



The Red Sky

By: Sunstar

Authors note:

6.5 million years ago a young and determined Field Commander, has a plan to return the Decepticons to the sky. Starscream can no longer stand life fighting on the ground and decides to do something about it. Unfortunately, he is captured and he has a new fight on his hands, a fight to freedom.

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Blood Rain

Earthdate: 6.5 million B.C.E. (Before Common Era)

Starscream inhaled sharply and his body trembled all over as he was led out of the Autobot Base and into a sheltered area outside. Starscream was led past a number of Autobots who waited to witness the event. His hands were cuffed securely behind his back and he was chained to a heavy metal pole.

Starscream raised his head and looked up toward the sky. The sky was red as the sun peeked up over the Cybertronian horizon. "Red sky at morn, Seekers be warned" he murmured to himself. Appropriate, he thought. It was sunrise; the traditional time for an execution. But the red sky could only be the result of light reflecting off acid rain clouds. Being caught in such a storm would be very damaging, it was best avoided at all costs. But that was not to be his fate; a firing squad was much more "humane".

'Where were they?' he wondered. 'Where's that rescue? Is this going to be it for me? Have I been forgotten?' his mind raced with random thoughts. He was not really anyone important; just a minor officer. All he was was just a field commander and those were easily replaced. He tried not to show fear, but his body simply shuddered. He twisted his wrists trying to break free of the cuffs that restrained him.

"Starscream, you have been found guilty for the murders of several Autobot officers and medical staff. Before you have your spark extinguished, have you any last words; or do you wish to renounce the Decepticon way and find peace in the embrace of Primus?" The firing squad commander asked.

Starscream raised his head for a moment and glared at his captors. "Yeah, I have some last words...may you burn in the pits for eternity."

No one said a word to Starscream's remark, but the commander of the executions nodded to the Autobot who stood nearest to the Seeker. Starscream writhed as the Autobot wrapped a black sack over the Seeker's head to blindfold him.

Starscream grunted and writhed his hands against his bonds. The cuffs were made of hardened trinium; impossible to break without the proper tools. His attention was distracted from his futile attempts at breaking free as he heard the call for the firing squad to aim.

'Now is a good time to rescue me...' he inhaled a short breath and held it.

"FIRE!"

* * *

Twenty-six months earlier.

Mortars rained down from the sky. The ground shuddered from explosions and the sky lit

up orange and gold from the shelling. It was mid day and the sky was dark from smoke. War was incredibly intense as the Autobots and Decepticons clashed for superiority over their home world.

Seekers, who had ruled the sky at the start of the war, were grounded and forced to fight in the trenches. The sky was unsafe and most who attempted to fly, were torn to shreds in a matter of seconds.

Megatron's orders were clear, Decepticons were to regain their air superiority. That involved eliminating all the facilities that were responsible for keeping the skies filled with the black armour piercing shrapnel.

The Decepticons had dug in, using the hundreds of grounded Seekers to rapidly carve a trench out of the surface of Cybertron. It was a rough wall, carved from the metallic rock and soils that covered the planet from its ancient times as a partly organic world. The walls were supported by heavily pitted metals that were green and orange from oxidisation.

"Field Commander," A Seeker called from the trench. "I am smelling acid rain in the air," The greenish-grey Seeker glanced upward for a moment then over to the dirt encrusted Seeker who lay on his canopy manning a heavy machine gun.

"Blast, that's just what we need right now," the field commander cursed. "Is our force shield generator even operational yet, Shadowline?"

"Negative. I requested the parts as you ordered, but they're being sent to more important-INCOMING!"

The pair pushed themselves from the edge of the trench. They covered their head with their arms covering their audio's as best as they could. The ground shook as the mortar exploded, dangerously close to their positions.

"Frag, that was close, Starscream," Shadowline remarked as they were both showered in clumps of dirt and chunks of metal.

"Yeah, that might have been just a bit lethal," Starscream agreed. "Thanks for the heads up," He grabbed one of his rifles that had fallen off when he dove for cover and studied the other for a moment "We're going to have to withdraw into the bunkers and ride this storm out," Starscream quietly informed his second in command.

"We're going to lose this fight aren't we?"

"No, not if I have anything to do with it." The field commander pushed himself up from his position. Dirt covered his dark grey face, his red optics glowed with a determined fire. Caked mud and grime covered his body; it was hard to tell that he was bright red and silver. He did not care, it provided some camouflage while he was on the ground. "Get things cleared up here, put stuff that we can't move under cover and then get inside. I've got a plan."

Shadowline nodded. "As you command."

"Field Commander Starscream to Decepticons, acid rain storm coming in fast, withdraw to bunkers and seal up tight. We will probably get some respite as the Autobots will have to do the same. All unit leaders report to the war room immediately."

The entrenched warriors grabbed their weapons and covered everything with a rubberised tarps to protect them from the caustic rainfall. Starscream rapidly assisted. His call was none too soon, he could feel the stinging burn of water drops as they hit his wings. A couple shouts went up and moments later the trench was vacated. The ground shuddered a few more times from shelling and even that stopped. The Autobots had also called the cease fire.

Moments later the acid rain came in a torrential downpour, it hissed as it struck the ground, creating an eerie fog that filled the battle zone. As much as Starscream hated the acid downpours, he also felt relieved whenever it happened. It gave the Decepticons a few hours to rest and recover. With battle nearly constant, any break was a welcome one.

Starscream hurried to the bunker's war room and met with the other unit commanders. They were equally as filthy as himself. They bore various wounds and scars from battle. They, like himself, itched at nanite infestations that inhabited their tired bodies. The nanites inhabited the Cybertronian soils, they were everywhere. Some were benign and some were not. As it was, the war was causing the nanite populations to mutate and look for other sources of energy; the living warriors and their fallen comrades. The conditions the Seekers lived in was bad, but they were all tough and could ride it out.

Starscream brushed his hands on his thighs in a futile attempt to wipe them clean as he grabbed a stick of chalk. "The acid rain has give me an idea," he said as he drew a quick map of the current battle. Energy supplies were low and their holographic imager had broken down. No word had yet come from Darkmount on when a replacement would arrive, so they made do with what they had on hand.

"The facilities we need to take out are here, here and here," Starscream marked each one with an X. The removal of these facilities will enable us to return to the skies and take out our enemies."

"That's what we've been trying to do for the past eight weeks," one air warrior interjected.

"Please do not interrupt me warrior, I am speaking." Starscream snarled, "I realise how long it's been but I plan on putting an end to us Seekers having to crawl in the mud like lesser transformers. We must return to the sky where we are at our best and we can win this war through our superior speed and agility. The Autobots realised this and have chosen to fill the air with black metallic death. This rain buys us time. They aren't firing the flack now are they?"

"No..." said the same air warrior, "you aren't suggesting what I think you are suggesting?"

Starscream's face twisted into a sinister smirk.

"Primus, he is...Field Commander, you're nuts," another Seeker responded. The room exploded into loud debate on the merits, the pros and the cons of such an action.

Starscream waited patiently until the others fell silent and looked at him with a mixture of horror and disbelief. "Please hear me out, before you condemn this idea. Give me a chance to fully explain it."

Starscream went over his idea in detail, explaining how he would only want volunteers who were willing to risk the dangers of fifteen minutes in the rain to end an eternity in the mud. Starscream explained he would lead the mission as a show of good faith in that he would not ask anyone to do that which he would not do himself. The others overcame their apprehensions and agreed to the idea. They were charged by the young Field Commander's enthusiasm and desire to return to the sky.

"Shadowline," Starscream called, "inform me when the downpour lets up to a light drizzle."

"As you command," he replied, "there is a break in the storm coming up shortly, it will be followed by another sky burst shortly."

"How much time do we have until that break and the next storm?"

"I say forty minutes until the storm breaks and another twenty three until it resumes."

Starscream nodded. "That should be enough, it's cutting it close, mind you, but I think we can do it. We have to."

The other Decepticons nodded in agreement.

"Okay then, get yourselves ready," Starscream ordered.

