget that we currently have an agent within the Autobot base." Megatron smirked. "Laserbeak could reconnnect with Soundwave and upload a new directive to him." Shockwave nodded. "It is a logical plan."

"We would still need to know the location of the Autobot base," Starscream said, attempting to make them at least doubt their own plan.

"It is my understanding the Soundwave had surveillance on more than just the autobots, but their human companions," Shockwave stated. "It would be easy to follow one of them to the base."

And if Starscream hadn't been a double agent, he would have been unspeakable pleased at that moment. It was a good, solid plan, and he wasn't sure how he was going to get to a console long enough to send a message to the autobots.

"Starscream, bring Predaking to the bridge. Immediately," Megatron said, walking out. "I have a mission for him."

"Right away, my lord," Starscream said, bowing, and his mouth tightened into a grim line as he went to a console. "Predaking! Meet me and lord Megatron on the bridge."

"Right away, commander Starscream," Predaking said, at the same moment sending a message over their trine bond, questioning.

What Starscream sent back was not so much words as emotions. Their trine bond was still hidden, especially from Megatron, and they had to keep playing their parts. A wash of understanding came back to him, and he stomped out of the lab.
Predaking arrived on the bridge before Starscream did, and he and Megatron were already speaking.

"You pride yourself on your evolution, yet you have learned nothing!" Megatron roared, and Starscream almost flinched. That particular tone was usually reserved for him, and he immediately sent a sense of calm and urgency to Predaking. "I may have lost my surveillance chief today! The Autobots have expanded their forces while ours have continued to dwindle!"

To his credit, Predaking stood tall against the verbal assault, lifting his chin, defiant. "Then I shall simple battle twice as fiercely," he said with utmost confidence.

"You will battle as a beast!" Megatron demanded. "To the South pole, to retrieve our final item. Now!" He pointed at the door, and Predaking narrowed his eyes but turned to leave.

"Starscream!" Megatron snapped as he spotted the seeker. "Debrief our forces at the ground bridge and prepare a squadron. After we get this last piece, we will wipe the Autobots out, and face no resistance when we complete the Omega Lock."

"Understood, my master," Starscream said, bowing quickly so as to not gain any more of Megatron's wrath. He followed after Predaking, pinging for squads loyal to him to move to the deck and prepare themselves. "Predaking-" he started, but a wash of anger made his almost stumble.

"I will look forward to the day that the warlord is dead," Predaking hissed, looking more predatory with every step, optics narrowing, claws flexing almost feral. "Preferably with my own hand."

"Patience," Starscream said, grabbing his arm and forcing the predacon to stop. "Megatron is not snuffed so easily. Be prepared." He opened their Trine bond as he left go of his arm, walking on, speaking privately.

'It is time to reveal our ploy to the autobots,' he said, eyes forward as they walked. 'This may be one of the last orders we follow, understand? You will tell the autobots that the time has come and that they must prepare themselves. Move themselves to the Harbinger if we learn the location of their new base.' He glanced at Predaking, and the predacon nodded. 'Inform Optimus of the plan to kidnap Ratchet. It must not be allowed to happen. All that we need to do is built the Lock. The rest can be solved later, after the Autobots control the Nemesis.'

'I understand,' Predaking sent back. Starscream sent a small pack of data over their bond, layout of the Nemesis and coordinates for them to space bridge up, before they went their separate ways.

Starscream only hoped that the warnings would be enough.
"I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail." - Abraham Maslow

Predaking decided instantly that he hated the cold, and his engine rumbled. It was unfortunate that Shockwave had, at the last moment, decided to come with them on the mission. It meant that he would have to speak with Optimus alone. It meant he would have to get the Prime away from his party. He attacked with a blast of fire, and thank the spirits that Optimus ordered his team inside to secure the target while he held off the Predacon.

"Optimus Prime," Predaking said, landing and transforming with a flair that he'd learned from Starscream. "I must have words with you."

"Predaking," Optimus said, tilting his head in the barest of motions.

"I have been sent by Megatron to destroy you. And I have been sent by Trine Leader Starscream to warn you. Listen well, Autobot." Predaking folded his hand behind him in another habit mimicked from Starscream, and leaned forward. "This is the last piece of the puzzle that Shockwave and Megatron require to finish the Omega Lock. I would let them, were I you."

"He will use the lock to rule over two planets. I cannot allow that," Optimus stated. "It cannot be allowed to be finished."

"Do not be a fool!" The Predacon roared. "This is your chance, our chance, for our world back. We will control the Nemesis, the space bridge, all that is left, and Megatron will be no more. If you do not act, very well. But the lock will be finished Optimus Prime, and we will control it."

"You understand I cannot allow it to be in anyone's hands," Optimus said, but Predaking seemed unimpressed.

"There is more, either way." The Predacon scoffed. "You have Soundwave in your base now. Move yourself elsewhere. Megatron plans on using that Laserbeak creature to find and return Soundwave to the Decepticons."

"He cannot find our base."

"He will." Predaking scoffed again, then suddenly turned his head. "I am being summoned," he growled, and took a step back. "One last thing, Optimus. You hold the key to Cybertron. Protect
"What are you talking about?" Optimus asked, but didn't get an answer. Predaking was already roaring and leaping into the air, transforming, and descending on the human base. When he emerged, he had Shockwave in one claw and the target item in the rest of his claws. Optimus fired off shorts, but none hit, and the Predacon disappeared into a bridge.

When his team emerged from the base, empty handed, Optimus raised a hand to his radio. "Ratchet, open a ground bridge," he said. Silence met him.

"Arcee to base," Arcee tried. "Ratchet, come in."

A groan ran through all their audials. "Ratchet is..."

"Bulkhead, what is going on?!" Arcee snapped.

"Ratchet is gone."

Ratchet wasn't made for combat. He'd never faced Soundwave before, but he knew, even before the Decepticon turned his full attention on the Medic, that he didn't stand a chance. Would he be offline, or just knocked out like the others seemed to be? He retreated, step after step, until his back hit the wall, and Soundwave kept coming. He raised his hands, as if it would do any good.

The claws at the ends of the tentacles grabbed onto his frame, and electricity ran through him. He cried out. Another shock and he fell to his knees. One more and his world went into thankful, peaceful black.

When he finally stirred, he was strapped down to a berth, and he struggled. It was no use, and he fell back, staring at the ceiling, wires and cables hanging above him. Medical procedure? Torture? He wasn't sure what was in store for him. A shudder ran through his frame. This was the last place he wanted to be!

