

Abigail Scott
Future Tense

Chapter One

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, wondering where a certain teleport had got to.

Only running some errands, Squeaks, he'd said. *I'll be back to take Lucy off your hands so quick, you won't even know I was gone.*

Sure. 'Errands'. That was a whole half an orn ago. More likely, he was trying to convince Nightsun of the reasons why he shouldn't book him for yet another breach of the peace. Pulsar smiled to herself anyway. Skywarp; poster child for the ASBO generation.

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, doing all the boring mundane things she used to hate with so much passion. Her grungy, half-derelict home district was hardly prime real-estate, but in a way, that had saved it. 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. Sparked at the start of the war and knowing little else, Pulsar couldn't help wondering what this new age of peace was going to bring.

The police-bike 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.

Thinking about her missing arm – or rather the cause of it – always upset her gyroscopes. She took a moment to cycle cool air and think stabilising thoughts, unclenching her left fist finger by finger. Siphon's not here, Pulse. He's buried under a desert somewhere.

A little noise in the background attracted her attention out of those bleak thoughts, and she glanced towards the living area. That sounded like the door to Forceps' study. They were back already? It was a quiet little *click*, not the resounding *crash* of anger that usually meant one of the twins (or more likely, their sire) had annoyed the burly surgeon, so she guessed all must have gone well at the hospital. She slipped out from behind the table, leaving Footloose glued to the flight videos playing on her computer terminal, and went to see what was going on.

As she'd guessed, there was no Forceps in sight, the big female having retired to the (comparative) sanctity of her study. Instead, an unfamiliar little blue 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, feeling a very familiar static envelope harmonise with hers. "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 to think properly. Still feels like my fuel lines are full of bubbles!"

The 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.)

"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 wanted to get a good look for herself.

He shook his head. "I wanted to, but Sepp 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 giggled 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 her twin, literally vaulting clean over the table. "Seeee-meeee," she crooned, latching her arms around him and rubbing their cheeks together. "You look all grown up and official, like Ama."

"Careful, I don't want paint-transfers already," he chuckled, nevertheless hugging her back. "Not from you, anyway."

"Yeah, 'cause *everyone* 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 playfully on his new 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?"

"It's okay, ama." Slipstream carefully nudged his bent antennae back into shape, giving Footloose a sneaky 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. 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-"

She gave an outraged squeak. "Glitching fragger! You know it's not *my* fault they say I'm too small!" She threw the empty flask at him.

Slipstream ducked, but not quickly enough; it clattered noisily off his shoulders and skated off across the floor to somewhere inaccessible.

"Aw, you two ain't causing a ruction *already*, 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’s back!” Footloose squeaked, and the two (former) sparklings immediately attached themselves to him, clicking excitedly, quarrel forgotten.

“Hey, Button. 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, worried. “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.

Pulsar gave an involuntary *yipe!* and reflexively kicked her feet, alarmed. “Put me *down*, Skywarp-!”

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, wobbling to regain her balance. “That’s great news. I bet he’s relieved!”

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

“They’re not fragging, Skywarp.” Pulsar shook her head, despairingly, and swatted his arm. “So *that* was what you meant by errands? You could have been less cryptic. I was worried you’d got arrested again.”

“Ah, you know how Pan’s place gives me the creeps. I just didn’t want you to think you needed to come hold my hand.”

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?)

Skywarp was – predictably – first back on his feet. For almost half a solar orbit, he danced a very fine line between 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.* Gentle 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 eventually he pulled up out of his nosedive.

Plus 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. The sparklings hung off his every word like it were some gospel truth, and happily joined in with his causing mischief. Even bathing the reluctant little fraggers had its moments of hilarity. Starscream very quickly got exasperated with their antics and summarily banned Skywarp and his “little minions” from his makeshift laboratory.

“So,” the teleport wondered, loudly, helping himself to the unattended flask of fuel balanced precariously next to the sink, “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. “Soo, how about...” He leaned down close and murmured near her audio. “We dump the bits 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. “S-sorry, Warp. 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?”

“*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. He rolled his optics, shrugged and nodded, a disappointed smile on his lips, and took refuge in his stolen flask. “Well, don’t make me go plead my case to Beemer. You know what a lack of interfacing does to a mech? I’m wearing my hand out.”

Pulsar blinked at him, not sure she understood the “squishy-ism” and not really wanting him to ping her any explanatory images. “Listen, you lazy fragger.” She gave him a stern swat on the wing, just hard enough to make the plating vibrate. “You 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.”

