



Purple Light

By: Sunstar

Authors note:

6.5 million years ago: Stressed out and bored, Skywarp convinces the others of his unit to take advantage of Flight Commander Starscream's exhausted state in order to stage an elaborate prank against the stuffy Air Commander, Nightfall.

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Nighfall Inspection

Darkmount, Province of Polyhex
Earthdate: 6.5 Million Years BE (Before Earth)

Darkmount was as quiet as a military stronghold could ever be in the middle of a war. It stood over Polyhex like a guardian, protecting the Decepticon occupied territory from Autobot incursion.

The grand structure of the fortress was imposing. Huge reinforced metal walls, thick with shock absorbing beams and a form of lead insulation protected it from electro-magnetic pulses as well as penetration from weapon fire. The thick walls bristled with defensive turrets and finally terminated with missile silos. These silos could fire antimatter shells that had an effect far more devastating than nuclear warheads.

The thick walls were riddled with passageways that only Minicons, Microns or Micromasters could travel. Most were maintenance workers and some were turret operators. The most frequent visitor to the walls were ever growing populations of Retro rats or Insecticons that sought out the energy that was slowly growing scarce elsewhere.

Withered vines of some ancient Cybertronian plants clung to the base of the fortress, holding on to life, just barely. They were the last remnants of nature that was pushed to extinction during the bouts of acidic rainfall over the centuries. They barely survived, protected in the slightest manner by the overhanging parapet wall. Their withered metallic leaves were corroded and could no longer get enough of the life giving light of the blue Cybertronian star. Even though it was midday, the sky was black; filled with the acrid clouds of dust and smoke from both war, industry and the fiery smelting pits where executions were proceeding, almost continuously.

In a higher part of the fortress was a large flat area; a wide open space which lacked a railing. Red and blue lights flashed and blinked along the outer rim. Large metal halide lamps illuminated the gun metal grey surface. It was marked, a landing area for large aircraft, small shuttles, even some of the larger space-going cruisers. A row of battered cargo shuttles lined the western edge. They had seen better days; the outer hulls of the shuttle craft were tinted with a patina of age and corrosion. The once vibrant paint of the purple insignia had faded and flaked.

The wall of the tower still stood high above the landing platform, with openings to the inside. It was a hanger for aircraft, the non sentient types. The best way to insult a Decepticon Seeker was to ask him or her if they lived in a hangar. The person asking would likely get a fist to the nose, best case, or a shot to the face, worst case.

A large doorway adjacent to the hangars lead to a section of the tower where the Seekers lived. Each of the barracks would house from six to eighteen flying Decepticons and it was not very spacious. It was kept spotlessly clean and in military order. They had a small recreation room, a small Holographic simulator.

Several platforms lined the dull grey wall, each ended with a metal foot locker. Each

locker was locked with a Personal Identification Number that only the owner knew. It was considered the only privacy that a Decepticon warrior could have. Even then his privacy was invaded by the monthly checks or the random "cell toss" as it was occasionally called. The Air Warriors stood by their platform with their lockers open. Their possessions, whether neatly stowed away or not, were unloaded and checked.

The Air Commander, black and a very dark midnight blue, strode through the barrack looking at each warrior. To his right was another Seeker, his second in command, a somewhat young and brash individual. He carried a datapad and took notes and nodded as the Air Commander remarked on each warrior's general appearance and the status of his weapons and possessions.

Megatron's personal bodyguards, an elite group of Air Warriors, were starting to feel the pinch of the recession that was facing the Decepticons due to the constant fighting. Their position as Megatron's guard required them to remain impeccably clean. Unfortunately regular bathing, a commodity they had enjoyed whenever they chose, was now a rare luxury. Water was precious, almost as valuable as electrum. They did what they could to maintain a level of superiority over the regular warriors who lived in the infested holes of trenches and hastily erected bunkers.

This late in the war, water rationing was in effect in the cities as well as the major bases. It was costly to treat Cybertronian water sources, which quickly became super acidic or extremely alkaline. Often it was thick with a soup of oily chemicals that could eat right through the living metal of any Transformer. Only the ceramic-like bed rock of Cybertron could withstand the potency of the extreme chemical cocktail.

Even the wildlife, robotic flora and fauna, was suffering. Much had been driven into extinction, or thrown into dormancy until such time as Cybertron would flourish. There was little hospitality left on the planet, which once glowed gold with the living spark of the planet. War had caused the planet to suffer wounds, and like any being, if the wounds were not closed, be it with cities or roads, it festered with infection. Cybertron was dying.

Even through the fighting their appearance was extremely stressed by Megatron, and not wishing to impede upon the wrath of their leader and his high-ranking subordinates, the troops turned to the Constructicons for solutions that did not require the water that was so difficult to come across. They came up with sonic showers; blasts of ultra high sound knocked the soil off their bodies. As effective as this new method was, it crippled the effectiveness of the users. The sonic shower disrupted the aural receptors. This effectively made the warriors deaf and useless in combat. Unless they could be sure they had the time to recover, it was rarely used. Megatron, gleaming to a polished perfection was cause for some discussion amongst the ranks. Did he have a secret store of water, or did the sonic showers not aggravate him as it did everyone else.