The Decepticons dispersed and went about their necessary preparations. Some cleaned out weapons they had not used in weeks. Others, who were not planning on flying to attack, organised themselves into teams to deal with medical emergencies or search and rescue parties. Starscream glanced over the warriors nodding to himself, quietly pleased that everyone knew what he was do to. He left them alone and, for the most part, it worked.

Starscream gave his own weapons a quick once over. He did not have to spend a great deal of time on it as he checked and cleaned them on a daily basis. He was ready and he was calm. He hoped the others would feel that way as well. The wait for action, irritated him though. He wanted to get out and and bring an end to it quickly. Starscream stood by the door and looked out the window as the thick, greasy, red tinged drops of acidic water fell against it. The drops resembled an ichor that was bled from some primitive carbon based creature. Each drop of deadly rain hitting the window left an oily streak that etched into the hardened glass.

Everyone knew what the acid would do to a person caught in it. First it would dissolve

the chromoderm layer, the protective colour skin that coated the metallic body structure. Once it passed the chromoderm, it would bite into the metals, dissolving them, coating them with the oily water, preventing the healing nanites from repairing the wounds. And finally it would get to the internals and cause permanent shutdown.

Starscream shuddered. He had seen death by rain a number of times. He knew that the mission was a great risk and that he would have to lead by example. Starscream looked at the rain with distaste, but he knew this would be the one act that could turn the tide of the war in Decepticon favour, that alone was worth the risk.

Starscream shook his head as he mulled over various thoughts that drifted through his exhausted mind. He was the field commander and was considered too young by many of the other older veterans. Some resented him, but he had gained his rank through the sudden death of his superior officer. It was perfectly legal. A couple tried to accuse him of murdering his commander, but he was simply there when his officer took a bullet in the chest. Others, such as Shadowline, were present when Firestorm gave Starscream his promotion with his dying breath. Darkmount acknowledged it, Starscream had even received a written congratulations from Megatron himself. Starscream felt inspired and was determined to prove himself to his comrades and to Megatron.

"Commander," Shadowline said pulling Starscream out of his trance-like reflections, "the rain has slowed to a drizzle."

"We better get a move on, I'd like to get this over and done with the least amount of casualties," Starscream acknowledged as he pushed the bunker door open. "Seekers, rise and attack!" he called shrilly.

Within moments, the battle ready Seekers burst through the bunker hatches. They ignored the sting of acid rain puddles on their feet and leapt into the sky. Each Seeker transformed and flew toward the enemy lines. Starscream joined them and fired his thrusters to take the lead.

The rumble of thirty jet engines was something to behold, even then it blended into the distant rumble of thunder. As they neared to their targets, Starscream screamed out his command to unleash their payloads onto their designated targets. Abruptly the ground shuddered and blossomed as the explosions consumed their targets. There were some secondary explosions as other sites or fuel dumps ignited followed by explosive pops and bangs as a large ammunitions bunker caught.

Immediately all hell broke loose. The sky was filled with explosions as rockets and powder kegs ignited. Fuel barrels and tanks flew in every direction. Seekers had to evade not only the random projectiles, but each other. There were a few near collisions but screams and shouts of Decepticons taking hits from the wild explosions.

Starscream circled the war zone briefly cursing to himself. A fuel tank rocketed toward him and he evaded almost hitting another tank. He surveyed the damage to ensure their targets had been eliminated before he ordered their return to base.

As he banked away from the Autobot base, a Seeker, who had been no more than fifteen metres from his right exploded with barely a shriek. Starscream inhaled sharply as he

was bombarded with bits of shrapnel and chunks of his former comrade. Glancing down as the bits hit the ground, Starscream knew there was no chance that the fallen could have survived. 'It wasn't Shadowline was it?' Starscream tried to glance over the retreating Seekers looking for his friend.

Starscream paid the price for his distraction, instead of watching the activities around him, Starscream failed to see the rocket that was headed straight for him. In a moment his pain sensors activated and he screamed in agony as his wing was blown off. Smoke and fluids issued forth and the Seeker lost control. Starscream spiralled toward the ground. Once again the sky flashed a hot pink and the clouds opened up. Acid rain poured down as the Seeker impacted into the soft muddy ground with a sickening thud. He struggled to transform, but the rain was already peeling back his chromoderm.

The other Decepticons hesitated for a moment as they fought with indecision. In the end, they decided it was best to leave Starscream and make it back to base before they were consumed by the deadly rain.

Starscream managed to pull himself under a sheet of metal, before passing out from pain and loss of fluids Starscream's last thought was to an instructor at the academy. "Friendships will be the death of many a good commander. It is lonely at the top for a reason."

Name, Rank and Serial Number

As soon as the storm had passed, the fighting had resumed with its usual intensity. Perhaps even more so as the Decepticons had dealt the Autobots a stinging blow and they were seeking revenge. Shadowline and the others who returned from the hit and run mission, were recovering from their injuries, they knew they would be needed shortly.

"Any sign of them, Stormflash?" Shadowline asked as the small search and rescue unit came in from the dark hallway at the back of the bunker.

The grim mission leader shook his head. "There are no signs of Starscream, Wirestorm, Updraft or Whisperwing," he replied. "We found parts of one Seeker, but it was badly destroyed by the rain. So bad that I doubt even our best medics could identify who it belonged to. I certainly couldn't tell." Stormflash threw an insignia badge on the table. "We found this."

"Starscream's insignia," Shadowline inhaled sharply as he picked up the purple and silver badge. "So, they're missing. Either dead or taken prisoner," Shadowline exhaled slowly. "With Starscream gone, I'm in command, any objections?"

"None, Sir. So we're not searching anymore?" Stormflash asked with a hint of surprise.

"We're too low on resources to expend in a search looking for four lost Decepticons," the new Field Commander gave the insignia a tap and pursed his lips. From field commander to field commander, the badge of leadership has been passed on yet again. He placed the insignia of rank on his left shoulder, as his predecessors had.

"But Starscream's your friend..."

"Starscream's a warrior; a good one. I'm sure Starscream would say the same if he was here and it was me missing. He's not prone to favouritism." Shadowline shook his head. "I will; however, be open to a rescue of him and the others, if they're alive, if we know exactly where they are and how involved such an operation would be. Warrior battle rotation is in three hours, you better rest up, we're fighting next." Shadowline said changing the subject.

"Yes sir, Field Commander," Stormflash exchanged a glance with the warrior next to him, "glad it's not me missing." he whispered as they turned to leave.

"Yeah, if they're leaving our field commander out there, then what'd they do with us?"

Stormflash shook his head. "What? Don't you know? We're rocket fodder... We're nobodies. Our job is to die."

Shadowline shook his head and ignored the pair as they left. He looked at the small foot locker that belonged to Starscream. It contained everything that Starscream ever owned. He had seen it a few times, it was mostly curios, weapons, as well as a couple of books

and instrumentation who's purpose he could never fathom.

Starscream rarely spoke about his past before the war; but occasionally, when he was in a bright mood, would show off the peculiar objects that he claimed to have found on other distant worlds. Shadowline often nodded and smiled, assuming Starscream was making it up to seem impressive. Starscream was, like himself, just another Seeker.

Soon, he would have to ship it to Darkmount for storage.

* * *

Ten hours after crashing

His first memory was of a pungent smell, a sanitary odour and then a numb throb in his right wing. He was concerned as he could not feel the tip, the flaps felt jammed and would not flick to his mental command. He felt dizzy and unsettled as he brought his optics on line for a moment. The room was bright, cold, and clean. He could turn his head slightly to his left and just make out the monitors. He could not read what they were displaying, which he figured had to do with his current conditions.

'What is my condition?' he wondered. It took him a moment to recall his plummet out of the sky to the ground. As to what side of the war zone he landed on, he was unsure. But he was pretty sure he was going to be okay. He was obviously in a military hospital.

He lifted his hands and looked at the glowing blue cr gel as it oozed between his fingers. It felt cool on his body which stung. He again recalled his plummet and then remembered the flash of pink and the downpour of the blood red drops of hell rain.