“Tch.” Skywarp flicked the tassels on the swirly blue shawl tied at a jaunty angle across Pulsar’s shoulders. “You don’t have to tell Prime’s Autodorks you’re not wearing the tat they keep sending any more. It’s not like anybody’s forcing you to.”

“*Perhaps I like* wearing them,” she retorted, semi-defensively. “They make me feel less... broken.”

Skywarp pursed his lips in a half-apologetic smile. “...I’m sure Sepp would be gentle, if you asked her to get you fixed up.”

“I know. I-... it’s not about being gentle. I know it’d just... put me straight back under the desert, with Siphon’s fingers down my intakes.”

“Even if I was there, to protect you?”

“I’m sorry, Warp.” The ex-Con didn’t often let his gentle side out, and she felt wretched for turning him away. “Soon as I think I can cope with it, I’ll let you know.”

“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 suddenly attached to him. “All right all right! Steady on, you two, you’re going to knock me flying,” he laughed, trying to stay upright. “It’s good to see you two troublemakers too. Still running poor Ama ragged, I see?”

Pulsar made a face. “You have *no idea* how glad I am that you’re here. Seem needs some practice with the new alt; if you wear him out a little, he and Footloose might stop butting heads.”

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 already had something of a reputation around the station, and only now realised the possible implications of his wording. His optics flushed a vivid cyan, alarmed. “N-nothing like that!” he blurted, hastily. “I-I just mean take him for a run round the block! Uh, that is-”

Skywarp planted a hand over the smaller mech’s lips, which managed to convince him to shut up. “You might wanna *quit digging*,” he suggested, amusedly, leaning closer.

“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 with her arms around his throat. “When *am* I going to get my wings?”

Skywarp vented air in a sigh, watching as the ground dwindled below. “Please don’t start this all again, Lucy. 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 huffed and bumped her helm against his. “I just-... It’s not fair. Now Goodie-Straight-Struts has got an alt, he’s gonna keep teasing me with it. Please, Day.”

“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 precisely 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 wibbling from that 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 you and Ama’s pedes and getting yelled at by Screamer.” Footloose muttered something quiet, vented a melodramatic sigh, and let her chin come down with a bump to rest on her parent’s shoulder, as though to emphasise how traumatised 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.*

“Sepp explained it for you, and even *I* get it and *I’m the stupid one*,” 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 clean off.”

“So I can be bigger! You can ask Aunnie Sepp to make me bigger!” 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-”

“Damn it, 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 flight-capable model yet, and she *told you* what’ll happen if we try putting a big old thruster complex onto those teeny tiny stick-legs of yours. I’m not gonna have you screwing up your harmonic 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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Down by Deixar's seismic rift, 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 there where I put the yellow radio beacon," 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 held the case at arm's length, as though it contained something poisonous. "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*. And that wasn't a challenge!"

Skywarp snorted and kicked off, deliberately scattering gravel at his wingmate. "I dunno what your last servant died of, but it sure wasn't *boredom*, huh?"

"What's that supposed to mean?!" 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 Skywarp's in a funny mood, or you can go back home now."

Footloose settled on the broken edge of the Rift and dangled her feet over the precipitous drop. "S'nothing."

The red jet gave a dismissive grunt. "So long as you sulk over there, and don't get in my way."

"I'm not *sulking*," Footloose retorted, arms folded, kicking her heels and watching as Thundercracker glided in. "I only said how I want to fly. You guys get torqued pretty quick if you're grounded, so why are you acting like it's outrageous for me to just *ask*?"

Starscream nodded an abbreviated greeting at his blue wingmate. "As we all tell you, at least four times a day, each and every day, you'll have to be patient," he growled, jaw tensed. "Now is not a good time to go testing my mood-"

"But *everyone always says that*, but *Seem* doesn't have to be patient, does he-"

"Look, you ungrateful little brat, if all you're going to do is whine about how fragging *hard done by* you are, you can clear off right now." Starscream stabbed an arm towards the busier streets in front of the Rift, voice deepening into a ugly snarl. Footloose actually flinched back, alarmed. "Bad enough that I'm forced to wallow in such sheer *ignominy* here, some-some... *reject little Empty* with wings, scraping to get by in a reject district on Cybertron, defeated and stupid, last thing I need is to have to listen to your slag as well! One more breem of *this* and frig, I might just go crawling back to Megatron and ask for my old job back!"

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

"Get her out from under my feet, TC. Next time I might do more than just yell," he snapped, irritably.

"Hi to you both, too, I guess?" 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 have told you 'no' quite a lot of times already, huh?" The blue jet used a fingertip to scratch at her aerals, and she calmed at the little affection. "Maybe it's a good idea to let us tell you when we think you're big enough, from now on, eh? It's not like we're going to *forget*."