Each Air Warrior, after his personal effects were inspected was asked to stow them away and return to attention at the side of their platform. They were being rated and the results of this inspection would be put in their permanent records.

"Flight Commander, Starscream."

"Sir!" Starscream responded sharply.

"Please stand back as I inspect your belongings."

Starscream nodded and stepped aside still maintaining a highly disciplined disposition. He knew the drill. The Air Commander picked up a bright red ruby stone from a chest and a slingshot. He looked at the silvery dark-faced Seeker who stared forward unflinchingly. "Where did these come from?" he had asked thousands of times over. The Air Commander was amused by the primitive nature of the slingshot yet was envious of the beautiful precious stone.

"I was given the ruby when I was in the Academy. The slingshot I've had as long as I have memory," the youthful Seeker replied.

"The other items?" The Air Commander demanded as he picked up several fine scientific tools. "You didn't have these during our last checks. So please, enlighten me as to where you obtained them from and their function?"

Looking over at them ever so briefly Starscream cocked his head and replied. "I was employed as a scientific explorer before the war. I scouted out various alien worlds and catalogued what forms of life existed, what metals, minerals or other potentially exploitable resources the worlds had. The tools were what I used during those days. That is a bio-scanner, the thing there with the handles is a Geiger counter, for analysing radioactive radiation, possibly locating other remote deposits of Cybertronium ore. And the thing there, with the flaps..."

"So, you are a science nerd as well," Nightfall nodded with a sharp laugh. "Where did you get these from? If they were yours before the war, would you not have had them during our other inspections?"

"They were-missing for a while. I finally tracked them down from the Decepticon storage lockers."

"Why were they there?" he said, fiddling with an instrument. There was an audible crack and Starscream cringed.

Exhaling slowly, "They had been there since I was taken prisoner by the Autobots about five hundred cycles ago."

Dropping the two halves of the now broken atmospheric sampler and locking optics with the young warrior. "These are so extremely important to our war effort that you wasted time and energy to locate them?" he inquired, his tone indicating suspicion.

Not knowing how to answer, Starscream nodded slightly. "I figure they will be of use, if not now then later."

Nightfall took the datapad from his lieutenant and looked it over, scrolling back several pages and skimming it quickly. "In your file, you do not state that you were a scientist before becoming a warrior, care to explain the omitted detail?"

"I wanted to fight for our cause, not sit back and play with test tubes. There is an erroneous belief that scientists cannot fight. I do believe I have proven my point more than adequately in my many years of impeccable service to the Decepticons."

"I see. Well since I do not like your tone, Flight Commander, these scientific things, the slingshot and the jewel are now mine."

"You can't do that," Starscream started, losing his disciplined composure. "It's all I have left."

Shrugging and smiling slightly, the Air Commander patted Starscream roughly on the shoulder. "I just did, warrior." He pushed Starscream to his knees. "I want to see seven hundred push ups. That should take you about three hours. Get to it."

Starscream glowered, but complied.

Sleeping like the Dead

Seekers were fliers, designed for high speed flight across the sky or space, depending on the parameters of their build. Their bodies, made of light yet tough materials, were not designed for heavy duty work, such as what Starscream had endured as a mining prisoner. Although they were the rulers of the air, they certainly lacked grace once they touched the ground. Their huge wings slowed them down when they ran; catching the wind and creating drag. Not only was drag a problem, but the excess of upper body weight as well. In spite of the problems they faced, Seekers were reasonably well adapted to life on the surface. Unfortunately if anything unexpected unsettled them, such as a planet-quake, or concussion blast, they would easily end up on their backsides, faces or stumble around like they had over energised. So push ups for a Seeker-any Seeker was definitely a strain on their systems.

Most Decepticons, Seekers especially, found any excuse to celebrate or party. They were gregarious by nature and could be found in groups of two to two thousand or more. They enjoyed each other's company. Their rations of energon had been taken out and pooled, Skywarp had even added to the collection from some unknown source, a source they did not wish to inquire about. Better to be innocently ignorant than to be caught by the original owner.

Starscream grunted and growled as he executed each push up. Thundercracker stood by keeping count. The others urged and encouraged the young warrior as he neared the seven hundred mark. Bets were being altered and changed as the others watched Starscream as he struggled with each of the remaining twenty. His normally dark grey face was coal black from the exertion. He wore a determined grimace that was filled with strain and pain. The Seeker muttered curses and words of encouragement to himself as he neared his mark.

He was determined not to stop just short of his goal. He did not wish to prove himself a failure, he wanted to show his comrades and his commander that he could indeed work as hard as anyone in spite of being a scientist in the past. It was never an issue before, why was it an issue now? Because of the tools. The son of a shuttle had busted his priceless tool, and taken the only connection to his past. A small burst of energy fuelled his system as his mind became angry. Unfortunately as quickly as the burst came, it ebbed and Starscream shook with exhaustion as he completed the last two push ups. Just to show that he could, Starscream did one extra.

"Seven hundred and One," Thundercracker said in an impressed tone. "Well done Starscream."

The Seeker muttered something and dropped to his canopy and pushed his head against the floor. His fingers and limbs felt distant as his chest and arms burned hot. The other Decepticons cheered explosively and collected their winnings and chugged back fuel.

