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Future Tense - Chapter One

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A/N: I seriously never thought I'd EVER get as far as actually STARTING the third story in this saga, but eh, I guess I'm destined to write fanfiction for the rest of my life (d'oh!).

Much love and gratitude to all those who have ever left me a review, I doubt I'd have got this far without you all. (CURSES :waves fist: I mean, um, hugs?)

The usual slow beginning, I'm afraid, and I'm not quiite 100% on the storyline. HMM. We'll just have to see where it goes.

(OH! And I keep forgetting to direct you to here; Blue AU fanfluff from JillDragon. I hope she doesn't mind my little plug: www.fanfiction.net/s/5709853/1/By_Nature_Imperfect ;))

In the 'kitchen' area of a large residential unit in one of Deixar's suburbs, desk sergeant Pulsar sat humming unmusically to herself and sorting through a heap of brightly-coloured squares of fabric, distractedly watching the news with one portion of her attention, and listening to Footloose chattering mindlessly with the other.

Even now, almost four solar orbits after her disastrous one and only unwanted trip to Earth, she still couldn't *quite* believe how *good* it felt just to be home. So her home district was hardly prime real-estate, so what? With nothing attractive to try and lay claim to, the fighting had passed around it on all sides, and Deixar had emerged relatively unscathed from a war that was definitely dwindling into its terminal stages. The place was run down and derelict in a lot of places, and the inhabitants weren't far off being destitute – but it was in better shape than a lot of the planet, it was comfortable, and the residents were upbeat, optimistic about rebuilding.

The little police-bike herself hadn't yet quite regained the strength – physically or psychologically – to properly return to work; light desk duty was still about all she was capable of, in spite of her efforts to get her life back on track and back to normal. She was at least back to her usual crisp, tidy self, resplendent in her renewed blue and white colour scheme, and usually wearing a shawl at a jaunty angle across her shoulders to make her remaining injuries – her still-absent right arm – less obvious.

She wasn't completely over her mistreatment at Siphon's hands, either – in spite of all her best efforts, she still found it very difficult to go dormant enough to defragment, without eighty percent of the time waking up after a breem or two in a blind panic, convinced she was about to have those thin, clawing fingers probing down her throat, feeding her noxious chemicals and scratching out another handful of components...

But she'd at least grown comfortable letting Skywarp within arm's reach again. Just catching sight of a large, dark-coloured mech no longer made her feel like screaming, and just having someone bump against her didn't send her into a full shaking retreat. Letting him get silly and "handsy" was still off limits, but for once he was

actually being patient.

The first clue that Pulsar got that someone had arrived home was the sound of Forceps' study door closing. It was a quiet little *click*, not the resounding *crash* of anger that usually meant one of the twins (or their sire) had annoyed the burly surgeon, so she guessed all must have gone well at the hospital. Footloose's rapt attention was on her computer terminal and she was making no attempt to get up, if she'd even heard the new arrivals; *no help there, then, thank you, Lucy*. The little Policebot hastily twirled the cap back onto her energon flask, to stop the precious, volatile fuel being lost in the event the container was knocked over (because Primus knew Footloose had the capacity to be every bit as clumsy as her sire), and went to see what was going on.

As she'd guessed, there was no Forceps in sight, the big surgeon having retired to the (comparative) sanctity of her study. Instead, an unfamiliar little blue gravity-bike stood in the main doorway, a couple of footsteps into the lounge, his arms spread, apparently waiting for her to appear. "Well?" he prompted, and gave a little twirl. "How do I look?"

Pulsar couldn't help the broad, pleased grin that lit up her dark features, and gave the stranger a hug; a very familiar static envelope harmonised with hers almost immediately. "Very dapper, Slipstream. How does it feel?"

Her sparkling hugged her back, and rubbed cheeks. "I don't know yet," he admitted. "I think I'm still too excited about it. Still feel like my fuel lines are full of bubbles!"

The little protoform had departed for the district hospital early the previous orn with his aunt, so excited about the impending upgrade that he was barely able to sit still. His family had gathered together enough credits to be able to afford to get both the twins an upgrade, now their harmonics were mature enough to cope with the transition, and Slipstream was first on the list. (Footloose, determined that she *must at all costs* have a set of wings, had been told in no uncertain terms that if she didn't want to ground-pound for a while, she'd have to wait until she was bigger. Not that it stopped her whining.)

"So have you tried it out yet?" Pulsar wondered, holding Slipstream at arms' length and giving him a thorough visual once-over – not that Forceps would have let even the smallest physical flaw slip past her attention, she just wanted to get a good look for herself.

He shook his head. "I wanted to, but Forceps said I had to wait until I had someone to look after me, just in case anything went wrong." He gave one of his nervous, excited little laughs, still quivering all over in anticipation, and squeezed her hand. "We bumped into Whites on his beat earlier, he said he'd come over later for me."

"That's good. I wouldn't want to keep you waiting." She tightened her own fingers in response. "You'll probably vibrate yourself to pieces, the way you're going at the moment."

Slipstream chuckled, excitedly, still quivering, and didn't argue the fact.

"Well, come on then, bitlet." Irrespective of the fact that he was a fraction of an inch taller than her, now, both her sparklings had reconciled themselves to the fact they would probably remain 'bitlet' from the rest of eternity. "Let's get your tanks topped up, eh? Be a bit embarrassing if you fell over in the middle of your first run."

By the time they reached the kitchen, Footloose had woken up to the fact that he was back. She squeaked excitedly and launched herself at him. "Seeee-meeee," she crooned, latching her arms around his torso and rubbing their cheeks together. "You look all grown up and official, like Ama."

"Steady on, Lou, I don't want paint-transfers already!" he chuckled, hugging her back. "At least, not from you."

"Yeah, 'cause *all* the femmes will just be falling over themselves to get to know you, now you look like *every other bike in this friggin' neighbourhood*," she snorted, tugging on his aerials; her brother *ow!*-ed in alarm

and tried to shake her off.

"Play nice, Lucy," Pulsar warned, gently. "If you *have* to maul your brother, can you at least wait until he's topped up his tanks?"

The smaller femme *pfft*-ed loudly, but obediently let go. "He doesn't mind, do you, Seem?"

"Apparently not...?" Her brother carefully nudged his bent antennae back into shape, giving Footloose a rueful smile and settling opposite her at the table. "She just doesn't like the fact she's the runt of the family, now."

"Oh I see, it's like *that* is it?" Footloose lifted her nose, aggressively. "Tell you what, *Seemy*, soon as I get my wings-... I'll race you, and I'll show you what 'runt' really means."

Slipstream cocked his head and waved a hand, airily. "Yeah, well, I won't put my life on hold waiting for you."

Footloose pursed her lips and narrowed her optics to a glare. "Well *that* was below the ejector valve." She turned the reproachful look onto her dam. "Ama-"

Pulsar knew what *that* face meant. "Don't. Even start."

"I'm not starting anything. I already know you're all gonna make me wait *forever* before you'll let me have an alt-mode." Footloose hunched her shoulders, and rolled her almost-empty energon flask between thumb and forefinger, sulkily, swirling the warm, volatile dregs around the bottom. "It's not like I'm gonna mess it up."

Pulsar sighed and shook her head, deftly removing the cap from the larger storage vessel with her one good hand. "I'm not going through it all with you again, Footloose. You know what Sepp told you."

"Yeah yeah I know." Footloose thumped her elbows down on the table and dropped her head heavily into her palms, sullenly. Her voice descended into disgusted mutterings. "It's still not fair. You're just making excuses. I bet Screamer could design something really *easy*, if he tried."

"It's not about whether he can, or not, it's about you being patient." Pulsar set the chilly flask down on the table in front of Slipstream, half-listening as he acknowledged it with a quiet *thank you*. "And not going out of your way to annoy him, because he gets enough of that from Day, and it's a guaranteed way to make him *not do it*. We're not going to bend the rules specially for you."

The instant his dam's back was turned, Slipstream gave his twin a smug little smile over the top of his flask. Footloose made more outraged noises and hefted her own empty container, on the cusp of hurling it at him.

"You break another one, Lucy, and I'll make *you* buy the replacements," Pulsar scolded, not even having to look around to know what her offspring were up to. "Either you stop squabbling with Seem, or you go to your room until your mood has improved."

Slipstream nodded agreement, and poked out his tongue, amusedly.

"But *Ama*-!" Footloose's voice increased in pitch to levels that would have done Starscream proud.

"...And *you* can stop egging her on, Slipstream. You're not some squeaky clean little innocent in this, either."

"Yes, Ama." Slipstream took refuge in his flask to hide his embarrassed grin.

"You two ain't causing a ruction *again*, are you?" a new, brash voice wondered, from the doorway; everyone glanced over to find a large black and purple flier silhouetted in the doorway, his impressive wingspan almost forcing him to turn sideways to get through the door.

"Day!" Footloose squeaked, and the two (former) sparklings immediately attached themselves to him, clicking excitedly, quarrel forgotten.

"Hey, Sparky! And *heeey*, Seemy..." Skywarp approximated a little wolf-whistle noise, and snerked when the youngster's optics flushed a vivid lilac-white, embarrassed. "Nice job they did, there. Just a shame about the colour. Why couldn't you have picked something nice, like purple?" He winked. "Seriously. You're wearing the look well, kiddo."

"I feel like I'm all legs," Slipstream argued, quietly, with a sheepish smile. "Still doesn't feel *right*, yet."

"Ah, give it time." Skywarp gave him a cuff around the audios, with a grin. "You've not even been in it a whole orn, yet. At least you're not walking into walls." The big teleport hesitated and gave him a exaggeratedly suspicious look, as though checking for scratches. "Or are you?"

Slipstream knew the abstract joke was referring to Celerity, whose systems had rejected all the dimensional primers that came with her refit and led to her being clumsy for a good hundred orn or so. "Not *yet*," he confirmed, with a sort of wary confidence.

Noticing Pulsar glanced over his shoulder for the third time in almost as many seconds, at last Skywarp caught her optic. "If you're waiting for TC, he's not coming over just yet."

Her gaze latched with his, anxiously. "Has something happened?"

The teleport grinned. "Nah, he's caught up in paperwork. Panacea finally agreed to sign him off." He impulsively scooped her off the floor and span her around with a laugh. "No more of that Pit-damned *headshrinkery*."

"I have no idea what you just said!" Pulsar laughed, alarmedly, reflexively kicking her feet. "But I'll assume it's a good thing-!"

The bigger machine gave her a decisive squeeze and a long, *serious* kiss on the lips before plonking her roughly back down on her feet. "No more visits to the psychiatrist," he explained, grinning all the way from audio vent to audio vent. "Pan says he's as 'fixed' as she'll ever get him."

Well, that explained the scintillating mood he'd brought home with him, she acknowledged, amusedly, wobbling to regain her balance. "That's great news," she laughed, genuinely. "I bet he's relieved."

"Last I saw, he was, ah, celebrating with Pan." Skywarp winked, meaningfully. "You know what *that* means."

Pulsar shook her head, despairingly. "Yeah, and it means nothing at all like what you're insinuating. Can't you go a day without innuendo?"

Skywarp smiled, sweetly. "I could try, but it'd be awful boring."

In the first few orn after their return to Cybertron, Starscream had got his wingmates signed up with a psychiatrist – and not just *any* psychiatrist, but the head of the entire psychiatry department, Consultant Panacea. *I need my trine back at full health, so I don't care about cost, just getting them all better.* Although he groused bitterly about it and how they never appreciated it, everyone knew he'd have done the exact same thing if given the chance to re-do it. (Besides, how does a former air commander plot righteous vengeance against his former leader with his trine in pieces?)

Although Thundercracker had understandably taken a lot longer, Skywarp was – predictably – first back on his feet. For a few dozen orn he danced a very fine line between complete recovery and total emotional crash-landing; *it was all my fault, I started this, I couldn't find them fast enough, I let Siphon escape, I'm slow and stupid and I deserved everything that has happened.* A combination of logic and reassurance convinced him that it wasn't *all* his fault, and that none of what happened was unfixable, and everyone was on the road to recovery, and...

Plus, of course, he'd very rapidly come to the conclusion that actually? Being a stay-at-home parent? Wasn't so bad as he'd thought. Kinda okay, actually. Especially as it was less "stay at home parent" and more "lazy unemployed bum with a couple of sparklings to get into bad habits I mean keep out of mischief." Starscream

very quickly got exasperated with their antics and banned both of Skywarp's "little minions" from his laboratory.

"So," the teleport wondered, loudly, "have you two troublemakers managed to bully Ama into having her arm reattached yet?"

Pulsar glared at him, good-naturedly. "Just because I only have one arm doesn't mean I can't give you a good punch in the faceplates."

He smiled sweetly and closed his fingers delicately around her wrist. "Care to review that statement, oh squeaking one?"

She growled and made a mock lunge at him, snapping her denta at the air close to his nose.

The *snap* took him completely by surprise and made him jerk backwards, then laugh rudely. "Feisty today, huh?" He cupped a hand around her 'blinker' sidelight, and used his fingers to strum lightly across her sensitive little array of antennae. "How about..." He leaned down close and murmured near her audio. "We dump the bitlets on Screamer, and go for a little 'fly'? I even made sure I'd got a baffle, just in case."

The feel of his rough fingers on her antennae was... *nice*... but it flared up a mess of other feelings in her chassis and after a tense little smile, she pushed him gently back anyway. "Not right now."

He huffed a sigh, dramatically, and obediently took his hand back. "Even if I promise not to accidentally make any more sparklings with you?" he wheedled.

"*Even if*." She gave him a terse, uneasy smile, backing out of arm's reach. "I'm sorry, Warp. I just-... not yet. Maybe soon."

They both knew that 'soon' was rather *over*-optimistic, but Skywarp didn't argue the point.

"Fine, then. I'll go see Beemer," he retorted, at last, as if to save face. "How could she *possibly* resist a handsome specimen of masculinity like myself?"

"You *know* my sister prefers femmes."

He grinned, lasciviously. "I know. I also know Surefire's back for an orn or two, and I'm hoping if I get 'em over-energised and interested in *each other*, I'll get lucky."

In spite of her desire to remain stern and glaring, Pulse couldn't help the snort of laughter that escaped. "You're just a leech. However did you survive on *Nemesis*, without all those femmes to ogle?"

"I don't know, actually." He offered up a studiously serious face, arms folded, thoughtfully stroking his chin. "I think I spent a lot of my time trying to glue Screamer to his desk. Or paint-bomb him funny colours."

"...nice to know you were just as dedicated to work *then* as you are *now*."

He gave her a broad, smug grin.

"All right. You," she gave him a stern swat on the wing, hard enough to sting, "need to remove our squabbling offspring from beneath my feet before I take more drastic measures to get them to behave."

Slipstream was already up on his feet and gazing hopefully out of the window into the narrow alley behind the property. "Whites is due off shift any minute. He said he'd come with me for a spin around the district, remember?" He glanced back at his parents, and smiled, shyly. "To help me get used to my new alt?"

Footloose muttered something disgusted, and folded her arms against the table with a meaningful *thump*.

Skywarp grinned. "Job done, then. No more squabbling. That was easy!"

"All right, Smart-aft, let me rephrase." Pulsar huffed a sigh. "You need to take *Lucy* out for a while, firstly so she stops feeling hard-done-by, and secondly stops getting in my way, so I can do my laundry."

"Pfft." Skywarp flicked the tassels on the swirly blue shawl tied at a jaunty angle across Pulsar's shoulders. "It's not like anybody's forcing you to wear those silly things."

"Well *perhaps* I like wearing them," she retorted, semi-defensively.

"Well *perhaps* Earth's made you go funny in the head."

She gave him a swat, and glared. "Glad to see *you* feel comfortable with joking about what Siphon did to me."

Skywarp gave her a faintly reproachful smile. "You know that's not what I meant."

Pulsar looked away, just a little, almost apologetic. "Well you can be difficult to interpret, some days-"

"Whitesides!" Footloose's gleeful squeak broke through the awkward atmosphere.

Being a significantly smaller mech than Skywarp, the Policebot stood up to the obligatory Greeting Maul a lot less easily – his legs almost gave way beneath the weight of nearly-grown sparklings that attached themselves to him. "All right all right! Steady on, you two, you're going to knock me flying," he laughed, trying to keep up. "It's good to see you two troublemakers too. Still running poor Ama ragged, I see?"