He noticed for the first time that he was not itching, and the crawling sensation of the tiny Cybertronian nanites and other microscopic fauna had ceased. He realised that was due to the fact he was completely washed off. Clean for the first time in weeks. 'How was that possible?' he wondered. Clean water was extremely rare in the trenches. Most entrenched Decepticons were leery of it out of fear it might be acidic. Even medical facilities used water sparingly and only washed off the area needing repair. As far as Starscream knew, the only places that could afford to use it often and in indecent amounts were the wealthy cities as well as the major military installations.

He rolled his head over to his right and inhaled sharply. Half of his wing was missing. The stub that remained was crudely patched. There was no effort to cut it straight and attach a new wing to the area. There was no attempt to brace it. It was gone. 'Was it possible the parts, like everything else was on severe shortage?' he wondered again. His ability to fly, even in his root mode, would be horribly hindered. His sense of balance would be also disrupted.

Starscream panicked and tried to sit up. A firm hand pressed his head back into the vat. "You need to remain still until the cr gel has healed your acid burns," a light but stern voice informed him. He tipped his head back and his optics met the blue optics of a female medic. He exhaled sharply and instinctively reached for his concealed service pistol; it was gone.

"Who are you and where's my wing?" Starscream demanded with a caustic hiss.

"I'm Para, I'm your nurse until you are healed," she introduced herself. "You lost your wing in the battle over the eastern front. Your weapons and defences have been confiscated. You're a prisoner of war," she stated flatly.

"Where am I?"

"A secret medical facility that deals with wounded Decepticon prisoners. It's not on the map. We treat our wounded prisoners as well as we treat our own, which is more than we can say for our comrades who fall on your side."

"Why haven't you fixed the wing, then? I can't live like this!" he shrieked.

"Well, admittedly we don't have the parts to repair your kind. So we did what we could. But it is better if you can't fly. Your kind can be rather slippery."

Starscream snarled a curse under his breath.

"Well, just to let you know, about sixty percent of your chromoderm layer had been burned off by the rain. It was foolish of you to attempt flight in such weather. Also, an officer will be with you as soon as you have recovered enough. He will wish to ask you some questions, please be open and honest with him," she brightened an optic as she looked over the wounded Seeker, "that is, if you can." She patted Starscream's shoulder.

Starscream scowled fiercely as his optics locked on her crimson insignia. He jerked his shoulder sharply away. He did not feel like being touched by an enemy female. "I'll have nothing to say, to him or to you fembot," Starscream hissed.

"I'm sure you won't," She said pulling out a fluid filled glass syringe. She took Starscream's arm and in a quick movement had exposed a glowing purple tube. She was about to stick the syringe into the fuel line when Starscream sat bold upright and grabbed the hand holding the injection. The fembot yelped in surprise.

"What in the name of Cybertron are you planning on putting in me?" He asked squeezing her wrists. Autobot guards hurried over to their location. "WHAT IS THIS?" he screamed, "WHAT ARE YOU GIVING ME?"

"It's Enrozine," she said nervously. "It excites your body's nanites and gets them to heal you faster. It's completely harmless," she whispered.

"Are you out of your mind?" He hissed smashing it out of her hand, the syringe shattered on the ground. "That stuff is LETHAL to Seekers. It KILLS us. Is that what you call treating your prisoners well? Giving them the wrong medications?" Starscream shoved the fembot away from him and she slammed into one of the guards who had responded to the commotion. There were three and they had their weapons trained on Starscream. "Don't you dare even touch me," he snarled.

"It's okay," Para said holding up her hand, "It was a slight misunderstanding," she

reassured them.

"Slight?" Starscream repeated in disbelief. "How did you get your medical license? An Autobot lottery? You know nothing of Decepticon physiology. Your practice should be revoked."

Another medic had arrived on the scene and used a hypospray to deliver a sedative into Starscream. It took a while for the sedative to kick in. Partly due to Starscream's size and the amount of electro-adrenaline that was flowing through his system. It was also part due to Starscream's stubborn determination not to go down without a fight.

Slowly he sank into his vat of ooze, fighting the onset of the drug induced sleep. He sighed reluctantly and finally went offline.

* * *

One weel later

The cell was bronze coloured with green tinge in the groves and cracks. It had a platform, a table and a couple books. It was small, though larger than the average Decepticon prison cell. It had only one access point and that was the end with the energy barrier.

Starscream had examined it, back and forth. He checked the lights, tapped the wall tiles, and poked at the floor. He even tried to short out the bars with his own energy, but only succeeding in rendering himself unconscious. A short visit from Para, put him back on his feet.

Starscream leaned against the back wall and crossed his arms. He looked at the Autobot officer, Krank, who visited him almost daily.

"Can you tell me any plans the Decepticons might have?" Krank asked lightly.

"Starscream, Seeker Field Commander, SSS905-1 Decepticon Airforce." Starscream replied dully. He tapped his fingers on his forearm.

"Okay, How many Decepticons did you command in your unit?"

Starscream looked pensive then tapped his chin. "More than you ever will," he replied. "As I said before; I am not authorised to answer your questions. So you might want to stop, it's not going to get you anywhere. Starscream, Seeker."

"How many units were in your section?" The Autobot asked sharply.

"Starscream, Seeker Field Commander, SSS905-1 Decepticon Airforce." Starscream repeated. As angry as Starscream was about his captivity and the refusal to repair his damaged wing, Starscream found the Autobot's aggravation privately amusing. He smiled inwardly.

The interrogator shook his head. "What was your mission when you were captured?"

"Oh that...hmmm, if you don't already know, I am not going to tell you. So give it up already. I'm getting tired of repeating myself." Starscream took a deep breath so he could repeat his name, rank and serial number.

The Autobot held up his hand and snorted. "Very well, Decepticon, as you wish." He looked at his notes for a moment. "We will be seeing you again shortly, don't try to break out again, you'll only get yourself hurt."

Starscream shook his head and glanced upward impatiently. He gave the Autobot an aggravated glare and turned to sit on his hard platform. "Yeah, get out of my sight, Krank," Starscream muttered and leaned back.

If there was a will, there was a way. Starscream knew that. It was one of the things his Academy instructors often said. "Necessity was the mother of all inventions." Starscream decided he would have to become a bit more cunning.

Antagony

Two months after captivity

Starscream was familiar with hard work; he had helped dig the trenches, so wielding pick axes in a tritium mine was not too different. What was different was the length of the working day and the few short breaks he had to refuel and rest.

He was given fuel to keep his energy and strength up, which was one thing that could be considered positive. He was not given time to wash the dust and dirt that was building up once again. Nanite infestations were few, and those were usually dealt with immediately. Scrapes, cuts and gouges occurred frequently. Only the very worst of those were seen to by a medic.

Starscream put his axe down and brushed the dust off his face. He glanced around at the others who were digging or loading carts with the ore. They, like himself, were chained with heavy chains, linked to a ring by a specific location. His feet were shackled together, which limited his stride. His hands were chained together but with enough free movement so he could work.

The mine itself was underground, dug into the living rock of Cybertron. It was an enclosed cavern which was worked mostly by Seekers. Above his head were several metal catwalks suspended from the stoney roof. Bright lights illuminated the work areas. The mine was teaming with Autobot guards, each one carrying a weapon and more than willing to use it on any Decepticons attempting to escape. He had seen that happen once, and it ended poorly. He considered the escapee a fool for trying to break out of the mine blindly. In spite of the miner's death, it taught Starscream a lesson in patience. If he wanted out, he knew he would have to plan it carefully.

The Autobot guards were not very kind to the Decepticon prisoners, nor did Starscream expect them to be. They often insulted or harassed the prisoners, threw rocks at them, took away their fuel or did not permit them rest. They were not above beating a prisoner for the slightest reason, and occasionally threatened them with death. Why did they do this? Was it because they did not like the way the prisoner swung his pick? Or was it because the prisoner happened to look their way? Starscream exhaled wearily and grabbed his axe and resumed working. He personally did not wish to attract unnecessary attention; he did not look at them. He focused on his work.

