



## The Fugitive

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### Authors note:

Succumbing to temptation, Starscream finds himself on the run from an enraged Megatron and his death squad. After a week long game of cat and mouse, Starscream finds himself an area to hide until either Megatron's temper blows over, or he is captured and killed.

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## Creatures of the Night

The sun cast an eerie glow across the mountainside as it set for the day. A cool breeze swept down from the peaks bringing with it the chill that would soon settle across the valley. At the foot of the mountains, within the darkening valley a small stream flowed. It wasn't too long ago that the whole area was covered in a thick blanket of snow, and ice.

It was just spring, summer would only be a few months away. The days were quite warm, pleasant and life would busy itself with new growth and starting families. Birds sang in the trees attracting mates that would be for the season or life long. The nights; however, were still bitterly cold with occasional snowfalls.

The area was serene, peaceful, remote. Away from highways and only accessible by an overgrown logging road, long abandoned. The only easy access was by helicopter and very few, if any ever ventured into the area.

The sun set further, finally settling below the horizon, if one could see the horizon for the mountains that blocked the view. Day creatures settled themselves down, leery of what lurked in the darkness; it was almost dark enough, for the night creatures to come out of their hiding places and search for food.

Up part way up the side of the mountain, hidden by thick cedar trees, scrub and large rocks, was a cave. It was a large formation, natural, created millennia ago by water that coursed through the mountains. Within it was a creature. The darkness not only provided cover for those that needed to hunt at night, it also provided cover for those creatures that were hunted by day. As soon as the last shred of light faded from the sky, the creature emerged.

Tall, only about twenty feet, one might think they spotted a giant, or a yeti, at least for a moment. Indeed the creature left huge foot prints and could be called big-foot, but, he was not organic in any way or manner. No, the creature was Cybertronian, from Cybertron. A planet many light years away, and could only be reached by a trip in a faster than light space cruiser, wormhole technology known as the Spacebridge or trips through warp gates that were scattered across the universe.

He let out a raspy sigh as he emerged from his cavern, it was dark inside, and he was aggravated at the necessity of using primitive technology for lighting. Even within the dark cave, he was afraid of being found. He could venture deeper within the natural cavern system, but he did not. Partly due to risk of the unknown stability of the eroded rocks, and partly due to his natural fear of being within such environments. It was only that his fear of being found was greater than his claustrophobia did he even attempt living in the darkness.

He exhaled slowly and inhaled a great heave of the chill fresh air. He looked to the sky cautiously before he quietly stole past the rocks and logs that he placed in a shielding manner. He would take a few steps before pausing, listening, straining to see into the depths of the forest. There were no sounds, no noises of anything not organic. The only mechanical sounds were the hammer of his fuel pump in his audios and the gentle whooshing noise of his air intakes sucking in the evening air.

He untensed himself and quickly made his way into the forest and down to the stream. Carefully making his way so as not to snag his sensitive upturned wings against the great trees. If he had his way, he would have blazed himself a trail, but in his efforts to conceal himself from his hunters, Starscream left things as they were-for the most part.

He reached the stream where a beaver had placed a dam across the water way. The northern area was flooded with a lake and a lonely beaver lodge. The inhabitants were gone, Starscream saw to that, he in his efforts to survive, made use of the primitive structures for his own ends. The dam contained a small hydro electric generator, while the lodge held the few meagre cubes that were collected during the day.

He headed to the edge of the beaver lake and paused looking up and listening. He hated this part of the day, he hated the chill of the water but hunger forced him on. Starscream inhaled deeply filling his intakes with air. It would be enough for him to last at least an hour, longer than that his energy would burn poorly. He knew he did not need to spend too long under the water under normal circumstances, but it was possible he would have to remain hidden if his hunters decided to search out this valley.

He slowly waded into the water, making sure that he did not overly announce his presence. He inhaled sharply as the chill closed in around him and he submerged himself completely into the murky lake. The water toward the centre, where the river originally was, was close to sixty feet deep. As much as Starscream disliked the forced swim, he enjoyed it. It was as close to flying as he had in months.

He swam to the base of the dam where he had installed the small energy generator. It was working fine, there was no damage to the wires, only some debris that had collected near the mouth of it. He carefully pulled it away and continued on, following the cable to the lodge.

The lodge was a large mound structure toward the shallower area of the artificial lake. It had a hole in the bottom that Starscream had carefully widened enough to permit his arm to be fully admitted into the chamber. He found the collector and then the cubes; there were four. It was not a lot, but it was enough for him to get by on. Carefully he stowed the cubes away on his person, checked the settings on the collector and made his way to the edge he had entered by.

He waited for a moment before surfacing and still he held his breath, again listening. The constant drone of his fuel pump hammered to himself, telling him that he was alone. Quickly and quietly, the fugitive made his way back into the shelter of the trees and toward his primitive home.

He had once been the second in command of the most powerful military force in the known universe. He was the commander of the aerospace warriors, commonly known as the Seekers. A fighting force that was unlike anything that had been seen on so many alien worlds. He assisted in conquering planets, creating weapons, collecting energy for the use and betterment of his kind. He had even, plotted against his commander, the mighty and all powerful Megatron.

He had plotted against Megatron countless times and rarely got more than a fusion blast, or a beating that sent him to the repair bay for more than a week. Sometimes a month if it was particularly severe. However, in any case, his return to duty rarely went on with more than a remark about where his loyalties lay.

But there were somethings that just did not simply get swept under the rug. Some lines that should not be crossed when one expects no more than a slap across the wrist. Starscream was a creature of opportunity and Megatron, inadvertently, left a door that was so wide open and so tempting that Starscream could not resist. The result was a bounty on his head; a death warrant.

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Starscream stood in the control room, watching the console that Megatron had just vacated. The Constructicons had called him to the work rooms so he might see his latest weapon, of the week, in almost working condition. Almost, Starscream knew that something invariably went wrong with the plans that had so much thought and time put into it. He had voiced that too many parts mean greater potential for break down and failure typically fell upon deaf audios.

'Why do I waste my breath?' Starscream wondered as he looked toward the control room access as the base shuddered from a yet unidentified explosion followed by the shrieking of the warning alarm.

"Earthquake?" Starscream inquired.

"Negative," Soundwave replied.

"Botched plan then, I take it?" Starscream asked rhetorically.

Soundwave made no response. But looked up as Rumble ran into the room covered in soot.

"Boss, you better come quick," Rumble said to Soundwave, "The workrooms are filling with water, and the bulkheads are sealing."

Starscream's head snapped around to Rumble as he made his announcement. "Really?" the Seeker asked darkly. "I take it my words of wisdom were once again ignored and the plan went on without the suggested alterations."

"Wisdom? You? That's a joke right?" Rumble replied, staring at his superior with a look

pure bewilderment.

Starscream snorted and whacked the smaller mechanoid with his hand, sending him tumbling. "Shut up you little runt," the Seeker snapped "Another remark like that and I'll have you chipping barnacles." Starscream turned his attention to the others in the room. "Ramjet, Dirge, ensure that you keep your optics on the scanners. Alert me of any problems. Shirk, and I'll have your heads on pikes. Soundwave, follow me." Starscream hissed as he left the control room.

The base was a sunken space ship that was built on Earth, using Decepticon technology. It was named the Nemesis II, commonly called the Nemesis. Unfortunately it, like its predecessor, the Nemesis crashed. Unlike the Nemesis, the Nemesis II simply crashed into the sea. Almost everyone survived the crash landing. Those that did not were interred in a small crypt near the sunken ship.

The ship itself was half buried into the sea bed, the Constructicons, after much discussion with Megatron and Starscream, agreed to level it so they might use it as a viable base. The construction took months and the ship's structure was shored up to withstand the pressure of the ocean that surrounded it. New outbuildings and living quarters were added to the area just below the ship. A huge concrete and metal structure was built below the seabed, that contained great store rooms, laboratories and a labyrinth of secret escape tunnels, designed by Starscream, in case he needed to get around unnoticed.

The structure held up reasonably well, as well as one could expect from using low grade materials created on earth. Cybertronian alloys were hard to create since the world they were on lacked in many of the elements that were required. It only had problems when there were fleeing prisoners, or infiltration by the enemy occurred. Such instances were rare.

But the base was not impervious to stupidity, and next to the element hydrogen, it appeared that stupidity was the next most common thing in the universe. Starscream could hear the groaning of metal as it gave way to the pressure of the ocean. He glanced around with deep concern as he knew that such a breach could cause other wall structures to collapse, trapping and killing most of the crew on the base. He knew that even now, the damage would be costly in both energy and precious resources and perhaps even lives which irritated him even further that Megatron had not heeded his warning.