Pulsar made a face. "Thank Primus you're here. I need you to try run down some of his excess energy, get him some practice with the new alt," she instructed, waving a finger in Slipstream's direction. "He's only been home a few breems, and he and his sister are already driving me to distraction."

Whitesides gave his former room-mate/adopted-sibling an affectionate smile and bumped cheeks in greeting. "Oh, I'll tire him out, no worries there," he promised, with a wicked grin. "We'll give that new alt of his such a workout, he won't know what hit him. He'll get in after we're done, and be far too busy recharging to want to fight with Lucy."

"Tire him out *how*?" Skywarp challenged, catching Whitesides' arm as he passed.

The smaller mech belated realised the possible implications of his wording, and his optics flushed a vivid cyan, alarmed. "N-not like that!" he gabbed, hastily. "I-I just mean take him for a ride. I mean a run round the block! I-"

Skywarp planted a hand over the smaller mech's lips, which managed to convince him to shut up. "How about quit *digging*, bikey," he suggested, amusedly, leaning closer. "Or I'll start thinking what they say about you is actually true."

"Da-ayy," Slipstream groaned, embarrassed, and pushed past him.

Whitesides looked a lot like he wanted the ground to open up and swallow him, mumbled something apologetic, and hastily scuttled out after his 'nephew'.

The instant the door closed behind them, Pulsar turned to glance at Skywarp, and arched a brow, amused.

"What?" the teleport challenged.

She just smiled, vaguely, and shook her head. "Just... take the bitlet out for a fly, will you? She's getting fidgety."

Footloose gave her a resentful look, but didn't argue.

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Seeing Slipstream racing excitedly away down the main street didn't improve Footloose's frame of mind – in

fact, it made it positively *sour*. *Proper little green-eyed monster*, Skywarp considered, privately, but didn't say so out loud. He'd almost – but only *almost* – suggested that well, maybe they ought to hold off on Seem's alt, too, just for a little while, so the two troublemakers could whine about how *unfair* it was together? But then he reasoned *that* wasn't especially fair, either, especially since Seem had no ambition any higher than ground-pounding his way around the planet's surface for the rest of his days-

"Day?" Footloose leaned closer to Skywarp's audios, sprawled out over his back. "When *am* I going to get my wings?"

Skywarp vented air in a sigh, genuinely tired, watching as the ground dwindled below. "Please don't start this all again, Lucy," he said. "You already know what I'm gonna say, 'cause we're telling you the same thing at least three or four times an orn."

"I know," she whined, and bumped her helm against his. "I just-... It's not fair. Seem's got an alt-mode, now. Why can't *I* have one?"

"Oh, so you changed your mind and don't mind ground-pounding for a while, eh?" He glanced backwards and met her muted green optics.

"I didn't say that!" She couldn't quite decide if she wanted to glare at him, or just look melodramatic and dispirited.

"Well, I pretty strongly remember us telling you it was *bike* or *patience*, and there was gonna be no budging until you're bigger."

"But he's leaving me behind! He's gonna get a *job*, and a *partner*, and *move out*, and I'll still be stuck at home, getting under yours and Ama's thrusters and getting yelled at by Screamer," Footloose complained, darkly, then muttered something quiet, vented a melodramatic sigh, and let her chin come down with a bump to rest on Skywarp's shoulder, exaggerating how unhappy she was.

Skywarp caught his sparkling's mutter, and had to offline his vocaliser before he could snap at her for it. *You just like him better than me.*

"Come on, Sepp explained it, and even *I* get it and *I'm* stupid," he said, diverting his irritation down an alternative channel. "Your protoform is too small, right now. You need two upgrades in size, and a new power handling system, then the time to stabilise your harmonic to each upgrade. That's aside from needing to be big enough that you won't just... blow your thrusters straight off, the instant you try and get airborne."

"So I can be bigger! You can tell Screamer to get Auntie Sepp to make me bigger! Pleeese, Day." She rubbed cheeks with him, as if that'd somehow sway his opinion. "It's not that big a deal is it? Seem's bigger! *He* didn't need time to stabilise-"

"Damnit, Button. Just accept a *no*, for once in your life." He glared at her, at last, and he felt her arms tighten around his neck as she cringed away. "Sepp *told you* why we can't upgrade you to a Seeker model yet, and she *told you* what'll happen if we try putting a big old thruster complex onto those little stick-legs of yours. I'm not gonna have you messing yourself up for the next Primus-only-knows-how-many Vorns just because you couldn't be *patient*. Besides." His voice softened. "I'm looking forwards to teaching you to fly, so I kinda want you bigger, too. We're gonna have to be patient together, huh?"

Footloose made an uninterpretable little noise that could have meant anything from suspicion to satisfaction with the answer, but she at least seemed mollified, for now.

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Starscream was off-duty, but that didn't stop him *working*. He stood at the edge of the rift, poking at a seismograph; there had been a fair bit of suspicious activity, of late, and he wanted to check out exactly what was going on. The last thing anyone wanted was for the rift to become active again, after the district had skated through the entire war pretty much unscathed.

"Go set these up over the other side of the Rift," he instructed, dumping a case of tools into Skywarp's arms the instant the dark Seeker had landed and dropped his passenger off. "I need to take some topological measurements."

"Well hello to you too, Screamer." Skywarp pursed his lips with a glare. "I don't even know what these are, and you'll probably tell me I did it wrong."

"Well, you don't need to know what they are to go put them over there. I coded them all with the right co-ordinates, and they go *flat side down*. If you can get them to balance on their domes, I'll be impressed."

Skywarp snorted and kicked off, deliberately scattering gravel at his wingmate.

"And that wasn't a challenge!" Starscream yelled at his departing thrusters, and got a rude noise in response. "And what's wrong with *you*?" He directed his attention down at Footloose. "You better not be the reason Warp's in a bad mood, or you can go back home now."

Footloose shot him a dirty look, settling on the broken edge of the Rift and dangling her feet.

"I see. Sulking again."

"No I'm not," Footloose retorted, quietly, arms folded, kicking her heels and watching as Thundercracker glided in. "I only said how I want to fly. It's not that much to ask, is it. You're all making such a big deal out of it."

Starscream made one of his contemptuous *noises* and shot the youngster a dirty look, nodding an abbreviated greeting at his blue wingmate. "Well you'll just have to be patient," he growled, waving a stylus for emphasis. "It's not like you'll be waiting that many Vorns."

"*Vorns*? But I only-"

"I know. Guess what, we don't *always* get what we want. *I* only want to lead the Decepticons. *I* fought Megatron for *thousands* of Vorns, trying to achieve what I wanted, and look where it left me." He spread his arms, disgusted. "A reject little Empty with wings, scraping to get by in a reject district on Cybertron, defeated and stupid." He glared. "You want wings? *FINE*. As soon as you're big enough to handle the power levels needed, I'll get you fitted with them, then you can fly *as far away from me as possible*. If I never have to listen to your whining *ever again*, it'll be too soon."

His words ended with a snap, and Footloose just gazed up at him, startled into a wide-eyed, frightened silence.

"Just-... get her out from under my feet, will you, TC?" he snapped, irritably.

"What's got *your* afterburners all pinched up, I wonder?" Thundercracker cast his gaze skywards, but obediently picked the small femme up; she immediately snuggled up against his chassis, vibrating softly. "C'mon, Button. Let's go for a wander."

"Didn't mean to upset him," she explained, barely coherent through the fizz of static distortions.

"Well, we did tell you 'no' quite a lot of times already, huh," the blue jet explained, gently, using a fingertip to scratch at her aerals, and she calmed at the little affection. "Maybe it'll be a good idea to let them tell you when they think you're ready, from now on, eh? It's not like they're going to *forget*. You're not going to be stuck in that little protoform forever."

He felt her nod, where her head rested against his shoulder. "I jus' don't like it when he yells at me like that," she explained, feebly.

Funny what things got under their plating, Thundercracker mused, ascending gracefully back to the cool crosswinds that played across the district. She'd take a scolding without so much as a flinch, but being told to *go away* reminded her of the time she'd spent on Earth and usually upset her.

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"So where's Lucy gone?"

"Off with TC. She was annoying me." Starscream didn't even look up from his controls, as Skywarp reappeared from his task. "She's worse than you at taking a hint."

"Thanks." Skywarp wrinkled his nose and just managed to resist the urge to tweak the seismograph's controls while he waited. "Couldn't you just-... you know." He gave his wingmate a little look. "You're the geek, right? Maybe just make her a couple of little antigravs, or something? Just enough to get off the ground? So she quits whining at us."

Starscream gave his wingmate a stern jab with his stylus and made him jump back. "I'm not bowing to your little brat's whining because she thinks she's hard done by," he snapped. "She's not gone without *anything* since we got home, the least she can do in return is learn a little patience."

"Whoa, hey, easy up, yeah?" Skywarp grouched. "I was only *asking*, Primus. What harm does it do? Not like I just asked you to go play chicken with Menasor or anything."

"Ha! Well just remember we're *stuck here* because of you, Skywarp," the red Seeker snapped, at last. "Stuck here in this frigging... *nowhere land*, eking out an existence with *Neutrals and Autobots*, because *you* decided it'd be a good idea to play around without using protection and got Squeaks sparked up. So don't you try and act like we *owe* you something!"

Skywarp backed off, clearly hurt. "How many times do I have to say I'm sorry before you believe me?" he asked, pouting. "I just didn't think-"

"That's always your problem! You never *do* think!"

"I meant, I didn't think it'd be a problem." Skywarp folded his arms, glowering hotly. "How was I supposed to know that the *one single fragging time* I got to interface with someone in the last few thousand Vorns, it'd have these sort of consequences?"

"Well maybe you should have investigated things a bit better before flinging yourself at the first bit of kibble to show the vaguest interest!"

"Yeah, of course. You're right again, as always." Skywarp made a gesture that implied adjusting a pair of glasses. "I'm sorry, miss, I know this is all kinda spontaneous, and all I wanna do is try and get you come hard enough to offline, but would you mind if we investigated the potential outcome of the situation *before* we got to bonking?"

He had to duck hastily as a spanner came flying at his audio vents.

"I dropped every ambition I ever possessed to get you two worthless idiots back on your feet!" Starscream barked, stabbing a finger in a point. "And *this* is how you thank me? By acting like it's *no big deal*? By just-... just seeing what you can get out of me?"

"That shouldn't matter to you, as it's all *you* care about anyway," Skywarp shot back. "It's not like you ever cared what *we* think. If it's not servicing your ambitions, you don't wanna know."

"...*You* wouldn't know ambition if it got up and *shot* you in the aft!"

"Well maybe that's good, because look where 'ambition' got *you*!" Skywarp drew little air speechmarks for emphasis.

"...second in command of the entire Decepticon army, just in case you forgot."

"Yeah, because *that* was worth it. Career prospects were awesome, huh." Skywarp folded his arms,

dramatically. "Second in command to a leader who ignored the few *good* ideas you had in favour of doing things his own way and fragging things to the Pit without fail every time. Besides, in the unlikely event you ever got to the top of the heap, how long do you think you'd have lasted before I dunno, someone like Blitz offed you, huh? Awesome job prospects there, oh gracious leader!"

"Because crawling at his feet and agreeing with whatever he said in the hope that he didn't slag me was so much better option!"

"Well what do you want me to say?" Skywarp demanded, at last, throwing up his hands. "Well golly, Screamer, I sure am sorry me and TC didn't say something *before* you pissed most of your life away, chasing after ambitions that anyone with even *half* a functioning cortical relay would know were completely out of your reach!"

"The only reason *you* didn't say anything is because you don't *have* half a functioning cortical relay!"

"At least I used to know when to shut the frag up, Screamer! So I didn't spend most of my life *in sick-bay*, slagged by the leader I kept trying to stab in the back! Even the fragging *Autobots* knew you weren't so much brave as just fragging unable to find a good enough leash for your vocaliser!"

"Well why don't you go *sign up* if you suddenly *respect* them so much?" Starscream stabbed an arm in the vague direction of the space-bridge. "Prime *can't wait* to get us all on board, why don't you go earn a few points by getting your name on the list *first*?"

0o0o0o0o0

"...They're yelling again," Footloose commented, quietly, noticing the flailing arms and gestures below.

"Yeah, I know, Button," Thundercracker agreed, softly. "They just... Well, neither of them knows when to back down, I guess."

"I didn't mean to upset him."

"Aw, don't be like that, Lou." He lifted a hand and felt her fingers brush against it. "It's not your fault Screamer's got a spanner jammed up his thrusters."

"He wasn't yelling until we got there."

"Your uncle's just tired," he soothed, gently. "He works too hard, destabilises his systems, and feels like smelt until he can get everything running smoothly again. And Day's never really been known for his tact, huh? They're just... rubbing each other up the wrong way, as usual."

He listened as she sighed, and felt her nod again.

"Come on. Let's see if we can track Seemy down. See how he's getting on. We can laugh at him falling over. Yeah?"

She managed a tired snerk and bumped heads. "That's mean," she pointed out, then; "ok! Let's."

0o0o0o0o0

Way above, unnoticed by all but the sharpest of eyes, a small meteor – if that was indeed what it was – began to scuffle its way across Cybertron's thin atmosphere.

...Whether it would *remain* unnoticed for much longer seemed unlikely.

Chapter 2: Chapter 2

Future Tense - Chapter Two

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A/N: This is one of those chapters that just didn't want me to end it. ಠ_ಠ Oh well; I guess longer chapter = bigger gap between updates? :smiley halo:

Slipstream wasn't difficult to find – a glittering chip of cobalt excitement, easily matching speeds with the policebike cruising leisurely alongside him, down one of Deixar's quieter side streets. He might not have Whitesides' practiced elegance, just yet, and often wobbled fairly dramatically, particularly when recovering from a corner, but he was certainly the older mech's equal when it came to the level of power in his fusion core.

Thundercracker caught them up, amused, and buzzed overhead; Footloose leaned down over his shoulder and shrieked with laughter at her twin, making the blue jet *grimace* amusedly.

"We'll race you, Slowmo!" she howled down at her brother, pinging him a location. "Bet we beat you to Screamer!"

Slipstream didn't bother to verbally acknowledge the challenge – being a groundling didn't mean he didn't have his father's harmonics or a powerful little engine core, capable of handling jet speeds. He simply gunned his engines and accelerated dramatically away in front, leaving Whitesides half-amused and half-annoyed (and spluttering grit out of his intakes) behind him.

Slipstream beat them all to the rift by a few body-lengths, with Thundercracker deliberately holding back *just* enough that it wouldn't be completely obvious he was letting the youngling win. The new little bike bounced on his toes and laughed exuberantly as his uncle glided in with his sister, thrusters pointed for a landing. "I win, I win," he squeaked, gleefully, doing big triumphant circles around them.

Still draped over Thundercracker's wings, Footloose pursed her lips, sulkily, and muttered something sour-tempered.

Her mood didn't go unnoticed by the big Seeker. "Come on, Lou." He nudged her under the chin with a knuckle. "You sure we can't persuade you to *do* like your brother for just a little while? You know from Auntie Lars that first alt mode doesn't mean *only* alt mode. It doesn't mean you're never going to fly, it just means you won't always have to hitch a ride when Seem leaves you eating his dust."

Slipstream nodded sagely, and she was already pouting and preparing to hit him, dropping back to the floor in the most threatening stance she could manage, anticipating a rude reply, when he spoke; "Come on, Lou. It won't be the same without you." He grinned. "Besides. Teasing you gets boring when you're an easy target."

She hunched her shoulders, somewhat humbled, and shot him a halfhearted glare. "I'll think about it," she mumbled, at last.

"Atta girl!" Thundercracker grinned and gave her an affectionate cuff around the audios. "Trust me, as soon as you get into that alt-mode, time will just speed past. You'll barely even notice that you're still on the ground."

At last, Whitesides pulled up, forcing a smile, trying not to look like his core was overheating from trying to catch up. "I'll have to get Ama to find some speed limiters for you, next time we go out," he grumbled. "Barely into your new alt and you're already faster than me."

Slipstream smiled sheepishly, and bumped heads. "Sorry, Whites."

Conveniently, the little group found Skywarp still lurking close to the Rift, as they approached; apparently still smarting from his squabble, and far too stubborn to take steps to apologise, but not willing to give up and

go home *quite* yet.

"Day? Day!" Fotloose launched herself bodily at him. "Day, I changed my mind!"

Skywarp put up his hands and backed off, startled by the vehemence of the greeting. "You-... what? Changed your mind? Slow down, I don't-"

"I changed my mind, I want to be like Seem!" She attached herself around his chassis. "Can you talk to Sepp for me? Please?"