He swung the heavy pick and chunks of rock piled around his feet. He would have to wait a while before the ore cart stopped by him for loading. Starscream carefully shoved the rocks aside and continued. He continued to do this wearing an expression of grim determination. He paused once again so he could brush dirt off his face. He inhaled deeply and resumed his labour.

Starscream was so deep in concentration and focus, he almost didn't hear the klaxon that announced the next refuel break. Starscream exhaled and rubbed his palms on his thighs and put the axe down. It was a break and any break was good, no matter how

short.

He watched as the prison guards passed out the refreshments to the miners. He waited patiently for them to get to him. Instead of giving him his fuel, they sneered and passed him over and gave the next prisoner two.

Starscream cocked his head and gritted his teeth. "Hey, what about me?" he asked. "Don't I get a ration?"

The guard stopped, turned back to him and came over. He about the same size as Starscream, heavier built and heavily armed. The guard looked at the chunks of ore at the Seeker's shackled feet and shook his head. "You only get paid for work, you haven't done enough to earn your keep. Got a problem with that, slag head?"

"Well, yes. Normally I would agree with you, but I've dug twice as much as that Seeker there," he pointed to the Seeker who was downing the refreshments as fast as he could. "I've more than earned my ration."

"You also stop working to look around. You're lazy. You're lazy and you're useless. So, you are going to suffer and watch everyone enjoy their break." The guard picked up Starscream's axe and shoved it into the Seeker's hands. "Get to work you worthless scrap heap." He gave Starscream a shove toward the wall he was digging into.

Starscream's optics narrowed slightly. And his hands tightened on the haft of the axe. It would be easy, simple... a quick swing of the axe and he'd have the point through the guard's head. He thought better of it, however his optics betrayed him as he turned to swing the axe at the rock.

The Autobot guard grabbed Starscream by the wing and spun him around. "You want to make something of that?" he demanded locking his ice blue optics with Starscream's.

It was a challenge. Starscream shook his head and broke contact. "No, I've got work to do," he said turning back to the wall to resume his digging. He was tired and hungry. He did not have the energy to engage the Autobot.

"Yeah, you do, you wingless coward." The Autobot used his rifle to smash Starscream across the back of his knees. The Seeker shrieked and fell into the ore on the floor. "Stand up and work, you lazy fragger."

Another Autobot guard joined the first. "This Con givin' ya trouble?" he asked coming over and looking at Starscream as the Seeker pushed himself to his knees. The Seeker fought back a scream of pain.

"Yeah, Ironback, this lazy slag thinks he can lay around all day and get refuelled." The Autobot kicked Starscream with a tremendous amount of force. Starscream grunted and dug his fingers into the dirt.

"Really? That ain't fair to the others, Who does he think he is? A Con lord?" Ironback gave Starscream a sharp kick in the side. "You aren't anybody and you'll never be

anybody. What's yer name anyway; Crud?" He kicked dirt into the Seeker's face.

"S-s-starscream," the Seeker whispered. He inhaled sharply as he was kicked once again.

"Starscream? That's a name?" Ironback laughed hysterically. "What're these Cons naming themselves these days. Starscream? Don't ya have a better name; something more sensible?" He grabbed the Seeker by the head and tipped his head sharply down to he can get a clear view of the back of his helm. Starscream gasped and braced himself against the ground "Ah, waddaya know, Gripshift, he does have a better name. It's; 643084-SS," the Autobot read aloud. Starscream and the other prisoners were branded with a number that was cut into the back of their heads. He shoved Starscream back down into the rocks.

"That's your name, Con, 643084-SS. Not Starscream," Gripshift insisted.

Starscream muttered a sarcastic remark under his breath.

"I heard that, slaghead," Gripshift grabbed a large rock and slammed it down across the back of Starscream's helm. The Seeker didn't make a sound as he hit the ground face first and went immediately offline. Fluids oozed from his head and mouth. "Wait, did I kill him?" asked the Autobot in alarm, surprised at how quickly the Seeker had dropped.

"Eh? No, the Con didn't go black." Ironback gave Starscream a hard kick in the side. "They'll do that when they die."

"We should get the medics here."

"Meh, leave 'im for now. Med-bay has more important things to deal with. This airhead ain't one of them." The Autobots each gave Starscream a few more kicks before leaving him where he lay. "No one'll care."

The other Decepticons said nothing as the Autobots left. They finished their fuel and resumed working as if nothing had happened.

* * *

Starscream came to, once again, in the sterile environment of the prison hospital. He moaned and put his hand to his helm.

Para came over, noticing his awakening. "Before you ask, you've been out cold for nearly three days, Starscream. Did you have a good sleep?"

Starscream made a face as he tried to think back to the incident in the mine. "No, I hurt. What happened?" he asked after a few moments of intense thought.

"Oh, the guards and another prisoner said there was a rock fall and you got cracked across the head. You should be more careful." She checked the wound on his head. "It's almost healed, but I think I can recommend you do only light duties for three more days."

You should rest a bit, you do look peaked."

"Wait, no...it wasn't a rock fall, I was hit by one of the guards. They beat me up," he corrected remembering.

Para shook her head. "Come on, they aren't like that. We take good care of our prisoners and they would not dare risk their jobs with that sort of activity, it's unheard of." She smiled at him and shook her head as if he was an offspark making up stories.

"You are as naive as you look, fembot. How about you work in the mine for a week and tell me if you have the same notion then. Believe me when I say, they really don't like me-or any of us. " Starscream glanced at the syringe she had in her hand. His optics brightened. "What's that?"

"No, its not Enrozone, I remembered, and looked it up. This is compatible with your type of system. You will feel better soon." she gave him the shot. She looked at him for a moment. "I won't work in the mine for you, but I might take a look in there sometime and see what goes on. If it is as bad as you say, maybe I'll speak to the warden and see what he can do about it. But I doubt it's bad. We Autobots are not cruel captors."

"So you are told, I am sure," Starscream muttered sitting up. He looked at his hands which were still in chains. His palms were rough and nicked in places from handling the rocks and ore.

"Well, you are ready to return to your cell, I'm sorry I can't to anything else for you." she smiled at him fleetingly. "The guards will be collecting you momentarily."

The door opened and the pair of burly Autobot prison guards entered. They looked at Starscream with intense dislike. "We're here for the prisoner," Gripshift said sharply.

Starscream immediately tensed up as soon as he recognised them. They were carrying an assortment of chains. Starscream's wing drew back as they stepped up to him.

"I hope he didn't give ya too much trouble, ma'am," said Ironback, checking out the shackles on Starscream's wrists and replacing the ones on his feet. "He's a troublesome Con in the mine, that's for sure."

"Oh, Starscream's no trouble here," she smiled.

"Starscream? Glad to hear it ma'am. I'd hate to think he's keeping ya from more important work."

Gripshift took a final chain which ended in a thick collar and latched it around Starscream's throat. The Seeker's optics filled with panic and he grabbed at the collar. It was tight and hindered the mobility of his neck joints and pressed uncomfortably on his vocaliser.

"Is that really necessary?" Para asked in concern. "He's still recovering." She glanced at the Seeker apologetically as he pulled in futility at the collar.

"You can't ever be too careful with a Seeker, even one with a single wing." Gripshift warned as he pulled on the chain and dragged Starscream to his feet. The Seeker avoided looking at anyone.

"Well, he's on light detail for three days," Para informed the guards.

"Ya mean, this rock digger's getting more time off?" Ironback said in disbelief. "You've gotta be kidding." His fingers slowly tightened into a fist.

"Just make sure he gets it." the medic said.

"Yeah, he'll get it. we'll see to that," Gripshift said lightly.

"Good," she said with a reassuring smile to the shackled Decepticon. Starscream looked away and resigned himself to be led out of the repair bay.

As soon as they were out of the medical wing, the guards sprang to life. They pulled sharply on the chain around Starscream's neck which threw the Seeker off balance. Starscream tripped over his chains and went sprawling to the ground.

Ironback pulled the collar chain back and Starscream started to gasp. "Gettin' friendly with the fembot, scrap heap?"

Starscream grabbed the chain in his hands to relieve the pressure on his neck and head. He inhaled sharply. "No, it's not like that."