"Test the inferno machine off the base," Starscream had suggested, only to be given a dire glare from Megatron.

"The plan is sound, Starscream," Megatron reassured condescendingly. "You worry far too much for your own good."

"I simply see the flaw in the plan and the potential waste of precious resources," Starscream snapped. "I can understand taking risks, mighty leader, but we cannot afford this sort of loss every fortnight," he warned. "As, your second in command, I am telling you, leader, that you'll regret going on with this. There is too much risk."

Rather than responding in words, Megatron turned and punched Starscream so hard his jaw snapped and mech fluids spurted forth. The point was taken and Starscream said no

more about the subject. He would have kept his counsel even if he had not suffered a broken jaw.

For the most part, Starscream enjoyed living on the edge. He tempted fate, he tempted danger, he lived for a bit of a rush which made him a dangerous opponent. Cunning and quick, he often plunged headlong into battle in spite of the grave danger to his own person. His ability to make snap decisions made him an ideal Commander. If there was a risk, Starscream was often willing to take it. But not when the danger was glaringly obvious.

Starscream was also very prone to temptation, a major personality flaw. Seeing an opportunity to gain him power or renown would cause him to cast his carefully nurtured plans aside and cause him to dive headlong after the golden opportunities. He knew full well that these opportunities should have been avoided, like the winning gambler at a casino should know that his luck is about to run out.

Rumble, Soundwave and Starscream had arrived at the workroom bulkhead. They were well sealed, holding back the ocean. The security detail were working on sealing off the damaged section with emergency force shields only installed eight months prior. One of Starscream's very successful personal plans, one that Megatron managed to take credit for. As soon as the clear was given, the great Pumproom pumps started up to remove the ocean from the Constructicon's workshop.

Starscream waited, not so patiently. He was bored and was itching to know the condition of his leader. Was this the time? Could he declare he was leader and actually was the lord and commander of the Decepticon empire, or would he merely be filling in for his leader until Megatron recovered enough to take the reigns once again? Starscream was hoping for the worst.

The Pumproom formech called up and informed them that the water levels were down to an acceptable level. Rescue teams could enter.

Rumble, who was now joined by Frenzy, pushed the door open and looked at the mess that lay before them. Even Starscream's jaw dropped.

"Frag me." Rumble muttered and Starscream nodded in agreement.

"Are there any survivors?" Starscream asked looking around. He could see parts of those who were caught inside under debris. He was unsure if those parts were actually attached to the bodies they belonged to.

"Unable to determine at his juncture," Soundwave replied. He entered the room, with the rescue and repair bay teams and started rescue and triage.

Starscream assisted where he could, hauling the lifeless bodies of several workmech, a number of them were seekers. Each death irritated him. Each one was under his direct command and now his fighting strength was reduced. He knew each one by name. He glanced up at the triage area and noticed that all the Constructicons had come out with little more than dents, scrapes and a lost part here and there. Nothing hard to repair. Part of him wished Scrapper had taken a lethal hit, but he knew better than to wish the death of a gestalt member. In spite of personal feelings for some of the Constructicons, he knew that as a united team they were extremely useful.

His optics took in the injured and he noticed Megatron wasn't amongst them. He looked at the dead and still no Megatron. So Megatron was still buried somewhere. But where?

Starscream glanced around at the rubble that was still being shifted. A roll call went out and there were still a number of people missing. Megatron was still on that list. He looked up to the shimmering force field that blocked the ocean from the gaping hole in the base. 'Perhaps he escaped?' Starscream was about to suggest an external search of the base for Megatron when his optics noticed something laying just under a girder. "Megatron?" he asked lightly. But when he leaned closer to inspect what he had seen, he realised that it was not Megatron, but the fusion cannon weapon that his leader always wore.

Starscream spun around looking for his leader wondering what might have happened to separate him from his precious weapon, hoping what might have happened did. He leaned down and picked it up. It was heavy, very heavy. He wondered how Megatron could use it so easily. He had made it look like it was made of the lightest materials. Starscream never had an opportunity to handle the cannon itself, he interfaced with the targeting system and was surprised at the complexity of the maths involved with simply firing it; Quantum Physics. The weapon, however was on standby, as any Decepticon weapon was. At least two full charges per gun was kept in readiness should one require it suddenly.

This thoughts and study of the weapon were interrupted as Rumble hollered for him. "Starscream, help, over here!" Rumble cried. "We found him, we found Megatron."

Starscream exhaled in mild disappointment as he and Soundwave along with the available rescue detail, rushed over to assist in the recovery of their leader. "Megatron," Starscream murmured to himself with a faint frown. But that frown changed into a slight smirk as he took in the damage of his "invincible" leader. But his smirk faded as his damaged leader came online. Megatron's optics rested on the fusion cannon in Starscream's hands then looked up at his Second in Command. Megatron held his hand out to Starscream in a silent request for his weapon.

It was in that moment, temptation overwhelmed Starscream's common sense. He followed his leader's gaze to the weapon in his hands. His wings quivered as his mind raced with ideas and he felt his system suddenly flood with electro-adrenaline. Before anyone could utter a warning, or anticipate Starscream's mad impulse, the Seeker had initialised the fusion reactor and fired at his injured leader.

The Decepticons jumped away from Megatron as he was struck at point blank with the power of his own weapon.

"Try that one on for size," Starscream crowed. He knew immediately that he was in the deepest slag pit he had ever stepped into when he looked at the shocked and horrified expressions of his comrades. Starscream looked at the cannon and then at Megatron, who had, in spite of his multiple injuries, had picked himself up off the ground. "Oh, slag," Starscream uttered.

"You dare fire upon me with my own weapon, Starscream?" Megatron asked as his optics flashed dangerously. "Do you know the consequences of such an action, Starscream?" Megatron hissed, his voice harsh with rage. "Arrest him!" he bellowed to the security team.

Starscream backed away but felt the hands of the security detail grab his arms and try to hold him in place for Megatron's retribution. "Let me go!" Starscream screamed at the guards, "I order it."

"You have no rank, traitor," the Decepticon leader snarled. "You forfeit your life."

"It w-w-w-was an accident, really, Megatron," Starscream stammered his optics filled with panic. "My finger slipped on the firing mechanism." Starscream dropped the heavy weapon as Megatron reached for him. This was enough to distract Megatron and he managed to wrench free of his captors. Looking to the breach in the base wall, Starscream gunned his thrusters, transformed and shot through the force field, shrieking in pain as the energy stung at his circuits. Seconds later, Starscream was into the ocean itself and rocketed toward the sky like an out of control torpedo.

He could hear Megatron scream his name in pure rage, warning that he would be found, and executed as soon as he was returned to base and faced his charges. And for the first time in his life, Starscream knew that this time, Megatron meant it.

Starscream climbed back to his hiding place and pulled out his newly collected rations. His optics glanced across the small pile, they were bright, rich with energy, but they were still not enough. Starscream required more than four for optional running. He needed a lot more than that to refuel his heavily depleted systems. Three was enough to survive on relatively comfortably, and two he could manage if he could ignore the drained feeling.

Starscream, unlike most of his kind, had two fuel tanks. It was beneficial to him as he often had to go for extended periods of time without fuel, or had to use extra energy to thrust him out of planetary atmosphere and into space. The fuel had to come to somewhere, and his powerchip could only do so much to bolster his speed. He also found the extra fuel tanks useful for extended flights through Earth's thick atmosphere, or inter-system travel in space.

Unfortunately, his dual fuel tanks were virtually empty and what little energy he could take in went directly to required life support systems. His power reserve was exhausted and he had to be very careful about what he did activity-wise. He exhaled as he studied his cubes hungrily. It was enough, but not enough. Starscream set one aside and contemplated what he should do with it. His instincts insisted he consume it immediately, draw nourishment off the energy, but his training insisted he hold it in reserve. He did not know what the future held and he did not want to find himself in dire straights

Reserve it was.

Starscream carefully pushed back a stone in the wall. He carved it out by hand and fitted it with a stone that was rich with iron ore. Starscream had lined the small cache with iron to mask the signal of the cubes. He did not wish to be located while he was insufficiently ready to deal with conflict. Five cubes glowed brightly within Starscream's makeshift larder. He carefully placed the one he had saved with the others. He looked at them hungrily, his mouth watered at the sight. Fighting with his hunger, Starscream closed it up.