He watched them out the corner of his optics as he attempted to draw in strength. All his internal warnings were firing with annoying error messages. He wasn't in any life

threatening danger, but his systems were wasting what little energy he had telling him he had little energy.

"You okay, Flight Commander?" Thundercracker asked, crouching beside the prone Decepticon.

"Yeah, fine...just a little weary. I'm trying to locate some energy reserves here." Starscream tried to push himself up, but his body did not want to budge. "Slag, I'm just going to stay here." He exhaled in a long sigh. "I just hope Nightfall doesn't consider my body as clutter in the Barracks. Last I need is demerits."

"I don't think you will get any demerits," Thundercracker replied as he helped the Seeker into a sitting position and handed him a fuel bottle. "You did pretty good, Flight Commander."

"I did better than pretty good, Thundercracker," he inhaled deeply and sipped the fuel. "I excelled."

The blue Seeker shook his head. "You still have no idea how to be humble do you?"

Ignoring the comment Starscream groaned and rolled his shoulders. His optics flickered as his body started to shut down. "One of these days....I promise...Nightfall is going to pay for this." The Seeker's head lulled to the side and he went off line.

Thundercracker nodded to the others, "We better let him rest."

Skywarp and Thundercracker took his arms, the others grabbed his legs, they all heaved the worn out Seeker onto his platform. "Meh, he's a heavy one," Skywarp grunted. "Did ya have to give him the fuel before we moved him?"

Thundercracker leaned over and smacked his wingmate. "Yes. He needed it then."

The Seeker at Starscream's feet pulled the dust cover from the end and pulled it over. "He's gone, and out. Our luck Nightfall will be back this evening with some half planned mission and we won't be able to rouse Starscream. He's in stasis; dead to the world. Megatron'll be pissed off"

"Let Megatron be pissed. Anyway, when was the last time we saw Starscream take a good long break? The son of a shuttle's been hard at work for at least seventy days. A 'Con need to rest once in a while." Thundercracker countered.

Skywarp circled and cocked his head and studied Starscream as he laid on the Platform. The cogs of creation were turning and Skywarp's optics were taking on a wild glint. "Hmm. Think he'll be out long?" Skywarp asked lightly.

"I don't know Skywarp, could be an hour, could be a couple days." Thundercracker shook his head then looked at his wingmate. "That look scares me. That look always scares me."

"What look?" Skywarp replied innocently, yet the glint of mischief remained.

Thundercracker shook his head sharply. "I'm stopping it with a pre-emptive no."

"It's a fraggin' shame he's so red," Skywarp remarked, ignoring Thundercracker's protest. "We can do something to make it look like Nightfall killed him...I've got an idea...."

Backing away from his wingmate. Thundercracker shook his head. "No, Skywarp. I'm not involved this time. Last time I took the fall."

"Awe, com'mon." Skywarp pulled back the dust cover and tapped Starscream. "Hey, Flight Commander, you awake? Can you hear me? Screamer? Yoohoo?" Skywarp glanced at Thundercracker with a broad smile. "He's as good as dead; let's get some stuff." Skywarp grabbed his wingmate by the arm and teleported him out.

A Tricky Undertaking

Two hours later, the Barracks had taken on a completely different image. The lights were dimmed to half luminance. Lavender funeral orbs lit a pair of sconces that hung on either side of Starscream's platform. The white dust cover was exchanged for a black body bag secretly removed from the Decepticon Morgue. A feat that only Skywarp could pull off.

Thundercracker reluctantly agreed to play along. The other Decepticons, bored and stressed from the fighting or the long lulls between major battles, desired just a little deviation from routine. As much as they enjoyed parties, they enjoyed a good prank. As long as the prank did not involve them as the target. But if scaring their stuffy Air Commander was the way to alleviate the frustration borne of uncertainty, then all the better.

Every Decepticon had attended at least one funeral of a friend lost in combat. It was an unfortunate fact of life. Any major conflict they could expect at least two critical injuries and usually one death. They went into battle, knowing it was possible, but looking forward to the party that immediately started once they returned.

The party served a few purposes. First one, if no one was lost in combat, it was an excellent way to unwind and celebrate their glorious victory: "Everyone survived, let's celebrate!" It would settle shaken nerves if one of their team was severely wounded: "We need to boost his moral, get well party!" Or if one of the team died: "We drink in his honour; let's have a wake now." Or it could have been that they were simply a bunch of energonaholics.

Starscream slept heavily, his body had gone into an almost complete shut down. Usually sleep would involve him in being in an alert standby; however, not tonight. His body recognised the need for intense rest to recover from the stress that had incurred.

The Decepticons worked quickly and quietly. One of their number stood by the entrance watching for Nightfall. Acidstorm gently dusted Starscream with graphite powder to hide his vibrant red body. Other Seekers brought out the traditional funerary lamps and shrouds. A large purple banner with the Decepticon insignia embroidered in gold thread was hung at the head of Starscream's platform.

Once the dusting was done, Skywarp unfolded a large black body bag that he had lifted from the Morgue. The only problem Skywarp could see was not smothering the Decepticon when he zipped the body bag up. Perhaps that part was not necessary. It was an easy fix to hide the dim glow of optics at rest; use electrical tape. Thundercracker had lots in his medical bag.