Footsteps alerted him to someone approaching, and he lifted his head slightly. "What do you want from me?" He demanded, clenching his hands into fists, as if that would do anything.

"Your assistance, actually." Megatron grinned. "To complete a little...science project."

"And you think I'll cooperate? Never." Ratchet narrowed his eyes.

"Fortunately for us, Shockwave does not require your cooperation," Megatron said, stepping aside. Shockwave was holding the end of a cortical-psychic patch cord.

Ratchet thrashed against his restraints as Shockwave moved behind him. He couldn't see, but he knew what was coming. "Stay out of my head!" He yelled, trying to move as much as possible, but it was no use. There was a painful stab as the cord attached itself to him. "Let me go!"

"Now now Doctor. This won't hurt a bit." Megatron chuckled softly as Shockwave moved to another berth and laid down.

"One look inside an Autobot brain," Knock Out announced as he hooked up the other end of the cord to Shockwave.
Fortunately for Ratchet, the only knowledge they sought was for the synth-en, and Shockwave brushed right past any mention to Starscream. He was only looking at numbers, at panels, at screens. They didn't look at Starscream working alongside him, or the way Starscream's hand rested on his thigh, or brushed his fingers against the medic's.

Snapping out of his own mind was painful, and he dimly aware of the conversation before him.

"I demand the autobot!" Predaking said, pointing at Ratchet. "Those Autobots destroyed my brothers. He is mine by right!"

"Predaking, calm yourself!" Megatron shook his head. "This autobot is more than a prisoner. He is our only key to restoring Cybertron. When he is no longer useful, you may have him. But not until then."

Predaking ground his denta together, and growled. "That is acceptable," he said, finally, after a brief silence.

"Good. Then return to your post, and inform Starscream that he may proceed with his next mission." Megatron looked to Shockwave.

"I will return for you, Autobot," Predaking growled, before turning and storming out. Ratchet pretended to still be out, still listening.

"Shockwave, what did the patch yield?" Megatron demanded, and Ratchet's control over his body returned slowly, his limbs feeling more like dead weight.

"Only that the formula is unstable and that the autobot medic's work on it remains incomplete." Shockwave nodded.

"Well then we must help him finish his work. Wake him and toss him in the brig. I have work to do." Megatron stormed out, and Knock Out shook Ratchet.

"Wakey wakey," the red medic said, tapping Ratchet's forehead as the restraints came off. "Up you go so that our illustrious master might have his way with you." He grabbed one of the medic's arms, and Ratchet tried to shove him off to no avail. "Hold still," Knock Out demanded, and managed to get the restraint cuff around Ratchet's wrists.

Damn his hands, that hurt. Ratchet tried to move his hands but there was hardly any room for them, and a pair of vehicons pulled him roughly to his feet, and half dragged him out, across the ship, and tossed him into the wide, empty room.

Ratchet pushed himself to his feet and looked around. Empty, fairly dark. Great. He huffed. He was on the Nemesis. Alone. And the autobots were in no state for a rescue. He huffed slightly and looked around again. Nothing of use. No way to escape.

He was at the mercy of Decepticons.

Ratchet was left alone for an hour before the door finally opened, and he turned. "Are you through poking around inside my head?" He demanded, and his eyes glanced at Megatron, then darted to...Starscream. Primus, but he looked good. "You didn't find what you wanted, did you?" He recovered quickly, glaring at Megatron, starting to walk toward them. "Or else you wouldn't be here!"

"What I want apparently does not yet exist," Megatron staring, red eyes glowing in the dim light. "We would very much like for you to complete your work on the formula for synthetic energon."
Ratchet scoffed. "Even if I could, do you think I would hand you a limitless supply of fuel and ammunition just so you can turn around and use it against the Autobots?" He turned back away, only to glance back when Megatron spoke again.

"Oh you misunderstand, dearest Ratchet. I intend to use your formula for the purpose of creation, not destruction."

Ratchet could see how Megatron had gained such a following. He was silver tongued. Ratchet could almost pretend to believe him.

"We have discovered that your synth-en, when combined with cyber-nucleic acid, may form the basis for an alternative cyber-matter."

Ratchet was turned entirely not, staring at the warlord. "...You plan on rebuilding the Omega Lock."

"We stand on the verge of a great moment in time, you and I," Megatron said, almost a purr, as if that would help his case. "The restoration of our very homeworld."

"Collaborate with the very barbarian who destroyed our planet in the first place? Who crushed Bumblebee's voice box? Who..." he cut himself off, glancing at Starscream, and covered it by turning slightly to gain his composure. He faced Megatron again. "No thank you."

"Then you may have your choice," Megatron said, all charm gone, showing his true colors once more. "Complete your research, or see your Autobot comrades destroyed. Accept my offer, and I will allow your fellow Autobots and human pets to remain unharmed. Think it over." He turned and left. Soundwave turned, immediately following.

Starscream turned, but did not follow, glancing at Ratchet. For a moment it seemed like the seeker was going to speak, or reach out, but he merely mouthed a word before following Megatron.

Amica.

Ratchet had seen that word on Starscream's lips too many times for it to be anything else.

The doors slid shut behind them, leaving Ratchet alone once more.

Two vehicons came to fetch him some time later, handling him not roughly but not gently, prodding him with arm guns to get him to move, leading him to, of all places, the bridge.

"Ah, doctor, so glad you could join us," Megatron said. "I'm sure you would appreciate a tour of our facilities if you were more comfortable." He waved a hand, and one of the vehicons reached over, undoing the cuffs with a small zap.

Ratchet rubbed at his freed wrists, relieved from the pressure that had been irritating him for the past several hours. "How do you know I won't use these to amputate?" His hands changed to blades and he started walking towards Megatron.

"And pass up a chance to see our molecular masking field?" Megatron asked, raising a brow and motioning at a console.
Ratchet hesitated, and his blades were stowed back away, and he flexed his hands as they came back out. "Your cloaking device." He took a few steps forward, looking over the screens. Interesting, interesting...No. Wait. He scoffed. "Shielding is shielding. High tech or low." No matter how interesting it was.

"Perhaps you'll be more impressed by our energon transfusion capacitor?" Megatron stepped to another console, and Ratchet followed as Megatron brought additional screens online. "It allows us to maximize our consumption a thousand fold."

"Decepticon engineering never fails to impress," Ratchet said, bitterly.

"Doctor," Megatron said, playing the smooth gentle card once more. "We may be mortal enemies, but we do share one common goal. You would like to see the ruins of our devastated homeworld restored to their former brilliance. I would like to see the same."