Skywarp arched a brow and gave Thundercracker a look. "What *exactly* did you say to her?" he wondered, amusedly, struggling to get a word in edgeways.

Thundercracker smiled, and spread his hands. "Just proved the power of the green-optic'ed monster, I guess? Can't bear for Seem to be having fun when she isn't." He glanced at the seismograph and sighed hot air from his vents at seeing a familiar wingtip protruding around one end. "Guess I'll go try and bully Screamer into going home. Again."

Skywarp gave him a dark look. "Yeah, good luck with that. Can you yank that stick out of his exhaust while you're at it?"

Thundercracker gave him a slap on the shoulder and a lopsided smile, and slipped past.

Starscream barely even glanced up at seeing his fellow Seeker approaching. "If you're here to heckle me, you can give up and go away now."

"I'm not here to heckle. I'm here because I've got an idea for you, and you never know, it might even *not kill you*. Just... come here a second..." Thundercracker set his fingers on his wingmate's wings, and pulled him carefully backwards away from his seismograph.

Starscream *yerp*'ed and flailed his arms, but rapidly realised his choices were limited to 'follow' or 'fall on your aft'. He elected to save his dignity.

"How about," the blue Seeker went on, using his lack of balance to steer Starscream around in a tottery half-circle, to face in the opposite direction, "you go home, get yourself a flask of high-grade, sit down, relax, and actually *defragment* for a change."

His wingmate's protests were strangely determined; he leaned hard back into the dark hands and dug his heels in. "I can't. I've got to work."

"Right, because the rift is suddenly going to open up to twice the size of normal and cause death and destruction all round in the process *the very instant* you take your optics off it." Thundercracker resisted the urge to cast his gaze skywards. "Remind me, how deep did you say you were saving, at the moment? Are you up to your senary storage, or are you already deeper?"

"I don't believe I said, and it's only quinary, thank you." Starscream elevated his nose, sniffily. "I can last another orn or two without needing to defragment."

"Without crashing and going into stasis, you mean?" Thundercracker sighed and fumbled with his subspace. "Well, I'm not dragging your aft home if you fall over, so... here. At least have this if you won't go home. You need it more than I do." He brought out a tall silver flask.

The red jet gave the container a suspicious look and tucked his hands away, up to his chest, as though at any moment it might jump up and bite him, and glanced up to meet his wingmate's gaze. "*You're* supposed to have intook that already."

"I know. Turns out I didn't need it."

Starscream narrowed his optics to a glare. "You better not be refusing fuel again," he threatened. "Because I'm not above sitting on you and pouring it down your intakes. I did it before, and I'll do it again in an instant!"

"No-o. I just got some from somewhere else." Thundercracker smiled in that gently chastising way he'd developed, and gave the flask an encouraging little wiggle. "Pan and I shared a glass or two of high grade. To celebrate me not being her patient any more."

Starscream's manner abruptly changed; his wings perked, he straightened up and his optics brightened. "What?" he demanded, a startled look knocking the scowl off his face. "When did that happen?"

"Earlier today." Thundercracker gave him a wry smile, using his wingmate's surprise to slot the flask of energon into his hands. "You'd have found out sooner if you hadn't turned your pinger off, and were willing to you know, *talk* to Skywarp without getting into a screaming match over nothing with him?"

Starscream pursed his lips and backed off a step, muttering something that sounded like an apology. "Well I can't help it if he's a moron."

"And *he* can't help it if you're being a cantankerous old glitch who acts like he's got a spanner permanently jammed up his vent. Come on, it's not *all* his fault. Sure he winds you up, but if you actually *defragmented* for a change, you might remember you don't have to take it personally?"

Tired crimson optics narrowed down into a hot beam of irritation, but – miraculously – Starscream kept his vocaliser offline, for once, concentrating on uncapping the energon.

Thundercracker set his hand against his friend's wing and gave him a soothing pat. "You just need to find something to satisfy your ambition, so you don't feel the need to work yourself to an early termination just to keep your mind occupied," he consoled, gently. "Something worth your time to fight for, eh?" He grinned, wryly. "Something more than just us two losers hanging onto your thrusters."

Starscream gave him a reproachful look. "Don't force me to say I care about you." He waved a finger, threateningly. "Because I will *not* be blackmailed."

"Yeah yeah." The blue Seeker chuckled. "We know, and we'd never beg a confession of affection off you. Poor Warp would probably melt out something critical at hearing it, anyway." He patted his friend's wing, affectionately. "If it means that much to you, I'll keep an optic on this silly thing for a while. Just go home for a bit, Star."

"Please. Don't call me that?" The irritable sentiment was a little more genuine, this time.

"Why not? It *is* your name."

"My *name* is Starscream." The red Seeker glared tiredly for emphasis, and waved his hands. "Don't go... lopping bits off just because you've suddenly got the idea it's *unattractive*."

"You never object to being 'Screamer', and it's only since we came home you've started to object to 'Star'." Thundercracker observed, ignoring his friend's bad mood. "Ahh wait, I get it. It's what Skyfire used to call you."

"Stupid maladjusted concretion of spare parts." Starscream's voice descended into disgusted mutterings.

"He only wants to be able to talk with you again, without you threatening to shoot out his main power regulator," Thundercracker soothed. "I think that secretly, you want to be comfortable talking to *him*, too."

Starscream promptly sucked energon down the wrong intake and was reduced to spluttering for several seconds. "After he showed me up, in public?"

"No, he tried to *apologise* to you before you could slope off without saying goodbye and he lost his chance altogether for the next few hundred vorns."

"In front of *everyone*! As if that wasn't a calculated exercise in *humiliation*..."

"I think even *you* know he's not quite that shallow-"

"...And he should have thought about the consequences *before* he kicked me to the kerb!"

"Starscream."

"I know I know. Stop rocking the boat." Starscream glared down into the flask, sullen. "You're *turning into* Pan, I hope you realise." He gave it an irritable swirl, and took the most sparing of mouthfuls. "That's the only reason she signed you off, because she's happy you've swallowed all her ideals and now you're ready to go out and spread her teachings."

"Screamer? Please. You need to go home, and get some rest." For the second time in as many breems, Thundercracker steered the red Seeker in a gentle half-circle to face in the vague direction of their home. "I know you've not defragmented in about ten orn. You're going to have a breakdown if you keep this up."

"Well *someone* has to earn enough credits to keep us in enough fuel to fly."

"I know. That's why I'm going to help out, now I'm back on my feet." Thundercracker smiled. "I already had my doctor's blessing, a while back, and now I don't have anything they can use as an excuse not to employ an ex-Con? Hardline's got some posts he needs to fill. Said that he'd take my history of command into account, I could apply for a post at inspector level."

"That's what you two were sneaking around discussing last night?" The tension visibly melted out of Starscream's wings.

"Yeah. We didn't want to get your hopes up in case our friendly local tyrant- I mean, in case commissioner Boxer put a nix on it." Thundercracker gave him a wry grin. "Thought we were talking about you again, huh?"

Starscream stared down at his thrusters, irritably. "Well I *had* just spent a breem shouting at Footloose for being careless and breaking one of my databoards, and losing an orn of valuable work."

"...And *that* only annoyed you because it meant you couldn't spend all evening working on it, and had to sit with us instead."

"-slander!"

"Only if it's not true." Thundercracker gave him another gentle push. "Come on, Starscream. Please? It's not logical to help me back to full strength if you self-destruct from overwork the day after, right?"

"All right, all right." Starscream put his hands up, defeated. "I'm going." Her was clearly tireder than he wanted to let on, because he was quite happy to amble along on the ground with his arms drooping. "...how's Seem?"

Thundercracker walked alongside him, mostly to catch him if need be. "I wondered when you were going to get around to asking me about him."

Starscream gave him a reproachful look.

"Yeah, the refit went well. He's just back from a run with Whitesides," Thundercracker confirmed, with a nod. "Completely outpaced the poor guy. Whites only caught up because Seem had *stopped*, and judging by their route I bet he's sucked a ton of dust up his intakes."

"So long as that's *all* he's been sucking."

"Don't *you* start, as well," Thundercracker scolded, amusedly. "You're gonna give the poor guy a complex."

"He's already got one." The red jet waved a hand, airily. "But then, don't we all?" He looked askance at his

wingmate and pointed a threatening finger.. "Except you, of course." Pointing finger turned into a scolding waggle. "Better *not* have one, after all those credits we spent getting your brain fixed."

"Hey, guys...? Guys?"

The pair turned to find Skywarp approaching from one side; behind him, the Twins had gathered strangely close to Whitesides, as if uneasy.

Thundercracker gave him a curious look; the dark Seeker actually looked vaguely concerned. "What's the matter, Warp?"

The teleport pointed behind them, above their heads. "What's that?"

They turned to follow his gaze; in the distant sky, too far away to see clearly, hung a small dark dot, with an odd 'tail' stretching out in a gentle curve behind it.

"That looks like... y'know. Something falling," Skywarp added, grimly. "Right?"

"Right." Starscream pursed his lips, irritably. "And if it's a meteorite, it's of a pretty decent size, too."

"...is that smoke?" Thundercracker wondered, warily.

"We can figure that out in a breem. All I know right now is that I don't want to be underneath it if it *is* a falling chunk of space-debris." Starscream gave the non-fliers a glare, and a snapped command. "All right, you gaggle of staring idiots. Get out of here. Now." When they just stared at him, he threw up his hands. "I'm not above nullraying you and *dragging* you away! Now get a move on!"

That got them moving; Whitesides shooed Slipstream away, then held out his hand for Footloose, who dithered for a moment but soon followed them.

"We better retreat to a safe distance, too," Starscream acknowledged, irritably. "Why *now*, of all the fragging times the fates could have picked-...? Argh. I don't need this to add to all my other problems! I swear, if that goes *anywhere near* the rift I'll, I'll..." His words ran out into outraged mutterings, to hide the fact that he couldn't think of a punishment suitably heinous for a rock.

"Uh, Screamer? I don't think that's a meteorite," Skywarp commented, attracting his attention back. "I think it's a ship."

"And I don't think it's one of ours," Thundercracker agreed, trying to boost his visual field enough to get a better look at it before it got too close. "I'm not getting a response to hails on *any* frequency. It's either damaged, or – Primus forbid – alien."

Skywarp's optics brightened, suddenly interested. "Aliens?"

"Grow up, Skywarp," Starscream scolded, irritably. "You're not living in a B movie."

"In a *what*?" the teleport challenged. His brows had drawn together again.

"After all the television you watched, while we were on Earth... You have a greater knowledge of bad human cinematography than any human alive, and you don't know what a B movie is?"

"Guys, please?" Thundercracker sighed. "Does *everything* have to degenerate into a squabble?"

Skywarp gave him one of those uninterpretable glances that could have been anywhere between cynical and amused. "TC. Come on. Would it be fun if it didn't?"

The blue jet finally put up his hands, and admitted defeat.

The stricken vessel they were tracking didn't seem to even be attempting to slow its headlong flight – the

sound of engines the three jets had been anticipating as it got closer turned out to be almost entirely absent. It came down hard on its belly in the ruins of an old building, in a derelict area on the Deixar side of the Rift, scattering scraps of oxidised metal and chunks of artificial rock in its wake. It skidded noisily through the heaps of old detritus before catching against a more solid set of broken foundations which flipped its nose dramatically back into the air, forcing Skywarp into a hasty scramble out of the way.

It finally groaned to a difficult halt with its shattered front-end protruding over the cliff-edge. For several long moments, it just... *hung* there, creaking, fighting vainly against gravity... until with a final gasp of straining metal it lost its grip on the edge, and the broken depths of the Rift obediently swallowed it up.

"Whoa," Skywarp commented, gazing after the plume of dust and smoke now rising. "That was exciting."

Starscream gave him a withering look.

"What? It was!" Skywarp threw up his hands and emphasised, jokingly; "It *is* alien invaders!"

Starscream pinched the brow of his nose and sighed theatrically. "Of course that's what it is, Warp. In fact, it's probably *Triffids*, or the monster from the black lagoon or something."

"The monster from the black lagoon wasn't strictly an *alien*, you know..."

"Sarcasm is just wasted on you, isn't it?"

Thundercracker slipped himself between them before the argument could get too animated. "Come on, you two. It's probably just a shuttle with a damaged communications array. We better check it out, yeah? Whoever it is might need help."

"Or we might be better served by getting out of the way, in case it blows up," Starscream sniped.

...the vessel turned out to be a lot smaller than it had originally seemed, falling like a stone from the sky with a plume of acrid smoke billowing from a scorched hole in its flank; the three Seekers lurking warily at the edge of the rift and gazing down on it were a little smaller, but not by a large margin.

"OK, so, that's *definitely* not one of ours, right?" Skywarp pointed out, needlessly, as though the alien writing and tiny hatches covering it weren't enough of a clue. "Where'd you reckon it came from?"

Starscream met his look with a little glare. "...why do you always automatically assume I'll *know*?"

"I was just throwing the question out there, Screamer. Besides, you might have known. You *are* the world's greatest explorer, apparently. Overreacting, much?" Skywarp rolled his optics and directed his attention back into the rift. He frowned, curiously, then perked his wings. "...whoa! Hey, look at that-!" Before his trine-mates could move to catch him, he'd gathered his feet underneath himself and pushed off the edge.

"Skywarp!" Starscream snapped. "What in Pit are you doing?"

The teleport caught himself in an untidy hover, a body length or two beneath them. "There's something come out of it!" he retorted, irritably. "C'mon, guys, you can't have missed it, it was huge. Down there, look." He stabbed an arm down into the rift beneath his thrusters.

"Where?" Thundercracker followed his arm. "I don't see anything."

Skywarp looked for himself, again, and grunted annoyedly at realising the thing he'd seen *had* in fact vanished behind one of the broken piles of jagged rock below.

"What did it look like?" Starscream chased.

"It was brownish, and kinda fuzzy." Skywarp frowned, consideringly, thinking back to his time spent on Earth. "...maybe we've been invaded by dust bunnies. Humans had problems with them, remember?"

Even Starscream couldn't help cracking a smile at that. "I think you need to look up the term 'dust bunny', Skywarp," he suggested, dryly. "It's probably just litter, blown in from further up."

The teleport made a dismissive *pfft*-noise, killed his thrusters and promptly dropped out of sight again. "Well I'm gonna go try catch it. You can dissect it and tell us what it is."

"Why do you keep doing that?"

"Doing what?" Skywarp's voice had a strange sort of muffled echo to it.

"Assuming *I'll* know?"

"'Cause you know *everything*. Duh."

Starscream sighed and commented, to no-one in particular; "Well I'm not scraping you off the walls when you get yourself blown up again."

Next second, and he found out his attempt to send the Twins home had been rather a failure, as well, when Footloose appeared out of nowhere and flung herself off the edge, determined not to miss out on whatever exciting thing her sire was up to. She vanished in a flicker of lilac; she might not be able to *fly* but she'd had plenty of experience in falling off tall things, and a series of short hops with her teleport would get her down before she picked up much speed. Landing without spreading herself over too many square yards of ground had become one of her specialities.

Slipstream wasn't very far behind her. He gathered himself to jump after her; a morbid fear of *flying* didn't mean he wasn't just as good at getting down off things, and had as good a grasp of 'cascade teleporting' as his sister.

...unfortunately, before he could jump, Starscream's attention landed squarely on him. "Slipstream!" he barked, startling the youngster into a wide-eyed retreat from the edge. "You even *think* about following them, and I'll deactivate your transformation subroutines for at least ten orns. *While you're in your alt mode*. Got that?"

"But Lucy-"

"-is an idiot like her sire, and we're not talking about her. I said, *got it?*"

Slipstream nodded hastily; being trapped in that hostile crimson glare had a bigger effect on him than it did on Footloose. "Got it!"

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Even if a mech ignored the unfamiliar writing on it, the vessel was clearly of alien origin, Skywarp mused, doing a cautious half-circuit around it. Its lines were sleek, albeit sort of *bulbous* in places, each plate smoothly welded together, lacking any hint of transformational ability. The gash that had brought it down ran almost full length up one engine pod, level with his face, revealing unfamiliar circuits and fuel lines and the heavy mass of a graviton core. Screamer would love to see it – maybe he ought to try salvage it first, then look for the hairball? He ran his fingers along the shredded metal, thoughtfully; the jagged edges reminded him of collision damage, rather than the intense heat of weapons damage. Maybe it had just took a wrong turn, out there?