"I only hope he stays out," Skywarp remarked after applying the tape to Starscream.

Shaking his head and putting his hands on his hips. "If Starscream hasn't woken up by now, after all the moving we've done, he's going to stay out for at least half a week."

"Great! We might even get him as far as the crypt."

"And what if Starscream wakes up?" Thundercracker asked.

"It'll scare the crud right out of him as well as Nightfall." Skywarp replied grinning largely.

A Nail in the Lid

Decepticons, contrary to Autobot belief, did mourn their dead. They had feelings like any Autobot when it came to their friends and families. Autobots found it barbaric that a Decepticon would terminate one of their own who was damaged beyond repair.

It was not that they could not care for their injured. It was that they felt it was kinder to let the Decepticon rest when he or she could no longer function like they wanted to. Decepticons are a proud and aggressive race of Cybertronian. They would prefer a fast demise in the heat of battle rather than suffer for eternity with some malady that prevented them from functioning as they should. Indeed the decision to terminate one of their own was not something they relished; especially when it was someone they did consider friend. It was a necessary evil, one they called compassion. Decepticons did not really care to think about old age. There were a number of older Decepticons, but most kept their wits as well as their strength. Once that was gone, so was their dignity and pride. So it was very unusual for a Decepticon as youthful as Starscream to suddenly have a pump failure.

Thundercracker, being the field medic, was faced with the unpleasant duty to inform Nightfall of the situation. He was the only one of the group who was remotely qualified to declare a warrior as deceased. Thundercracker did not find the joke very appealing at all. He believed that, as he would be the one to tell Nightfall, he would also be the one who bore the brunt of the blame. Thundercracker did not joke about things. He took his work and his friends very seriously. Even when his closest friend did not.

Although Decepticons did not have a religion, they did believe that the sparks all returned to the source of all sparks where it could be recycled into an entirely new entity.

Nightfall hurried into the barracks room and noticed the sombre silence of the other Seekers who sat around the platform, drinking a beverage they reserved for only the most serious of occasions; the passing of one of their kind.

Looking over the datapad at the prepared death certificate, he stepped forward to greet Nightfall before he flipped out. "I regret to inform you that, our Flight Commander, Starscream, has passed on." Thundercracker's dark demeanour helped fuel the lie. The blue Seeker passed over the datapad with the paperwork to his commander.

Optics brightening ever so slightly he glanced quickly between the Datapad, Thundercracker and the shrouded figure on the platform "You've got to be kidding," Nightfall gasped as he narrowed his optics slightly.

"I never kid," Thundercracker replied acidly. "Starscream is gone. Who leads our unit now?"

"You've checked for everything? Spark? Fluid pressure? Pulse? Energy fluctuations?" the Air Commander asked, still disbelieving.

Thundercracker nodded, shooting his wingmate a nasty look. He knew when the joke

was revealed, he would be the fall guy and Skywarp would get off. Even though Skywarp reassured that he would take the blame, Thundercracker somehow seriously doubted it. "If you don't believe me, take a look at the body."

"I will, if you don't mind."

Stepping away from the platform. Thundercracker gestured invitingly. "Be my guest."

Nightfall unzipped the body bag to reveal the now darkened body of the Seeker. Starscream unknowingly played the part well. His mouth, wearing a neutral expression, hung slightly open. The Air Commander shuddered and turned away. He had seen bodies before, but never one which was so intact. He wondered what it was he was going to do now. He'd have to report it to Megatron.

"Megatron's going to kill me," he whined. "We need Starscream's tactics for the upcoming mission, I hadn't debriefed him on it." He glanced over his shoulder at the body behind him and shuddered again. "What am I going to do?"

"I am sure no one will tell him that you made Starscream do seven hundred push ups when the guy was already so severely depleted." Skywarp shook his head. "He did them all; plus one. Then he collapsed of exhaustion moments later; cursing you out. Few minutes after that, his spark left him." Skywarp said in a calm but mournful tone. "We will miss him."

"We won't miss his arrogant attitude, but we must not speak ill of the dead," Thundercracker added.

"It was not even in battle," the muddy green Seeker concluded. "What sort of death is that? We all half expected Starscream to be returned to us in a biscuit tin after he was gloriously disintegrated by an anti aircraft missile; not literally drop dead at our feet."

"Acidstorm is right," Thundercracker agreed, slowly easing into the prank.

Wings flaring, Acidstorm continued his rant. "And you actually took the few things Starscream owned because you felt it was a waste of energy to go look for them. Since when was seven hundred push ups a good use of energy? It's no fragging wonder he died. You killed Starscream."

Nightfall realised the tone being delivered by the Mourning Seekers was accusatory. He looked at the dark body, then at the funeral decorations and back to the Seekers. They were pinning the blame on him. Starscream blithely slept on, oblivious to the activities around him.

"But, of course, we won't tell Megatron," Skywarp finished.

Nightfall looked at the Seekers slack jaw. He opened and closed his mouth trying to find some words to say. "M-M-Megatron has to be informed..." he stammered. "It'll be necessary to get the paperwork filled out to get him a plot...in the crypt.

"But what plot can a Decepticon get when he died out of battle?" Acidstorm asked. "He's

no war hero, he did not go out in a glorious kaboom, he just....dropped."