"You would just try to reconquer it," Ratchet said.

"Of course!" Megatron laughed. "But we would posses a planet worth fighting over again."

"But you wouldn't stop there. Earth would be next! What assurance do I have that you wouldn't destroy Earth next? Or me, once you get what you need?" Ratchet frowned.

"None whatsoever. But even if I did, you wouldn't trust my word. Decepticon, remember? But that does not change that fact that you may be Cybertron's only hope. Do keep that in mind, doctor."

Megatron stalked off and motioned for Ratchet to follow. As soon as they left the vehicons followed, bringing up the rear. The minutes of silent walking were as awkward as could be.

"If you should agree, you would have access to our lab," Megatron stated as they passed into a new room. "I'm sure you would find it better than what you have grown accustomed too."

"Is that a quantum cryo-inducer?" Ratchet asked, the equipment catching his eye. "Only two were ever made."

"Three. That is the prototype." Megatron chuckled softly. "Come Ratchet. The tour is not over."

Another several minutes later and Ratchet was thinking of the last tour he'd gotten of a Decepticon ship. That one had been...very different. Finally, to get his mind off that, Ratchet spoke up. "Even if you rebuild the Omega Lock, it is a mystic force. I've come to my senses. The notion of scientifically replicating its capability is pure folly!"

A door before them opened, and Megatron stepped through, gesturing before them. "How will we ever know for certain doctor, unless we try?" With the press of a button the floor before them spiraled open, and Ratchet took a step back. "And how can we not try when the means finally lie within our reach?"

The bridge was already repaired and built, hanging under them. Sparks from vehicons repairing bits of wire and metal sparked on the surface of the metal. Primus, it was huge.

Primus, they were already finished.

"You've actually done it," Ratchet whispered.

"Decepticon engineering," Megatron said, with a laugh. "It will not take long for this Omega Lock's drives to be fully operational. All that is still needed to restore our home is the cybermatter to launch through it."
"Which requires a stabilized formula for the production of synthetic energon," Ratchet whispered.

Megatron rested a hand on Ratchet's shoulder. "I have every confidence in you, doctor."

"...I'll do it," Ratchet said, and damned himself as the words came out of his mouth. It was too close. The temptation was too great. Ratchet turned his head, and glared at Megatron. "But then...you already knew that. Didn't you."

Megatron only grinned.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this one was mostly quotes from the episode ;a;
Are you guys ready for shit to get serious?

"Give a boy a hammer and chisel; show him how to use them; at once he begins to hack the doorposts, to take off the corners of shutter and window frames, until you teach him a better use for them, and how to keep his activity within bounds."

It was agonizing to have Ratchet so close and not be able to touch him, to hold him, to give comfort when all of life was going to scrap. At any other time he would have worked to distract himself, but as a large portion of the remaining Decepticon forces were focused on finishing the Omega Lock, he had no one under his command, no one to order, and nothing to distract himself with.

"Predaking," he stated, turning, as the predacon entered his berth room. He'd pinged him earlier, summoned him and finally, finally the predacon had shown up. "Report."

"The autobot medic has begun work in the laboratory with Shockwave and Knock Out," Predaking said. "When he is finished, Megatron has promised him to me."

When Starscream's wings tensed, Predaking reached through their Trine bond. 'I will escort him to a safe location for the coup', he stated, and Starscream's wings relaxed. 'Megatron will be too distracted to notice that he has not been destroyed.'

"Excellent," Starscream said, to both statements. He still couldn't believe that Ratchet had agreed. Of all the things in the world! However another part of him knew that the reclamation of their homeworld was one of the only hopes Ratchet had left.

If that meant working with Decepticons, so be it.

"Predaking, let us go see the prisoner," Starscream said, deciding, and he waved a hand before him. "We should inspect the room and make certain that the prisoner has no chance of escape or getting in contact with any stray information."

"Agreed," Predaking said, and waited for Starscream to lead the way. Even when walking Predaking took his position behind Starscream and at his right, just like in flight. As they walked
Predaking could see the anxiety practically on display in his Trine Leader, wings up and tense, steps a bit louder and heavier than usual, even the way his hands flexed. Fliers, particularly seekers, didn't like feeling trapped and cornered, and at this point all they had were corners.

*Never back a seeker into a corner,* he'd heard on the ship. *When they have nowhere to go, they go through you.*

Predaking only hoped that Starscream could be patient enough to only go through Megatron in the end.

It was some stroke of luck that they arrived as Shockwave was leaving the lab. "Starscream," Shockwave said, pausing. "They have encountered a problem with the Omega Lock. See to it that Knock Out and the prisoner stay on task."

"Excellent idea," Starscream said, with a chuckle. "Make the air commander of the Decepticons a glorified babysitter!"

"It is logical," was all Shockwave said, walking on down the wall. Starscream ignored him, walking on, and his steps were far lighter than they had been a moment ago.

"Knock Out!" Starscream said, and Knock Out sputtered, almost dropping a large container of the unfinished Synth-en. Ratchet tensed at his console. "Predaking seems to be running a glitch in his systems. Go and do give him a once over, won't you?"

"I am a bit busy here," Knock Out stated, setting the container down. "Pits sake you surprised me. As it is I am watching the prisoner." He gestured at Ratchet.

"I have eyes, don't I?" Starscream raised a brow. "Take Predaking and go. You will only be gone a few minutes, I am sure, and this is far from the first prisoner I will watch."

"...Only a few minutes," Knock Out said with a sigh. "Try to not blow anything up, Starscream? I don't want to clean up that mess. Come on big boy," he said, patting Predaking's arm as he walked by them. "Let's go get you checked out."

Starscream waited until they both left before turning to Ratchet. "Well well well," he stated, slowly approaching. "An Autobot here, working for the Decepticons. What an interesting development." He stood behind Ratchet and the medic tensed, fingers paused on the keyboard. "And now, all alone. Whatever shall you do." His voice dropped to a purr and he suddenly grabbed the back of Ratchet's helm and yanked back.

"Starscream-"

"What do you think you are *doing*?" Starscream whispered, almost too quiet for Ratchet to hear. "Do you realize what you have done?"

"What I have to," Ratchet whispered back. His hands clenched into fists before he could wrap them around Starscream. Pits, being this close to the seeker, hearing the low thrum of his engine, it was almost too much. "For Cybertron. For us."