He cupped his hands around his mouth to yell up at his wingmates – pinging them would be easier, but yelling was so much more satisfying – when something small, pale brown and fuzzy-looking darted between two rocks, diving for cover close to the wall of the ravine. He swallowed the words and lunged towards it, hastily, clipping a wing on the sheer walls of the ravine in his haste to try and see what it was. Definitely a creature, not just windblown debris!

As he rounded the little corner, however... the hole in the cliff became visible, and his enthusiasm deflated.

Whatever it was... had gone underground. Skywarp fidgeted his thrusters, and glanced back over his shoulder, to check no-one had seen his *wince*. Good; no-one was watching.

The soft *slap* of shifting air as one of his sparklings appeared attracted his attention; he turned just in time to watch Footloose rematerialise a foot shy of the ground, and land with a *thump* and a squeak on the broken rock.

"Lucy," he sighed, watching her pick herself up. "What are you doing down here?"

She brushed grit off her knees. "I wanted to help."

"You mean, you don't want to miss out." He managed a glare, and pointed up. "It's not safe down here. You need to get back up on solid ground, and stay with the guys."

She gave him her most inoffensive, honest face. "Can't fly," she reminded. "And it's not so bad down here. Just... jaggy."

"You *know* I meant *this* isn't safe," he gestured to the alien spacecraft, "and I know for a fact that you've teleported up onto higher things than the top of the Rift."

"Maybe I just wanna stay with you," Footloose asserted, clinging to his arm. "Screamer just... yells about nothing too much."

Her expression was aggressive and her manner determinedly forwards, but Skywarp could feel her trembling and knew it was mostly a front. His mood softened, a fraction. "Well you better not be a brat, or I'll take you up there myself."

"I'm never a 'brat'," she argued. "I'm *always* good. It's just Seem makes me look bad, the little goodie-goodie."

"Yeah, Button. Funny how we never believe you any other time you say that, huh?" He patted her head, just hard enough to be gently chastising. "All right, *for now* you can stay with me. You'll probably raise Pit if you go back topside anyway. Let's just..." A quick glance at the jagged mouth in the cliff face put an awkwardness back into his manner. "...let's see what we can, uh, figure out. Might not be here for so long ourselves."

Footloose shrank back into his wings. "...what's down there?"

Skywarp gave her a glance. "You do know *why* I'm down here, right, Button?" He could hear strange, muted little clicks and squeaks filtering up from somewhere in the distance, and the gleam of tiny lights occasionally flashed in the gloom, but he balked at the idea of actually *approaching* them. It was very *dark*, down there. Very... *undergroundy*. "I'm chasing aliens, right?" He steeled his nerve, and got the words out with only the smallest of wincing. "Underground aliens."

"I know." Footloose bumped harder up against him, shivering. "I just... don't wanna go in there, Day. We don't have to." Her voice shrank to a murmur, and Skywarp could hear the soft sizzle of static in her voice. "Let's get Seem down here, little ground-hugger doesn't mind being underground."

"Hey, hey." Skywarp poked her nose, gently. "Be nice to your brother. You're the one who insisted on not-missing-out."

"I *am* nice. He doesn't deserve it," she grumbled, putting herself just out of reach.

Skywarp made an uninterpretable noise. "Not touching that one, spark." He advanced a step or two into the mouth of the chasm; it was just wide enough to walk down without clipping his wings on either side. *Okay, Skywarp*, he reassured himself. *The roof hasn't fallen in yet. It's all ok.*

"Da-ayy," Footloose whined, shifting from foot to foot.

He glanced back over his shoulder; she was stuck at the threshold, as though there were a sheet of glass stopping her advancing. "I'm not gonna go far, ok?" he explained, holding out his hand to her. "Just gonna see how far it goes, whether Screamer'll want to get some remote scopes down. You can come if you want, but I'm not forcing you."

"What's the other option?" She dithered in the entrance.

"Same as before. You go back up to the top, and stay with TC."

The *what, and miss out?* in her expression was almost audible, it was so clear; she skittered forwards and wrapped around his hand, optics wide, uneasy. "Ok I'm going to stay with you."

"All right." He gave her little hand a squeeze, and advanced another few steps into the increasing gloom, boosting the sensitivity of his visual circuitry in an effort to see anything. *Never thought I'd ever wanna be an Autobot, but a set of headlights would be reeeaaally useful, right now.*

-How going, Warp?- Thundercracker's nonvoice came over his silent inner communications channel. *-Find the thing?-*

-Gone down tunnel,- Skywarp pinged back. *-Gonna follow for a bit, 'kay?-*

-Underground?-

-Yeah TC, tunnels generally are-

-Not coming to get you if you freak out- Starscream griped. *-Can get yourself out.-*

-Psh. Whatever. Not going far-

The uneven, jagged ground creaked and broke under two sets of heavy feet, as the two machines slowly advanced. The tunnel struck Skywarp as distinctly seismically-generated, not mech-built, which was more than a teensy bit worrying, especially after seeing Screamer's obsession over his seismographs earlier. If the Rift *was* active and they *were* stuck in here when it decided to all kick off...? *I know he's fragged off at me, but he'll tell us if anything's going wrong*, the teleport consoled himself. *Besides, we'll probably hear it, down here in the bowels of the planet.* He had to work hard to resist a shudder. *Just a little further. Just far enough that Screamer doesn't have the chance to snipe at me for 'cowardice', or chasing shadows.*

"Okay we can't find it, can we go back now?" Footloose whined, softly.

Skywarp glanced down at her; the glow from her greenish optics gave her face a strange nauseated look. "Just a bit longer, all right? I see little lights, up ahead."

Footloose peered into the gloom in front; she'd seen them too, but hadn't wanted to say so. "They're probably some natural thing," she suggested, hopefully. "You know. Swamp gas."

Skywarp managed a little snerk of amusement. "That explanation didn't work on that TV show, either, squirt," he reminded. "All right. We're not gonna get any closer to whatever they are anyway, are we?" The tunnel was narrowing a bit anyway, if he wanted to go any further he'd have to edge *sideways* through the gap ahead, and clamber over an uneven ridge of rock. Sure, the tunnel widened back out after the "squeeze", but he wasn't sure he wanted to go *that* far just yet...

Starscream's voice intruded onto his thoughts. *-Warp? Get out of there.-*

The teleport sighed to himself. One or two little panic-attacks underground, and Screamer automatically assumed the worst. *-Not gonna freak out, Screamer. All ok. Found something. Relax, 'kay?-* he shot back.

-Nothing to do with that! Ship's core unstable, might be about to blow, just get out of there!-

Skywarp froze, horrified. *-What?-*

Footloose squeaked in alarm as her sire's fingers tightened around her own, and attempted to jerk her hand free, but Skywarp's grip was tighter., and when she later considered it, she recognised it probably saved both their lives. It stopped her *running*, which would have forced him to *chase*, right into the onrushing danger.

In the distance behind them, away in the open air of the Rift, a cough and a rumble marked the start of the chain reaction that was to obliterate what remained of the downed alien ship. Skywarp scooped Footloose up against him and leaped for the gap in front, unthinking; it was a tiny fraction too narrow to get through without the aid of his teleport, but the pillars of rock would shield them from the blast, and they could triangulate their way out later.

He'd barely rematerialised before something grabbed his left leg, and yanked him out of the air. He landed with a yelp, hard enough on his front to shatter the tough crystal copolymer 'glass' of his cockpit; it was a little miracle that he managed not to land square on top of Footloose. The little femme tumbled out of his arms and gave an unashamed sob of fright, skidding on her stomach across the rocks.

Skywarp seized her ankle and yanked her back under his wings; she squealed in pain as the rocks scoured off a layer of surface enamel, but he ignored it, tucking her right up close to his chassis and curling down over her.

A distant roar made the air shiver, and after an astro-second the firestorm swept overhead, condensed into a plume of intense heat by the narrow tunnel. The subsequent rockfall echoed up the tunnel, seeming to go on forever, a deluge of shattering rocks, closing off the mouth of the tunnel in the direction from which the two idiots that had dared to advance into its domain had come.

Only when the dust had settled and the sounds of falling debris had faded into a painful silence did Skywarp let himself uncurl from his ball; he thrummed his fans and coughed grit from his venting, and peered into the crimson-tinged dust-filled dark, looking for the green glitter of his little girl's optics. "Lucy? Button, are you there?" he croaked. "Are you all right?"

The vibrating little mound of dirty plating with a spiky, discordant electric field, tucked up close to his broken cockpit, proved to be Footloose. After a moment or two of gentle coaxing, she finally relit her optics and uncurled, and Skywarp was intensely relieved to find she was – miraculously – fine. His broad wings had sheltered her from the blistering heat and cascade of rocks. She was fizzing with concerned static, and all over him with careful little fingers, checking none of his extensive list of damages were going to prove fatal, but otherwise unhurt.

Content that Footloose was going to be just fine, Skywarp turned his attention inwards. Something felt very wrong. Not his wings, they just hurt where the heat had blistered the paint and crisped away a handful of sensors. Not his chest, either; so he'd smashed his cockpit, no big deal, there were no actual sensors there. No, the... *wrongness*... was limited to his left leg, and it didn't *hurt*, precisely... It just felt... cold. *Heavy*. Not even really like it was weighed down, it was just... like someone had snipped his actuators and left him with no motor control at all from the hip down.

...he didn't even have to look to know what the problem was, but he looked anyway. His *right* thruster was fine. His *left* thruster, on the other hand, just... stopped, abruptly, a third of the way down, where the rock started. He groaned, miserably, and let his head drop down between his arms; it was only the third time he'd ever done it – the first time had been bad enough that he'd never intentionally done it since – but he'd jumped without a good view of where he was going. And had quantum entangled his left leg with the rocks – literally mixed the two different sets of atoms of the two different objects together into the same place. The only way to get out? As there was no way of separating out the two sets of atoms? Would be to cut his leg off altogether. So until such a time as he could find a knife, he was trapped. *Underground*.

"Lucy?" He waited until Footloose had stopped checking his hurts and he'd secured her gaze before continuing. "You need to go to the surface and get help," he instructed, a lot more calmly than he actually felt. It took every ounce of self control just to keep the static from his voice. "And you need to do it the long way. This fissure should take you up, I can feel a breeze and you can follow it. No teleporting!"

"It would be quicker-" she protested, but he lifted a finger for quiet and she actually did as told for once.

"You've seen my leg, haven't you?"

She nodded.

"And you've got stuck in things yourself, before, right? Now imagine you misjudge things like I did and get *yourself* stuck too? Who's gonna find us? If you even survive it! So no teleporting until you're back on the surface and can see where you're going. Please?"

She whimpered and rubbed cheeks with him, nodding. "But I don't want to leave you alone, Day. Not hurt like this."

"I don't want you to go either, spark," he admitted. "But I want to get out of here, and if my transmitter's not broken? It's being blocked by all this rock, 'cause I can't raise the guys."

"If... if I dug your leg out-"

"Lucy." He leaned his head against hers, felt her little arms go around his neck.

"Please, Day, there's got to be *something*-"

"The only thing you can do for me right now? Is go get help. Please. I'm not exactly gonna be going anywhere. Okay? Please?"

At last, she nodded, and scuttled away down the narrow corridor in the stone. At least, he consoled himself, there was very little likelihood of her getting lost; his little family might not be known for their brains, but their sense of direction was second to none.

As for *you*, you prize-winning idiot... you're all right, he scolded himself, watching as the green glow faded out and finally disappeared. You're fine. Aside from the thruster, you're not so badly injured. You're just stuck und- in the dark. No worse than a run-in with the Auto-dorks. So you don't need to overreact, right? *Don't* need to overreact. Come on, what would TC do in this sort of situation? He'd be calm and collected and remind you that you're not *that* far und-... undergr-... away from friends, all you have to do is wait for Lou to get back topside and they can track her positioning all the way back down here and get you out. *Easy*. Right?

...Could take Lucy a while to find her way up, though. And it could take 'em a while to triangulate where you are, though. And damn, it'll sure take 'em a while to *dig* all the way down here. All the way down here through all these-... all these *rocks*-...

He squelched his nerves, annoyed, trying to stop his hands vibrating. Don't need to *overreact*, Skywarp.

And that's assuming Lou took your advice and kept her teleport offline! What if she went and blended herself with the rocks? Because damn, she's still got your impulsive streak and might still think she knows better than you!

...*Don't* need to overreact. He closed his hands into tight little fists and offlined his optics, concentrated on trying to convince himself he was back on the surface. Come on, just 'cause you're out of the Cons doesn't mean you've suddenly gone soft. Right? You're gonna be a sensible, patient, reasonable mech, and not *overreact* or *overthink* or go crazy or anything. It's just dark, that's all. Dark and a wee bit und-... by some rocks.

A scuffle of something dragging through the dust – maybe soft little feet? – and a curious *chirp*? from nearby attracted his attention. Those damn fuzzy... dustbunny-alien-whateveryweres. He shrank back, hunching his wings, defensively. It was their fault he was trapped down here. If he'd not followed- what if it was a trap? What if they'd *wanted* him to follow?

The crimson glitter from his optics wasn't quite enough to see by, but there were definitely shadows, darting

about in the peripheries of his vision. Shadows, and freckles of glitter where the glow of his optics reflected off... *something*. Lots of tiny eyes.

...There was something indefinably horrible about all those little eyes, fixed on him, creeping closer. Without even realising he was doing it, Skywarp flushed charge to his weaponry, just in case. Go down fighting, if I have to.

Please hurry up, Lou, he thought at her, silently. There's things down here and they're freaking me out...

His fans hitched, a soft little stutter of gulping noise that he found himself focusing on.

Don't need to overreact, Skywarp, he scolded, firmly. Don't. Need. To *overreact!*

But she could be *dead*. Merged her little spark with the rocks and fizzled out. That's *worth* overreacting about.

Oh Primus please stay calm!

Melting down here. No air. No breeze. Stifling hot, oh damn.

His spark felt constricted, a hot, swollen drop of lead in his chassis, trying to spill free of its magnetic bottle. Thudding pain accompanied every not-so-subtle shift in harmonic.

Going to die down here; you know that, right? Your spark is already losing cohesion, harmonic uncoiling, flickering out. And your stupid hands-... is that just the dark playing tricks? Are you *sure* they're not less brightly coloured than they were just a breem ago?

Something skittered across his wings – to the raw, abused sensors, it felt like a dozen little sets of feet, each tipped with a needle. He gave an involuntary cry of alarm and bucked; something squeaked angrily, very close to his audio, but the weight vanished and there was a soft *thump* as it landed in the dust.

Just get out of here, you giant lumpen idiot! Get out!

The words formed a drumbeat in his mind – repeating over and over, inescapable, impossible to ignore, a thudding cyclical pulse of intangible noise that seemed to go with every tiny shift in his spark's harmonic. *Get Out. Get Out. Get Out. Get Out.*

"...get me out," he pleaded, not sure who he was talking to. "Oh damn oh sweet Primus get me out of here...!"

Skywarp's tortured semi-logic quailed before the weight of the fear that had boiled up out of nowhere. But your leg- it protested, feebly.

-is disposable! Logic didn't really stand a chance. Shedding one broken body part was an acceptable sacrifice. It'd have to go anyway. And he wasn't sitting down here with dust-bunnies for any longer than he absolutely had to! *get out get out*

No knife was no barrier to escape, for the desperate. The flaring pain all up his thigh and into his back as he tore into his own substructure? Barely noticed. Connectors tore away beneath his frantic, clawing fingers. Energon spat from ruptured lines, coating the rocks and fizzing a lilac fluorescence into the gloom.

getoutgetoutgetout

The instant his leg was free – the instant he'd shredded his way through enough connectors to tear himself apart at the knee – he went against every instruction he'd ever given Footloose and teleported himself as far *up* as he could possibly manage.

Out!

Pain flashed all down his insides – hard, cold pain, like his spark had frozen hard in his chassis, and he was

momentarily convinced that he'd misjudged his destination and rematerialised inside something solid and this was it, this was the end and serve you right for panicking you moron-

...the world that obediently reappeared beneath his broken thrusters was reassuringly cool and familiar. Unfortunately, so was the gravity. The relief that he was physically no worse off than he had been a second ago, no more body parts melded with the environment, turned immediately into *ohshit falling!*

Skywarp gave an unashamed yelp of alarm and felt gravity close its fingers around him. The one thing almost as bad as being trapped underground, and he'd succeeded in shoving himself right into it! He'd gone from one bad situation to another one comparable in awfulness. His one good thruster was far from strong enough to keep him in the air; the scramble to remain airborne and save himself from any more damage was over almost before it had begun. All he managed to do was to slow his fall a little.