"Out of sight, out of mind," he reasoned out loud. "I wonder if I've been out of sight long enough to be free to go?" Starscream shook his head and muttered, "Probably not. Megatron's not likely to drop this one, frag up."

Starscream leaned himself against the cold stone wall and sipped at his energy battling the urge to down it as fast as he could. "Control, patience, and savour it," he urged himself.

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He had evaded most of the Seekers for the best of a week, the hunt was on and Starscream had little to no chance to stop, to rest or to collect fuel. He had to make risky raids in order to keep his energy at a level that was sustainable for his activity.

Megatron was clearly infuriated. Angrier than anything Starscream had ever witnessed. 'Who could blame him', the Seeker muttered to himself as he once again lost his hunters

by flying well above their maximum flight ceiling then diving down to a new location on the planet. He managed to lose them for up to an hour at best, but it was hardly enough to catch his breath. As soon as he managed to get something to recharge his desperate systems, they were upon him again and the cat and mouse game resumed.

The Seeker cursed himself continuously for his brash actions. Megatron, knowing that Starscream had an ability for marathon flights, drove the Seeker to his very limits of his endurance. It had been a week, almost constant hiding, escaping and pursuit. Starscream had even attempted to stay on the dark side of Earth for as long as possible, however he wasn't that fast and his energy would force him to make an emergency hit and run raid.

Starscream knew that Megatron had a tactical advantage. He had turned out every Air Warrior on Earth loose in several short shifts, so there was always a fresh and eager squadron on his tail.

Only to make his matters worse, if it were not his former comrades after him, Starscream was dealing with the inhabitants of Earth. Fighter jets from most nations would rise to engage him in combat. Or the military forces would target their ground to air missiles at him. Starscream had to expend great deal of energy to track, anticipate and dodge what was thrown at him. If he had not been so concerned for his life, he might have been more proud of his skills in flight.

As time went on, well within the first two days, Starscream's ammo was exhausted. He had not been able to rearm his arsenal and he knew that coming by weapon charges or missiles would be a tough call. He made it a point to avoid all established military areas, which limited his ability to run and hide. Megatron also made a point of posting warriors at his known retreats, which made things even more awkward.

Canada, the country north of the United States was weak in regards to military strength. Starscream again lost his pursuers by flying into space. As he came down, he almost flew right into a squadron in search pattern. Starscream shrieked and banked rapidly weaving himself through mountains and canyons. His system's began to warn him of his critical energy state. Starscream flew low into the mountains and then below radar. His belly almost brushed the tree tops as he knife edged between a pair of narrow cliffs. His pursuers were temporarily delayed and he made one last ditch effort to lose his hunters.

Below him was a long, narrow, but apparently deep lake. Skimming low and keeping an optic out for his attackers, Starscream nosed down and impacted the water. He was concerned that the others might see his ripples. Starscream continued to let momentum carry him as far as it would before he transformed and swam the rest of the way down.

He hunkered down near the bottom of the lake, looking up trying to focus through the water. It was impossible to tell what was going on above the surface. He watched as fish swam by checking him out with curiosity or seeing if he was something interesting to eat. He waited for an hour, his systems started to slow down as his oxygen levels were depleted. He held on for a while longer, until his engines felt strangled for the need of fresh air.

Slowly and cautiously, Starscream swam to the surface. He chose an area which was darkened with the shadow of natural growth. He made sure it was a tree, or a bush before poking his head and shoulders raised. With a sharp gasp, he inhaled deeply until

his systems returned to normal.

Once his breaths subsided, he listened for a moment. but there were no sounds of the Seekers in the sky. Just the chirps of birds, cries of late summer insects; it was serene. Starscream cocked his head and wondered for a moment, What if they had landed and were waiting for him in the forest? What if they were waiting for him, knowing that the need for air would drive him to the surface, breaking his cover and exposing him to their sensors. Unsure of the situation, Starscream stayed put, hidden as best as he could in the shallows under the some trees. He knew he could wait, he had nothing to lose.

He waited several hours in the water until his legs and body started to go numb from the glacial melt water. He wished he did not have to move as it was the first time in over a week he had a chance to stop and rest. His body protested as he climbed out of the water, careful to keep his feet on solid ground. Trying to not leave anything for trackers, Decepticon or human, to use to find where he went.

It was time to take his bearings. Starscream had little time to figure out where he was flying while being chased across the planet. His brain did not register the cities, their location to known landmarks that Seekers had used to navigate the planet by. It was a city here, or a stream there. Was that a bit of lake or a part of ocean? It all merged together in a blur of water, land city, country. All he knew for sure was he was in the Rockies, but was he in Canada, or in the USA.

Starscream glanced around at the mountains either side of himself. They were tall and virtually nondescript from the next range. He walked into the trees following the lake-river downstream until he came across an overgrown dirt road. He stopped and crouched looking around for human traffic. There was none, and judging by the road's appearance, there probably would not be any for quite a long time.

He wondered what sort of risk he was running with discovery by the Autobots. A situation he wished to avoid, but if given a choice, Starscream would prefer to be their prisoner, rather than that of Megatron's. Pushing his rampant worries aside, he returned his focus to hiding himself so he might rest and refuel. His optics followed the road toward the foot of the mountain. It had to go somewhere and where that was, there might be fuel, no matter how meagre it was.

The Seeker kept to the trees and followed the abandoned trail. It was difficult as some areas were thick with trees. Often he cursed as his wings became snared or fouled in the trees, or he tripped over a stump, or stumbled on some stones and once, caught his foot in a large animal's burrow.

He finally arrived at an area which had been cleared away by lumberers. It wasn't a recent cut, as the cleared area of forest was growing back with secondary growth. Small saplings were growing through bushes. At some point, they would be replaced by a mature forest and everything before him, a couple of broken down buildings and dilapidated equipment, would be hidden from view and eventually buried by decomposing organic matter.

The machines and buildings were of some interest to Starscream. He reckoned that if his comrades detected something, they might pass it off as some of the rusted heaps that were scattered about.

Starscream remained under the canopy of leaves until darkness had fallen across the valley. Quickly, soundlessly, he sprinted to the buildings, and took shelter in one of the large empty drive sheds.

The shed was large, used for holding logging machinery. It was big enough for Starscream to stand up fully erect. He did not have to worry too much about the beams, just the things that hung from them. Saws, chains, hooks, axes, big knives. They would not do him much damage, but they might hurt if he had them fall upon his person.

Starscream's optics focused in the darkness so he could make out the other stored items. He backed away when he spotted a small black and white, striped animal. He recognised it and knew that if spooked the creature, it would spray a foul smelling mist in defence. He knew he was in trouble as it was, and he did not want to add an obnoxious organic odour to his list of problems.

In the corner of the almost pitch black room, Starscream could make out the shape of fuel cans. He rushed over to them and picked them up, gently, almost lovingly and carefully opened the lid with the tips of his forefinger and thumb. He took a small sniff and snorted in disgust. They contained fuel, gasoline, but unfortunately the fuel was tainted with water. It would not do for him as it had to be processed. To process it, he needed equipment he did not have. With a sigh, he put it back and continued with his exploration.

A wolf howled and Starscream jumped and turned around at the unexpected sound. As he did, his wing caught itself on a pile of precariously stacked lumber which was standing in a corner. He froze and stifled a shriek of dismay as the lumber clattered down noisily; several large chunks hitting him as they fell. He held his breath as his fuel pump started to hammer at high speed. The Seeker tried not to twitch in terror. Had anyone heard that? He held his breath for a few moments longer as he realised there wasn't a sound to be heard, everything had fallen quiet. He gingerly let himself relax and turn to see what sort of mess he had made. He was grateful that the skunk had vacated the shed as he was more than positive that it would have released its noxious odour.

The fallen pile had revealed a new discovery; a small machine. Starscream leaned in and carefully removed the remaining chunks of wood and tattered tarp. It was a power generator; medium sized, and ran on diesel. Starscream smiled slightly and looked it over. His large fingers accidentally turned the generator on. The lights in the drive shed blazed on, illuminating him, his mess and a family of racoons that glared at him. The lights were on all across the camp. From the work sheds, to the abandoned mill and the living quarters for the workers.

For a moment Starscream stood slack-jawed in surprise before he hissed in protest ripping the wires free of the generator. Power went out across the camp and Starscream battled to find the switch to turn off the alarmingly loud generator. Once again he stood still, listening, hoping that his light and sound display did not attract attention from any of his former comrades or the attention of any humans that happened to be near by.