Starscream made a frustrated noise. "...As soon as it is finished, we will attack," he mumbled. "I
will attempt to contact the autobots. Predaking said his discussion with Prime did not go well."
They stared at each other a moment longer and Starscream glanced around the room before
shoving Ratchet away. Before Ratchet could get his balance he grabbed the medic again and
pushed him, right into a wall.

"Starscream!" Ratchet hissed, only to be cut off by Starscream's lips over his, and he let out a
muffled groan. Starscream grabbed his wrists and pinned them against the wall.

"Amica," Starscream whispered before that kiss and the next. "This is so close to being done."
Another kiss. "And in celebration of the end-" another kiss "-I plan on doing countless unspeakably
filthy things to you."

"I'd like that," Ratchet said, breathlessly, and his optics shuddered once.

"If not for the cameras and Soundwave's unfortunate return, I would bend you over a desk right
here," Starscream purred, and Ratchet's fans hitched. This was so dangerous, here of all places, but
Starscream couldn't stop. Pits, for some reason the danger made it all the more enticing. "I would
tease you until you were begging for my spike. And then I would slip in. Nice and slow. You
always feel so good around me Ratchet. Like I belong in there."

"Starscream," Ratchet breathed out, offlineing his optics as Starscream's fingers tightened on his
wrists. "Frag."

"I wish we could. Right here." Starscream whispered against Ratchet's audial. He kissed his way to
Ratchet's lips and they kissed, needy and desperate, and only broke when the door opened.

"Starscream!" Knock Out said instantly, and he laughed. "Have you been molesting our poor
prisoner this entire time? Pits, I didn't expect that powerless fetish for you. Though that does
explain quite a bit." He was still laughing, and Predaking behind him looked confused.

Starscream stepped back instantly and Ratchet's legs failed him, sliding down the wall. "Just giving
our prisoner some initiative to finish his work," he said, examining his claws, before reaching
down and pulling Ratchet to his feet. He met Ratchet's eyes once, a wordless question hanging
between them and Ratchet just nodded. He was fine. Starscream sighed, relieved. That had been
close.

"Yes yes," Knock Out snickered. "But let him get back to work, won't you?"

"You heard Knock Out," Starscream said, and grabbed Ratchet to pull him up as Megatron's voice
came over his comm lines.

"Starscream, take Predaking and a squadron and find out why we are getting Laserbeaks signal
approaching," Megatron demanded.

"Right away lord Megatron," Starscream said, straightening, going for the door. "Predaking, with
me."

"Starscream," Knock Out said, picking up a tool. "Next time you want to harass an Autobot, just
ask me to leave the room. Predaking is fine." He glanced at Ratchet, thne rolled his eyes. "At least
you have decent taste."

"My tastes are exquisite, thank you very much," Starscream said, using that as his final word. As
soon as the door closed behind him and Predaking, he let out a sharp exhale.

"You almost lost it in there," Predaking said, amused, and Starscream scoffed, straightening
"Perhaps we should get your optics checked," Starscream, marching off. "Come Predaking, let us investigate why we now have two Laserbeaks." When they reached the top deck, Starscream's seekers were already waiting for his arrival. "...On second thought...." Starscream looked to Predaking, and nodded. "Predaking, be my optics and audials here," he said, before falling off the edge of the Nemesis and toward Earth, transforming a few seconds into the free fall. His seekers followed.

It was a long flight before the false Laserbeak finally appeared on Starscream's scans, and Starscream was shocked to find Optimus Prime on it's tail. "Optimus Prime?!" His turned his attention his seekers. "Break off," he ordered, flying towards the Prime, only to veer off when he opened fire. "Optimus!" Starscream screeched, spinning in the air. "What are you doing?!"

"Finding Ratchet." Optimus' eyes narrowed, a barrage of energon flying towards Starscream. A shot grazed his tail.

"You have the coordinates for the Nemesis!" Starscream yelled, spinning, and it took almost all his attention and acrobatic skill to keep ahead of the bullets.

"And Megatron has Ratchet! You could have warned us!"

Starscream flipped through the air again. He had no choice. Not now. The Prime was showing no sign of listening to reason. "Seekers, distract him!" He ordered. "I will handle the signal from Laserbeak!" He spun in the air as Optimus was forced to turn his attention to the now attacking seekers that had broken through the clouds above, following the signal until he saw the small rocket that was generating it. "Found you," he hissed, and fired a rocket.

It exploded before him and he flew through the smoke, only to find himself under fire again. "Optimus!" He yelled, spinning, and the Prime followed him, still firing. He flipped through the air, too fast for Optimus to follow with his gun, and transformed right above Optimus, grabbing onto his back with sharp claws and digging in. "Listen to me, Prime!" He yelled. "If you want Ratchet back, stop firing immediately and listen!"

Optimus spun in the air, trying to shake Starscream off, but the Seeker stayed, scratching Optimus' paint. "Starscream I am warning you-"

"I am warning you!" Starscream kept ahold of the plating as he hissed in Optimus' audial. "Listen well Autobot! It is not only your medic that is captured, but my courtmate. My plan will be set in motion the moment that they finish their work. We will have the Omega Lock. But only if you do not stand down right now." He dug his claws in deeper. "You have the coordinates of where the Nemesis will be."

"How can we trust you?" Optimus asked, glaring over his shoulder Starscream.

"Because you do not have a choice. You will follow my plan." Starscream finally let go of Optimus and fell, transforming quickly and shooting back up. "I will see you at the battle, Prime, or I will see you not at all!"

"Megatron to Starscream," the comm echoed as Starscream flew into heavy clouds. "Return to the Nemesis immediately!"

"I require a ground bridge."

"The Autobot medic has finished his work. He is in my care. Our forces are preparing themselves."
"Starscream said through their bond. The ground bridge opened and Starscream soared through it. He transformed and landed on the bridge.

"Starscream, all is well?" Megatron asked, turning to face Starscream.

"Optimus Prime somehow survived. He will not return." Starscream smirked, and yelped as Megatron grabbed him by the throat.

"And why is that, Starscream?" Megatron growled, lifting Starscream up. Starscream grabbed at Megatron's arm.

"Master, please-" Starscream said, and choked as Megatron's grip tightened. He sent a hurried message to Predaking, a single word, 'NOW'.

"Could it be because you have betrayed us, Starscream?" Megatron threw Starscream, and Starscream hit the floor hard, twisting and was stopped by a wall. He tried to stand, to get away, but Megatron was closing on him. "After all I have done for you, Starscream!" He grabbed the Seeker by a wing and pulled him back, tossing him to the floor again. "Welcoming you back into our ranks! Giving you command! And you betray me to Optimus Prime!"