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. "And I don't want him going back *there* 'cuz of me."

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 the concept of *loss*, again, so close on the heels of almost losing everyone the first time? "He's not going to go back," he reassured. "He's just being a fractious old grump because he's working too hard."

“...he doesn't really think it was a mistake, coming here, does he?”

“Nah.” Thundercracker lied through an offhand grin – truth be told, he wasn't entirely sure about that, himself. “Skywarp and me just need to find something good to keep his ambition occupied.”

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“So where's Lucy gone?”

“Off with TC, seeing as she seemed to have lubricated her vocaliser again.” Starscream didn't even look up from his controls, as Skywarp reappeared from his task. “Whining about her favourite topic.”

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. “Maybe just make her a couple of little antigravs, or something? Just enough to get off the ground? Get us a bit of peace and quiet, and all that.”

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. “You useless saps have seen to it that she hasn't gone without *anything* since we got home, the least she can do in return is learn a little patience.”

“Whoa, hey, ease up, yeah?” Skywarp grouched, backing off with his hands up. “It was just a suggestion, seeing as her whining is clearly so offensive to your delicate audios.” He curled his lip and added; “I guess since it's not servicing your ambitions, you don't wanna know about it.”

“...*you* wouldn't know ambition if it got up and *shot* you in the aft,” Starscream sniped. “Never aiming any higher than your next energon break.”

“Well maybe that's good, because look where ‘ambition’ got *you!*” Skywarp drew little air speechmarks for emphasis. “Hook's infirmary, mostly. Shame he couldn't loosen that *over-wound purge-retentive aft* in the process!”

One of the delicate sensors rocketed out of nowhere and spanged off Skywarp's helm, sending him reeling in a cascade of broken sensory components. “Make that, second in command of the entire damn *army*, just in case you forgot. Which I gave up because I stupidly thought you two useless walking scrapheaps were worth it!”

“And career prospects were awesome, huh.” Skywarp rubbed the little dent in his black paint, and curled a lip in a sneer. “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. 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, you cowardly purple blob of tin!”

“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!” He hastily teleported a few metres out of reach of Starscream's arms-outstretched lunge for his throat, and watched with a thinly veiled glee as the scarlet jet got an intake full of dirt for the trouble.

Starscream replied with a shot at the teleport's thrusters. “The only reason *you* didn't say anything is because you don't *have* half a functioning cortical relay!”

Skywarp danced inelegantly out of the way. “At least I used to know when to shut the frag up! 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 sympathy points by getting your name on the list *first?!?*”

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

“Yeah, I know, Button,” Thundercracker agreed, softly. “Neither of them knows when to back down, as usual.”

“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 slag 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 for a while. Yeah?”

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

Chapter Two

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 sire'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.

"You cheated. You cheated!" Still draped over Thundercracker's wings, Footloose flailed an arm, outraged.

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 go groundling 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 grinned 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. "Changed your mind about what? Am I coming in halfway through a conversation again?"

"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?"

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.

Spotting him in the periphery of his visual sensors, Starscream didn't even glance up at his wingmate's approach. "If you're here to join in abusing my audios, you can give up and go away now, because I *will* turn them off."

"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.

Pulled over his centre of gravity, Starscream gave a little *yerp* of alarm 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 finish this. I need to work out where these readings are coming from."

"Right, because the Rift is suddenly going completely destabilise 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 scraping your aft up off the dirt 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, releasing a single chastising blue finger to underline the point. "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 picked up lately, 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? You know that

was why he came down here in the first place, right – or did you think it was for your charismatic attitude?"

Starscream pursed his lips and backed off a step, muttering something that sounded like an apology. "Maybe if didn't act like a prize idiot every once in a while, I'd indulge him every now and then."

"And maybe if you weren't being a cantankerous old glitch who acts like he's got a spanner permanently jammed up his exhaust, *he'd* be less inclined to wind you up. Come on, it's not *all* his fault, and if you actually *defragmented* for a change, you might remember you don't have to take his heckling personally? You're stretched thin and fractious, and yelling at everything. Please go home."

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.

"You're not going to self-destruct from admitting you're a tiny bit fallible." Thundercracker set his hand against his friend's wing and gave him a soothing pat. "And you don't need to work so damn hard. They're not going to suddenly remember you were a Con and kick you out the instant you take a nap."

Starscream still refused to look up. "...you know that's not precisely my reasoning."

"...yeah, Starscream. I know. We'll make it worth your while."