Fearing discovery, Starscream reluctantly left the compromised building and returned to the shelter of the forest. He knew that he needed to get to a location that was high enough for him to have a decent view over the forest canopy, the road as well as a clear view of the sky and provided him shelter from any prying optics.

As Starscream climbed higher, he realised he was disoriented. He attempted to align himself with compass north when he realised his compass was registering an error message. Starscream set himself down on some rocks to try to run a diagnostic of his systems. Starscream was about to panic when he remembered being disoriented in the past. There were areas over the world where the magnetic field was disrupted causing malfunctions in things like compasses and other scanners.

Starscream looked around himself and rubbed his chin as he recalled that pieces of lodestone, hematite, iron or nickel were enough to interfere with a compass at close range. Large enough deposits of those metals were enough to disrupt scanners at a greater distance. He realised that as long as he stayed within the area, he would be relatively safe. At least until the hunters called off their search.

"Navigate by the stars then," he said to himself as he looked to the sky and located Earth's Polar star. With that, he set off to find himself a hiding spot.

Starscream figured it was around eleven at night when he had finished his final energon cube. He looked to his storage hole for more, but resisted. He exhaled in frustration and looked to the mouth of the cavern. He could take his energon store and hike to the other side of the mountains. Starscream cocked his head as he listened to what sounded like a rumble of thunder. "A storm coming?" he asked himself as he pushed himself to his feet. "That could mean a fast flowing river and a better energon production, I better prepare."

He made his way quickly and quietly to the cavern entrance to check the sky. It was clear and there was no sign of any storm clouds. "What the frag?" he muttered. "Am I losing it already?" The Seeker cocked his head as he heard the thunderous rumble again. "No, there it is again." Starscream took a few steps out of the cavern and looked up. For a moment he thought maybe it was a storm in a different region echoing along the peaks, but then he saw it. A jet. A fighter jet. Again he heard the thunderous rumble and he recognised the sound to be that which belong to Thundercracker; it was a greeting.

"Oh, no!" he whispered to himself as he drew back into the darkness of the cavern. "They couldn't have found me...I'm not ready," Starscream dimmed his optics and held his breath hoping the Seeker would leave the area, but instead, Thundercracker landed in a nearby clearing. He could hear the other Seeker approaching. Thundercracker was not known for stealth. Branches and logs snapped noisily under his feet, rocks clattered over one another. Each noise made Starscream wince.

"Starscream, where are you? I know you're around here," his former wingmate called as lightly as he could. The blue Seeker's voice was still gruff and rough.

Starscream did not respond to Thundercracker's call. He remained as still as he could. His fuel pump rang noisily in his audios. Starscream feared that Thundercracker could hear it. Perhaps he could.

"Look, Starscream, I ain't huntin' for you. I come in peace," Thundercracker called from just below the entrance. "I'm here as a friend."

Starscream held his ground, but not his breath. He let it out in a soft whoosh before taking another one and holding it. He could see Thundercracker's shadow nearing his position, holding up a hand in a Cybertronian gesture of friendship and peace. Starscream cursed himself in silence for not trying to locate himself an escape tunnel before now. Instead he crouched behind a large boulder toward the back of his make shift living quarters. Deep caverns and dark places did not appeal to Starscream at all. He was unsure of the footing the further he went in and his fear of enclosed areas kept him near the mouth.

"Look, I know you're hiding. I know you are scared and are panicking out of your mind, Starscream. Trust me when I say I'm not here to arrest you or take you to Megatron," the other Seeker's voice seemed genuine and honest.

Starscream felt a small surge of hope, however his cautious instincts made him reach for large stone. It made a grinding noise as it scraped the ground as he lifted it. He exhaled

sharply as a shadow fell across him and his hiding spot. Starscream looked up and he could clearly see Thundercracker standing before him.

"You know, this was a good hiding spot. If I were you, I would have used it too." Thundercracker said lightly. He held his hands up to show Starscream that he was unarmed. The blue Seeker's rifles were pointed downward, in a non aggressive manner. Thundercracker glanced at the rock in Starscream's hands. "You know, you shouldn't be thinking of stoning your house guests, it's considered rude."

Starscream released the stone and it hit the ground with a sharp crack. He stood up and brushed himself off trying to gain composure. "It's considered rude of "guests" to simply walk into one's home without invitation," Starscream hissed back, his voice even more harsh with disuse. "Why are you here?" he demanded locking optics with Thundercracker in a challenging manner.

"I'm just checkin' on you," the other replied breaking the contact. "Thought you'd be home by now."

"Really? Just checking?" Starscream asked suspiciously. "Or did Megatron send you?"

"I am here on my own free will. Megatron thinks you're dead, Skywarp and I knew that you weren't." Thundercracker leaned in close to the fugitive Seeker. He could see the wear, mental fatigue and physical exhaustion on the other's face. "I got a feeling you will be dead if you don't come home soon. When was the last time you refuelled?"

"This morning...err evening. This is my morning. I'm just up." Starscream studied the other Seeker. Thundercracker, although he followed his orders, occasionally strayed from his path for whatever reason he felt the need. He and Starscream were never the best of friends. They worked together, they often refuel in the same mess hall. But Starscream never equated a friendship or that Thundercracker ever had a care outside of the job.

"I meant when you last refuelled to the point you can't move because you over energised?"

"Oh that? Hmmm, I can't quite remember. I suppose the day I blasted Megatron," Starscream replied with a bitter hiss. "Pity I failed to succeed, because here I am, Starscream of Cybertron the pathetic homeless Decepticon. What I always dreamed of becoming." Starscream gestured to his cavern. "Welcome to my castle, do you have a spare credit or a scrap of fuel for one who is less....fortunate?" he inquired with a hint of sarcasm.

Thundercracker paused for a moment before speaking. He thought of remarking on the madness, his former Sub Commander was displaying, but thought better of it. "You made your choice when you attacked Megatron, but I say again, come home. You can't survive like this much longer and I am pretty sure Megatron's gotten over it, he won't kill you. Anyway, you've done worse, a lot worse and you still live."

Starscream looked at Thundercracker and shook his head. "I might have done worse, but I never used his own weapon against him." Starscream exhaled in a long sharp sigh. "Ah, I am almost to the point to take you up on your offer. Warm private chambers, warm showers or baths. Fresh fuel...the luxuries." Starscream paused to ponder for a moment.

"Well, I likely would not be returning to such a lavish standard, but right now even prisoner rations would be a luxury." Starscream rambled on more to himself than to Thundercracker.

"You found an iron-hemitite deposit," the blue Seeker mused as he glanced at the walls. "Definitely a good choice if you're looking to drop off the face of the planet. Hides energy signals really well."

Starscream watched Thundercracker intently, trying to determine whether or not his wingmate would betray his location to his former leader.

"C'mon, Starscream. I'm not your enemy." Thundercracker reassured identifying the glance.

"I am not entirely sure, you are my friend either," Starscream replied darkly. "How will I know I am welcome home?"

"What will convince you? Fuel? Ammunition?"

"As I said, your offers sound good. Especially after what I've been through. But your offers also sound like bait to a creature who is at the point of throwing caution to the wind. Think about it, Thundercracker, you are intelligent, you are a thinker, what would you be doing in my place; how would you react?"

Thundercracker looked at the other Seeker and nodded. "I do see your point Starscream," the blue Seeker shrugged and looked at his former Air Commander. "I won't try to convince you that I speak the truth, but here," Thundercracker removed a couple charges from his storage and a belt of ammunition. "Take these, I am pretty sure you're all out. If you encounter hostiles, then you at least have a chance."

Starscream took the ammo and looked at his wingmate. "That's your personal supply, how will you manage your trip home?"

"Skywarp," without another word, Thundercracker left. Starscream watched as the other disappeared into the trees. Moments later the blue Seeker shot into the sky and was joined by another. They flew for a moment together as a rift in subspace appeared before them, they both flew through and it closed up behind them.

Starscream realised that one more, he was totally alone.

He sat down in his customary spot after watching the sky for a while. Part of him hoped for the return of his wingmates; however, they didn't. Instead he spent the night pondering what it would take for him to throw caution and return home.