Nightfall shifted his wings and feet uneasily. "I'll see to it I can get him placed in the hall of Air Warriors..." Without further ado, the shaken Seeker turned and hurried out, wringing his hands going over, semi-verbally, how he was going to explain the situation to Megatron.

Thundercracker let out a long windy sigh. He had been holding his breath and trying to maintain his composure. His knees bent like they were made of rubber and he slugged Skywarp on the shoulder. "You have no idea how much slag we're gonna get over this, when he and Megatron find out the truth."

Skywarp smiled ever so slightly as he turned away to close the body bag. His mind was already turning to the possible explanations for Starscream's upcoming unannounced revival. "I am working on the plan already," The dark Seeker reassured. "With our funeral plans already underway, we should be seeing him in the crypt by morning. Anyway, it doesn't take long at all to get a Seeker's marker made."

Bearer of Bad News

Pall Bearer of Bad News

The control room was located near the top of Darkmount. It could be called the heart of the Decepticon empire as that was where Megatron could usually be found. Megatron was not the largest of Decepticons; there were indeed bigger warriors out there. But he did boast the most powerful weapon that any transformer had: The Fusion Cannon. He was able to extract materials from collapsing stars and use it to fire a slug so hot and so dense that it could simply vaporise a city almost instantly. Fortunately for everyone, the use of a collapsing star required so much power Megatron, very rarely used it. The fact that he could, was usually enough to keep everyone in order as the Decepticon Warlord had little to no sense of humour. Almost all Decepticons respected and feared Megatron.

Being third in command, Nightfall had much experience with the great Warlord. He knew how short his temper was and how little tolerance Megatron had for inconvenient occurrences. Nightfall felt a peculiar flipping in his fuel tank as he approached the massive heavy metal blast door which separated the heavily shielded control room from the rest of the base. It was a sense of dis-ease. He was almost certain the Decepticon Warlord would, for lack of anything more accurate, be furious.

The huge fortress itself had a very sturdy construction, the control room boasted something even more complex. Many times the Autobot forces had launched attacks against the great structure and had blown out massive sections; Yet the control room remained intact and unaffected. Product of the Constructicon's engineering genius.

The power supply to the control room was in the room itself, it was a separate system from the rest of the base. Should power be cut off to the fortress the command centre itself would remain fully operational. Even attacks against the master computer would end in failure. They had ample backups and several fail-safes to prevent damage from power surges or e-m pulses. The windows and portals to the outside world overlooking the Province of Polyhex were made of thick blast proof glass. They were seated in equally thick walls which were honey combed with tridium and trinium alloy crumple zones layered in lead panelling. Over which was an ultra thin skin of Teflon and finally a force shield to reinforce any weakened sections.

The door itself was made of thick reinforced steel alloy several metres thick. Layered with a honeycomb structures and solid alloy plates and lead shielding. Rumours had it, that Autobots had attacked at the time of its construction and they were sandwiched between the layers, adding a sort of "personality" to the structure. The locking mechanism was a combination between primitive bolt and tumblers and a more modern electro-magnetic seal. There was also a rumour that should Darkmount be destroyed the control room could disengage and, through transformer technology, reform itself into a shuttle.

Nightfall came to a stop before the entrance and placed his hand lightly on the security pad. The machine hummed gently as it scanned his palm with a beam of light. It sampled his energy signature and then compared it with what was in the files.

"Welcome, Nightfall. Please enter your access code," the machine intoned.

Fingers moving quickly, Nightfall entered the ten digit number before it had finished the request.

"Access confirmed."

The doors whined from within followed by loud clanks; the heavy alloy bolts retracted releasing the primary seal. The secondary seal, the electro-magnetic lock, released. A screeching grind and hiss of air being pulled into the momentary vacuum as the door cracked open. Ancient bearings along the track cried out for oil as the door slid into the massive walls; pulled open by a massive counterweight. Within a few moments, the door finally came to a rest, fully open. A dark menacing power exuded from the figure in the middle of the room. An authority that should never be questioned or—toyed with; Megatron.

The Warlord's attention was fixed on a messy conflict that was panning out on the vis-screen. With his arms crossed he gazed upon it with a glowering glare that showed his burning dissatisfaction with the entire affair. "So, are your warriors ready to fly, Nightfall?" he asked sternly and without shifting his gaze.

Nightfall could see that Megatron was not going to take his news well. He only hoped the Decepticon Leader would not fly off the handle. He took a deep breath. "We have a problem sir," Nightfall announced, barely keeping the nervousness out of his voice.

Megatron optics flickered from the screen and he slowly turned to face Nightfall, uncrossing his arms. "I beg your pardon?" He asked dangerously.

Nightfall glanced briefly at the Warlord's massive weapon. His wings quivered back into a slightly submissive posture. "We have a serious problem, the unit won't be ready to fly for at least, twenty-four hours."

Clenching his fists and grinding his teeth Megatron narrowed his optics. Nightfall could almost feel his leader burning holes into his being. "Care to explain this—delay?" he growled, stepping toward the Seeker.

"Uh...it's really simple, sir. One—of the...aah...warriors died suddenly and the others are attending to the funeral rites," he explained meekly.