At last, the dark face offered a fleeting, tired smile. "How, precisely. We crashed out of the Cons, and now we're stuck, just... wandering, like little lost sparklings." He didn't bother hiding his pleasure at the energon – cool, crisp, felt like it washed a little of the sludge off his spirit. "We used to *mean* something, TC."

"And we will again, now we're all back to full strength. Right? We'll help you 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. Something worth your time to fight for, eh?" Thundercracker offered a gentle grin. "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'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. Go home for a bit, Star."

"Don't call me that." The irritable sentiment was a little more genuine, this time. "You know I don't like it."

"Why not? It's your name."

"My *name* is Starscream. 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."

Starscream's voice descended into disgusted mutterings into his drink. "Stupid... maladjusted heap of spare parts."

"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.

"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 orns. 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 at the suspicious look he got in response. "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.

Thundercracker gave him another encouraging 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." He was clearly tired 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. "Yeah, the refit went well. He's just been out for 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. 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 somewhat genuinely concerned. "What's the matter, Warp?"

"Can't you hear it?" The teleport pointed behind them, above their heads. "I think it's that thing up there."

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. Now they were paying attention, the agonised scream of overworked engines cut quite cleanly through the quiet air.

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

Thundercracker sighed, inwardly, sensing that his carefully planned exercise in finally getting Starscream to *go home* had just been completely scuppered. "...is that smoke?" he wondered.

"We can figure out what it is in a breem. All I know right now is that I don't want to be underneath it." 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! 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. "I can't tell how big that is, but it'll make a nice dent in whoever it lands on."

"Shouldn't we try and catch it or something?" Skywarp wondered. "I think it's a vehicle, it might be one of ours."

"I don't think it is, Warp," Thundercracker demurred, 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 not local."

“And trying to catch it will only result in someone getting flattened,” Starscream added. “Safe distance *now*, please...”

The stricken vessel 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, engines thundering and desperately throttling back in an attempt to stop, before its front end caught against a more solid set of broken foundations. Its skid turned into an uncontrolled cartwheel, 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. The dwindling set of crunches finally faded away with a last cough of smoke.

“...ouch,” Skywarp said, as though in sympathy.

“*That’s* putting it mildly.” Thundercracker gunned his thrusters and glided closer to the cliff-face. “Come on, we better check it out. 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, nevertheless following dutifully behind. “I doubt anyone could have actually survived that.”

...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. The silver fuselage was barely visible in the shadowy, sunless depths of the canyon.

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

“Its design isn't something I'm familiar with.” Starscream gingerly picked up one of the broken plates that had sheared off as the vessel had tumbled past. The metal still felt hot against his fingertips. “I have no doubt we could cross-reference the writing with what we have in the library, though. If it's remotely local, it'll be on file.”

“...whoa, hey, did you see that?” Before his trine-mates could move to catch him, Skywarp had 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 pointed into the depths. “C'mon, guys, you can't have missed it, it was huge. Down there, look.”

“Where?” Thundercracker followed his pointing arm, retuning his vision to probe into the gloom. “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 junk, 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.”

“Thank you, Skywarp.” 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.

...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 and running a curious hand over the buckled mess of twisted fuselage. Deep inside, the rumble and crack of fire made the whole machine tremble. It had probably once been a sleek little shuttle, smooth and graceful with atmosphere-capable wings, but non-sentient. A powerful electric field tugged on the circuits in his palm, but it didn't feel like any actual *thoughts* accompanied it. His low-intensity greeting broadcasts went unanswered.

The gash that had brought it down ran almost full length up one engine, level with his chest, revealing unfamiliar circuits and fuel lines and the heavy mass of a graviton core. He ran his fingers along the shredded metal, thoughtfully; the jagged edges reminded him of collision damage, rather than the intense heat of a weapon strike. Maybe it had just taken a wrong turn, somewhere out there?

"You'd love to get a good look at this, Screamer," he called up. "Want me to bring it up for you?"

"Not yet," Starscream demurred. His scratchy voice sounded terribly distant, away at ground level. "We don't know if it's safe and I'm getting some worrying readings off its central generator. You might want to get to a safe distance."

"Nah, it looks okay. It's just got a weird engine. I'll keep a sensor on it and move out if it gets worse, right?"

Skywarp had more to say, but never got the chance. Something small, pale brown and fuzzy-looking darted out of a hole in the vessel's side and right over his foot – he leaped back, alarmed, and slammed his wings against the wall of the ravine, dislodging a small cascade of rubble. The thing dove for cover close to the rocky walls.

"Skywarp? Are you all right?" Thundercracker's deep voice carried better than his wingmate's. "What's happening down there?"