The past winter had caused Starscream a lot of problems, and almost forced him out of hiding in his desperate struggle for survival. It happened several times and even now that spring was full swing, he felt the urge to return and rejoin his kind. Seekers, by their very nature, enjoyed the company of other Seekers. Starscream, in spite of being a loner, also felt the urge to mingle from time to time. For the first time in eight months, Starscream wanted to go home.

"Was it safe to return?" Starscream asked himself settling himself down just before dawn.

It had been a week since his wingmates had appeared. And he looked to the sky often, hoping for their return. He saw nothing. Just a few passenger jets that travelled across the planet, carting its passengers who were blithely oblivious to the Decepticon below. They were unaware that even mechanoids felt pains of hunger. While they dug greedily into their organic based fuels, Starscream carefully stored away another cube of unrefined energy and sipped on his meagre rations. While they chatted cheerfully with their neighbour, the Decepticon sat, alone, trying to get himself comfortable so he might rest.

Since Thundercracker had arrived and left, Starscream did not rest easily. He was also worried that they would bring the force back to get him; however, that had not happened. Perhaps it was true. Perhaps Megatron thought he was dead. Would Megatron seriously object to his return? He knew was in no condition to challenge his leader. Would Megatron realise that himself?

Starscream also knew that Megatron could easily take him out in his weakened condition. Starscream weighed his options, going for the worst scenario his mind could muster. What demise would he choose? It would be fast and probably painful by Megatron, or slow, drawn out energy starvation. What would be better? Fast at the point of a weapon as a Decepticon's demise should be? Or would he choose the weakened and suffering demise like that which Autobots seem to enjoy inflicting upon its weak and aged? Honourable or embarrassing? What should it be?

Starscream exhaled in a irritated sigh. "I'll sleep on it....Brain, shut off. I just want some sleep," he told himself. For some reason, it was as easy as that. Starscream's mind happily shut off its morbid train of thought and let him fall into much needed rest.

\* \* \*

Or perhaps his mind had an agenda of its own.

It was definitely winter. Cold winds blew past the mouth of the cave, snow blew in with great clustered flakes. Starscream's few possessions were pushed nearer to the back of the cavern, close to a large stone boulder that Starscream called the back wall. Large triangular icicles formed around the cavern mouth that reminded Starscream of the crystalline Cybertronian spires that were scattered across the planet before the worst of the war had destroyed them.

Starscream had attempted to fashion a crude snow barrier in front of the cave to block out the snow. It did sort of work, for the most part; however, it seemed to create a drift on the inside.

The Seeker stood at the mouth of the cavern with his arms crossed in irritation. He was watching the blizzard as it engulfed the region in a wall of white. It was pretty, for a few moments and then it was bothersome to his current way of life. Stealth was difficult when

he left huge foot prints in the snow. His treks to get energy was limited to the immediate area. Not that the snow hindered him at first. It was the ice that formed on the beaver lake was what had managed to mangle his carefully laid plans for collecting energy and sent him down a very precarious path.

Using the beaver dam to collect energy was a brilliant plan, at first. Starscream prided himself on his genius thinking to use local materials and what was available to him to further his attempts at scoring a few dozen cubes of energy. There were several advantages. Firstly, the dam was there, local and quite high. It should provide ample energy. Another advantage was the beaver lodge was not too far away from the structure. Once the giant rodents were eliminated, a messy affair that Starscream had both enjoyed and found revolting, it would provide a natural shelter for the resultant cubes. The forest canopy provided cover virtually to the edge of the lake which meant he could move around fairly freely.

With these advantages in mind, Starscream set off to the abandoned logging camp to collect materials for his master plan. Wires were gathered, parts from broken down machines removed and carefully carried to his cavern. There he set to build himself the under water turbine and energy collector that he needed. Even setting up the generator was a fairly simple affair and he had a working generator within a couple of days. Energy was created and converted into energon. He was set...or was he?

It was about a week after that first success that the disadvantages started to show their ugly heads. It was Autumn and some of the trees started to drop their leaves. The coniferous trees, as they naturally do, kept theirs. The loss of deciduous leaves left the forest without the cover he had originally planned for. It was an easy problem to solve, he would simply collect at dawn or dusk, under the cover of night.

Then another pair disadvantages started to disrupt his plans. Energy collection abruptly dropped significantly. This forced Starscream to check out the turbine underwater. There he found sediment, loose branches or other underwater debris had managed to get itself in the way or into the turbine occasionally breaking the fins off. Starscream, increasingly irritated, managed to deal with it and set checking the turbine before he collected his cubes. Problem solved.

Then another evening Starscream saw that the area where his turbine was had broken open. Water in the lake was starting to drop and the force of the water began to erode the dam away. He hurried to shore the dam up with stones and logs then had to hunt for the turbine in the river itself. It took two hours to repair it and reset the turbine into operating order. Unfortunately, the result of the damage, left the generator not as efficient as it had been. Back to the drawing boards.

Realising his energon collection was going to drop, he devised a couple back up plans. Again he returned to the lumber camp and nosed through the wreckage collecting various bits and pieces he did not collect the time before. It was getting sparse and Starscream did not wish to disrupt the appearance of the camp. He figured his damage would be written off to salvage looters who wanted to collect metal for sale to scrap yards. 'An honest business', or so Swindle would insist.

Within a week, Starscream had a small wind turbine, with wooden blades that he made like wooden propellers, and a small device that was created to focus solar light and heat energy into a cube at the central point. He had them working together to collect enough

energy; but they were not very reliable.

The wind turbine's blades broke often and needed to be repaired, maintenance he had anticipated with using primitive materials. Or the wind was not strong enough to turn the rotor. Even keeping the machine low key was toward the difficult side as he could not put it high enough to catch good wind without attracting unnecessary attention. He was pretty sure a wind turbine, standing in the middle of nowhere, would raise a few questions and curious humans or foes.

The solar collector was even less reliable than the wind turbine. Autumn was in its later stages and it had been increasingly cloudy. Not only that, the days were short and the nights were becoming tediously long. The longer nights left him with more cover to go about his business, which was collecting energy or thinking up better ways to do so.

After a particularly nasty cold snap, with frost and light snow, the next problem with the dam became apparent. It was this problem that drove his shaky morale into the ground. The beaver lake had formed a thin skin of ice. A problem that could easily be solved by breaking through it, however, Starscream wanted to keep a low profile. Breaking the ice could attract unwanted attention. He figured that it would do to leave the lake alone for a few days as it would likely warm up and thaw out enough for him to collect. He was wrong.

If his situation could get any worse; it had. His optics watched the snow fall and he heard a sharp cracking snap followed by a muffled thump. He clenched his fists and exhaled in a shrill sigh. At the base of a tree, sitting in snow already piled about six feet high, lay the wind turbine with the wooden blades. It was shattered beyond repair.

Disregarding his plans for stealth, Starscream waded out into the snow to collect what was left of his generator. Some parts were useable, but the blades were broken, the turbine's axle was bent and the tree had fallen on what remained of the rest of it. His energy crisis was snow balling, so to speak.

Starscream shivered and looked over the broken pieces in dismay. The wind generator was his pride. It was reasonably reliable, and close to his hide out. He could have energy more frequently and he had not thought to save much. So it, along with his morale, lay in ruins. He had two options left to him, small solar-collector and returning home to whatever fate he would face.

Starscream was not ready to return home, so he opted to fight on, and finish what he had started. His fear of the unknown was almost his undoing. His fight for survival was at its peak. The nights became incredibly long, and he wondered if he had crashed in British Columbia or had actually ended up somewhere in the Yukon. He realised the northern areas of Canada could be extremely hostile, even to the humans who could consume the animals that lived there. The days were too short for him to collect much energy from the solar collector, an idea that looked good on paper and functioned very well at the time of year when light was plentiful. It was barely sunny long enough for the collector to get enough heat energy to form a single cube, let enough to run a Decepticon at even basic power. It had its purpose.

Starscream's thoughts returned to the hydro-electric turbine. He wondered if it was still there at all, but the river was frozen over and had several feet of snow and ice covering it. Starscream knew that he should have left the valley when he still had the energy to do

so. But his confidence in his plans was strong and he felt he could not possibly fail. Unfortunately he was foiled by mother nature herself. To him, that was as embarrassing as being executed by Megatron. It could not get any worse. Or could it?