"Please master, there is a misunderstanding!" Starscream held up his hands, trying to scoot away from Megatron. "I have not betrayed-"

"Haven't you?" Megatron began to stalk towards Starscream as the seeker kept pushing back until back hit wall and stopped his retreat. "What were you doing with the prisoner, Starscream? Soundwave has some very, very interesting recording that he has shared with me!" Megatron grabbed at Starscream again and shoved him against the wall. "Why was the Autobot base not destroyed? How else could they survive?!" He was still yelling as he moved his face closer. "How Starscream?!!"

"I have not betrayed you master!" Starscream choked out, kicking his feet, desperately clawing at Megatron's arm, trying to get free. "Let me go and I shall prove it to you! My lord! My master!"

No, no, he couldn't die now. Not on the eve of his final victory! Terror rose in his throat, sharp bitter energon in the back of his mouth. He couldn't leave Ratchet here.

"Save it for the Allspark, Starscream!" Megatron onlined his fusion cannon and it powered up as he aimed it at Starscream. It powered down immediately when a comm channel opened. He dropped Starscream to turn toward the consoles. "Report!"

"Lord Megatron! The Predacon is going on a rampage! Vehicons are attacking! They're heading toward - GHK!!" The comm cut off with a blast of energy, a splatter, and the sound of footsteps running.

"Starscream this is your doing!" Megatron looked at Starscream again, only to see the seeker running for the door. He fired, and his shot barely missed, catching the door as it closed behind Starscream. Megatron roared.
the ship. The vehicons had all painted a broad, white line across their chest to show their allegiance, and they ran down the nearby hall.

"Stay here," Predaking ordered, turning to Ratchet. "My Trine Leader would be upset at the loss of his mate."

"I need to contact the Autobots," Ratchet said, quickly, and Predaking looked hesitant before nodding at a console nearby.

"Contact them, and then hide." Predaking marched off in a hurry, pinging commands to forces.

Ratchet typed away on the console quickly before he managed to open a commline. "Ratchet to Autobot base," he said. "Autobot base, do you read? This is Ratchet. Can anyone hear me?"

"Loud and clear, old friend," Optimus said, and then Raf was heard, "Autobot base receiving!"

Ratchet let out a sigh of relief. "It has started up here. Megatron has managed to rebuild the Omega Lock." He typed quickly. "I have deactivated the Decepticon shielding system. You should have no trouble bridging onto--" he stopped as gunfire echoed down a nearby hall. "You all need to hurry! Megatron will cyberform Earth if we do not stop him!" The echos came closer. "I need to go!" He slammed the comm shut and ran.

He ducked down hallways that were empty, trying to avoid fighting and other bots, when he turned a corner and ran into someone. Panic set in. He couldn't have it end so quickly! He had to fix his mistake. He had to stop the Omega Lock-

"Ratchet!"

Ratchet stumbled back but hands caught him, and he changed one hand to a sword before he realized who it was.

"Starscream!"

"What are you doing out here?" Starscream hissed. "I told Predaking to put you someplace safe!"

"He did. Unfortunately I am more hands on than that." Ratchet grabbed Starscream tightly, pulling the seeker into a hug. "I will not leave you to fight alone, amica."

Starscream shuddered and rested their foreheads together as a red light began to flash ship wide and an alarm started to ring. "Ratchet, should this be the end-"

"Don't speak like that," Ratchet urged. "Starscream, don't-"

"If it is, know I only regret that I did not meet you sooner," Starscream whispered, then smirked. "And when this is over, I look forward to spending the next few eons with you. I promise you." He gave Ratchet a quick kiss. "I promise you, our lives will be grand and perfect and a million other things." His voice was a whisper against Ratchet's lips.

Ratchet turned his head slightly, then looked at Starscream. "Patching you into Autobot communications," he said, and Starscream twitched as the new flurry of data came in. "Starscream is here."

"Starscream, thanks for starting the party for us!" Wheeljack said over the commlink.

"Yes yes," Starscream said, pulling back from Ratchet. "Do try not to hit my forces. Ratchet and I
will meet you at the Omega Lock controls on the lower deck."

"Your forces?" Cliffjumper said.

"The ones with the white stripes on them." Starscream tilted his head and opened another comm, to Predaking, "Order our forces to stand down against Autobots. They are allies."

"Yes Commander," came Predaking's smooth voice over the distant sound of fire being exchanged.

"Excellent." Starscream grabbed Ratchet's arm, and started to lead them at a hurried pace. "Come Ratchet. We only have so much time left!"

Chapter End Notes

I hope Optimus feels real dumb but, really, can you blame him for not trusting them as much with everything that's gone on. e_e
The emergency alarms and sounds of battle were all that could be heard on the ship. It was hard for Ratchet to keep up with Starscream as they drove, and flew in Starscream's case, through the halls. The first time together in their alt forms should have been under better circumstances, Ratchet thought bitterly, but there was no time for that.

"There is the control room!" Starscream said, changing into his root form and landing at a run, weapons online. Two shots and the guards were down. Starscream was wasting no time, no energon. As they entered, Shockwave spoke to Megatron through a comm linked to the console.

"The Omega Lock is fueled and ready, Lord Megatron."

Megatron's answer came over the speaker. "Commence Omega Lock firing sequence while I finish the Prime!"

"Optimus!" Ratchet yelled, and ran into the room ahead of Starscream.

Shockwave pressed a button before Ratchet reached him, and the machinery around them began to churn and come alive as Shockwave was forced from the console. Ratchet tackled him to the ground, swords out, and slashed at him. Shockwave battered him with his gun and knocked Ratchet off, getting up.

Ratchet rolled to his feet and landed on one knee before standing and charging at the decepticon. Shockwave punched him hard and forced Ratchet back a few feet, but the next punch was dodged and Ratchet put a deep slice in Shockwave's arm.

Starscream ran to the console in an attempt to stop the lock, but it didn't work. His fingers flew over buttons, typing, trying to cancel the process, but it was too late. He yelped and ducked as Shockwave fired at him as the Omega Lock started up completely, a blue glow coming from under them.

"Shockwave, prepare to fire the-" Megatron said as the ship shifted and nearly everyone on board lost their balance.

"We've secured the bridge!" Miko's cheery voice called over their comms, and Starscream recovered from the change of ship's direction.

"I need a team of Vehicons to the bridge to aid in it's protection now!" Starscream said, and someone called an affirmative. The door opened behind them and he raised his guns, shocked to see not more of Megatron's toops, but the Autobots.