Thankfully, he didn't have far to travel. A few seconds of freefall culminated in a good solid *whunch* in a heap of old recycling; scrap metal cascaded briefly across his flailing limbs and pain jangled all down his abused, blistered wings, but it was short-lived.

For a full breem, all he found he could do was lay on his back in the junkheap and wheeze blissfully cold air through his venting, letting it flow unhindered through his chassis, soothe the agonising heat out of his overtaxed spark. The stars formed a reassuring, relaxing vista overhead.

You're not underground any more, and you're not falling.

He pinged a positional signal at his wingmates, but it felt underpowered. Probably sorely limited range.

Oh well. The worst that could happen was that he endured Screamer chewing his audios for a bit longer for being a moron, and Footloose's woebegone look for making her crawl all the way up and getting out before she had. He figured he could handle that.

Chapter 3: Chapter 3

Future Tense - Chapter Three

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A/N: Trust Skywarp. If anything is going to go to the Pit, he'll find a way to make it *worse*.

Shorter chapter this time! Thanks to all you kind people for your reviews.

The heap of old recycling was prickly and uncomfortable against his heat-damaged wings, but it was also cold, and he couldn't bring himself to try and get up. Not as if he was going to get anywhere, after all. The lack of lower left leg had rather put paid to his overall mobility – couldn't stay in the air, and couldn't walk either. He could always make up an excuse if pushed; better to stay here and make it easier for his wingmates to find him, right?

At least he wasn't bleeding any more, now he'd finally persuaded his self-repair systems to pinch off the damaged fuel lines, and any residual energon left in the lines had crystallised off. Wasn't going bleed himself completely dry, grey out, and blend in with the rest of the rubbish.

What were you trying to prove, anyway, huh? he scolded himself, settling down for what might be a loong wait. *Going underground? You should have known it'd all go to Pit even if you managed not to freak out, 'cause Primus totally has it in for you – fliers going burrowing about in the undercity? Some kinda blasphemy, surely. And why didn't you just go up, when you realised that thing was gonna blow? Not as if*

you didn't teleport anyway!

The contrails streaking through the sky reassured him; two glittering snow-bright lines across the velvet dark. *At least the guys are all right. Didn't get caught in the blast.*

He set up an automatic subspace beacon to ping his whereabouts to any machines in the general vicinity, and offlined his optics, settled into a doze to preserve what fuel he had left. Could be here a while, he reasoned. Stupid transmitter seemed to have taken some heat damage, his range was horribly limited. It'd probably manage a couple of hundred yards at most. Oh well. Wasn't as if he'd be here for long, he mused, feeling his abused, stressed-out systems gradually click over into a pleasant dormancy. Patrols usually came past the recycling facilities, wouldn't be long before someone found him. His 'lurid, horrible' purple colouring wasn't the best camouflage eithe-

"Hello!"

A rustle in the junk and an unexpected little voice startled him out of his energy-preserving doze, and he onlined his optics to find a smiling little face with bright blue optics gazing down at him.

"What are you doing in there?" the little femme went on, curiously.

"Stargazing," he replied, more gruffly than he intended, wondering where the little brat had magically appeared from, because she looked suspiciously like a sparkling and they in turn usually meant nosey parents. Great. Like he *needed* to be interrogated, right now.

She perked her head and frowned at him, confused.

"I fell in," Skywarp clarified, tiredly.

"Is that how you hurt your leg?" She peered down at his knee.

"Nnoo." *Why exactly am I indulging her curiosity?* "My hurt leg is why I fell in. Couldn't stay airborne."

"How did you hurt it?" She disappeared from view, apparently to examine his damaged knee.

"Blink? Come on, spark, come away from there," a distant (and strangely familiar) voice called out. "We need to get you to auntie before my shift, remember?"

"I'm talking to the mech in the recycling," the little femme protested.

"We don't have time for make-believe today, bitlet, I already told you I was running late. Come on. Please?" The voice gradually got louder as its owner approached. "We can play later, after my shift."

"But you're always too tired after work, Day," the sparkling reminded, sadly, turning to watch her carer approach. "And we need to help this Seeker. He's been hurt."

"Seeker?" As Skywarp had half anticipated, from the soft male cadence he could hear in the distance, the owner of the voice turned out to be Whitesides. The bike's optics met his own for a fraction of a second, before he leaped away, as though someone had jabbed him in the side with something sharp. "What in Pit-" he blurted, involuntarily. "Skywarp?"

The dark jet just rolled his optics; *give me strength.*

"H-how did you get there? Where have-"

"Listen. It'd be really nice if you stopped gawping at me, and just called TC," Skywarp interrupted, tiredly. "My transmitter's broken."

"Um, uh, yessir, okay sir! Right away. Uhh." He glanced down at his sparkling – 'Blink', the teleport figured – who was watching him expectantly. "Okay, bitlet. You stay here and look after mister Skywarp, all right?" He

stroked her 'bunches', distractedly. "I need to call for a paramedic..."

"Yes, Day," the sparkling agreed, cheerfully, butting her small head up into his palm.

Well, this must explain why the bike was sneaking around in this unfamiliar part of the district. Hiding the sparkling from his room-mates. *One fling too many, huh?* Skywarp wondered, privately, giving the constable a suspicious look. *Guess it had to happen sometime.*

Blink treated him to another of those huge smiles. She didn't look very old at all, Skywarp realised – maybe just a full solar orbit, at most. A little older than his twins had been, when they had shown up in Vantage's lap, while he was still, ah, 'working' (in the loosest possible interpretation of the word) on that horrible mud-ball world, but certainly not anywhere near being an *adult*. "Hello mister Skywarp," she greeted, as though practising his name. "Where did you come from?"

"I live here."

She perked her head. "...in the recycling?"

"No-oo, in Deixar."

"Really?" Her face creased in a curious smile and perked up her bunches – most likely little external sensory boutons, and probably why she'd picked up his signal so well. "When did you move in? I've never seen you before. You'll get on well with the other jets here, Day says they get very lonely."

"Ugh, tell me about it." He didn't bother to correct her that he *was* one of the other jets.

"Where did you come from before here? Because you're very big, for a Seeker," she pointed out.

It figured that the product of Whitesides' spark would be *chatty*, Skywarp considered, uncharitably, wondering if she'd pay any attention if he explained he *just* wanted some peace and quiet? "Not really," he demurred, tiredly. "No bigger than the other guys."

"Maybe it's all the bits you're laying in making you look bigger," she agreed, although her little brows were pulled together in a frown. "You're definitely more boxy, though." She scooted herself through the scrap and fetched up by the point of his shoulder. "Your guns are on the outside, too." She patted the closest of his cannons.

He gave her a suspicious look. "Your imagination is *way* too active, kid."

She giggled. "I know. Day says so, too," she agreed. "But I'm being serious, this time! Aren't I, Day?" She looked over at her parent. "He's bigger than your boss, isn't he?"

Whitesides made a face, and avoided the question.

"You kept *her* secret," Skywarp pointed out, watching as the smaller mech halted nearby. "Who've you been mucking about with?"

Whitesides looked down at his feet and mumbled something unintelligible, before adding; "Ambulance will be here soon."

"O-kay..." Skywarp gave him a curious look. *Either the kid was a sore point, or he was disappointed at finally being rumbled.* "Where do you stash her when you have a shift? Back with Ama, or what?"

Whitesides just made another of those awkward, meaningless noises and got himself settled to wait for the ambulance. Blink was the one to answer, in his stead; she smiled and settled into the uncomfortable Policebot's lap. "It's just me and Day. I haven't got an Ama." She didn't look particularly bothered by the revelation, though. "My aunties look after me when Day can't."

Whitesides refused to meet Skywarp's probing gaze; he fussed with the strands of ribbon tied around the

sensory boutons on the sides of the little femme's helm. "You're making a big deal out of nothing, sir." His words came out as a quiet mumble. "It's not as if it's important."

Skywarp quirked a suspicious-curious brow. "Right. Of course. Totally unimportant." As much as he wanted to grill Central Station's resident drama-hound for juicy gossip, he knew from experience that it was going to take some imaginative *sneakery* to get it out of him if he was involved.

After a breem or two of reluctant half-discussion, the *whuu-up!* of sirens announced the arrival of a paramedic. The rugged little green all-terrain vehicle unfolded itself into a stocky, smiling little mech, bristling with built-in medical equipment. "Hi!" he greeted, with a wave. "Someone called an ambulance?"

Whitesides went out to greet him, looking relieved to have got away from the touchy subject of his offspring. "No offence, but I hope that's not you, Braze," he said, dryly. "Because he's pretty large."

"Nono, I'm just here as First Response. Flatliner's following me, but he's a bit further back, got held up just outside the depot." The medic jerked a thumb back over his shoulder. "Where's the casualty?"

"Over here..." Whitesides waved an arm in Skywarp's direction.

The medic scarcely even blinked at the sight of the downed flier. "Hello there, sir," he greeted, with a friendly smile, acting as if it were the most natural thing ever to find a Seeker with an amputated leg in a heap of old garbage. "You must be the one we need to get to hospital, eh?"

Skywarp just made a face at him, lips pursed in an irritable pout. The *I-don't-want-your-small-talk* fairly oozed out of every vent.

"All right, then." The paramedic – Blaze? Braze? Whatever his name was – was obviously used to seeing patients on a bad day because he acted like the teleport had *agreed*, not sat and glared. "Let me just get this in place..." he plucked a silvery brace out of his subspace, "...so you don't get any more dirt in there, then we can get you out and fixed up. Sound fair?"

"So long as you quit gabbing and hurry up about it." Skywarp levelled a glare at his helper, but it didn't quite have the desired effect. He lifted his injured leg (trying not to concentrate too hard on the amputated body part), and watched as the smaller mech carefully brushed away the loose bits of grit and broken plate before fastening the cup-shaped device around his knee. The soothing chill of inbuilt coolant relieved the worst of the bristling hurt. If only the fat little green guy had a mantle on him, too, for his poor wings... Skywarp watched, semi-hopefully, but no mantle was forthcoming.

"Feel okay?" the medic prompted, holding out his hands.

"Just help me up," Skywarp grumbled, slithering through the recycling in his effort to stand. "I'm not an invalid." *And I don't need any over-eager Autobot groundling with a lunatic grin helping me, either.* "I can still walk."

"Well, all right, if you think so." The paramedic sounded doubtful, but took an arm and helped him carefully back to his wobbly remaining thruster anyway.

Skywarp propped himself up on a convenient bit of old scaffolding and glared hard enough to 'scare' his medic away a step or two. Okay, so... huh. How *was* he supposed to walk? *Yet again, you fail to think these things through, Warp.* He studied the ground and clung to his crutch. This wasn't going to be easy. At least he didn't have a lot of ground to cover – the scuffed little green flatbed ambulance that had arrived to carry him to hospital had got as close as it could.

Braze endured watching the dark Seeker attempt to hop/hobble for only a few moments; long enough for him to catch his crutch on his wings and almost fall over twice in as many steps.

"Come on, sir." The stocky little mech slotted himself under the Seeker's arm and walked carefully with him to the flatbed ambulance. "No offence, but it'll take you all day to get to hospital, at this rate."

Skywarp glared, for emphasis, but accepted defeat and let himself be helped, figuring it was better than having to swallow his pride and ask for assistance. It'd probably be more wounding to his dignity if he went flat on his face in front of the Policedork and his brat, anyway, because they sure wouldn't let him forget it.

Whitesides followed close behind them the whole way to hospital, with Blink sat on his back, clinging to his forequarters with an ease that belied long practice. Skywarp watched her out of the periphery of his vision, wondering why he'd never seen the little one before – wasn't as if she was a shy, retiring little sparkling that spent all its time hiding behind the furniture, after all. If stashed somewhere secret, from what he'd seen so far he had no doubt at all that she'd probably find her own way out. And if she stayed with "aunties", well, Squeaky wouldn't have been able to keep something like *that* secret for long...

Blink noticed him watching her, and waved. Skywarp made an awkward face and wiggled his fingers, briefly.

The ambulance finally drew up at the rear of the district general; a couple of bored, uninterested nurses were chatting quietly outside on their break, and a harassed-looking security guard stood nearby, wreathed in vapours and sucking busily at a flashstick, but that was it. Skywarp hid his little sigh of relief that he wouldn't have to endure the attention of dozens of nosey Autobots. He might technically not be a Decepticon any more, but there were still a lot of bad feelings on both sides, and having to endure and the sneery, holier-than-thou expressions would only make him rage. That was *guaranteed* to make him fall flat on his face.

He pushed himself to his feet, and managed to stand unaided for all of about an astrosecond before his wings pulled him off-balance and he had to grab Flatliner's cab to stay upright.

Braze cheerfully helped him hobble through the back doors into the emergency department and over to the closest empty berth, and made sure he was comfortable before heading off to call the senior on-duty medic.

The sudden quiet as soon as the paramedic pulled the privacy screen closed was a blessed relief. If not for his poor, painful wings, which made it really hard to lay back, relax and gather his thoughts, it would have been easy to ignore the little murmury voices outside and get some well-deserved recharge.

Soon as he was back in one piece, he resolved, he was going to grab a remote camera and go look for that whatever-it-was in the rift. Fragging *dare* they blow him up. Little fuzzy dustbunny gits, they were so gonna get what was coming to 'em.

Unless it was spiders. Ugh. Might have to draw the line at them. Maybe Hardline would like to go stomp them on his behalf. Spiders were his least favourite Earthly species, he liked them even less than he liked humans. At least humans couldn't get in his tanks and leave nests and webs and other disgustingness in his systems. Even since he'd accidentally brought a spider onto Nemesis and it had spun webs in his room, he'd hated the little fraggers. All... hairy little legs. And why did they have to *scuttle* like that? And-

"Sir?"

Skywarp shook himself awake; one of the nurses he'd seen outside had put his head around the privacy screen. "What?" The words came out more surly than he'd intended, but he couldn't bring himself to feel sorry for it.

"Just checking if you were awake." The nurse ducked in through the screen; he looked like a kind of skinny, dark blue version of Forceps. "Doctor wanted me to see if you needed any painkillers before they assess you."

"I tore half my leg off, what do *you* think?" Skywarp gestured irritably at his knee brace.

"I figured as much." The mech smiled, apologetically, and unspooled a temporary fuel rig. "Sit tight and I'll give you a shot. We'll try get some fresh energon into you, while we're at it." He hunted a suitable fuel line close to the surface, across the top edge of his patient's wings where the plating wasn't quite so solid. "Once you're stabilised, the doctors can see about getting your knee fixed up."

Skywarp put up with the gentle manhandling with a sullen patience. Some energon *would* be nice, he resolved. Probably could stand to be kinda grateful.

Before the nurse was finished, a skinny, smiling little green protoform pushing a trolley of equipment appeared from behind the privacy screen – Skywarp felt his lip curl, involuntarily. *Just* what he needed, *another* inane grinning idiot to heckle him.

"Hi," the newcomer greeted, ignoring the Seeker's sour look. "My name's Fine-tune, but most folk here call me Patches. I'm going to just check you over, make sure you're stable before they come down and collect you for surgery, all right?"

"Are you lot gonna try and *talk* me fixed, is that it?" Skywarp waved his leg, irritably.

Patches forced a smile, and bent to carefully unclasp the brace. "So what's your name?" she wondered, picking a wash-bottle off her trolley and carefully rinsing the last slivers of energon crystal and broken plating out of the damaged knee-joint.

Skywarp gave her a hard look. "Are you really that stupid?"

Her optics visibly brightened, alarmed. "Uh, n-no sir, just-... wanted to know who I was treating."

"Well go suck on someone else's sump, I'm not playing any stupid Autobot games." He folded his arms. "Just fix me and let me go home."

"Of-... of course, sir. Uh-..." She straightened and wiped her hands, awkwardly. "I, uh, I think I'll need to call Resector down to take a look at you. Might not be so easy to fix if we don't have the components."

Skywarp wrinkled his lip. He remembered Resector well from the Blue debacle; a very pure-sparked, holier-than-thou Autobot surgeon suffering from a *severely* overinflated opinion of himself. "Well *that* blousy old glitch isn't coming near me," he asserted. "I'm not having him sabotaging me. Go ask if Sepp'll do it, or something."