He needed to find another source of fuel quickly before he ran out of energy. Forcing the panic out of his mind, Starscream struck upon another plan. A plan for liquid fuel that would provide him with the energy he could use to convert into energon manually. He carefully set up a plan to make wood alcohol in his cavern. As he did, he realised he had a new problem. Yeast required warmth to ferment. Shifting through his salvaged materials he pulled out a small fuel tank that was large enough to fit inside his canopy. He blended in the ingredients and stuck it inside and carefully incubated it. It worked relatively well, enough to get him small amounts of energy to keep him at the base line of survival. Inactivity kept his energy use down and he virtually slept the rest of the winter, waking up every few days to re fill his fermenter and collect the energy from what he had created. The end result was a bitter energon, and a Decepticon who smelled like a drunk human.

It was not until nearly March when the days became noticeably longer did Starscream find his fight for survival easier. But by then, he was extremely weak. Mother nature had almost defeated machine.

It was a dull nudge that he first noticed, and then it was the voices. The realisation that he was not alone. As much as he wanted to move, Starscream did not have the desire to wake up. "Do ya think he's alive?" asked a, familiar yet faint voice.

"I dunno, it's hard to tell in this light," another familiar voice rumbled. "He should be up, he said he's usually online at this time."

"Let me try again, just a bit harder though." He felt a jab of pain in his side and Starscream grunted in discomfort but he did not care. He was tired and he wanted to rest just a little more. "I'll take that as a yes. We need a lamp, I think."

"I found a lamp or something here," the second voice rumbled, "and something that looks like a generator....faugh, what is this slag?"

"He's conscious, at least...well sort of. Hey, Thundercracker pass that stuff over here, I think I recognise that smell," said Skywarp sniffing at the air.

"Do you know what it is, Skywarp?" the other Seeker asked handing the tank over. "He's got piles of slag laying around here....worse than a Junkion....worse than even you."

Skywarp inhaled the fumes from the opening and erupted in a small explosion of chuckles. "Yeah, I know what it is. I've seen all manner of slag from Starscream in my day, but I never thought I'd see the day he'd resort to moonshine to solve his troubles. It smells really strong. I think it's fuel."

"Hmm, alcohol? That's pretty ingenious," Thundercracker poured the alcohol into the generator and fired it up. It spluttered to life for a moment, the light brightened up the room, casting a eerie yellow glow across the Seeker who lay with his head propped against a slightly worn rock in a very awkward position. The generator emitted a puff of acrid smoke and stopped running with a terrific grind. The sound of the generator evoked an abrupt response from Starscream, he sat upright and his weapons primed to life. His optics were wide and wild and shrill raspy shriek erupted from his throat. The weapons failed to discharge. Starscream exhaled and slumped against the wall with a groan.

"Whoa, geeze, Thunder, did ya see that? his colour's pretty bad."

"Yeah, I saw." Thundercracker nodded. "bring over those cans of energon, I have a feeling we might be here for a while." He put the lamp and tank down and turned his attentions to the severely off coloured Seeker. Starscream resembled something that had been laying in the sun or in bleach for a long time. His colour was a sickly, washed-out orange rather than the usual scarlet red. His face and body was tinged greenish grey while the rest of him appeared dull like faded paper. "Easy there, Starscream, It's just Skywarp and me." said Thundercracker placing a hand on Starscream's canopy. "We're here to help you get home. Starscream?" The Seeker simply muttered to himself sleepily.

"Think he'll make it?" Skywarp inquired leaning over the two, handing his wingmate one of the cans.

"Yeah, I think so," Thundercracker said grimly. "I warned him that this would probably happen, but no, Starscream knew better." Thundercracker opened the fuel can and poured the liquid energy into the red Seeker's mouth. Trickle of it seeped from the corners of Starscream's lips and then the Seeker started to swallow it instinctively. "Good sign, but he's so fraggin' out of it. That burst of energy must have been one of his last reserves. Eh? Empty. Greedy Decepticon you are." He talked in a low voice partly to Starscream and partly to Skywarp. Mostly to let Starscream know that his intentions were friendly and he would not be harmed. "Pass me another one will you, Skywarp. Starscream's done this one." The blue Seeker tossed the can over his shoulder where it clattered to a stop.

"Hey, that hit me, dumbaft." Skywarp said thrusting a new can under Thundercracker's nose.

"He's taking the fuel in," Thundercracker said with a tone of relief, "I was worried there for a few moments." The second can was well received and drained as quickly as the first. "Take it easy there, Starscream. Your tanks are not used to having so much at once."

"That's good and that's another one he owes us for savin' his aft." Skywarp said in a half joking manner passing another can over to Thundercracker.

The blue Seeker nodded slightly and resumed refuelling Starscream. "We aren't out of the woods yet, it's getting him home and past Megatron that'll be the problem."

Starscream moved his head away from the can of energy that Thundercracker was pouring into his mouth. He inhaled deeply before making a real effort to speak. "You've come back...I made a choice, I'll face it. I'll face Megatron, I'll take his wrath. I just want to go home," his voice cracked from disuse. "Whatever you do, just don't leave me here alone."

"We aren't going to leave you anywhere, Starscream." Thundercracker reassured him. "We were making the choice for you. You're comin' home with us whether you wanted to or not."

"Yeah, I don't care what Megatron thinks. We need you as Air Commander again." Skywarp remarked.

"Can I have that?" Starscream asked as he grasped the can from Thundercracker. He quickly drained what was left and eagerly took what was offered by Skywarp. As the Seeker drained the can, he could feel his systems absorbing the energy almost instantly. It was refreshing and a real pleasure. Starscream enjoyed the freedom of drinking what he wanted and it was so wonderfully rich in energy.

"What pushed you to decide to return?" Thundercracker asked. "Was it your dam breaking last week? We were sure that you'd be home around then."

Starscream glanced up from his refuelling. "My dam broke? Last week?" It didn't break last week. It was still intact last night when I collected a few cubes. Anyway, you were here, Thundercracker, and you saw it. Stop trying to confuse me." Starscream snapped as feelings of panic started to creep in.

"Nuh-uh" Skywarp replied. "I saw it for myself when I was flying over the area. I returned to base and told Thunder. I'd have looked for ya, but I wasn't gonna look under every stone for your hiding spot. Thunder never told me where you're hangin' out."

"Starscream, I was here three weeks ago, not last week. That was the end of April. We're now in the middle of May. Were you asleep?" the blue Seeker said showing new signs of concern for his wingmate.

"Eh? What do you mean? You were here a week ago, I remember." Starscream replied sounding nervous. He did not like what Thundercracker was implying. "You gave me ammo and told me the merits of returning home, which I considered carefully."

"Uh, yeah, three weeks ago. I'll be right back." Thundercracker gave Starscream another can of energon and pulled Skywarp to the mouth of the cavern, well away from their wingmate.

"Primus, Skywarp, I think he was in stasis lock for the past couple weeks." Thundercracker whispered. Gesturing to Starscream with a thumb jerk over his shoulder.

"Then we barely got to him in time." Skywarp nodded, "he's a lucky son of a cessna that I spotted his dam, then." Skywarp commented. He glanced back into the cavern. Within the darkness, he could see the Seeker toss his empty can away and reach for a fresh one. Skywarp shook his head. "Frag, he's gonna drain them all before we can get him out."

"We might have to wait a day for him to fully recharge. I'd say contact Blitzwing and Astrotrain and tell them we found them. Ask the others to send in their supplies. We might need to arrange for transport for Starscream if he can't fly by tomorrow night. I'm not sure how much longer Megatron's gonna be on Cybertron, but while he's off Earth, we got an opportunity of sneaking Starscream back. We need him back."

"Don't you think Megatron'll notice when he does get back to Earth? Starscream is kinda hard to miss you know," Skywarp remarked. "Also, Megatron's gonna be really pissed when he sees Starscream."

"Yeah, but Starscream, hopefully, will be back on his feet by then." Thundercracker agreed. "He's obviously a survivor, he can handle himself." Thundercracker turned to return to the cavern. "Make radio contact with the others, I'll continue to spoon feed our Air Commander." Thundercracker grinned and Skywarp teleported into the sky where he transformed and teleported once again out of sight.

Even though he was still exhausted, Starscream insisted on flying back to base himself. Unassisted. It was a matter of personal pride and a sign to the Decepticons that he, Starscream, was fit to return and take his rightful place. Starscream took point and the others fell into formation behind him.

As Starscream flew over the blurred landscape, he felt the extraordinary heat of his engines running at full power, the wind lashing across his canopy and wings. The air filling his intakes adding power to his jets. He could feel the ripples of air forming at his wingtips and the sensations excited him. He had almost forgotten the freedom of the sky, being locked on land so long, without the power to break free and claim his rightful place as lord of the sky.