"Did you see that?!" Stupid question, of course they wouldn't have, way down here. He could barely see *them*, away at the top of the cliffs. "The thing I saw before! It's a, a... fuzzy alien thing!"

Skywarp lunged for the spot he'd seen it vanish into, 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*. "Guys? Uh... It's gone underground. Can you send me a probe or something?"

"I'll see what I have on the seismograph," Starscream offered, unexpectedly, although his words carried a flavour of long-suffering resignation. "So we can get you an answer before the thing blows up..."

The soft *slap* of shifting air as one of his sparklings appeared attracted his attention; Skywarp 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. "Did you not see this thing crash spectacularly, or something? 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. "Feel safe with you."

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 back up there myself." He patted her head, just hard enough to be gently chastising. "*For now* you can stay with me. You'll probably raise all kinds of 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*.

-how's it, warp?- Thundercracker pinged, cautiously, switching to a more private channel to avoid unduly alarming Skywarp's company.

Skywarp shifted from one thruster to the other, trying to make his mind up. *-see little lights-* he offered. *-noises too-*

-...and?- Starscream interjected.

-camera?-

-nothing useful. Check it later-

-no, send Seem, need to check it out now-

-not a chance. Get back up here!-

-might blow up!-

-Come. Back-

Skywarp rolled his eyes and shook his head. "They're not sending reinforcements, squirt. Guess we better check it out ourselves."

Starscream's audios were apparently better than Skywarp gave them credit. *-don't you dare, Warp-*

Next astro-second and Thundercracker added to the protest. *-come on, don't be a glitch, come back-*

-shut up, guys- Skywarp shot both a filthy image that summed up his current opinion of their "over-reacting". *-just getting a look. Won't be long-*

He advanced a step or two into the mouth of the chasm; it was just a handsbreadth wider than his wingspan, allowing him to walk down it 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. You can come if you want, but I'm not forcing you."

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

"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 reeeaally useful, right now.*

-not coming to get you if you freak out down there- Starscream griped, but his voice had a distorted quality to it. The rocks were obviously interfering with transmission. *-Can get yourself out.-*

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 torqued 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. Far behind, the stricken shuttle still groaned and crackled.

"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 strangely nauseated look. "Not much further, squirt. 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. "And they say *I* watched too much TV." The tunnel was narrowing a bit, though, 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... "All right. I guess we're not gonna get any closer to whatever they are anyway, are we?"

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. *-all ok, Screamer. Found something. Relax?-* he shot back.

-no, 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 thought about it, she recognised it probably saved both their lives. It stopped her *running*, which would have forced him to *chase her*, right into the onrushing danger.

As if in agreement with the red seeker, the shuttle gave a cough and a low groaning rumble, deeper than before, like a slowly dying fusion reactor, collapsing under its own scorching bulk. 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 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 blue 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 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 dust-filled dark, looking for the green glitter of his little girl's optics. "Footloose? 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. 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? Would be to cut his leg off altogether. So until such a time as he could find a knife, he was trapped. *Underground*.

"All right, 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.

"What happens if you misjudge things like I did and get *yourself* stuck too? Who's gonna find us? If you even survive! 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, looking back at him every few steps. 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, leaving the place lit only by the ominous warning-light red of his own optics. *You're fine. Aside from the thruster, you're not so badly injured. You're just stuck down here for a bit, 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-... 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, and closed his fingers into fists in an attempt to stop his hands vibrating. "You don't need to *overreact*, Skywarp," he said, out loud, as though it would help him to believe it. "You've not even been down here for a breem, you useless wuss. Call yourself a Decepticon?" He examined his scuffed fingers, and the purple enamel that his optics had stained a murky magenta, like bad energon. "Lucy will be back any time soon."

Assuming she took your advice and kept her gate 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 clenched his fists tighter, feeling his servos protest, 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. Pretend it's night, or something.*

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-whatevertheyweres. He shrank back, hiking his wings a little, defensively. It was their fault he was trapped down here. If he'd not followed what if it was a trap? The thought blindsided him. What if they'd *wanted* him to follow? To trap him here, on purpose? What if they'd blown their own ship up, on purpose?

“What do you want?” he challenged, out loud, struggling to keep the uneasy distortions from his voice.

The crimson glitter from his optics wasn't quite strong 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. Eyes. Lots of tiny eyes.*

There was something indefinably horrible about all those little eyes, all fixed on him, creeping closer. Without even realising he was doing it, Skywarp charged his weaponry, just in case. *Well, you won't get me without a fight.*

The spots of heat in his arms weren't so comforting as normal. And his fans sounded far too loud.