"Special delivery!" Smokescreen said, holding the Star Saber. "Optimus, catch!"

The words caught Shockwave's attention and he fired across the way at the same moment that Ratchet called out to warn Smokescreen. The Star Saber went flying and Smokescreen flew back as the shot hit. The younger bot rolled, stunned, until he hit the wall.

"Get it!" Arcee yelled, and ran. Shockwave pushed Ratchet away and dashed toward it, but neither of them were faster than a seeker. Starscream abandoned the console and leapt off the edge, transforming and streaking across, only to transform again to grab the saber.
"Scout, your move," Starscream yelled, as Shockwave went down, optical broken from a well placed stab with Ratchet's blades. Starscream ran to meet Bumblebee and handed the saber to him, who whirred a quick 'thanks!'. Bumblebee grabbed onto the edge of the giant hole in the room, let go, and grabbed onto a lower point.

Starscream followed his progress, and then spotted Optimus and Megatron, fighting along the edge. His eyes narrowed. This was it. The battle would ensure the victory of one side over another.

Bumblebee beeped loudly to catch Optimus' attention, and jumped from his point, towards the Prime. He also caught Megatron's attention, who raised his fusion cannon.

And fired.

Optimus lunged for Megatron and tackled him, keeping him from firing again, but the three shots were already there, and Bumblebee could not change his path midair. The Autobots watched with horror as Bumblebee was hit over in his chest, over his spark, each shot causing sparks and metal to come off his body. The saber dropped from his suddenly lax fingers, and he hit the cyber matter hard and limp as his optics flickered and went dark.

"Bumblebee!" Smokescreen yelled, voice going to static. He'd scrambled up and to the edge just in time to see his team mate fall.

Optimus' optics focused in and out and his fury awakened as he looked at Megatron, and the warlord smirked before the Prime attacked. Each punch was brutal, ferocious, and without hesitation as he knocked Megatron back farther and father. There was no defending against his anger, even for a champion of Kaon.

"Get him!" Starscream roared, wings fluttering. All the years he'd spent waiting, searching for openings, wanting Megatron's demise, and this would be it. This would finally be it! Every beating would be worth it. Ever harsh word justified. "Kill him Prime!"

Megatron slid back and hit something, knocked down to his side. The dark Star Saber was in his grasp once more. With a roar he swung it, and the dark energy hit Optimus, knocking him back over the edge.

Sparks froze as Optimus went over and disappeared, and for a moment no one moved. Megatron was standing over where Optimus had fallen, laughing, speaking, but too far away to hear.

"No," Starscream whispered, and then his optics went bright with fury. He had not come this far to lose. He had not sacrificed so much over thousands of years to see it end like this. "NO!" He jumped over the edge and transformed, not recognizing his name being called from Ratchet. He swooped down, one wing skimming the surface of the cybermatter, and transformed in time to grab the Star Saber.

His mind was empty of all thought except for his one focus. Put an end to this fight. Put an end to the war. One more death piled upon hundreds of thousands of millions. Countless sparks dimmed for power. He'd lost friends, berthmates, and each time Megatron had just sneered. The cost of war. The cost was too high.

"MEGATRON!" He roared, and Megatron turned. The momentum from his flight carried him still, as Starscream gripped the Star Saber. He stabbed the sword forward and it met spark, and at the same moment Megatron fired, point blank, into Starscream's chest.

Pain ripped through his body but Starscream took another step foward. The blade slipped into
Megatron's chest a few inches deeper. His pain sensors overloaded entirely, failing and rebooting and segments. Pain and numbness shot through his body. Starscream's spark glowed through cracks in his chest, as energon began to well and run down his torso.

His satisfaction that not even Megatron could survive this was stronger than the panic revelation that he was about to die as well.

"Star...scream..." Megatron managed to get out, and he raised his own blade to attack, but it slipped from his fingers. "You...traitor."

Starscream stared at Megatron, frame shuddering, and suddenly coughed up energon. It splattered across the saber, across their frames, and Starscream smirked. "I finally....made good on my word." His legs gave out and he his his knees, and his frame creaked. Cracks in his armor worsened. He was kneeling in a puddle of his own life blood. "I finally did it." He looked up at Megatron who stumbled back one step. "You will never - " he hacked again, more energon flecking across the floor before them " - harm another....again."

Megatron sputtered and grabbed at the sword with his hands. "I will...kill you...for this," he said, words half static as he pulled the sword out, inch by inch, each breath possibly his last. His optics were fading and brightening as he clung to the last flares of energy from his spark.

"You already have," Starscream said, and he had the satisfaction of watching the last of life fade from Megatron's eyes a sparkbeat after he disloged the sword and it clattered to the floor. The warlord fell back, off the edge. Starscream's vision half faded for a moment as he tilted his head back. One eye was completely off. His systems struggled every moment, and he heard the faint tinkle of crystals.

Crystals....Vos. He fell back, and the gap in his subspace let something slip out.

He turned his head, reading the broken glyph that Ratchet had etched into the crystal long ago, now shattered from the impact from Megatron's fusion cannon and his own metal caving in. He let out a choked sob. It was ruined, destroyed, in pieces, and smeared with his energon.

Promise broken.

The ship shifted again, and he rolled, powerless to stop it, He hit the pool of cybermatter, beginning to sink under it's surface. "...Ratchet..." his whispered, before his tanks were full.

His other eye failed.

His chest stopped glowing.

His spark was gone.

It took Arcee and Smokescreen both to keep Ratchet from diving over the edge, but neither of them could stop the staticy wail that Ratchet's vocalizer had produced. It had started at Starscream's name but gone intelligible. His vocals reset three times, evident for the time breaks in his cries, but it refused to reset the fourth time and Ratchet fell against the other two autobots, his frame shaking with silent sobs.
He had lost him. His amica. His Starscream.

"Optimus Prime to all units," Optimus said, and his voice was grim. "Megatron is no more." There was an uneasy silence. "We have lost Bumblebee and Starscream."

Ratchet's vocals scratched with the effort to make any noise, but all that emerged was the grinding of audio and a hiccup. They'd won the battle, but at what cost? What did it even matter now? Starscream and Bumblebee had given their lives for this, and Ratchet was useless to help. He was a medic. He couldn't bring back the dead.

"Trine Leader Starscream!" Predaking yelled, running through the doors. Arcee online her weapons at the predacon but he ignored her, leaping over the edge and transforming. When Arcee looked back over she saw Predaking dive into the matter, scooping something out, and flying up. He held onto the edge and opened his mouth, dropping something on the floor beside them.