Megatron shook his head and waved his hand as if it was a moot point. He considered funeral preparations for the regular warrior a waste of time, resources and energy. Their lifeless carcasses could be put to better use melted down and then used for other more constructive purposes. He, however, permitted the warriors to have their funerals, if only to help their moral. "Then find another warrior to replace him, NOW. We must get this situation rectified immediately." he snarled gesturing to the vis-screen and the action that was being displayed.

"It isn't so easy as that, my Lord." Nightfall replied in a placating voice.

"And why not?" Megatron demanded.

"The warrior who died is our Flight Commander, Starscream. I'll need to promote a warrior from the unit to fill his place and get him up to speed."

"Starscream? Dead?" Megatron asked disbelieving. "Is this some sort of joke Air Commander?" his tone shifted from surprise to sceptical. "If so, I am not finding it the least bit amusing."

"Absolutely not. I take my job seriously, my Lord." Nightfall replied quickly. "I'm not prone to making jokes, especially not one of this nature at this most critical time," he reassured.

Megatron nodded still keeping his baleful gaze locked upon the Air Commander. "Then do tell, Nightfall, how did he die?"

Nightfall looked at the datapad in his hand. "The report clearly states he had a pump failure. They say it was due to...stress."

"Stress? You scheduled an inspection today, what sort of stress would cause an otherwise healthy off-duty officer to have a pump failure? An off-duty officer who is barely seven million years of age."

Nightfall shifted on his feet. He was sure Megatron could see through a lie, but he decided he would try to anyway, at least in part. "My Lord. Flight Commander Starscream was always working at something, even when classed as off-duty. He probably failed to take enough time to rest and wore himself out." Partly the truth. Omitting the details that he had in fact forced the warrior to do seven hundred push ups after taking his few possessions for his own and after Starscream had pulled three all nighters working on the assignment he was now having to delay due to his unexpected demise.

Megatron paced back and forth casting glances at the vis-screen and then to the Air Commander. "You will correct this situation immediately. I don't care how you do it, but you will do it." He turned and grabbed the Seeker off his feet by the throat and locked optics with him. "If you don't get your replacement for Starscream up to speed, you'll join him in the crypt." Megatron thrust the Seeker away from him and turned his back.

Without waiting for an invitation, Nightfall scrambled to his feet and bolted out the control room.

One Foot in the Grave

Nightfall sat in his tight officers quarters scanning the names on the screen. He was to pick a new leader for his elite unit. The warriors within the unit all had special abilities, functions that were useful if combined with one another, making them extremely effective in battle. Yet, none of them had the initiative or the intuitive nature of the now late Starscream. The Flight Commander did not boast the most powerful of weapons; but it was, in its special way, useful. Null ray blasts caused the target to momentarily malfunction or drop into stasis permitting the others to have a chance to act against or capture the target. Again, not powerful, but very convenient.

He wondered for a moment if Starscream's past as a scientist was not as bad as he had initially thought. Nightfall admitted to himself that he disliked scientists in general. They had their usefulness-locked away in some remote lab; but as warriors they were usually ineffective. They spent their time observing and over analysing a situation. They would have to think on a problem, going through a multitude of steps before finding a solution. Starscream was different. In the heat of battle he observed then analysed, and then, almost instantly, acted on a plan. When given more time, Starscream could think out in depth plans, even considering a multitude of possible failed outcomes and finding a solution to each one.

The ruby glinted in the dim light catching Nightfall's optic. He picked up the stone and glanced it over. It was finely cut and glimmered gently. Not a rare stone, by any means. They were often used within lasers, but it was unusual for its size. It seemed to lack any imperfections. It was perfect for a weapon or even adornment.

He exhaled slowly as he looked at the list of names and qualifications. It hit him like a hammer. The reason it was so hard to find a replacement for Starscream was because the former Flight Commander's past as a scientist was a bonus to the effort rather than a hindrance. He realised he was not going to be able to replace the lost warrior; he would simply have to find someone to do the job effectively.

It would take too long to brief a new Flight Commander for the mission and, unless dead mech could talk, he had less than 15 hours to come up with an effective plan-and attend a funeral. Nightfall looked up at the ceiling as a new revelation revealed itself. He was expected to give a eulogy. Nightfall exhaled and rubbed his face. He wished, momentarily, that he could either extend the day, or go back in time and stop himself.

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The following morning was much like the previous night. The sky was still dark. The smell of smoke from distant fires hung in the air tinting it a slight blueish grey. The air was somewhat cold and damp.

Continuing with their prank, the Seekers had stuck as close to the traditional funeral rites and told each other humorous and embarrassing stories about their Flight Commander. Starscream, if he were conscious, would not have been amused. Luckily for him, he

slept soundlessly on, blithely ignorant.

Nightfall, having momentarily given up the quest for a replacement mission leader, chose to join the group and listen in. He had come to the conclusion, while trying to write up a eulogy, that he knew virtually nothing about the deceased warrior.

Skywarp chortled loudly as he spoke. "Starscream's pretty good in the sky, but get him on the ground...have ya seen him walking around the base? You know how he is on his feet, he can't walk to save his life. Well, there's a lifted floor plate down annex 7A. Ya know, the femcon living quarters? Well he tripped on that plate and spiralled out of control and smashed through the wall. He got his head and intakes stuck, real stuck-inside the one barracks. Lucky mech, I tell ya. But you know Starscream, he'd see it as a living nightmare; 'no time for girls', know what I mean? 'Duty first', he'd always say." Skywarp grinned broadly. "The girls just seem to have a thing for him."