Something chirped, again, a clicky little spot of sound close to his elbow. Skywarp swiped at it, alarmed, and felt his fingers connect with something warm and yielding before the blow smacked it away. “Ah! Frag-!” He swallowed the exclamation and had to resist the urge to shoot at it. The way his luck was going, the shot would bounce off the walls and hit *him*.

Come on, Lou. Please hurry.

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. “She's not an idiot. Stay calm.”

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

...Pit sake, Warp, please stay calm!

The trapped seeker concentrated on slowing his stuttering fans, getting the air moving properly inside him again. Cold in, hot out. Felt like he was *melting*, down here. No air. No breeze. The rocks sucked up the heat his stressed systems poured out, and dutifully reflected it back at him.

“What do you want?” he challenged, unable to get the force he wanted behind his words. “There's easier ways of getting scrap metal than *murder!* Let me out of here, right now.”

His spark felt constricted, a hot, swollen drop of lead in his chassis, trying to spill free of its magnetic bottle. Tight 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?

“Just get your fans running smoothly,” he whispered encouragement to himself, clenched hands trembling. “Cool down, think straight, right? Cool down, think straight...”

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.

Having the gremlins crawling on him proved the final straw. 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, fingers clawing through the dust. “Oh damn oh Primus get me out of here...!”

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

-is disposable! he decided. 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 these monsters looking for scrap iron for *any longer than he absolutely had to*.

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.

get out get out get out

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 melted into 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. Thank Primus for small mercies.

As soon as the urge to dissolve into helpless, relieved static had faded, Skywarp pinged a positional signal at his wingmates, *come find me, guys*, but it felt underpowered. The intense heat had probably crisped his antenna.

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. If they were all safe and happy and non-blown-up, he figured he could handle that.

Chapter Three

The heap of old recycling was prickly and uncomfortable against Skywarp's 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?

Plus, he wasn't leaking 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 looong wait. *Going underground? You should have known it'd all go to Pit even if you managed not to freak out – 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! Just a microsecond more thinking would have saved you from all this.*

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 limited to maybe 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 either, so it wasn't like they wouldn't be able to spot-

"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 from somewhere above his head.

"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 guardians. Great.

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.

"No, *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.

Skywarp sighed the stale air from his core. "Listen, do you have parents anywhere? Do you think you could

maybe... fetch them, or something useful?"

"I can get my Day!" she agreed, rustling about. "He's nearby. Day?"

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

"I know, but I'm talking to the mech in the recycling," the little femme protested. "He needs us to help."

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

"Look, 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*. "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 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 close to Skywarp's thrusters to wait for the ambulance. Blink was the one to answer, in his stead, settling 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.

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. *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.

"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 push him into a 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.

"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, or something?"

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?"

"Forceps? She does work here, right? She's a friend, I'm sure she won't mind too much."

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

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. Something was getting... strange, about this whole situation. His insides felt funny, like he was about to need to defend himself against something. "You must have heard it, come on, it's not that far away and it was a pretty massive bang."

The doctor arched a brow and 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 leg, the damage is fairly extensive. Your wings don't look too good either." 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 straight back out again. Bad memories of poor smashed-up wingless Thundercracker made his own back ache. "No. My wings stay attached."

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

"No, no no, wings stay on-"

"But-"

"Don't make me punch you in the face, Autobot."

Patches hastily backed off, involuntarily covering her nose with her hands. "I-I'll go get the surgeon."

The nagging little concerns they'd left him with meant it was very difficult to actually *enjoy* the silence when the medics finally left him and his painkillers in peace. 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 him?"

"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, mostly masked by analgesia, 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 Fotsie? 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, ah, wasn't him."

Fotsie? 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.

Skywarp tried to banish his gloomy thoughts, but the idea of parallel universes was swimming around in the front of his cortex. Was that where he was, right now? All that chatter about him not being him, or whatever they'd said. What did that actually *mean* anyway. Who else was he gonna be? Unless there *was* no Skywarp here. Or he'd been killed in the war. Or, or... *something*.

Don't be stupid, Skywarp. He covered his face with one hand. *Why would you 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 high-pitched *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 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 his own rescuer 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-

"Oh 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 chassis, holding her at arms reach. "Do I know you?" Her static field felt very familiar but he couldn't tell *why*.

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 Footloose."

Chapter Four

For several full seconds, Skywarp could only sit, open-mouthed and staring at the femme in his lap, replaying the words in his head.

It's me, Day. It's Footloose.