"Oh yeah? But she calls ya by yer so called name," Ironback said pulling up on the chain.

Starscream gasped and pulled himself up. "She has the decency to treat me like a person, more than I can say for you," he managed.

"Oh, so you think you're a person?" Gripshift said standing over Starscream, "Is that it? You think you have rights? No way, not while you continue to wear that symbol of hate." Gripshift jammed the gun muzzle against Starscream's remaining wing and insignia leaving a small indentation.

Had Starscream's throat not been so constricted, he might have laughed at their hypocrisy.

The Autobots grabbed the chain and dragged the Seeker along the hall. He tried to pull himself to his feet but was unable to. They passed some other guards, who did nothing but taunt and jeer at him. Some even threw objects, hit him with the butts of their rifles or kicked him. Finally they arrived at his cell. They shoved Starscream in and chained him to hoops in the floor. He was unable to stand up or sit comfortably.

"What I'd do to kill this loser," Ironback said. "Too bad he isn't worth the energy of a shot," He took the chain that was around Starscream's neck and swung the loose end around and smashed it across the Seeker's back. In spite of Starscream's best efforts not to give the Autobot guards the satisfaction of his torment, Starscream screeched in

pain. The Autobot jerked the collar and cut Starscream's cry off mid shriek. "Shuddap, you worthless piece of slag." Ironback repeated the action and again told Starscream to shut up as he screamed in pain and protest.

"Okay," Gripshift said grabbing Ironback's raised arm as he was going to whip Starscream with the chain again. "I think, the con's got the point. Now we can let him rest, as the good Para, ordered." He gave Starscream one sharp kick in the side and turned away from the cell leaving Starscream chained to the floor.

Starscream watched them leave and leaned forward until his face rested against the cold metal. His neck and throat burned but the cool metal felt good. Starscream remained in his awkward position until the next shift of Guards came on. They quickly released him from his bonds and called the Med-bay.

Para arrived in the cell and looked at the haggard Seeker as he lay on his canopy across the platform. "What happened?" she asked, shaking her head.

Starscream looked at her and fury burned in his optic. "Your peace loving, can do no wrong guards; that's what happened." he said, his voice harsh and raspy.

"Well, your head is intact, so that's good, your voice is a mess." She pressed her fingers against his throat and Starscream tensed up. "Okay, I won't touch you there. I was just checking to see if I can feel what sort of damage is inside."

"Leave it," he snarled. "I'll live."

"I don't know. They wouldn't do this unless they have a reason, Starscream. Did you fight or resist them? We don't do this to our prisoners, we are better than Decepticons."

"Stop giving me that, "we're not like that", slag. Open your optics and see the reality of it. Sure some of you mean well and are probably really nice, but there are others who are a lot worse than what you think us Decepticons are."

"That's not true." Para said pulling out her tools to repair his wounds. She neutralised his pain receptors in the damaged areas which extracted a sigh of relief from Starscream.

"You want the truth, Para? The legendary, Optimus Prime said that 'freedom is the right of all sentient beings'. I am a sentient being; yet here I am, in a cell. My only crime is being a warrior who was shot down on the wrong side of the lines. My only crime is fighting for my beliefs."

Para looked at him and said nothing. She was deep in thought as she looked over his wounds. Para ran her finger along the impression on his neck from the guard's collar. "That'll pop out, give it a day at the most. I'm sorry they did that to you, it was a little excessive; I think. The rest of your wounds will take a couple days to repair themselves. Here, take this. It's for pain," she handed him a hypospray. "It has a couple of charges, enough to get you through the worst of it." She patted him on the intake and left the cell.

Starscream tucked the hypospray into subspace. He hoped he would not be searched; he figured if he did not use it for his current injuries, he would have it for later ones. And

the way things were going, Starscream knew there was likely to be more.

He realised something else, Para was trying to be friendly to the prisoner and he wondered why. Starscream pondered this for a while, he wondered how he could use this to his advantage. Could this be an open avenue to escape? He pondered back the instructor at the academy. "Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer." There was a ring of truth to that. Starscream decided to keep that thought close to the surface.

Freedom was the prize and it was worth anything it took to get it.

Gambit

Eight Months in Captivity.

Starscream sat at a table in the prisoner mess hall. It was a rare day off for all prisoners, a rest day. The Seeker did not think he would be able to get it off himself, but the guards who had been known to harass him were also off and not at the prison. For Starscream this was a bliss and it gave his various dents and wounds a chance to heal.

As other Decepticons filed into the mess, along with several guards, Starscream hunched down and pulled his fuel nearer to him. He held it tightly in his hands and started to gulp it down while watching them; he feared they would try to remove it from him. A small group of Seekers got their rations and then pointed to Starscream's solitary location. They nodded at each other and made their way over. As they did, Starscream flattened his wing and stub across his shoulders; a warning.

"Field Commander Starscream, isn't it?" One of the Seekers asked as he sat down; Starscream nodded. "I'm 634798-RJ, better known to our kinsmech as Rainjumper. A rather sadistic name considering how our weather is these last few millennia," he introduced himself. "These guys are Talon, he pointed to a dark grey and blue Seeker, Deepsky, Jetstream and Shallowdive."

"What do you want?" Starscream asked roughly. His voice had never fully recovered. It was still high, but rough, sharp and broke a lot. He eyed them suspiciously as he continued gobbling down his ration.

"Well, to start, you're alone and we thought we'd join an established table," Rainjumper explained cheerfully. "We're also aware you've been avoiding everyone like the rust. Well, that's fine and dandy, but you need to be with your brethren," he continued.

Starscream nodded. "Perhaps I need to be, perhaps I don't. What's it to you?"

"You've been denied fuel again, haven't you?" Talon asked.

Starscream nodded watching them and clutching his fuel closer. "Yeah, three days this time," he agreed. "What's your point?"

"We haven't," Jetstream said.

"Well isn't that good for you," Starscream hissed. "Coming here to rub my face in my misfortune?"

"No," Talon said. "We're all brothers here." Talon nodded to the others. They each broke a chunk of their rations off and put it on Starscream's tray. "We'll share with you."

Starscream's optics widened in surprise as he looked at the generous offerings. "You're

serious?" Starscream asked not daring to believe.

"We're not pulling your wing. Fuel up because you're gonna need it," Rainjumper said.

"Need it for what?" Starscream asked brightening an optic and again giving them a suspicious glance.

"Whatever it is you're planning. You don't take what you've been taking without some sort of future plan. So what is it?" Rainjumper surmised.

Starscream shook his head. He had made several plans and had other ideas over the past months. He thought each one through, carefully, patiently trying to keep in mind what could go wrong. What were the pros and the cons. How could each one fail or succeed. What sort of risks were involved. However he kept coming to one specific road block; Starscream did not know the layout of the prison. He had no idea what sort of firepower awaited those who tried to escape. He had been unconscious when he had arrived and therefore did not see the outside world.

He looked at the other Seekers who had gathered around him. Perhaps they had seen the outside. Starscream shook his head to his own thoughts; he also had no idea where on Cybertron this base was located. If it was in the heart of Autobot held territory, it would be extremely risky if not deadly to escape. What was the alternative? An eternity mining ores for the Autobots. Ores which would likely be used to fight and kill his own kind. Starscream felt sickened at that thought. He did not wish to further the efforts of his enemies. The other alternative was to die at the hands of his cruel overseers. They did not care, Starscream was disposable and there were always more prisoners to take over his work.

Starscream looked deeply at his scraps of fuel and then to Talon and Rainjumper. "I have no viable plans, thus far. Nothing seems to be without great risk. At least nothing with the fairest chance that I might succeed. Anyway, open discussion of an escape would likely get us all killed. Do you really want that?" Starscream said in a low voice.

Talon nodded. "You were thinking as an individual. You're a field Commander and you know how to use a team to get a job done. With us, your chance of success should be increased."

Starscream pondered this for a moment and exhaled. "To command a unit one must become familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of those who are to be commanded. Otherwise chance of failure will be greater than chance of success. I don't know you. I am not saying I won't know you; but to have a working plan, I need to become better acquainted with you."