"Um, sir?"

"You know, Forceps?" The teleport rolled his optics, exaggeratedly. "She does work here, right?"

"Uh-... in a manner of speaking, yes. Uh-"

"She knows me. Just go ask her." Purple hands flapped in a shooing motion.

"I'm not sure if, ah..."

The nurse picked up on the awkwardness and helpfully redirected the conversation. "Your wings are very blistered, over the back," he pointed out, attempting to examine them without touching them too much. "Have you been attacked? Is that why they found you in the recycling division?"

"No-o. Just caught in an explosion at the rift." Skywarp gave him a little glare and shifted his shoulders, uncomfortably. "You must have heard it, come on, it's not that far away." Beat. "And stop *poking* at them."

The doctor arched a brow.

"You can ask Screamer if you don't believe me," Skywarp challenged, sourly. "Bet he can't wait to tell me what a *moron* I've been."

The medic swapped a funny look with the nurse.

"What? Primus, *what is it* with guys being *cryptic* today?" Skywarp gave the nurse a half-hearted shove, annoyed. "Just gimme a painkiller, fix me up, and get me out of here. How hard is that gonna be to do?"

"Well, um, I'm not sure how easy it'll be to repair your wings. The damage is fairly extensive." Patches tapped her lips, thoughtfully. "How about if we were to maybe just take them off for a little wh-"

"No!" Skywarp sat up straight, alarmed, and the cannula the nurse had just succeeded in getting into the side of his neck jogged back out again. He ignored the little noise of irritation he made. "No. My wings stay attached." Bad memories of poor smashed-up wingless Thundercracker made his own back ache.

"They'll be easier to fix, and you'll be a lot more comf-" the medic tried to explain, but her patient interrupted again.

"My wings. Stay attached. To me." Skywarp waved a finger for emphasis. "And your nose? Stays attached to *you*."

Patches hastily backed off, involuntarily covering her nose with her hands.

The silence when the medics finally left him and his painkillers in peace was *blissful*, but the nagging little concerns they'd left him with meant it was very difficult to actually *enjoy* it. All the little "wrongnesses" were adding up in a way Skywarp very much didn't like. He sighed and shifted his shoulders, awkwardly, and boosted the gain on his hearing.

"So... what do you think?" Among the vocalisations he didn't recognise, Skywarp recognised his nurse's tones, and the mech sounded... uneasy. "Is it actually-... you know?"

"Looks like it. Not many are going to match *that* description-"

"Has anyone notified the Superintendent?"

Patches' nervous, reedy voice spoke up. "I was just about to, now I'm satisfied he's stabilised. I just didn't want to get anyone's hopes up." Beat. "Does anyone know the frequency?"

"I can do that," Whitesides offered, quietly, in the background – Primus, what was *he* doing, still here? Wasn't he grumbling about being late for his shift, earlier? "I have a direct frequency to get through to my inspector, he's the superintendent's attaché for central station. Probably best going through us than letting the entire station know by asking Whisper to relay a message."

Skywarp sighed, and flopped back to the surface of the berth; an abstract sort of pain shivered up off his wings at the impact, but it was a dull hurt, and he ignored it. Those few short breems of relaxation he'd been hoping for had promptly evaporated. Last thing he wanted was for Hardline to be giving him a hard time too. *Stupid idiot, wasting police time, why did you even go underground in the first place, you should have known it'd go to Pit, because you're an moron who doesn't know his own limits and you always frag it up.*

"What about Footsie? Braze?"

"I'm, uh... I've held off telling her," the paramedic replied, as though it was some terrible giant admission. "I kinda wanted to preserve the peace in here for a while, you know? Just while you guys got him checked over. I mean, in case he wasn't-... you know."

Footsie? Gotta mean Lou, Skywarp mused. Didn't realise *she* knew the grinning idiot. Didn't think she had much cause to come here, even. Perhaps she'd been her usual idiot self and broke something (or got something stuck somewhere), and had to sneak in to the Emergency Department to get fixed, without telling anyone – Primus knows she'd have got teased something merciless about it back home.

Skywarp sighed and tried to banish his gloomy thoughts, but Screamer's talk of B-movies earlier had lodged the idea of parallel universes firmly in the front of his cortex. Unlikely? Sure. Why would he have suddenly accidentally teleported into a different universe after all those millions of years of *not* doing so? But then he'd never felt that weird, cold, almost *nothing* sensation when transitioning between places before, either. He couldn't put a finger on what it felt like, aside from... well... *nothing*.

There was a *squeal* of glee and a ripple of alarm from the medical team, but before anyone could move to intercept the approaching little green blur that had rudely crashed through the privacy screen, it had collided with Skywarp hard enough to almost tumble him clean off his berth. He teetered dangerously on the edge for

an instant, before his nurse spotted the problem and lunged to catch him.

The 'something' turned out to be a smallish dark green femme with vibrant blue-green optics and broad, sickle-shaped wings. *Paramedic?* Skywarp wondered, recognising (when it stopped moving long enough for him to get a good look at it) the same colour scheme as Blaze-Braze-Whoever had been wearing. He was pretty sure there were no fliers he didn't know in the district, though, and this little one had a very strange root mode; skinny and lightweight, with an unfamiliar propulsion system – her little feet did have in-built thrusters, sure, but there was no way they'd be strong enough to get her in the air.

No time to think about that now, though. His lap was full of paramedic and he needed to get her *off* him because she was making his wings hurt-

"Primus it's you it's you it's really you-!" Words bubbled in an uncontrolled flood out of her vocaliser. "I thought you were dead or trapped or something, gone forever and Primus, you're back you're back oh thank Primus-"

The broken jet winced and peeled her off his broken chassis and held her at arms reach. "Do I know you?"

The excited grin plastered across the pale grey face suddenly became less enthusiastic; a sort of confused smile. "Don't-... don't be silly," she instructed, still trying to hug him.

Skywarp felt his brow furrow, irritably. "Either you explain it, you little psycho, or you get off and go away *now*."

"But... it's me, Day..." Her smile faltered, became uncertain. "It-... it's Lucy."

Chapter 4: Chapter 4

Future Tense - Chapter Four

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A/N: Thanks again for your comments. :) I've tried to work a few in, here and there, where I could...

For a full few seconds, Skywarp just *stared*, dumbfounded. "What in *Pit* are you-... just... That's nonsense," he asserted, grimly. "Even I'm not so stupid that I'll fall for *that*. Get off my friggin' lap, and leave me alone."

"But *Day*-"

The little femme's static field was spikey where it intersected with his own, and unpleasantly disharmonic. More worryingly, it was *familiar*, too – did *feel* like Lucy, when she got all awkward, clingy and emotionally prickly. *Coincidence*, he told himself, firmly. *Lucy is a squeaky little brat driving you crazy with her demands to fly. There's no way this green weirdo is her.*

"Will you stop calling me that? Fragging-... just *gerroff*, you little psycho!" he growled, with a little push for emphasis. "Or I'll *make you* get off."

The smile had gone altogether, now; the small flier's lips had pulled together in a little pout of distress. "Yes sir." She obediently slid back to the floor. "I just-... okay."

He directed his glare towards the ceiling, where he guessed a camera could theoretically have been hidden. "Okay guys, joke's over," he said, loudly, scrutinising the corners for hidden lenses. "Wasn't funny to start with, so you can just... knock it off, already!"

"It's not a joke," the little female spoke up, quietly.

"You? Quiet," he snapped, waving a threatening arm that he couldn't *quite* get to stop trembling. "This... this *smeltery*... it's not funny. I'd have thought better of a friggin' *doctor*. How much are they paying you to play along with this, huh?"

"It's... Please, Day, I-... you've been gone a long time, I just-"

"Stop calling me that!" He stabbed a finger at her. "You're no relation of mine. Just... frag off, will you?"

"Y-yes, sir. Of course." She slipped out through the privacy screen, trying (and mostly failing) to keep the distressed static out of her voice.

Not particularly wanting to listen, but knowing he ought to if he wanted to get to the bottom of all this, Skywarp boosted the sensitivity on his hearing. *Any moment now*, he told himself. *They'll be all 'aw, darn, he figured it out already, better tell the guys you can't out-prank the master'. Any moment now. Aaany moment.*

"Heyy, Footsie," he heard the little fat one pipe up, instead. "You all right?"

"I'm going home," the femme asserted, bluntly, her voice shaking. "Not staying around here to be *abused*."

"...is Deuce back off his round?"

"I don't care, I'm going. If he's there, he's there, if he's not, I'll just... yell at him until he comes home."

"What about your shift?" a reedy voice piped up, uneasily. "I-we-we've had on-call medics try to cover but we're not mobile eno-"

"Hey, hey, it's all right, Patches, calm down. I'll call for cover – Threespots still owes me a favour. Ambulance service will be fine. Footloose?" Sigh. "Go home, spark. I'll keep you apprised of what's going on, all right?..."

Skywarp slumped back and let his auditory sensitivity slip back to normal. *Well, that was successful, huh. You found out, like, nothing whatsoever.* He groaned softly to himself and wiped his hand over his face, pinched his nose, trying to ignore the way his wings had started hurting again.

Ok so maybe it's not a prank, he finally allowed himself to admit, unhappily. So that means... what, precisely? Where am I? Aside from in this friggin' dump. Stupid hospital. He cast a glance out of the window and shifted his back, uncomfortably. *Need to get out of here. Find the guys, work out what's going on. Find those fuzzy hairball things, too, I know they're involved.*

C'mon, Warp. What do you actually know so far – and like, actually properly know, for definite, not what you're making up 'cause you're trying to live in one of those B movies'Screamer was talking about. You freaked out underground after an explosion (which no-one here seems to have heard, what's up with that?), and fragged up your teleport in the process, then crashed like a lump of old scrap metal into a heap of garbage. That's all. Aside from that kinda... 'nothing sensation'. What did that mean?

He wrinkled his nose. Might have meant nothing. *Probably* meant nothing. Just his imagination, he reassured himself. Just... the whole going from somewhere *hot* to somewhere *cold* had stressed his systems, made them spasm. *That fitted, didn't it? When that medic comes back, I'll ask her.*

There was that one other little thing, though. *That dopey sparkling said I was bigger than all the other fliers, didn't it?* The memory made his pumps twitch, awkwardly. *What does that mean?*

Maybe that means the guys don't exist here. The thought blindsided him; he briefly offlined his pumps altogether, to quell another flash of unsteady surges. *Wherever 'here' actually is.*

...Frag. What if I've been unconscious? Maybe they were killed in that explosion? They never said anything

to me since it all went off, I just assumed they couldn't reach me, through all that rock, but... maybe they hung around for me, and it killed them. That's why no-one came looking for me.

...yeah, Warp, that's pretty likely, he scolded himself, hoping to encourage a little common sense. Screamer was the one who told you it was going to blow up, he's hardly gonna just hang around and wait for the blast. So maybe the guys aren't dead. Maybe they just moved away. Couldn't find me, and moved away. But moved where? He wrinkled his nose and bit back a snort, folding his arms protectively across his chassis. It's not like Screamer wouldn't have already moved away the first instant he got if there was anywhere else he could have gone. And Deixar only got through the war this intact because no-one friggin' wanted it – Vos had been pretty much razed all the way to the basement rock within like, orns of it all starting.

So maybe I was laying in that big old heap of recycling for longer than I thought I was. Maybe... maybe a lot longer. Maybe I passed out – stressed, botched teleport, bonk on the head, that could destabilise a cortex, right? – and cuz no-one was looking for me there, no-one saw me there. It was only when I woke up and set up a beacon they found me. That'd work?

Yeah, cuz all of that smelt is pretty likely, he scolded himself. Your clock would have still tracked the passage of time, even if you'd been unconscious, and there's no big gaps in your record. Might as well ask if you've not teleported into a parallel universe-

...that's not to say you haven't, Warp. You could have found a spot where the space between worlds is thin, and fell through it. He laughed, in spite of himself, and rubbed his temples, tiredly. Primus, Skywarp. Screamer was right with the whole 'junk science' you keep latching onto. Any minute now, the monster from the Black Lagoon will show up.

At last he noticed that the voices out in the main work area had dipped, as if in anticipation of something. Skywarp redirected his attention at it, wondering if he could glean himself any more useful little snippets of information that'd help him out of this mess-

"Well, Whitesides?"

Skywarp startled, and sat up. That deep voice he'd just picked up at the very limit of his hearing? Was most definitely Thundercracker's. How could that be? The bike's little brat implied they were gone!

"Is it him?" the voice went on, getting louder as it approached.

"I'm fairly confident, sir," the bike confirmed. "Blink picked up on his transmission. Very underpowered, I don't think I'd have caught it."

"Putting those sensory boutons to good use, eh, bitlet?" Chuckle. "All right. I better go see him, work out how much it'll take to get him back on his feet. Oh, and Whites?"

"...sir?"

"Personally, I'm grateful for you staying, but Vector says that is the *only* reason she'll forgive you being so friggin' late, and only this once. Beemer's still happy to spark-sit Blink, but both are on the condition that you get your aft to the station in the next couple of breems."

"Sir! Right away!" The clatter of flat feet and a sparkling's amused squeaking announced the bike's hasty departure.

The teleport ignored the chatter, focussed on just the one thing. *TC!* He clung to the sound of the hollow *thoks* of an approaching set of thrustered heels. Any second now, his wingmate would appear, all sad-faced, and make him feel bad for freaking out, then Screamer would come along and abuse his audios (and those of everyone else within a half-mile radius) for a breem or two, and he'd just have to sit and endure it until they'd got bored and given up. Then he could get back to the serious business of tracking down dustbunnies-

"Skywarp?"

What appeared through the screen was *not* Thundercracker – certainly not the person the teleport remembered. Sure, so it was *similar* – about the same height, and the same muted azure and silver in colour, it wore an elegant pair of wings on its back and had his wingmate's voice. That was as far as the similarity stretched, though; where Thundercracker had a solid, powerful frame, built for the rigours of war and the ability to withstand all but the harshest Autobot attacks, *this* skinny little abomination-... It looked like it'd snap in half if you blew too hard on it, all spindly limbs and subtle, aerodynamic corners. A narrow but obvious band of white and yellow police chequering bordered his wings.

Skywarp gave a funny, strangled little cry of alarm and promptly scooted himself off the far side of his berth. "...the frag are *you*?" he demanded, peeking up over the memory-foam surface, struggling to keep the tremor out of his voice.

The blue flier had jumped back after Skywarp's outburst, startled. "It-... It's me, Warp," the ghoul reassured, in his wingmate's voice, holding out those little black hands in a placatory gesture. "It's Thundercracker. You remember me, right?"

"Ohh no you don't. You're not TC," Skywarp asserted, keeping the berth between them. At least, he consoled himself, when he'd jumped, so had the stranger, so that proved he was real, and not a, a *ghost*, or something. "You're an, an-... *imposter*. What the frig are you lot playing at?" He pointed an arm at the screen, using a stabbing gesture to hide his trembling, only just managing to keep himself upright. "First that little brat pretending to be Lou, and now you? You think I'm stupid, or something? What have you done to TC?"

A flicker of clear disappointment passed through the pale features, but was quickly hidden. "You've been gone a long time, Warp. A lot's happened since you blew up. This-..." He placed a hand to his pale chassis. "It's just a refit. That's all." Beat. "How about you just let the docs check your memory, make sure your clock is ok, maybe recalibrate-"

"What, so you can implant some false memories, or something? My memory's fine." The teleport interrupted, sharply, wobbling backwards on his one good leg and bumping unsteadily into the wall, turbines grumbling softly in threat. "My *clock* is fine. What do you want from me? What are you trying to trick me into doing?" Something new flashed into his mind. "Information, is that it? You think you can trick me into telling you everything I know just 'cause you look a bit like my best friend?" He edged along the wall until his wings caught against the corner. "Well you're not gonna trick me into betraying the guys, I swear I will kick that skinny aft into the middle of the next vorn before I give you anything-!" Well aware what a surreal figure he cut, primed to fight even though he could barely stand, Skywarp – for once – failed to see the humour in it. *Laugh, please laugh, so I have an excuse to kick that skinny chest in.*

The imposter put up his hands in surrender. "I don't want any sensitive information from you, Warp, just to know where you've been. You can't have been in that junk heap all this time."