It explained the uncomfortable familiarity of her static field, if nothing else. But for it to actually *be* her? That... it was impossible! A weird coincidence. Footloose was a brat barely five full solar orbits old, too small to fly, whiney and wingless.

"That's nonsense," he asserted, at last. "Even I'm not so stupid that I'll fall for a stupid joke like *that*. Get off my friggin' lap and leave me alone, if you can't be serious."

"But *Day*-"

He squirmed under her weight, trying to get their combined weight off his wings. "Will you stop calling me that? Fragging-... just *get off!*" 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-... Sorry. Okay."

Skywarp 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. "It wasn't funny in the first place, so you can just... knock it off, already!"

"I promise it's not a joke," the little female spoke up, quietly.

"Quiet." Skywarp waved 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 fraggin' *doctor*. How much are they paying you to play along with this, huh?"

"It's not a joke. They're not paying me." She shifted from one thrusters to the other, uncomfortable, reaching a small green hand out towards him. "Please, Day, you've been gone such a long time, I just wanted to see you-"

"I told you to stop calling me that." He pulled his hands out of reach, glaring hotly enough to melt plate steel. "You guys might think it's hilarious, but I'm not in the mood for any of your stupid smelt. I feel like I've took two turns through the mill, my leg hurts, my wings hurt, my head hurts, and I'm sca- can't think straight. If you can't keep quiet, just... frag off."

"Y-yes, sir. Of course. I-... just... give you some time to yourself." 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 in, 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. Any 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 where I'm clearly not wanted." Her words fractured. "I just thought he'd be more pleased to see me."

"He probably doesn't mean it – he's just disoriented." Beat. "How about go home for now, spark? We'll tell you if anything changes."

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

"It's all right, Patches, 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 appraised 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 nothing whatsoever.* He groaned softly to himself and wiped his hand over his face, pinched his nose and concentrated on trying to bleed off a little of the pressure building in his coolant relays, trying to ignore the way his wings had started hurting again.

Ok so maybe it's not a prank, he finally allowed himself to believe, unhappily. So that means... what, precisely? Where am I? 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. What do you actually know so far – and like, actually properly know, for definite, not what you're just making up to torment yourself with? You freaked out underground after an explosion (which no-one here seems to have heard, what's up with that?), and fragged 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 pursed his lips and studied the ceiling for a while. It 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, uncomfortable. What does that mean? Does she just not know the guys? Maybe if Whites has never asked Pulse to 'babysit', I guess she's never met them?

Or maybe, that means the guys don't exist in this parallel universe. The thought blindsided him; he briefly offlined his pumps altogether, to quell another flash of unsteady surges.

...Or, frag. What if I was unconscious for a longer while than I thought, and 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. Common sense, what's that. 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 swallowed 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. Vos got pretty much razed all the way to the basement rock within orns of it all starting, there's nothing out there any more.

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 since no-one was looking for me to be there, no-one saw me there. It was only when I woke up and set up a beacon they found me.

Your clock would have still tracked the passage of time, though, even if you'd been unconscious, and there's no big gaps in your record. That parallel universe is looking more and more likely.

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.*

At last he noticed that the murmur of 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 bolt upright. 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 gremlins in the Rift-

"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, landing on the floor in a noisy, untidy sprawl of limbs. "...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 ghoulish 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 another *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 Footloose, 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, Skywarp. 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 *chrono* 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 because 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-!"

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."

"All *what* 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* here?" To his shame, Skywarp found his voice skittering away up the scale, angry and scared. "I swear, if you've done anything to my wingmates-"

"Warp, Warp... 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. I know it must be a shock." 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 stayed in his corner, engines growling in threat, until the blue impostor smiled, tersely, and vacated the cubicle. *He didn't even remember activating his cannons, but now he was alone he could feel the spots of heat pooling on his arms, the irritating mosquito song of circuits blazing into defensive life. See? Scareder than you thought you were, he recognised, unwillingly, reluctantly winding the circuits back down.*

Fighting Autobots, you could handle. Pranking Megatron, you could handle. This weird... parallel universe, full of plastic replicas of folk you used to know? No, it's gonna take a lot of brain-work before you can even start to think about handling this one.

The murmuring continued unabated outside, the unmistakable low drone of a familiar deep voice overlaid on top of the higher chattering of the medics. Skywarp concentrated on the sounds, tuning in on half a conversation. He knew the impostor probably sensed he'd be listening in, but made no effort to hide what he was saying.