"Anyway, Six femcons tried to push or pull him back through. Well one femcon, Phoenix, is her name, punted him hard in the face, sent him spiralling back out the way he came. The other girls were on his wings and arms tugging. He landed on one just as Megatron walked around the corner, coming to check in on the commotion. I bet Starscream wished he had died then. He was sent to repair bay to fix a broken nose. Megatron said absolutely nothing at all." Skywarp finished.

"What was Starscream doing down in the femcon annex anyway?" Acidstorm asked.

"Beats me," Skywarp replied with a shrug. "He probably didn't know why he was down there either."

The morning wake up klaxon sounded and the Seekers looked toward the dim digital wall clock. "Geez, Dirge'll be here shortly to lead the way." The Seekers fell quickly silent.

When the traditions had started, no one was entirely sure. What was certain was that the Seekers had developed their own culture and practised it at every given opportunity. The foot fall's of a trio of Seekers neared the door then stopped. Followed by a triple knock on the door then a pause.

"We have arrived" said Dirge.

Acidstorm rose to his feet and opened the door. "We are waiting."

Dirge stood wearing a double snare drum across his shoulder and it hung lightly at his hip. It was painted black with gold highlights. The web belt that held it to his waist was coloured in a deep midnight blue with a golden insignia emblazoned on the buckles. Around his neck he wore a finely braided silver and gold wire lanyard which ended in a heavy bronze key.

Dirge was flanked by his wingmates, Ramjet and Thrust; neither looked happy to be there. Ramjet held in his hands a neatly folded gold and black cloth while Thrust held a folded flag.

"As the sun rises, has Starscream also risen?" Dirge inquired in a mournful tone.

"Negative, Dirge," Acidstorm responded on cue. "Starscream still lays in an everlasting sleep." The muddy green Seeker stepped away from the door to permit Dirge and his wingmates to advance.

"We will collect him and take him to his place by the everlasting flame."

Skywarp barely stifled a snicker as he set up the pall next to Starscream. With the help of Ramjet and Thrust, the three moved the unconscious Seeker.

Thundercracker, filled with dread, held his breath as the Coneheaded Seekers proceeded to fulfil their funerary duties. They, like Nightfall, had no idea of the truth.

Ramjet unfolded the black cloth and covered the body bag and then Thrust laid out the flag on top. Skywarp and Acidstorm unpinned the banner from the wall then handed it to Thrust and Ramjet. They removed the two sconces with the purple funeral orbs and hung it on hooks on the foot of the pall; they were ready.

"We now proceed to the crypt." Somehow funerals always fell upon the shoulders of Dirge, yet he did not seem to mind. Someone had to officiate them and as long as he was not the one the funeral was about, it was morbidly interesting. The Seekers lined up on either side of the pall and then glanced expectantly at Nightfall. They had left one spot open.

"Uh...right," He inhaled deeply and took the vacated spot. It was tradition that the leader of the unit take the right hand side. Since it was the unit leader's funeral, he, as his commander, had the unfortunate honour.

Dirge nodded grimly and started to beat out the march and they all slowly moved forward; painfully slow.

There was never a convenient time for a funeral but this time, of all times seemed the most ill timed. It was not Starscream's fault and that had aggravated him even more. As they got closer to the crypt, Nightfall worried more. He was unsure how much time they would need to finish their proceedings. It could take a few minutes to several hours, depending on the popularity and position of the Decepticon.

Starscream was not particularly well liked; he came off as an upper class snob. He did not call anyone his friend and he spent much of his time away from the others. He seemed to enjoy being alone, which was odd for a Seeker as they were such a group oriented race. Nightfall was not sure exactly why the others were suddenly so mournful of their Flight Commander's passing. Was it because they felt empathy for him abruptly dropping dead. Or maybe it frightened them. It certainly frightened him.

And then there was that eulogy, even though he had sat in on the stories, he still did not know anything about Starscream. He knew that he did his job well, that he was a scientist before the war and at some point he had been a Prisoner of the Autobots and had somehow managed to escape. He did not know much of Starscream's personality other than the odd aloofness. As one did not speak ill of the dead, he could not go

around calling Starscream an arrogant snob. What were his merits? Masterful tactician, fast thinker, adept flier. Those were well known.

Nightfall abruptly paused in his march. What did the others know about Starscream, the loner, the friendless Seeker? Could he make stuff up on the spot. Would they call him out later on his..."errors". Since he really knew very little about the deceased warrior, he decided it would be enough to keep it short and to the point. Perhaps this funeral could be over in a couple minutes. Hopefully his wingmates had little to say.

"Sir?" Thundercracker inquired as the group bumped to a stop, jostling the pall. They held their breaths hoping the sudden stop did not disrupt Starscream from his deep state of somnolence. Fortunately for them, Starscream was content to remain co-operative.

"Um, nothing. I was just reflecting on our...departed comrade," he replied picking up the pace once more. Thundercracker nodded and the group resumed their tedious march.