"I've not been anywhere. I teleported, I crashed in the junk, and that's it. So you just tell me, what. In *frag's* name. Is going on?" To his shame, Skywarp found his voice skittering away up the scale, growing high-pitched in frightened anger. "I swear, if you've done anything to my wingmates, I'll kick your aft *so hard*-"

"All right," the deep-voiced Seeker finally acknowledged, backing up a step. "It's all right, Skywarp, I don't mean you any harm. I didn't mean to scare you. I'm... sorry, that you don't believe me just yet." He sighed hot exhaust. "Let's just... get you repaired first, yeah? After that, we can try and work out how to explain what's happened. All right?"

"Right." Skywarp nodded, just the once, not quite able to shake the suspicious tension from his expression. "If you fix me up, I'll-... *leg it as soon as you're finished*..." -listen to what you have to say. But no funny business! I'm not so stupid as people say, I'll *know* if you're lying-!" He settled awkwardly on the very end of the berth, arms securely folded, glaring.

The blue impostor smiled, tersely, and vacated the cubicle without another word. Skywarp pursed his lips, thoughtfully; *annoyed at being found out, huh? See what you have to say about that...*

The murmuring outside was just quiet enough that even after elevating his auditory sensitivity, Skywarp couldn't quite hear it. Frustrated, he hop-hobbled the single step to the cubicle wall, and pressed his audio up against it, straining to listen to the faint words that filtered through.

"No, he's not convinced," the fake-Thundercracker said. "Did you really expect-...yeah, I know. ...well, yeah, sure, I think it *is* him – looks beat to Pit and is still covered in rock dust. I just think-... no. Stubborn, yeah, how did you guess? Listen, do you still have that holograph lurking anywhere...?"

Had to get out of here, Skywarp resolved, miserably, turning away from the wall, before they had the chance to try anything else to fool him. Had to get out and figure out what in frag's name was going on. Who these imposters were, what they wanted from him. What they'd done to his wingmates. *Attack of the bodysnatchers. Obviously too much to hope that getting out of the 'Cons would be the end of it, huh?*

He scrutinised the scenery outside his window; there was a nice flat roof within teleporting distance. That was good enough. He could get a view of the land from up there, plan a route and make another couple of hops to somewhere secluded, where he could at least try fix his leg for himself. The knee-brace fitted around his wounded knee with a strong, sturdy set of clips, if he could somehow attach something like some bits of old building supports to it? Then maybe he could use it as a kinda makeshift limb.

Wouldn't help him *fly*, but at least he'd be mobile, even if the idea of crawling around at ground level made his pumps surge unpleasantly. *Won't be for long*, he reassured himself. *Just until you found the guys. The real guys. Rescued them from whoever kidnapped them, or whatever smeltery is going on. Right?* Any other time, the mental image of "peg-leg Skywarp, dread space pirate" would have made him grin, but right now he just wanted to be out and as far away as his meagre fuel supply would take him.

He pressed his fingers against the window, and concentrated on the building. Thankfully it was still on his maps – same height, location.

He'd already triangulated his position when the doubts crept back. What if he botched this one, too? What if the explosion had caused a serious problem with his gate, destabilised it? If he teleported this time, he might lose whole chunks of his superstructure. Or worse, lose cohesion altogether, spiral out into a scattering of disconnected molecules and rain down unseen across the entire district.

He leaned his head against the window, and concentrated on drawing cold air through his vents. *Everything feels normal, Warp, calm the frag down already*, he told himself. *It was over-reacting that got you in this stupid mess in the first place. All your parameters are reporting back normal. Your gate diagnostics are all green. Quantum signals are strong, pattern buffer is fine. There's nothing wrong with your teleport, it must have been some outside influence that caused it. You can find out what went wrong later. Just get out of here, before they start digging all your secrets out of you.*

The transition between the close, stuffy hospital room and the clear, cool atmosphere felt gratifyingly normal, when he finally plucked up the courage to use his teleport. *See, Warp? You're fine. Everything went fine. No missing structural components. No instability. No problems. Okay?*

He managed a single unsteady hopping step before something grabbed his hand and jerked him over backwards, landing him hard on his aft. After an instant of alarm, priming himself to fight, he had to bite back an expletive at seeing nothing but long, thin stems of metal... which emerged from the back of his hand.

Primus. Friggin'... telecoms aerials! Who in their right freaking mind used this primitive old smelt, these days? In his haste to get away, he'd not seen them. It took a good half a breem or so to finally succeed in snapping them off – for such flimsy little bits of metal, they sure were stubborn – all the while cursing quietly under his breath to hide his embarrassment. All those thousands of vorns of successful teleports, and he'd gone and entangled himself *twice* in one orn. *Careless idiot. Serve you right for not looking where you're going.*

He wobbled back to his good leg and clutched precariously at the steep slope of the roof; come on, there had to be a better vantage point a little further away that he could get to... there. That was a better rooftop, flatter

and more importantly there were no aerials sticking out of it... Kinda derelict-looking and pretty holey, but the internal structure he could see through the gaps looked sturdy enough...

He managed another two short hops – aiming for the small rubbish dump he remembered tripping over once, and finding it wasn't there any more – before he got too low on fuel to teleport any more, and gave up running. *Admit it, Warp. You're not gonna find the guys on your own, and it's not like you can go beg help off the Empties.* He huddled down on the securest ledge he could find, hugging his arms protectively around himself.

Where *was* this place, anyway? He didn't *like* to admit it. Didn't *want* to admit it! But the place frightened him. Looked superficially like Deixar, but it didn't *feel* like it. He hunched his shoulders and mantled his sorry, blistered wings very slightly forwards around himself, protectively. If someone was trying to "con the 'Con", they were sure putting in fragloads of effort, building this fake-district. Maybe it was all holograms? Surely he wasn't that important. Not like he had lots of sensitive data. Maybe they just thought he was stupid enough to fall for it? After all, Screamer was a better source of information but he'd see through all this like, *immediately*.

What was perhaps worst of all, though, was the fact that-... well... he hated to even think about it, but he felt *lost*. There were familiar landmarks, sure, and it was all superficially the same, but... his maps didn't quite match up. Buildings were in the same places, but looked different. Some buildings had gone, some had been replaced. There were big open spots, too, where he remembered ramshackle old offices, derelict factories. Up between the unfamiliar buildings there even poked little bits of green stuff – surely not *trees*?

For a mech that relied so heavily on knowing exactly where he was, to suddenly find himself in semi-familiar surroundings that didn't match what he thought he knew? It felt like someone had clawed around in his chassis, and dug out half his senses, leaving him running half-blind. It was like that first time he'd woken up on Earth, and had to scramble to form the bones of a map in the orns before the Autobots got up and started shooting at them.

A chit of data pinged off his firewalls, and at last Skywarp dragged himself far enough out of his murky introspection to notice a familiar airborne shape had come closer – and it was actually *familiar*, properly so. Right shape, right colours, and reassuringly solid and blocky in all the right places.

"Thundercracker-! Oh thank Primus-" Skywarp's vocaliser hitched, sharp with static, and he lurched unsteadily to a standing position, arms out and clutching for his wingmate. "Where the frag *were* you?"

"Trying to find *you*," Thundercracker teased, gently. "Why'd you have to go run off like that, huh?" He settled carefully on the roof alongside his wingmate; it felt like it'd bear up under their combined weight, but there was no point in taking chances by being rough. Skywarp clutched at him, unsteadily; the blue Seeker managed to catch him just before he went over, lowered them both carefully to their knees.

Skywarp just clung to him for several long, relieved seconds. The static envelope that harmonised with his was familiar, and reassuring. The real proper genuine article. His for-serious real wingmate, un-blown-up.

"There's some guys pretending to be you," the dark Seeker explained, at last, deadly serious, looking him in the optic; Thundercracker could probably feel him still trembling, but he didn't care any more. "I wasn't fooled, though. Stupid, skinny-looking protoform, I dunno how they thought it'd fool me."

"In the hospital?"

"Yeah they were trying to trick me into giving them our secrets, but I saw through it, I'm not so *stupid* as they think I am, I'd have stomped them but my knee is still broken-"

"Steady, Warp." Thundercracker interrupted the flood of babble before Skywarp could run his vocaliser too far away. "It's ok. I know what happened-"

"You know? Well why aren't you doing anything *about* it?"

"Hey, gimme a second, yeah?" Thundercracker smiled for him, gently. "I'm not doing anything because that was *me*. Screamer and me, we've had to make a few changes-"

Skywarp's hands convulsed open so fast his wingmate could have been hot, and he shoved himself backwards. "You-! No, no, leave me alone, I'm not telling you anything!" He flopped away across the roof, alarmed.

"Khn..." The blue Seeker sighed, dramatically, and let his arms dangle. "C'mon, calm down. You were close enough to pick up my static field, weren't you, a second ago? Don't you recognise me? I promise, it's the real Thundercracker."

The teleport had backed up as far as he could get, and now clung precariously to the edge. A flicker of doubt passed through his expression. "I don't know. You're not TC," he asserted, shakily. "You're trying to trick me. I'm not gonna fall for it again!"

Thundercracker sighed, tightly. "All right. I know this is going to be a difficult concept for you to process, but... Look. Here." He plucked a news-wafer out of his subspace, held it out and wiggled it gently; Skywarp hesitantly accepted it, as though it might bite. "I picked this up from the *Sphere's* main office on my way past, just after we got the report you'd been found. It's dated today."

Skywarp stared at the page for so long Thundercracker began to wonder if he hadn't broken his brain altogether.

At last; "this isn't today's news-sheet," the teleport asserted, firmly, leaning forwards and sternly placing it back into Thundercracker's hands – if that was truly who he was. "You made it up. Forged it. Can't be too difficult, you just need a word-processor or something."

"I promise it's today's news. See?" A slim black finger touched delicately against the image at the right of the front page. "There's you."

"No it isn't. I-I mean... yeah maybe that's me, but... that-... that's not the news. That's not today's date. You made it up. It's a, a... counterfeit or something. It's not today's news."

"Warp? Please?" Thundercracker put the wafer down on the roof and gave him a long, serious look. "I know it's difficult to take in. Frag, it's hard enough for *us* to understand, I can't even begin to imagine what it must be like for you." He sighed. "Look. the police central computer is on the same frequency as it was before your accident, Warp. It'll confirm the date and time for you, if you need it."

"But *it can't be* today's news," Skywarp pleaded, pathetically, sagging shakily back to his aft. "It just-... friggin'... can't be. What you're saying, it's... it's not even *possible*, Screamer's always saying it's junk science, it's impossible-!"

Thundercracker settled next to him, and let him slump into him.

"If this is today's news," Skywarp croaked, his voice finally stunned into a dead flatness, "then where the slag have I *been* for the last thirty-seven vorns?"

Chapter 5: Chapter 5

Future Tense - Chapter Five

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A/N: Sorry this one's taken so long. :dies: I had lots of notes, it was just pulling them all together that was difficult. X) (Plus, getting in practice for the sponsored cycle ride I'm doing was wearing me out.)

...I guess I should stop making excuses and just post the thing. Another talky one, sorry!

"This has gotta be a trick," Skywarp groaned, softly, leaning his head into his hands. "There's no fraggin' way I can have been gone that long and not known about it." He cast a pleading glance at Thundercracker. "Please tell me it's a trick. You've made your point, I don't know where I am or what's going on and I'm in no position to fight or-or... look, I'll even go peacefully, if you just tell me this is all a big scheme to get me to do what you want."

"You have no idea how much I'd like to do that." Thundercracker vented stale exhaust in a long sigh, and added a bleakly humorous snort for good measure. "If only to help my own peace of mind! I just-... I'm sorry, Warp. I wish I *could* explain it. All I know is that you've been gone a long time." He vented a long, slow pulse of stale air. "A *very* fragging long time. Seeing you here today, it's like... seeing a ghost."

"But it-... it's like... *three thousand times* around the sun," Skywarp despaired. His wings were steadily sagging lower and lower. "How's that even *possible*? We weren't even on that nasty fragging *dirt ball* that long."

Thundercracker didn't bother correcting him. "At least you didn't spend all those orns wondering if you were going to stumble over your missing wingmate's long-dead body one day," he said, quietly.

Skywarp gave him a semi-reproachful glance, hurt by the idea they could possibly think he was dead.

"We looked everywhere for you," Thundercracker defended himself, quietly. "It's not like we just went 'oh well, he must have been his usual idiot self and entangled himself in the rocks, never mind, eh'. We spent every spare waking moment searching. We must have been through every last rubbish tip and derelict building in the entire district at least twice, trying to find you. Frag, it was only in the last vorn or so we'd started getting used to the idea that you might never be coming back."

Skywarp dropped his gaze, guiltily. "...didn't mean to mess up, TC," he explained, faintly. "I-I mean... I just... you know."

"Yeah, Warp." Thundercracker didn't need to hear the word 'scared' to know it was what his friend meant. He patted the leading edge of his wing, careful to avoid the burned spots. "I know. Underground, and all that."

"I-I mean, I didn't even freak out *that* bad," Skywarp agreed, quietly. "I just... needed to get out, and... it... happened."

He watched as the blue Seeker put up a hand to his upper arm and gave an invisible *something* a squeeze – his outline *flickered*, very briefly, and the excess mass faded out.

Skywarp gave him a distressed pout, eyeing the holoemitter strapped around the blue jet's upper arm. "Can't you put that thing back on?"

"The holograph?" Thundercracker arched a brow. "Why? You know it's me."

Skywarp gave him a brief visual once-over. "Because you look *wrong*." He gave him a tentative little poke in the arm. "Like a big plastic toy, or something."

"Well, you're going to have to get used to it sooner or later," Thundercracker soothed. "Might as well get it out of the way now."

Skywarp grunted unhappily, and folded his arms around himself, again. "Get used to it?" He studied his scuffed foot, distractedly, waved it aimlessly in the void. "Maybe I could just wake up. This has got to be a dream, right?" he insisted, mostly to himself. "I must have... cracked my head when I fell in the junk, and I'm hallucinating. That's what it is." He cast a half-hearted glance at the blue jet perched alongside, and rubbed his arms, uncomfortable. "You're just a figment, or something."

The glitter of new silver caught Thundercracker's attention. "What did you do to your hand?" he coaxed, gently, examining the spar that jutted from the back of it.

Trying not to look too uncomfortable, Skywarp took his hand back, quietly, and tucked it into his lap. "Wasn't watching where I was going."

"...does it hurt?"

"Nah. It's just annoying." The teleport was obviously trying to carry off his usual old offhand manner, but his voice was still shaky. "Look." He demonstrated, flexing his fingers – the smallest two wiggled slightly, but the inner two, next to his thumb, were motionless. The metal must have gone clean through the actuators and frozen the cables in place. "Friggin'... radio aerials. Who uses *aerials*, these days? Aside from those policedorks and their weird hairpieces."

Thundercracker let him take his hand back. "Oh, we can fix that, easy. Not like it's the first time we've had to do it, right?"

Skywarp didn't smile back. "Stupid... teleporting fail," he mumbled, ashamedly. "Can't you make some excuse so I don't look like an idiot, again?"

"They're not going to laugh, Warp. You're somewhere unfamiliar, you're hurt... They'll understand. Mistakes happen. Just come back and let us get you fixed up, huh?"

"Huh." Skywarp made a non-committal noise that could have meant reluctantly agreement, picking at the aerial jutting from his hand, distractedly. "When-... when we get back, can you help me work out where I actually *am*?"

"What do you mean? You're here in Deixar-"

"No, no, I-I just-" Skywarp remained silent for a second or two longer, clearly deep in thought, and when he spoke up again, his voice was small. Uneasy. "You don't think I've maybe... swapped with *your* Skywarp, do you?"

Thundercracker gave him a funny look. "What?"

"Well I mean, I can't *travel through time*, come on. That's like... just happens in stupid sci-fi. This is probably some, some... parallel universe or something. I mean, look at you, all weird and skinny." Skywarp gestured with his good hand. "There's no way the TC I know would agree to look as stupid as that, so I must have teleported into the wrong universe. That's what it is. It's why everything's all strange."

The blue jet couldn't help a little smile, in spite of the insults. "...You *are* our Skywarp, Warp. Only you could possibly come up with the idea that time travel is impossible, but teleporting into a parallel universe is just fine."

"What makes you think that *your* 'real' Skywarp wouldn't have the same idea? Him and me might be the same. You're saying he's not exactly *brainy*, either."

"...we-ell, I suppose that's a reasonable guess, I just don't see how it's more likely-"

"Hit me," Skywarp interrupted.

His train of thought by now completely derailed, for a moment or two Thundercracker could only *stare* at him. "...what?"