It was Bumblebee.

"He's getting our dead," Arcee whispered, covering her mouth, as Predaking fell back and circled over the Cyber Matter again. By the time he returned, Bumblebee had returned online, Optimus had climbed back up and was seeing to the scout. Everyone was staring.

"My voice," Bumblebee whispered, his voice scratchy from unuse but functional. "I-I've got my pipes back."

"The Cyber Matter?" Smokescreen asked in awe.

"What else could it be?" Arcee asked, then tensed as Predaking landed behind them and transformed. He hadn't deposited his second load. "Does that mean-"

They all turned to look as Predaking stood there, holding the battered, lifeless body of Starscream. Ratchet scrambled forward and grabbed Starscream, and Predaking let him go, though he loomed over them, frowning.


"Amica. Please."

The words echoed past him as he sunk, deeper, deeper, into the warm dark. He was so tired, so weary. It would be so easy to fall asleep. He could barely move. A few minutes couldn't hurt. He was so comfortable.

"Amica. Please."

The words barely reached him, overwhelmed by a distant hum that resonated in his chest. He felt a warm embrace around him and he relaxed another fraction. He could just rest for awhile. It was nice here. This time felt so different. Less frantic. Less painful. He felt as if he were returning home from a long, long trip.

It wasn't like the last times that he'd died.
"Amica...please..."

Starscream's optics refocused in the dark, and then he was almost blinded. He lifted a hand to shade his face, only to lower it and stare in awe. Was this the Allspark? The thing that had teased him for so long, closer than it ever had been? It was not out of reach this time. He just had to stretch his arms out and join it, and eternal peace. No more beatings. No more injuries. Just rest.

"Child of Primus. Do you wish it to be your time?"

The words came from everywhere, and Starscream tensed, then relaxed. This was the voice of a loving parent embracing it's child. The voice of one proud beyond belief. The words wrapped around him like a tight hug. He put his hands on his chest, over his spark.

"I am so tired," he said, quietly. "Megatron is dead." He looked at the Allspark, as if trying to look in deeper.

"I am saddened it was necessary. But I am proud of you for doing what was right. But it was not what you were made for, child."

His spark warmed under his hands. "Then what was I made for?" Starscream pleaded.

"To love. To live your life. That is all I would ask of you, of all of my children."

Starscream could almost feel lips on his forehead, tender, undemanding. "And I could rest, now."

"If you chose."

"It is my choice."

"It is your choice."

There was silence, and Starscream offline his optics. He could sleep. He could finally rest.

"...No."

A small laugh. "I am gladdened by your answer. Go. Child. Live. And love."

"Amica please."

The voice was growing stronger, as the Allspark faded away, as the world around his began to brighten, and Starscream felt the distinct feeling of flying upward.

"Amica please."

And this time there was no echo to the voice. He was hearing it with his own audials, fully aware. His body ached. He was cold. He was still weary. He sticky with dried energon, and his own spark shone through the cracks in his chest, weak but growing stronger.

He was alive.

His optics were barely online, his nonvital systems shutting down to save energon, but he found the energy to move his hand. Ratchet's body was shaking as he curled around Starscream, rocking him, optics offline.

Starscream raised his hand, and pressed it against Ratchet's cheek. "Amica," he said, barely a
whisper. Ratchet's optics snapped online and he covered Starscream's hand. Predaking gave a sigh of relief over them, looking up at the Autobots.

"Starscream," Ratchet said, clutching Starscream.

"I made....zzt...promise," Starscream whispered, and he weakly patted Ratchet's cheek. His vocalizer was scratchier than usual. "Need -zzt- t'recharge."

"Medical bay," Ratchet said, standing and trying to support Starscream, but his legs failed him.

"Let me-" Predaking started, but Ratchet was already pushing the weakened Starscream into his arms. Predaking ran off, already roaring for Knock Out to meet him in the med bay.

"...The day is ours," Optimus Prime said, and years of worry and weariness vanished from his face. For a moment, he looked like Orion again when he smiled. "Autobots....it is time to celebrate." He lifted a hand to his audial. "Ultra Magnus...set course for Cybertron."

---

Hours later Knock Out's yelling interrupted the almost silence that had taken over the Nemesis in the time after shooting what remained of the Cybermatter into the heart of Cybertron.

"Really Starscream, I must protest this!" Knock Out said, but there was no changing Starscream's mind. Not now. Starscream limped his way through the halls, toward the deck of the Nemesis, where he'd ordered the vehicons and seekers to meet. "As both a medical professional and your friend, you need to rest, not be up walking around!"

"I can rest when I am dead," Starscream scoffed, in a voice that was not quite what he'd come to know as his own. Bumblebee was not the only one that had undergone repairs, it seemed, and it was odd to imagine that he had his voice back. His real voice. Oh he'd always been Starscream, but at least now he wasn't as...screetchy. Still, it wasn't fair that Bumblebee had clearly gotten more healed than he had!

"You were dead!"

Starscream waved a hand in the air. "Details."

"He has decided," Predaking growled and glared at Knock Out, but it took more than that to intimidate the medic.

"Oh please, as if most of Starscream's decisions have been wise." Knock Out rolled his eyes when they all finally arrived on the flight deck. "I will be keeping an eye on his systems then since neither of you can listen to reason." He pulled the scanner out of his subspace, turning it on and starting up the diagnostic systems.

Predaking scoffed, but straightened and went serious when all the vehicons and seekers waiting on the deck turned to look at the three. They had all been chatting, but as soon as the doors opened it had gone silent in a moment.

Starscream stepped out, doing his best not to limp. The Cybermatter had not entirely repaired him, but that didn't matter. His voice, his life, was more than enough. He ran his claws over his chest, where he'd taken the shots. While some of the damaged had been repaired by the Cybermatter, the
rest had been welded together. The remainder of his repairs would be cosmetic, and he had every faith in Knock Out's ability to fix it.

Later.

For now, he had to address his troops.

"Vehicons! Seekers!" He raised his voice and lifted one hand in the air. "We are victorious! Our world is ours!"

Cheers washed over him as the cons before him yelled, hands raising in air, and the energy was electric. This was happiness. He had not achieved only his own freedom, but the freedom for those that had pledged to him.

"The day is ours! And your lives are yours!" He waved a hand over his troops. "You are all free to do what you wish." It would be so easy to keep control. To fight the autobots now. But not that the power was in his grasp, it was meaningless. He didn't even care about it anymore. Other things were more important. "Find your own leaders. Find your own way, claim your own names! You are free."