Starscream observed the familiar patterns of landscape, roads, human cities. They quickly crossed the ocean where they were greeted by the rising of the docking tower. The Decepticons circled the area until it had fully risen and opened the great metal jaw wide to admit them. A number of Decepticons stood just inside waiting for the arrivals. They greeted Starscream with surprised expressions or indifferent nods.

His concern still turned to how Megatron would react when he finally arrived home from Cybertron. Starscream realised that he had the support on his side and found courage in that. Had he not had the support, the others would not have come after him when they thought he was in trouble. They did not have to. It was quite acceptable to allow another Decepticon to deal with a situation on his own. It was the law of survival, a law of nature, only the strong made it through and the weak perished. Yet, they came for him, rather than let him perish. He had wondered why and Thundercracker explained it to him when he had regained most of his strength.

Thundercracker told Starscream that he was aware of where he had been hiding out; virtually since the day Starscream fell off the map. Thundercracker explained that he had seen the wake in the lake and knew that Starscream had crashed into it. As the others did not notice it, he continued to lead the hunt away from Starscream giving him a chance to escape. He noticed the sensor anomaly and realised that Starscream would notice it too. As he had told Starscream the first night he had arrived, he would have hidden there too. It was a good spot. Thundercracker explained how he logged the GPS location in his online computer.

Thundercracker said that although he did understand Megatron's rage with Starscream, he felt that his order to execute Starscream was too short sighted. He admitted that he did not have the guts to tell this to Megatron's face, so led the hunt astray giving Starscream the chance to get away until it was safe to return. Thundercracker had been uncertain of anyone's opinion on the matter of Starscream's whereabouts and so kept the knowledge of his location to himself until he felt it was time.

It took a few months for Megatron to finally call off the hunt. Several rumours abounded that Starscream was not even alive. Either captured by the Russian or Chinese governments for the purpose of experimentation, or killed by an American submarine and was somewhere in the bottom of the Indian ocean. Other Decepticons had speculated that Starscream might not be on Earth at all. It was common knowledge that

Starscream was the one Seeker who was more than capable of escaping Earth's gravity and flying into space. Some suggested he was at the ruined Decepticon Moonbase, or on Mars or some other moon or planetoid in the Solar system. A few Decepticons suggested that he might have returned to Cybertron through the space bridge, but Shockwave confirmed that Starscream was not anywhere on or near Cybertronian air space.

Thundercracker said that it almost seemed like Megatron's reluctance to stop looking for Starscream was not due to the fury of Starscream taking advantage of the opportunity to try out the fusion cannon against its owner, but the realisation, after his temper had levelled out, that he had in fact lost a very skilled and versatile member of his Decepticons. Thundercracker said that he knew that Megatron would never come out and say that to anyone, especially Starscream. For reasons, Thundercracker speculated, that it might cause someone to stop trying to do their best. He felt that Megatron wanted to find Starscream and return him to base, not for execution, but to reinstate him.

It was not until winter had claimed most of North America that Megatron announced to the others that hunting for Starscream, a single Decepticon, was a waste of valuable resources and that he would be officially upgraded from MIA to deceased. It was then and only then that Megatron chose those who would succeed Starscream. Soundwave, was the most logical choice to step up to take over Starscream's rank as Second in Command. Shockwave was in command at Darkmount and Soundwave had already been working in that roll. The transition of Soundwave to Sub Commander went reasonably smooth. Perhaps too smooth. Thundercracker said neither was a great choice as Shockwave and Soundwave did not have the flexible or creative mind to devise simple plans. Nor did either one have the cables to point out flaws and errors in Megatron's plans as they were too busy kissing his aft.

As for the Decepticon who would take over Starscream's roll as Air Commander; Megatron had found that a more difficult choice. As logically it had to be a natural flier and there were many Decepticons who fit the bill. Yet in the end Megatron declared that Dirge would fill the roll. His reasoning for that choice was unknown and it confused or upset several Decepticons who thought they would be a far better selection. That transition went poorly. Dirge did not have the natural skills and there were many mission failures due to indecision and hesitation at the wrong moment on Dirge's part.

Thundercracker chuckled sympathetically as he explained that he had even seen Dirge stumbling down the hall with a smoking hole in his shoulder. Dirge had told him he had a run in with Megatron. Thundercracker said he could not help himself when he replied with "Welcome to Starscream's world, Dirge. You're the new underdog."

Skywarp, who had left Thundercracker to explain the situation, had interjected that it was not the same without Starscream around. With Dirge in charge of the Seekers, it was very hard for him to single out Ramjet or Thrust. Dirge had always taken their side and he got into trouble. Or that Soundwave rarely flickered an optic when he managed to slap a post it note to his back. Practical jokes were hardly funny anymore.

Yes, Life had moved on and things had changed, but not everything changed for the best. The situation was steadily going down hill. The Decepticons were disorganised. The Seekers did not want to follow a leader who could not make a rapid or sensible command decision. Megatron was becoming increasingly frustrated which meant Dirge started to crumble under pressure.

Thundercracker said that he spoke to Skywarp after a particularly devastating mission which left Dirge in repair bay for a week. He said that he knew where Starscream had been hiding out and had been keeping tabs on him in secret. Skywarp was surprised and rather put out that his friend would not tell him this interesting news. After they had discussed the situation, Skywarp and Thundercracker decided to travel to the valley to find Starscream.

After the successful contact, Thundercracker had gathered together a small, exclusive group of Seekers and other fliers. Thundercracker realised that he was starting to promote a mutiny of sorts and knew that the consequences of such actions were rather dire. But for the sake of the Decepticons, he chose to go forward with his plan. It was time.

Thundercracker called the chosen fliers to a secret meeting. It was there where he informed them that Starscream was alive and in hiding. That his location was somewhere in the mountains in Canada. They were surprised that he had known this all along and were irritated that he had not come forward long before. To this the blue Seeker had responded that he was unsure of Starscream's status until after the winter thaw. He said he had seen no notable activity from Starscream and had wondered if he was actually alive. Also, he did not want to push the issue too soon with the chronically irritated Megatron.

Skywarp elaborated on what he had said before about the broken dam. He said he had flown into the valley out of curiosity. He had hoped to find Starscream, to stop and talk to him as he had not been given the chance the last time he had been in the area. He wanted to try to convince Starscream to return home. But he had found the destroyed dam and no sign of Starscream. That was when he returned to base and informed Thundercracker that he thought it was possible that Starscream was on the move again. They debated on going out to look for him but chose to wait at the base in case Starscream returned on his own. Starscream did not return.

Thundercracker explained that it was a few days after Skywarp had discovered the broken dam, that he had called a meeting again with the chosen mutineers. It was decided that it was a good time for them to go out and search for Starscream and find out what had become of him, as Megatron was off world dealing with issues on Cybertron with Dirge and Soundwave. They also figured it would go reasonably unnoticed as the fliers were prone to making their own decisions with or without Dirge around. The Mutineers hoped that Starscream had not moved on to a different location out of fear of being caught. Thundercracker hoped that Starscream had not finally died from starvation as he had recalled the physical and mental exhaustion that was etched on the Seeker's face.

It was then decided, the Fliers would break up into several search pairs, each one equipped with a medi-kit and an ample supply of fuel to give to Starscream when they found him. They were all given instructions to call for the other pairs when Starscream was found, in whatever condition he was in, living or dead.

Thundercracker explained that he, and the others were most relieved that Starscream had been found alive, although weak; and that he was recovering his strength rapidly. There was still concern that Megatron would have forty slag fits when he saw Starscream upon his return. It was agreed that they would stand at Starscream's side

when Starscream finally had to confront Megatron; only if he needed it.

The Mutineers agreed that although they had found and returned Starscream to base, it was up to Starscream to take back his position and his right to live amongst them. It was something that only Starscream could do.

Starscream discovered a number of problems upon his return to the base. His private quarters had been given a security lock that prevented entrance by anyone other than Megatron. With the help of his wingmates, they managed to tear the mechanism out of the wall and gain entry into the living quarters.

All was not well, they looked around in surprise; it had been ransacked. Starscream snarled in anger as he gently picked up pieces of an artefact that lay broken and scattered across the floor. An award, an honour he had received at the Cybertron University of Sciences and Explorations. He looked at the artefact and his expression changed from anger to hurt, it was one of the few things he had left from his earliest days.

Skywarp and Thundercracker exchanged glances with each other then assisted Starscream in setting the room back into order. They said little to each other than to ask Starscream where something would go.