"No, he's not convinced. Did you really expect him to-...yeah, I know. ...well, yeah, sure, I think it *is* him – looks beat all to Pit and is still covered in rock dust. The right bits of his leg are missing, too. I just think-... no. Well, it would help if I could talk to him without him jumping at shadows! Listen, do you still have that holograph lurking anywhere...? I wonder if it might help..."

Have to get out of here, Skywarp resolved, turning back towards the window. Before they had any more chances to think up something else to try fool him with. Had to get out and find somewhere safe to 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 for now. He could get a view of the land from up there, plan a route and make another couple of hops to somewhere secluded, before they could drag him back, 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 to make it longer, support his bulk? Then maybe he could use it as a kinda makeshift limb.

Any other time, the mental image of "peg-leg Skywarp, dread space pirate" would have made him cackle, but right now he wanted to be out and as far away as his meagre fuel supply would take him. The makeshift leg 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?*

He pressed his fingers against the window, and concentrated on the building. It was at least on his maps – same height, location – and he'd already triangulated his jump 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 not just end up in another dimension, he might lose whole chunks of his superstructure if his primary field didn't move all the air out of the way. Or worse, his pattern buffers might fail and he'd lose cohesion altogether, end up nothing more than a mist of disconnected molecules, raining 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 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 at the top of the tower block 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 another two short hops – aiming for the small rubbish dump he remembered tripping over once, hoping to scrounge up a few building materials and maybe a little fuel, but finding it wasn't even 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, looking more like a small bedraggled city pigeon than the proud eagle he once had been. 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, at least) like Deixar, but it didn't *feel* like it. He hunched his shoulders and mantled his sorry, blistered wings very slightly forwards around himself, wrapping his arms around his chassis, protectively. If someone was trying to "con the 'Con", they were sure putting in fragloads of effort, building all this just to trick him. 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 *immediately*.

What was perhaps worst of all, though, was the fact that... 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 around in circles, 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 the murk 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-! 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*, mostly," 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, finally looking his friend in the optics; Thundercracker could probably feel him still trembling, but he didn't care any more. It wasn't as if the blue jet wasn't trembling a little himself. "I wasn't fooled, though. Stupid, skinny-looking protoform, I don't how they thought it'd fool me. They were after something from me, but I didn't stick around long enough to find out."

"In the hospital?"

"Uh-huh." Skywarp could feel his systems starting to slow again, battle protocols standing down. "I think they might have been they trying to trick me into giving them our secrets, but I saw through it, I'm not so *stupid* as they think I am." He drew a stabilising pulse of cold air into his core. "What's going on, TC? Where am I, why does everything look so strange?"

"Listen. It's going to be difficult for me to explain." Thundercracker gently lowered him down to his aft, so he couldn't fall off the roof altogether. "And you know I don't explain the scientific things quite so well as our glorious wingleader. Just promise to hear me out before you skedaddle again. Right?"

Skywarp felt a tingle of concern prick up the back of his wings. "Wh-what?"

The blue jet took a moment to compose himself. "You've been gone for a long time, Warp. You vanished after that explosion. We spent forever looking for you, and-"

"It-it's you, isn't it?" Skywarp interrupted, shying away, scooting towards the edge. A sensation of dismaying freefall gripped him. "From the hospital. The impostor- I'm not telling you anything! Whatever it is you think I know, I'm not giving you it-!"

"Skywarp. Please." The blue Thundercracker impostor whoever-he-was somehow kept the friendly, reassuring expression fixed on his pale face. "You were close enough to pick up my static field, 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. "You're not TC," he asserted, shakily, but a flicker of doubt passed through his expression. "You *can't* be. You're all... stick-legged and strange-looking. TC looks like *me*. You're trying to trick me."

"I'm not trying to trick you. I'm trying to explain something to you that I don't really understand myself, so I know it's going to be an even more difficult concept for you to wrap your processors around... Look. Here." The blue jet 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 blankly at the page for so long, Thundercracker began to wonder if he hadn't broken his brain altogether.

"This isn't today's news-sheet," the teleport asserted, at last, leaning forwards and sternly placing it back into Thundercracker's hands. "You made it up. Forged it. It can't be too difficult to write a fake news-sheet, you just need a word-processor and a good imagination. Especially if you want to trick the idiot into believing you."

"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, making a spectacular fall from the sky. I'm amazed someone caught it."

"No it isn't. I-I mean... all right, sure, maybe that's me, but... that-... that's not real. That's not today's date. You made it up." His voice fractured. "It's a, a... counterfeit or something. It's not today's news."

"Please, Warp." Thundercracker put the wafer down on the roof, keeping his voice as low and soothing as he could manage. "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-... Look. The police central computer is on the same frequency as it was before your accident, 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?"