He didn't want this power. At least, he didn't want it by force. He didn't want to be Megatron, keeping bots in line with honeyed words and a heavy fist.

They hadn't been expecting that, Starscream guessed, by the uneasy and confused murmurs. It was all he could do for them. They had all been under Megatron for so long, but he had found his own way, and they could do the same.

"Starscream!" A vehicon said, stepping forward. "I would follow you!" The vehicon looked at the others, and raised a hand in the air. "Air Commander Starscream!"

"Air Commander Starscream!" Another echoed, and Starscream stared out.

"Air Commander!"

"Air Commander!"

The Seekers joined in as the chant grew in volume and voices. They were unified in a way that they all never had been during the war. This was their choice.

They were not created to do this. They were choosing to.

"Air Commander," Predaking said behind him.

Knock Out laughed. "Sure, why not? You can't be worse than Megatron."

Starscream held up a hand and the chanting ebbed away. "...Very well," he said, and stood, tall and proud. "I accept." The cheering rang out again. "Predaking, you will be my second for now, as my Trine."

They could figure out the details later, but relief washed over Starscream. They had chosen him. There were things to figure out, rosters to make. He had to learn the names of each of his troops, figure out strengths and weaknesses, but a wave of weariness waved over him and he swayed slightly. He reeled at what they before them. Was he really ready for this? Was he enough for this? After all that he'd done, did he even deserve this?
"Starscream," Predaking said, putting a hand under Starscream's elbow. "You need rest." He turned his attention behind them, pulling back.

"Yes yes fine." Starscream groaned and turned to address his troops again. "Your first assignment troops! Find those who you would trust to lead among you, to answer to me directly. Your second assignment...Celebrate." He held his hands up and looked at the sky. "We are home. It isn't going anywhere."

Many of them seemed to instantly turn to their second assignment, several bots transforming and taking to the air in spins and loops, and there was another unanimous cheer.

"You too, 'Air Commander'," a voice said behind them, and Starscream turned. Ratchet smiled, amused. "You could use a little celebration."

"He could use a little rest," Knock Out stated, turning off his scanner.

"Both." Ratchet shrugged and extended a hand to Starscream. "We are home."

Starscream took Ratchet's hand and pulled himself against the medic, hiding his face in Ratchet's neck. "I am now," he said, in the comfort and warmth of his courtmate's arm. "Right here, I am home."

Freedom never tasted so sweet.
Epilogue

Chapter by hero_of_derp

Chapter Notes

I uploaded the final chapter and this today, so be sure to go read Law of the instrument, Pt 3!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Years later on Earth, Starscream stood in front of the Harbinger, surrounded by humans. In the time that had passed, so much had happened, barely scratching the surface of what was left to do. Predaking had his brothers back under his command, and each of Starscream's squadrons had a predacon among them. And then there were the vehicons who had gone out, found their own paint colors, their own names, their own bonds among each other. How many courtships had Starscream given his approval to? Countless.

All the Sparks on Cybertron sang together as the planet slowly came back to life, stronger every day. But he wasn't on Cybertron right then, he was on Earth for a few weeks to take care of business.

After all, it wouldn't do to leave the Harbinger in human hands.

Starscream narrowed his eyes as the lights came on around them, illuminating the area around the Harbinger, chasing off the darkness of coming night. He nodded, satisfied. "Yes, that will do well enough," he said, and looked down at the humans by his feet. "You all can see? Good." He looked at the datapad on his hand and swiped through it, sending a file to the human's datapad. "I have mapped out the outline of the Harbinger here. Do try to not damage it during the excavation. The more intact we pull it out, the easier it will be to fix it and get it into orbit."

"Ratchet to Starscream. You're off duty, get back here," a comm interrupted him, and Starscream looked up as he responded.

"I'm almost done. Patience." He turned his attention back to the humans. "There are cave ins here and here, I've marked them on the map. The structural integrity-"

"Ratchet to Starscream. Again. Don't make me pull rank."

One of the humans tried to hide a laugh, making a small snort, as Starscream glared off at the sky. "Pull rank? Air commander ranks higher than Medical Officer! Ask Optimus!" He said, but he was turning off his datapad.

"Except in the cases of health, and over working yourself isn't healthy for your spark. Now get home. Ratchet out."

"Husbands, right?" One of the humans, as woman, asked, and laughed as Starscream groaned. "Same in any species. I think we can handle it for this evening sir." She gave a salute. "We'll see you tomorrow."

"Yes yes." Starscream sighed and placed the datapad in his subspace, pulling out his ground bridge.
remote instead. "I will repeat to not go inside. The engineers will be here tomorrow to help-
"
"And when they get here we will let them. Go!" The woman made a shooing motion with her
hands, and Starscream sniffed. "If you don't leave soon, Ratchet'll have your head."
Starscream sighed as he activated the bridge. "If an emergency comes up-
"
"Then we'll contact you but not before then! Shoo!" Some of the humans laughed.
Starscream growled but stepped through the portal anyway, and Ratchet was waiting for him.
"Happy now? I'm off duty, I'm here, and I am all yours."
"Very happy." Ratchet plushed the remote from Starscream's hands and set it aside, taking one of
the seeker's hands in his. "C'mon."
"What now?" Starscream sighed but went along with it, struggling to hide his smile as Ratchet led
him outside and up the side of the building, until they were on the roof. "Oh Ratchet. You
sentimental glitch."

There was a wide tarp spread out, a few cubes of energon, and it was all terribly romantic. Even
though they'd sworn to not leave their berth for a week after the war was over, there was far too
much to do to actually indulge themselves like that. They'd had little moments instead. A few days
here and there, exhausted recharges, stolen moments between shifts. They had a planet to rebuild,
and that was no easy task.

Still, they had begun their courtship during a war. Continuing it now was easy.
"You like sentimental, you just won't admit it." Ratchet sat down on the tarp and tugged
Starscream down with him, handing the seeker a cube of energon.

"I like you," Starscream corrected but, yes, he did like the sentimental too. He opened his cube to
drink from it, one handed, the other hand curled around Ratchet's. This was nice. It was damn near
perfect. Starscream couldn't think of anywhere he'd rather be than there, on the roof, watching the
stars overhead.

Perfect.
Sorry for the dopey picture. I couldn't resist ;A;

Everyone, thank you, thank you so much. I have loved working on this fic. This is probably the best thing I've ever written. Thank you so much for all your comments, kudos, bookmarks. Everything. I look forward to writing more in this world. I already have a few ideas.

Thank you so much everyone!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!