"Fair enough," Rainjumper said. "We shall introduce ourselves in detail."

Each Seeker explained to Starscream what his specialities were. Deepsky, Shallowdive and Jetstream were simple, but skilled, air warriors. They did not have higher education save the basic schooling most Decepticon warriors received. Talon and Rainjumper both showed signs of initiative and had education at the War Academy level. They graduated with good standing. They, like Starscream had positions of command in their respective

fields. Talon was a weapons specialist while Rainjumper was a meteorologist.

Starscream realised why they had come to him. He, of the six Seekers who sat at the table, had the highest pre-capture rank, he was the oldest and the most experienced. He had proven himself to them by taking the punishment given to him by their captors. That proved he was tough and therefore fit to lead. He did not want to give them false hope by including them in any plans, but they, like himself, wanted to return to the air and home. He heard the voice of his instructor once again in his mind. 'Together we stand, divided we fall.' Starscream gave his thoughts a nod. Seekers were gregarious by nature. They could almost always be found in a group. Their strength was in numbers and they seemed to feed off each other's enthusiasm for a task. It was better to have some false hope than none at all, he decided.

"I see, well...hmm. If you are willing to take risks, and possibly even die, I may have a plan that can get us, and possibly others out. It could take us time. Here, let me explain." Starscream leaned in toward the Seekers and they spoke quietly. Starscream was on guard watching incase their activity was noticed and attracted unwanted attention. "What we need is access to a terminal to get a copy of the prison plans," Starscream finished.

"How are we going to get that," Rainjumper asked, "None of us have access to anything like that."

Starscream smiled slightly. "I may have a way to get to one; a trump card if you will. It won't be pleasant for me but as I said there are risks involved. I think the prize is worth it to take such a chance." He looked at the Seekers and turned his head as the prison guards neared to their location, "Leave it to me. We'll try to get together another time. Lips sealed; our lives depend upon our silence."

* * *

Two days later Starscream chose to put the first part of his plan into action. He kept most of the details to himself not telling the other Seekers. It was not that he did not trust him, but the truth be told, he was unsure he could trust anyone in the prison environment. It was too easy to turn and look the other way from another's suffering as many had done for him. He felt it was safer for the overall success of the plan to keep what he was doing to himself. The less who knew, the better the chances to succeed.

Starscream cringed as he held his axe ready to swing it at the rock. He spied a piece that was loose and calculated where it would fly if he hit it at a specific point. Starscream held his breath and swung the pick, with luck it would hit what he was aiming for. The small rock chunk flew out of the wall and smacked Gripshift in the side of the helm. Perhaps his aim was too perfect, Starscream mused as he inwardly cringed. He did not miss a beat and continued to work, appearing innocent as the Autobot Guard looked at him angrily. This was going to hurt.

"Got a problem, wingless?" Gripshift asked walking over.

Starscream raised his head and looked over his wing. "Uh, no. Problem sir?" He used his feet to push aside the ore. His work area was clear once again. "Is there one?" he

asked putting his axe down. He did not want them to get the wrong idea and kill him.

"You hit me in the head with one of your rocks, you useless digger." Gripshift snapped, watch what you're doing next time."

"Sorry. It won't happen again," Starscream said, stepping back. The Seeker was worried that his plan was about to go flat and Gripshift was going to let him off with only some minor insults.

"That Con's at it again?" Ironback hollered from a catwalk above the work area. Starscream looked up and inhaled sharply. Ironback had his weapon trained on his chest. Of the two, Starscream knew that he would have to be extremely careful around Ironback. Especially if Ironback was alone; the Autobot guard let his hate consume him and rule his actions. He was easily provoked into rage. Starscream needed to be sent to the Med-bay, it was important to his plan. Starscream just did not want to go there in a permanent stasis lock.

"When isn't he causing trouble?" Gripshift hollered up.

Ironback lowered his weapon and hurried down the metal stairs to the working level. He came over with huge strides. His expression was of irritation and malice. "I've got ya covered, Gripshift." Starscream backed up until the rocks pressed into his back and wings.

Ironback grabbed Starscream by the throat and squeezed, lifting him off his feet. Starscream let out a strangled terrified shriek. He did not have to fake fear. "Do that again, rock digger, and I'll pulverise your face as easily as this stone." Ironback pulled a rock from the wall closed his fist around it. It cracked, popped then grated as he ground his fingers together. Ironback opened his palm and shoved the remains of the stone into Starscream's face.

Gripshift nodded smugly as Starscream wrestled against the huge hand. "Please let me go," he gasped. "You're choking me."

Ironback looked at Starscream in the optic. "Ya want me to letcha go? Okay." Ironback released Starscream and put him down gently, brushed his shoulders off and turned away as if to go. This scared the Seeker more than being grabbed. Ironback reached down and grabbed the pickaxe Starscream had put aside. It happened too fast for anyone to react, including Gripshift who was about to protest, in a split second, Ironback had sunk the pick into Starscream's uninjured wing and deep into the rock behind him.

Starscream let out a piecing scream that reverberated through the mine. All miners stopped working to look his way. Seekers visibly shuddered. The other guards ran over.

"Frag, here comes Fastdraw. Now you've done it, Ironback," Gripshift warned. "One thing to rough the slaghead up and blame it on rocks, this would be hard to excuse.

"Gripshift, Ironback," Fastdraw, the head Guard, hollered. "In my office. NOW !" He turned to another guard, "You, contact Med-bay," he said to another who was talking into a radio.

I'm already on it, Fastdraw. We're to keep him here, the Medic's coming," the guard said putting his hand against Starscream pushing him against the wall. "We're to prevent him from dropping and tearing the wing off." The Seeker whimpered to himself and started to slip. "You need to help, sir. This Seeker's heavy." Fastdraw nodded and helped hold Starscream up.

Para hurried into the mine and put down a box of tools. "This is getting way out of hand," she said to Fastdraw. "Starscream's been in my repair unit almost weekly."

"We've not been able to catch them actually doing it," Fastdraw said. "We've usually found the prisoner under a pile of rocks or something. So it's his word against theirs." Fastdraw shrugged. "This time we all heard that scream, I am sure it woke the dead too." Starscream's head rolled to the side and he passed out. "So now we can actually do something about the behaviour."

"Well, Seeker wings tend to be very sensitive," she explained neutralising the pain receptors. "This should help. Pull him and the pickaxe away from the wall, don't pull it out. I am not sure if it's cut through any major fluid lines. There are some bleeds and I am not sure what is in there. I'd hate to cause an uncontrolled leak and kill him." Para braced the axe to keep it in position and helped pull the Seeker from the wall. They laid him out on a stretcher then they carried him to the medical wing.

* * *

Starscream awoke to find Para working on his wing. Starscream winced as he looked over at what she was working on. She had a panel off his wing and was working on the fuel lines and workings inside. "We meet again, Medic." Starscream said weakly.

"Para. Just call me Para, Starscream." She smiled at him. "I only wish our meetings were not always under these circumstances."

"Perhaps I like your kind face and sympathy," Starscream said with a faint chuckle. "How's the wing? Can you save it?" Starscream asked with concern. "I rather need it, well...I haven't really needed it in about eight months, but still, I rather like my wings; what's left of them."

"It'll be good as new," she reassured him. Just a couple lines had to be replaced, that's all." She looked over her work. "I can repair damage to a wing, just I cannot replace it or repair it if it's lost or torn off. That's why I had them hold you up. You've already lost one. I'd hate to see you lose the other."

Para carefully replaced the repaired wing panel back onto the superstructure. Starscream watched and nodded in approval. Had he had both wings, her work would not have generated too much drag in flight. "Well, you're fixed. But to make sure I did not do anything wrong, I am gonna keep you here for observation, possibly overnight." She smiled reassuringly. "However, now it's done, I'd better speak to Fastdraw and the warden about those two knuckle heads and these recurring incidents. You know, at first I did not believe you, or want to believe you, about those two. I know that we need to use force from time to time because someone gets really out of hand, but to purposefully harm a prisoner for fun?" Para shook her head in disgust. "You rest. I will be back in a

couple of hours with some fuel and to see if I did any damage."