"Hit me," Skywarp repeated, seriously. "It'll prove whether this is just a dream or not. If you hit me hard enough, it'll wake me up out of this hallucination and, and-..." He shifted, awkwardly, and made an effort to perk up his sagging wings. "I'll be back where I'm supposed to be. You know? It'll all be okay, you won't have been stuck dealing with Screamer on your own, and I won't have, like... missed a giant chunk of my life."

The slight pleading edge to his wingmate's voice was painful to hear. "I don't think that's a good idea," the blue jet demurred. "It's not going to prove you're here in the-the *future*, or whatever you want to call it. Besides, it only ever worked in those TV shows you used to spend all your time watching, and we don't dream like squishies do anyway-"

Skywarp pursed his lips. "You're only saying you don't *want* to do it because you're a figment of my imagination, and it'll just *prove* you're a dream when I wake up," he challenged. "The least you could do is *humour me*."

"I'm not going to punch you, Skywarp. I mean, look at you; you're already falling to pieces." Thundercracker waved a hand at him. "You might finally self-destruct if I go adding to it."

"You were a *Con*, for Pit's sake, you wouldn't have had a problem back *then*." Skywarp's voice descended into a despairing growl. "Is that what these wibbly fraggin' neutrals have done to you? Turned you into some weird freaking wannabe-*Autobot*-"

A black fist came out of nowhere and exploded a brief flurry of stars through the teleport's vision. "Oww!" He flopped backwards, automatically curling his knees up, protectively, and clapped a hand over his nose. "Oh, ow, *owww* TC, that really hurt! You didn't have to punch me *that* hard."

"...sorry, Skywarp." Well, at least Thundercracker sounded genuine enough. "I forgot your talents included a knack for goading even the most unwilling mech into a fight." He ran a hand across his friend's wing, apologetically. "Your nose gonna be okay?"

A hairline fracture ran across the teleport's cheek, just under his right optic. "Yeah, you sappy limp-wrist. Call that a punch?" he joked, painfully, voice coming out muffled by his fingers. "Ow. This means I'm awake, doesn't it."

"...yeah, I guess it does...?"

"Well, fuck." Skywarp offlined his optics, defeated, and let his arms flop out to each side.

"...sorry, Warp. I know this is a lot to take on board, and-"

"You're gonna send me back, right?" Skywarp cut in, matching stares with his wingmate's tired crimson. "*Right*?" He scooted himself back to a halfway seated position. "You're gonna make sure I go back to the right time, and don't miss out on everything important that's happened?"

Thankfully, the pale features curved into a small smile. "Sure," Thundercracker agreed, gently. "Soon as we can figure out how you got here. Did you feel anything unusual when you teleported?"

"I... well... no." Skywarp pursed his lips. "I mean, my diagnostics didn't pick up anything. It was... probably nothing, really. Maybe just..." Skywarp frowned and tried to recapture the sensation he'd thus far tried to forget had happened. "There was... sort of a... *cold* feeling, I guess."

"Cold?" Thundercracker nudged him to elaborate.

"Well, like..." Skywarp frowned, seriously, and after several seconds of intense thought finally came up with; "like everything had just *stopped* for an astro-second or two. But it-it must have been nothing. My diagnostics don't even record anything happened." He gave his friend a glance. "What do you think that means? How... how did *that* put me *here*?"

"I don't know." Thundercracker shook his head, disappointed. "Screamer might have a better idea. Soon as we get you back to hospital, we can ask him."

Skywarp hunched his shoulders a little, and gave him a sidelong look, lips pursed. "Is he gonna be mad, d'you reckon?"

Thundercracker managed a faint, knowing smile. "What, do you need to pre-emptively prank him, you mean?"

Skywarp snorted. "Yeah, TC; I'll play zombie and throw body parts at him until I fall over again." His smile withered. "He's gonna really chew on my audios this time, huh. Not many mechs are skilled enough to break time itself."

Thundercracker patted his shoulder. "Listen, if it's worth anything, I wasn't the only one to have missed you," he reassured. "Our beloved wingleader's been a proper grouch without you around. Even inventing silly sciencey challenges for himself hasn't *quite* kept him from being in a permanent foul mood. The quietest he's been was when he was designing these refits."

"*Screamer* built them?" Skywarp gave him another look, and couldn't quite hide the doubt in his gaze. "Screamer, who has a knack for getting himself as smashed up as possible? What is he, suicidal?"

"It was only after he'd investigated every other avenue possible to get around the energy deficit. *You* know Seeker builds are notoriously energy-hungry, it started to become a choice between lighter, fuel-efficient rebuild, or go ground-pounding.

"It still looks ridiculous," Skywarp muttered, casting a critical glance over his wingmate's lean frame. "All... plastic-looking."

"Don't knock it. It's stronger than it looks-"

"...no, TC. You look like you're made out of *polystyrene*," the teleport argued, grimly, giving him a hesitant, very underpowered shove on the arm. "Primus. Even that useless teeny yellow Autobot could poke holes in you."

"You've already goaded me into punching you in the face, Warp, you know first hand that it's not *that* flimsy."

"Well you're still not getting me wearing it." Skywarp folded his arms, decisively. "You can just fix my leg." He waved his stump, meaningfully. "Then I can keep you bunch of skinny little gliders safe if anything actually dangerous comes along."

Thundercracker smiled, patiently. "...this 'silly skinny new refit' *did* help win the war for us."

Caught off guard, Skywarp's belligerence faded again. He studied his scuffed fingers, quietly. "...it's official, now, then?" he wondered, reluctantly. "War's over?"

Thundercracker picked up the subtle undercurrent of *something else I missed* in his friend's words. "Kind of. Mostly," he apologised. "Things still rumble on in the background, a little bit, but... it's been... quiet, the last dozen or so vorns, since we took ownership of the space bridge. Megatron's stuck on the wrong side of it, a-"

"Nono, don't tell me, don't tell me." Skywarp waved his hands, urgently, then planted his palms down over his audios, as best he was physically able. "La la la I'm not listening."

"Warp...?"

"Don't want to know what's happening. Bad enough I've seen you lot looking all skinny and weird, if you tell me anything else I can't go back, because I'll break history. So you can't tell me!"

"Well, you know, technically you've *already* broken history," Thundercracker reminded him. "But that's not such a big deal, right now, because when you go back, the future won't happen this way, any more." He echoed Skywarp's earlier words. "Because we won't have had to live without you for all those vorns. Right?"

Skywarp allowed his hands to drop back into his lap. "I still don't think you should tell me much. Just in case." He studied a dull scuffmark on his thumb, where Lucy – little Lucy, not strange green impostor Lucy – had crashed into him. "Just-... Did you find those fuzzy things?" He glanced up. "What are they? Did you work

out what they wanted?"

Thundercracker shook his head. "No, we didn't and haven't." Sensing the disappointment that virtually rolled off his wingmate in palpable waves, he hastily added, before the dark Seeker could protest; "we were sort of preoccupied by *you* vanishing, if you remember? Then the Triplechangers came along to cause trouble and... well, your chasing gremlins down in the Rift just got lower and lower on our list of priorities."

Skywarp winced, in sympathy. Not knowing what they'd been up to didn't mean his wings didn't hurt. "Triplechangers? What did *they* want?"

Thundercracker gave him a tired smile. "Mostly? A fight, we figured." He shrugged, one-shouldered. "We're not sure if they were following orders, or just trying to improve their standing with Megatron by being self-directed. Either seemed pretty likely, given what else was going on."

"...uhh... what else *was* going on?"

"You don't want to know, remember?"

Skywarp pouted, and gave his friend a little resentful glare. "You can't give me tidbits like that then not follow up on it," he whined, petulant.

Thundercracker gave him an affectionate shove. "Well don't get mad at me if Screamer tells you off, eh?" he teased. "Lessee... we were already tight for fuel before you disappeared, remember? Which is why Screamer was near-on having a breakdown, trying to pay those overinflated prices our suppliers demanded to keep us all in the air-

"Prices that Shockwave initiated," Skywarp reminded, waving a finger. "Mean one-eyed old slagger."

"Exactly. Well, Megatron finally told Shockwave to embargo *all* the supplies they were sending through, not even to let out those few little dribs and drabs at his usual extortionate prices. I think the hopes were that we'd get so starvingly desperate, we'd go crawling back to his mercy, you know? We'll do whatever you say, you win, just please feed us?" Thundercracker shrugged, amiably. "All it actually did was make his other loyalists rebel. His fleet didn't take too well to being grounded."

Skywarp wrinkled his nose, unimpressed. "How can a mech riot if he's too tired to do *anything*?"

"Ah, see. Never let it be said that Screamer's lost his edge since telling Megatron to go stick a fork in somewhere sensitive." Thundercracker smiled, and there was a flicker of that familiar old Decepticon guile in his expression. "He saw an opening, and chased it for all it was worth – approached all the grounded Seekers with an offer. If they fell in with us, promised their loyalty to us instead of Megs? We'd get them refit and back in the air. We knew what they needed, what was important, 'takes a Seeker to know a Seeker', and all that."

"Yeah, and I'm sure they were all *overjoyed* to end up looking like plastic toys," Skywarp snickered.

Thundercracker snorted and gave him another shove.

"You mean to say after all that, they actually went along with it? Didn't go straight back to Megs once Screamer had sorted Shocky out?"

"Hey, come on, *some* of us have a sense of loyalty." Thundercracker gave him an amused little shove. "It's hard to be exclusively loyal to a leader who'd been absent for thousands of vorns, and more interested in hounding the leader of the enemy faction than rebuilding what was left of the world when he finally returned." His lips quirked into a lazy half-smile. "Acid Storm's out co-ordinating the rebuild at Vos. Still takes his lead from Screamer, but seems to have kinda been bullied into a leadership role, himself – Primus only knows if he actually *wanted* it."

"They're rebuilding?" Skywarp straightened, surprised.

"Ehhhh, after a fashion. It's mostly ground clearance, at the moment." Thundercracker gave his wingmate a sad glance. "Still good and flat over there, you know? Be a prime building spot, once the ordnance has all finally been removed." He offered his hand. "Come on, Warp. At least lemme get you back to hospital and cleaned up, yeah? We can talk all you like, once you're feeling better."

Skywarp studied the proffered hand. "...all right," he agreed, hollowly. "I guess it'll be easier to bully Screamer into sending me back if I've got both legs to stand on. You're gonna have to get me some fuel, though. I'm too depleted to teleport any more."

"What do I look like, a courier? I'm not flying back and forth all orn," Thundercracker joked, gently. "It's all right. I'll carry you."

"*You'll* carry me? You, and that... that... *polystyrene refit*?" Skywarp involuntarily leaned backwards, away from him, brows arching, alarmed. "Like frag I'm gonna let you try it! I'm *lost*, not suicidal."

The blue jet made a gently chastising *come-hither* gesture with both hands. "Just trust me, all right?"

Trust me. Skywarp stared down at the dark palms for several long seconds, the words just hanging between them. *When has TC ever let you down, huh?* he reminded himself, and hesitantly slotted his own (strangely large) hands into his wingmate's. "If you crash us, I'm gonna kill you," he promised, quietly, allowing his friend to help him to his one unsteady good leg.

"Well, if we do, I promise to stand still so you can." Thundercracker made sure he had a good grip before engaging his primary drive. "All right? Secure?" he coaxed, poised to launch, the chilly backwash from his wings sending scraps of old detritus fluttering away.

We're so gonna crash. Skywarp winced. "No."

"It'll be fine." The blue Seeker gave him a reassuring smile. "Just hold on tight, eh?"

In spite of the ease with which Thundercracker lifted off, the unnaturally quiet roar of his engines left Skywarp feeling unnerved – as though his engines were running down and they may just... fall out of the sky, at any second. His fingers tightened, involuntarily.

They arrived back to find a scarlet-painted waiting party standing watching them from the street outside the hospital, a glare pinching its dark features, arms firmly folded, foot impatiently tapping.

"Well you two certainly took your time," a familiar glass-etching voice cut across the air between them, very distinct and classically screechy, even over the increasing pitch of Thundercracker's engines as he pulled them up for a landing. "What took you so long?"

"We were talking, for a while. It's still allowed, isn't it?"

"Well thank you *so much* for keeping me in the loop and letting me know you were sat out there timewasting." Starscream stabbed an arm in the direction they'd just come from. "I mean, it's not as though I was wondering if I should send for a *search party*, or anything."

Thundercracker just smiled, amiably, and helped Skywarp push past him. Somewhat deflated by the lack of response, Starscream muttered something huffy under his breath, and followed his wingmate.

"All right, Warp. Comfortable?" Thundercracker asked, once his wingmate was finally settled back in that private (horrible, small) cubicle.

Skywarp shrugged and pulled a semi-resentful face. "I guess." He waved his foot, aimlessly. "Not like I've got much choice in it, huh."

Thundercracker hesitated in the doorway. "We'll get to the bottom of it," he promised.

"And send me back home," the teleport reminded, waving a finger at his wingmate's departing back.

"Is he going to stay put, this time?" Starscream wondered, out in the main area, in an intentionally-loud voice. "Because he can find his own way back next time."

Skywarp sneered at the wall, and demonstrated his knowledge of Earthly hand gestures to whoever cared to be looking.

The voices outside his cubicle carried on at a more hushed level. Whether they didn't realise he could hear them, or just didn't care – or frag, maybe they *wanted* him to hear – Skywarp couldn't tell. He listened in regardless, feeling... small. Jittery, inside. He willed his pumps to shut off, but it didn't help as much as he'd hoped.

"...Well?"

"Well what?"

"Well, what's your opinion? Is it him?"

"Why are you asking *me*? You're the one who's been poring over the scans the hospital took before he made a run for it. What do *you* think?"

"...*you're* the one who just spent the last ten breems sitting on a roof and talking to him. A couple of isolated scans are useless, you know that. *Especially* scans like *this* wretched place takes. All I want is an opinion, Thundercracker. If you don't want to put your money where your mouth is, then fine, just... stop making excuses. I'm not going to hold it against you if you're wrong."

Snort. "You said that last time, and how long did it take you to decide you were going to talk to me again?"

"*Last time* you made a stupid mistake."

"All right, all right." Sigh, pause. "I know you're going to yell, but I think it *is* him, this time."

Huff.

"See I *knew* you'd act that way. You say you want my opinion, but it turns out you only want it if it's the same as yours-"

"Okayokay. No need to overreact. Reasoning?"

"I just think it is! There's just too much that *fits* for it to be anything else. All the *little* things match up, for a change."

"They have had plenty of *practice*, Thundercracker. What is this, number three, now?"

"See, that's just it. I don't care how much practice they've had, he's too... too *him*... you know? If he's a facsimile, then he's a *brilliant* facsimile, absolutely perfect, right down to the little idiosyncrasies in his manner of speaking, and his special personal brand of non-scientific handwavium."

Another little huff. "Didn't we say that about the second one, to start with?"

"...yeah, but I think we were grasping at straws, too, because it wasn't *that* good. We just wanted it to be true *so bad*, we'd have believed anything."

"You're not doing so well at convincing me this isn't you indulging in re-runs."

"Then *you* go talk to him! Primus, anyone would think you're scared to."

A frosty silence took hold for a good few seconds.

At last, Starscream spoke again. "Maybe later. I have to go talk to a surgeon." The hollow *thoks* of his thrusters on the hard ground marked his departure.

A long-suffering sigh showed that Thundercracker hadn't accompanied him. Skywarp hastily directed his attention out of the window, hoping it made it look like he'd not been eavesdropping – and just in time, when the blue jet poked his head through the screen.

"Sorry about that," Thundercracker apologised, dryly.

"Sorry about what?" Skywarp lifted his head.

The pale face looked instantly relieved, for a fraction of a second before the expression was hastily swallowed up. "Eh, nothing. Just... Screamer being Screamer. You know."

"Pfft, I know better than to listen in when *he's* in a bad mood." The teleport poked out his tongue. "I actually value my auditory sensitivity."

If Thundercracker suspected him of lying, he didn't admit to it. Just... smiled, in a funny, vague sort of way. "Listen, I've got a couple of things I need to attend to," he excused himself. "How about you get some rest, huh? You need to relax, get your head in order, before we start thinking about getting you fixed. I'll get some energon sent down. Sound good?"

"Yeah," Skywarp studied the floor, quietly.

"...it'll be all right, Warp."

"How can it be, when I've missed out a great important chunk of my life?"

"It'll be all right, because we'll fix it. Somehow."