"I suppose I should not be surprised," the Seeker said as he looked into his empty armoury and energon stores. "Megatron would have absorbed my assets into the empire's" he muttered, "I do hope that my things are returned to me once he and I have settled things once and for all."

"Well, it could be worse," Skywarp commented, "Dirge could be livin' in here and who knows what sort of disgusting things we'd find."

"Other than weapons and energon, what else is missing?" Thundercracker inquired getting a datapad off the desk and a stylus to write with.

"Eh? most of anything that was valuable." Starscream said with a snort. "My datapads are all in a disarray. I suppose he was looking for my private journal, which you know I keep on me at all times. So the only way he is ever going to get to that is by killing me. But, that aside, I lost several valuable medical journals, a few lab note books, nothing major in those but it irritates me all the same. I also lost around three thousand credits from my desk. That's not much, but I can safely assume that my credit accounts have all been flat-lined, which was a substantial sum." Starscream exhaled in a shrill sigh. "I'll be ruined if my caches were discovered." Starscream glanced at Thundercracker for a moment and narrowed his optics. "Don't mention my caches in your notes."

Thundercracker nodded. "Skywarp and I will go to the Quarter Master and see if we can locate your weapons and other things. If not, they might know where to look."

Starscream nodded and the pair quickly took off. They did not want to hang around while Starscream was in a foul mood.

The Seeker turned to the desk and fired up the computer. "I suppose this has been ransacked too," he said to himself as he sat himself down. The computer arrived at the login and he punched in his personal password. His optics brightened in surprise as his password was accessed. "This is unexpected, I can actually use my computer."

Finally he accessed the control panel and tried to look up his personal record. Instead the computer responded with an error message. "Access Denied"

"Why am I not surprised?" said to himself dryly. "Well there is more than one way to flay a bot, and there are always backdoors." With a some effort, and a lot of curses, Starscream managed to access the Decepticon Datafiles. He frowned as he was unable to locate his personal file. Starscream tried several times and each time he received the message 'Decepticon does not exist in system'.

"Megatron really did erase me." Starscream shook his head and leaned back in his seat and exhaled a long sigh. "Oh well, could be worse. A lot worse. But at least I am home now."

\* \* \*

Three days later.

Starscream, fully refuelled and adequately rested, stood leaning against the portal of his personal quarters. He raised his head and focused on the other figure who had appeared in the reflection. "I take it that Megatron is still unaware of my return?" Starscream asked the newly arrived Thundercracker.

Thundercracker shrugged slightly. "Well, as you know, news usually travels fast around here, but I think everyone is hoping to surprise Megatron."

"Lucky me." Starscream said dryly with a nod to the other. "Well, he's returning home today, I am sure it will be interesting, in any which way, at how he takes to my presence." Starscream turned away from the portal. "My personal affairs are in order, or as well as I could get them. So I will take whatever comes my way; however, with that said, I won't go down without a fight. If it comes to that." Starscream smiled in a slight sneer. "I will, most certainly, defend myself."

Thundercracker nodded slowly. It had not taken long for Starscream to get over his rough exile and return to more or less his normal self. "As I said, we will back you up; if you need it."

"I am sure you will," Starscream replied with a hint of disbelief.

"We won't fight for you, true, that's gonna be your battle; but we'll vouch for you."

"Too bad I am locked out of all the major systems and the computer still insists that I don't exist" he said changing the subject suddenly. "Do I look dead to you, Thundercracker?" Starscream asked.

Thundercracker shook his head looking slightly amused. "No, but a couple days ago you smelled pretty bad."

"Listen to this, Thundercracker; Computer, where is the Decepticon Starscream?" he asked clearly.

"That Decepticon's status is deceased," the computer replied immediately.

"Really?" Starscream looked down at himself. "I don't feel dead," Starscream hissed. He turned to Thundercracker and looked him in the optic. "Do I even sound dead? Wait, don't answer that. I am sure you will have some ill humoured remark about my voice three days ago."

Thundercracker chuckled as Starscream strode to the door.

"Well, we better not delay." Starscream paused in front of the door it did not open until Thundercracker drew nearer to the sensor. "Primus help me, Thundercracker. Not having access to anything is driving me crazy. It's like being invisible."

"Well, you should be used to it then." Thundercracker remarked leading the way down the hall. Starscream snorted derisively from behind and followed him out.

\* \* \*

"Megatron is returning," Blitzwing informed the Decepticons as the Docking tower activated.

Starscream looked up from the datapad he had been reading. "It's about time," Starscream hissed. He put the datapad down on the console and stood up and waited patiently for the return of Megatron.

The control room door opened and Megatron, Dirge and Soundwave stepped in. Soundwave and Dirge stopped just after taking a couple of steps inside. Dirge stood with his mouth slack and in shock. Soundwave did not appear surprised and Megatron took a few more steps in. He stopped for a moment and optics narrowed as he took in the gaunt Seeker.

Starscream faced him with his head held high, arms crossed and his feet shoulder width apart. The Seeker's optics narrowed and his wings raised slowly then flattened across his shoulders in a gesture of challenge. His lips curled into a vicious smirk and he showed no fear.

Megatron took a couple more steps, and started to circle Starscream looking over the missing Seeker trying to fathom where he had appeared from. All searches were futile, all scans turned up nothing and yet, Starscream, who he had assumed was dead was standing right before him. As haughty as ever. Megatron noted the still muted colours of the Seeker, the fatigue in his optics; time had been rough on the young Decepticon. However he also noticed that Starscream, in spite of his appearance, was ready. Time and exile had not dampened the Seeker's spark.

While the two Decepticons exchanged silent signals, the other Decepticons slowly drew to the edges of the room. The spectators did not wish to be at close range should there be a fire fight.

"I see you have found your way back, renegade," Megatron remarked dryly. "I hope your vacation was restful." Megatron made a fist with his hand and continued with his circling. His intent was to intimidate the Seeker but the other Decepticons appeared more unsettled than Starscream did.

"Oh, I found it peaceful, if nothing else, Megatron. For one, you weren't there."

Starscream replied keeping his optics locked on his opponent.

"Indeed," Megatron replied stopping to face the smaller Decepticon directly. "And yet you have returned here. What brings you back, traitor?" He drew himself to his full height and towered over the Seeker.

Starscream inhaled deeply but did not flinch. "I understand things have not been, oh how can I say, easy, without me around."

"Are you implying that I cannot run the Decepticons without you around, Starscream?"

"Oh, not at all. You can run it fine without me." Starscream said sarcastically. "It's just you can run it that much better with me as your Second in Command."

"Hmm, I see." Megatron studied the younger Decepticon for a moment as Starscream started to draw his wings back in preparation for a fight. Starscream was facing him, challenging him directly, his body language dared him to fight. He understood that his former lieutenant was not going to back down with the simple intimidation tactics. Megatron lips firmed as he realised that the gaunt expression on Starscream's face was not entirely a sign of weariness, but the signs of someone who had expressed months of stubborn determination in an effort to survive.

"As you wish, Starscream," Megatron said slowly and then, without a warning, Megatron whacked Starscream resoundingly across the face with the back of his hand.

The other Decepticons flinched as the Seeker let out a strangled cry and staggered back a couple steps. Starscream touched his hand to his face where Megatron had landed the blow. He could feel the warm sticky mech fluids on his finger tips. His optic's, filled with anger, locked with Megatron's once more.

"You're lucky that's all you get this time, Starscream. Next time, should you pull such a tactic, you won't be so fortunate. This I promise." Megatron glowered at the young Seeker fiercely. "Now, get to work before I change my mind about reinstating you," he snarled, swinging his hand once more at the flier.

Starscream, anticipating such an action, lightly dodged out of the way and out of range. "Just one small problem, Megatron," Starscream said heading over to his usual post.

"What sort of 'small problem', Starscream?" Megatron asked in irritation.

"My access codes appear to have been locked out. And the Computer system insists I do not exist, so if you could rectify this situation quickly, then I can resume my work as efficiently as ever."

"Yes, very well... " Megatron turned to his own station and rapidly punched in some commands while muttering Cybertronian curses under his breath. "You should be set once again-Sub Commander."

"Excellent," Starscream said cheerfully. "Now for my first order of business," Starscream grabbed Dirge by the intake then roughly yanked him out of his seat and sent him spiralling to the floor. "Is to demote you, Dirge, and reinstate myself as Air Commander.

Effective immediately."