Starscream nodded and rested his head on his arm. Para had taken to releasing him of all chains and bonds during his medical visits. One of her attempts at showing him her friendship in an attempt to gain his trust. Starscream, though grateful for the release of his bonds, was mildly disgusted in the fembot. Sure she was nice, had a pleasant disposition, but she was ignorant and perhaps a little arrogant if she thought it was possible to be his friend. She was the enemy; there were lines that were never crossed and that was one of them.

Starscream cocked his head, listening. He waited a few more moments until he was sure the coast was clear. He slid off the repair table, wincing in pain as his repaired wing throbbed. He turned to the door and quietly locked it. Of course it might rouse suspicion if anyone tried to enter, but he could not risk an intrusion; this was important.

Starscream sat down at her computer and accessed the network. He shook his head. She was as naive as she looked. There was no password on her system and he could freely browse the network at his leisure. Perhaps it was ignorance in the fact that some Decepticons could not only speak in the Autobot tongue, but also read and write the script. It took Starscream a while, but he found the schematic and map for the penitentiary they were imprisoned at. It was a large facility, partly underground. Starscream wasted no time to print off a couple of copies of the map. He was careful to put the computer back exactly the way he had found it.

Again he looked around and listened. He still had some time to explore. Starscream looked through several drawers in the room and carefully selected a laser scalpel and a stylus. He came across a couple of charges of pain killer for the hypospray and grabbed those. He knew they would come in handy. After he had quietly ransacked the office and snooped everywhere he could, Starscream unlocked the door. Quickly he rolled the scalpel into the printed plasti-film maps. He opened a small empty compartment on his arm and hid the maps in there. Starscream only hoped he would not be searched before he could get the rest of his plan to the others. Once he was done, Starscream laid down where he had been before and fell asleep. Mission accomplished.

Para returned and Starscream was resting peacefully. She tapped him on the shoulder and he grunted awake alarmed but then relaxed. "Sorry to scare you," she said handing him a large serving of fuel. It was more than he would normally have received.

"Thanks, I forgot where I was," Starscream admitted. The Seeker quickly dove into his meal.

"You should slow down, take your time. I won't rush you."

"Force of habit," Starscream said apologetically. "Have your fuel stolen from you a few times and you will take what you can as fast as you can."

Para nodded. "I thought I'd let you know the warden has suspended both Ironback and Gripshift for a week. So you should have some respite for a while. They've also had black marks entered into their records." She smiled. "See? Those who break our rules are punished. And, if they are smart, they won't do it again."

Starscream laughed harshly. "If they're smart? Trust me, Ironback is about eight rocks short of an ore cart and Gripshift is not that much brighter. You have far too much faith in them if you think a little suspension will make them repent. But we shall see, as you said, it's some respite and I will enjoy not being harassed by them for the next week. I am sure someone else might take up their slack, though." Starscream smiled grimly.

Para gave him a pat. "Well, believe it or not, I have other patients to attend to. You, my friend, are not the only Decepticon who needs a healer's touch." Para grinned brightly.

Starscream forced a smile and nodded. "Yes, you better go to them. I need to rest anyway." Starscream placed his empty fuel tray down and settled himself down. Moments later Para left and Starscream went over the map in his mind. There he plotted in silence. His preliminary plan worked, although it was extremely risky once Ironback came on the scene, however it paid off well. He got the maps, some tools, a good helping of fuel as well as getting the two prison guards off his back for a week. Starscream now had an opportunity to get the ball in motion. He hoped freedom would be within his grasp soon.

Canary

Nine Months in Captivity.

The tunnel was narrow, rough and angled steeply downward into the inky darkness. If it were not for the lantern, Starscream's optical sensors could not have seen further than the end of his nose. He looked behind him and could barely make out the silhouettes of the guards and other crew watching as he descended into the unexplored.

The two guards had been chastised for their rough handling of Starscream as well as a few other prisoners. They did not try to physically harm him themselves, but chose to take their revenge against Starscream in subtler ways. They chose to send him on the more dangerous tasks. They still insulted him, calling him a number of terms and names. They still occasionally denied him fuel. He could see by the way they looked at him that they would love to see him dead.

One of the prisoners had accidentally opened a new tunnel when the area he was working on collapsed. A new tunnel could produce a new vein of metals to be collected. However, to decide if it was a viable source and worth the effort, they had to send someone down. Since the tunnel was unknown and therefore, potentially dangerous, they selected a prisoner to do that work. The tunnel did not have a particularly large entrance. Most Seekers could not fit, but Starscream, being "wingless" fit. Just barely.

Starscream protested when he was chosen for the job. It was not a friendly job and often proved fatal for the inmate who was sent down. Some died when the tunnels broke on top of them, others when explosive gasses ignited. Some simply disappeared with little or no trace of them ever found. Those who survived were put back to work, with no reward or compensation for their risks.

Starscream had resigned to have himself fitted with a lamp that was strapped to his head. It felt peculiar, uncomfortable and a little too tight. Of course Gripshift was the one who had seen to it Starscream was equipped in the most uncomfortable of manners. Starscream had a cable strapped to his waist. A thin line that would be connected to the surface. This was considered the "life line" but it was laughable at best. Starscream could tell it would be incapable of holding his weight, but it was better than nothing. The Decepticon was given a scanner, a couple of tiny tools which were almost useless. They removed the chains from his hands and feet, giving him a small taste of freedom and sent him into the darkness.

The Seeker did not care much for the tunnel. It was tight, and the air was noxious; Starscream reckoned toxic, even for him. His job was to die or report, whichever came first. Starscream remembered reading about the horrific ancient creatures who might have lived in the unexplored depths of Cybertron. Huge energy sucking slug-like creatures with tentacles and tendrils that turned mechanoids into energy vampires. They were often shrugged off as myths or legends, but even Starscream knew that myths, although greatly exaggerated, were often based in fact.

Starscream had always enjoyed exploration and discovery as his curiosity did get the

better of him from time to time. There was a thrill at being the first to see something new, or discover something important or being somewhere no one else had been. Had Starscream not been a prisoner and was able to choose this challenge or given an option to come and go as he pleased, he might have enjoyed it.

Starscream slowly descended, brushing his fingers along the wall. He could feel the roughness of the rock, sharp stones. Occasionally he bumped into a stalactite or tripped over a stalagmite. These ancient formations were the result of a time when water ran freely across the surface of Cybertron, when Cybertron was a very different world, a mechanical jungle of unimaginable beauty, a wilderness of metallic plants and animals, most of which had become extinct during the great wars.

Starscream felt the tunnel turn at an almost right angle. His fingers pushed against the walls and he felt it sink into a sort of spongy material. He was not expecting that and let out a startled yelp of surprise. He glanced at where his fingers had touched and noticed a faint phosphorescent glow. He looked around and could make out the glow from the sides, floors and ceilings of the tunnel. Intrigued, Starscream touched his finger to the switch on his lantern and the light went out.

Starscream stood alone in a tunnel, it was solidly dark for a few moments while his optics adjusted to the new light levels. Before him he could see the glowing mycelium. It cast eerie blue, green, purple, pink, red or yellow glows. These glows were both bright and dim. They did not cause him to shed any shadows other than the dark marks where his feet had crushed the fragile fungus. Starscream glanced past his damaged wing and saw that the trail continued until it rounded the corner and out of sight.

He was impressed, fascinated and leaned closer to study the walls. It was definitely organic in nature. It was rare and Starscream wished he had been free to examine it at will.

"You stopped moving, wingless," a voice crackled over the radio he had attached to his forearm. "What's going on down there?" The radio broke him out of his bubble of wonder. He exhaled sharply.

"Nothing, Gripshift. I'm just checking out the status of the walls," Starscream replied looking once more at the glowing fungus. His curiosity would have to wait.

"Oh. So you are still alive," Gripshift said with a tone of disappointment. "We were beginning to wonder. What's the readings?"