The Crypt was located outside of the Darkmount fortress. It was a long walk at a regular pace. The march easily took an hour and a half to get to the great metal doors. The Decepticon Crypt was not a popular destination. Most Decepticons, once their friends were laid to rest, would avoid the place like the rust.

The entrance of the Crypt was reasonably modern. It was altered and adjusted as it suffered damage in the war. Massive pillars made of rare Lapis Lazuli, a deep blue stone were topped with a large Tridium lintel. It was capped by a bronze roof, that had gone green with age and corrosion. The top of the roof was adorned with dragon-like gargoyle statues, each holding a purple lamp in one of their clawed hands.

Putting his drumsticks aside, Dirge removed the lanyard which the key was attached to. He walked up the heavy bronze door. It was almost as old as the crypt itself. The door was inlaid with metals depicting images of ancient Decepticons in battle meeting a most glorious, if not, messy end. He inserted the key into the lock and turned it, using both hands. The primitive lock thunked loudly causing the remaining Seekers to jump just a little.

Dirge pulled on the ring handles to open the door. It creaked ominously as if the hinges objected to the intrusion. A whoosh of escaping, musty smelling, stale air caused the Seeker's wings to prickle. Even though most of the group realised there was a sort of prank in progress, they felt uneasy.

The structure's original foundation was incredibly old and none of the Decepticons knew its actual age. Even Archaeologists who studied the ruins of ancient Cybertron were unable to get an exact date; the oldest tombs were so old that the metal had become so corroded as to be unreadable. Archaeologists and scholars argued that the crypt structure were originally built by the Autobots, and Decepticon hoodlums had vandalised the writings which was why the oldest tombs were not legible.

The deeper a Decepticon would wander within the catacombs, the older and more primitive the statues became. Many of the visitors to the structure wondered if the ancients actually looked like that or the artisans were not particularly skilled. The one thing that stuck out to anyone who entered the ancient building was, the statues of the

oldest warriors lacked any possible form of transformation.

Although Decepticons refused to acknowledge any form of religion, they believed in luck and even a few believed in fate or destiny. They tried hard not to believe in ghosts; the concept was laughable. However, deep within an ancient crypt, it was very hard not to let the imagination run away. The group of Seekers drew nearer to each other. Even Dirge slowed his step until he was bumped into by Ramjet and Thrust. Nightfall, gripped the pall so hard that his knuckles flared with purple sparks. The effect caused him and the others to let out a sharp gasp of fear. Even Skywarp's optics skittered around the room nervously as if he was second guessing his initial idea; he wasn't supposed to be the one who was to be scared.

The troop finally arrived at a large circular room with a vaulted ceiling. The most ancient room in the crypt contained the fountain of the everlasting flame. The floor was marked with words and a star that resembled the points of a compass. It was correct once, but over time, the magnetic north moved its position. Also on the floor, surrounding the fountain were words in a language that was no longer used. Scholars believed it to serve as a warning as translated: "He who drinks from the fountain of slain warriors, will burn for eternity in the everlasting flame." The fountain itself flowed with purple fluid, which was often called the blood of warriors. Decepticons, who felt it best to not push their luck or test the curse, chose to leave the fountain well alone, deciding the fluids within were most likely very toxic.

And finally, the top of the fountain contained the everlasting flame; a bronze chalice that burned with a hot golden light illuminating the room. Some said that if one stared into the flame, they could see the faces of the warriors who had drunk from the fountain. Twisted expressions screaming in silent agony as they burned for eternity.

Thundercracker tapped on Nightfall's shoulder as the Seeker stared intently into the flames. The distracted Seeker jumped and shook his head as if to clear it. "Commander, it's just fire, nothing more." the grizzled blue Seeker assured.

Along the perimeter of the room were more statues. These were larger and more ornate. Adorned in thin metallic leaf of precious metals, and some even had exquisite jewels inset into the optics. The statues all had a single purple orb glowing in a small aperture at the base of the monument. These were the grave markers of the Decepticon leaders from times long past. They had met their ends in battle or by the cunning of their successor.

After every second statue was a door leading to a different burial hall. The hall of heroes, the hall of warriors, the hall of Air Warriors and finally a small, grungy, unmarked door the hall of betrayers and traitors. A place where the bodies of the unwanted dead were unceremoniously deposited along the back wall. A procedure that was long since abandoned in favour of recycling the traitor in the smelting pit.

Once again, Dirge disengaged from the group and stood at the door marked with the insignia of the Air Warriors. He removed a ring of keys from a subspace holding and inserted another key, smaller than the one which he used to open the crypt entrance. Again the door opened, this time it was smoother and a little less noisy. The Hall of Air Warriors was too frequently used. Statues marked Air Warriors of status. While the lesser

warriors had small vaults in the wall. Each occupied vault had a glowing orb set in the socket. It gave the mausoleum an appropriate atmosphere.

The pall bearing Seekers placed their burden upon a heavy metal altar in the centre of the room while Dirge and his wingmates pulled open one of the vaults in the wall and made it ready to receive its occupant.

Nightfall glanced at the shrouded Starscream. Did he hear a moan coming from the inert Seeker? He wondered. None of the other warriors appeared to have heard it. Perhaps it was just the wind.

Will be continued at a later date.