"I am not that easily killed," Starscream replied. "Ah, the readings...of course," Starscream turned the lantern back on and looked down at the scanner, he set it to test the air. "I am getting readings of Methane and trace Hydrogen."

"How high?"

Starscream glanced around at the glowing fungus and exhaled. "Methane levels are potentially dangerous. I wouldn't trust the hydrogen." Starscream warned. He looked at the fungus. Rotting organic materials released gasses. He made a face. He began to

wonder what the fungus was feeding on to be growing in the first place.

"Any useful minerals?" Gripshift asked ignoring Starscream's warning.

"Uh, yeah...useful minerals." Starscream shook his head and brushed the fungus layer off the wall. He carefully removed a tiny sample from the wall and deposited it into the scanner's tray. "I am getting trinium, iron, cobalt and some traces of iridium. Useful, if the methane doesn't blow up." Starscream muttered into the comms. "I think I've done my job. I'm returning." Starscream turned and pulled on the cable to use as a guide out.

"No, we need you to go in further," Gripshift insisted. "Keep moving, wingless."

"For Primus sake..." Starscream gritted his teeth and reluctantly obeyed. He carefully made his way down, past the mycelium and into another long tunnel. He walked along it, for what seemed an eternity. He paused every so often to take samples and readings. Starscream wondered how long he had been in the passage or how far he had gone when he thought he heard something. Starscream stopped and cocked his head. It was silent, so he continued to walk forward. Again he heard it; a sort of shuffling sound somewhere to the left of him. It seemed closer and he held his breath and stood still.

He remained motionless for several minutes. This of course caused the surface crew to become curious. "Wingless, you stopped moving again, are you alive?" Gripshift hissed. "What's your status?"

"Shhh," Starscream snapped. Again he heard the shuffling sound, followed by a sort of grinding grunt-like growl. "I-I'm not alone."

"Pardon?" Gripshift sounded genuinely surprised, "do you care to repeat that?"

Abruptly from Starscream's left a huge form lunged at him from out of the darkness. It had glowing yellow-orange optics. Starscream could just make out its shape in the dim light. It was heavy, round with short but powerful back legs. It appeared to be organic in nature. That was until it opened up its mouth and exposed several rows of razor sharp metallic teeth with a set of rotating teeth in the back. Acidic saliva sprayed from massive maw onto the rocks causing them to sizzle.

Starscream was frozen to the spot before his claustrophobia took hold and all rational thought was thrown out the door. His body unfroze itself and he swung wildly with his hand, battering the ball-like body away. The Seeker turned to run back the way he had come. "GET ME OUT!" he screamed into the comms. "GET ME OUT NOW!"

His shrill voice and rapid movement attracted other creatures who came bounding from the opposite end of the tunnel.

"Starscream?!" the guard called. "What the frag is down there with you?"

The creature made a squeal-like grinding screech as it leapt at him again, this time its teeth managed to find purchase on his forearm and the power in its lunge knocked the Seeker over into the wall. It squirted the acidic saliva over his arm and that hissed as it ate into his chromoderm. He howled in pain as he struggled against the ball-like body.

He was able to notice that it was almost entirely head. His right hand scrambled to grab at the monstrosity. He found the creature's tiny tail and grabbed it tightly, crushing his fingers against the bone-like metal structure. It cracked and snapped and the creature screamed in fury. For a moment it dug its teeth in, then released.

Starscream flung it away into the darkness. He heard the creature impact the wall and at the same time the tunnel started to shudder. Starscream glanced up and noticed the section of rocks above him were starting to come loose.

"SLAG!" he screamed as he pushed himself to his feet and dove forward at break neck speed. He could hear the metallic claws hitting the stoney ground as the creature dodged rocks as it hunted Starscream. The Seeker scrambled forward, grunting in pain as a heavy rock hit him. Was it the rock or was it the creature? He stumbled and the lantern which was strapped to his head slipped off and hit the ground. His large feet crushed the lantern causing it to emit a tiny spark. In an instant the whole cavern lit up then exploded in all available directions. The bouncing monstrosity squealed as the methane and hydrogen explosion consumed its organic outer casing leaving behind the metallic skeleton. The body continued to jerk and shudder before it finally laid still.

Starscream dropped to the ground as soon as he realised the peril. He covered his head with his arms. A futile gesture, he realised but it was all he could think of. As he landed, his canopy shattered then the falling rocks fell around him, piling up..

Starscream groaned as he came to. He was under several tons of rock and dirt. But he was alive and he hoped he could keep it that way. Starscream ran a quick diagnostic check on his systems. He was wounded, but not as severely damaged as he could have been. That was a relief. Starscream inhaled deeply and pushed the pain out of his mind. He had to focus. He realised he had a small opportunity to escape. He was positive that the rock fall and explosion did not go unnoticed. He was also certain that he was assumed dead.

The Seeker could hear the sounds of wuffling and grunting, and the noise of heavily clawed feet digging into the rock. Starscream realised that it might not be a good idea to consider escape if it meant diving further into an entirely unknown area. Especially if there were more of those creatures hidden in the darkness. He realised that it would be totally dark as he no longer had a working lantern.

The creatures were digging, he could hear their metallic teeth crunching into raw rock, the grind as their inner teeth ground it into a wet acidic pulp. How they could digest such materials and form it into energy was beyond Starscream Another subject that would be of interest for study. Another subject that would have to wait until the war was over.

Starscream concentrated on his personal energy hoping to make a single effort to pull himself from his burial. He was concerned about what would happen to him if the creatures exposed a part of him. If they ate rock, then what would they think of him? Various nutritious metals and minerals, with a very energy rich fluid system that was filled with nanites and other micro-nutrients. A crunchy outside, with a chewy centre. Starscream was not used to being considered a potential fuel source for other creatures. It was not heard of; it was obscene.

"I'll give you indigestion," Starscream warned as he pushed his hands down to the ground and his back to the ceiling. The rocks began to shift from him, falling away. "Decepticons taste bitter, try an Autobot. I know some that would feed you well." The creatures grunted, startled by the movement under the rocks. They stopped for a moment then started to dig with renewed vigour.

Starscream's head was free of the stones and he looked forward then behind himself. He realised he was uncertain where he had come from. It was too dark to tell. He moved himself out of the pile and listened again. The sound of scuffling and digging came from behind him. He put his hand out and touched a wall of loose rock and stone. That way was blocked, he wondered if the creatures were also blocked.

Not waiting to find out, Starscream carefully picked his way through the tunnel, holding a rock in his hand as a weapon. The cable at his waist had been broken. He was uncertain if it was cut by the rocks or by the creature's teeth. Starscream was unable to locate the cable in the darkness. He took a few step forward and noticed that the tunnel had a slightly upward slant to it. he hurried forward until he came to a bend in the tunnel. He exhaled with relief as he realised this was the way he had come.

He paused before emerging from the darkness. A chance to escape had slipped through his fingers. He shook his head angrily. Had it not been for the strange beasts, he might have found a way out. Starscream shook his head again at his folly. He had no idea where the passages could lead, and forced himself to realise that escape was likely impossible.

He quietly made his way to the entrance of the tunnel and looked out. The tunnel entrance had been cordoned off. The mine was still running although the staff and prisoner population seemed to be at about half strength. He glanced out passed the barriers he spotted Rainjumper and Talon working at an area not too far away. He could not escape through the tunnel but he still had the maps secreted away. It was the first opportunity he had since their meeting in the mess hall to get them the maps and start the second phase of the escape plan. Starscream inhaled deeply and hurried to their location.

"For the love of Primus," Rainjumper, said looking at the badly battered Seeker. "You managed to survive that?" Starscream was scratched, torn, and his canopy had spider cracks and chunks missing. The backs of his wings were blackened from the soot from the methane explosion and the ash that the burned mycelium had created.

Starscream nodded grimly. "Look, I don't have much time before I am noticed, but take these," Starscream quickly stuffed a map into the hand of Rainjumper then handed one to Talon. "Meet me in the mess or recreation hall at the next opportunity. We'll work out the wrinkles then." Starscream put his hand to his canopy and groaned, he was aching and finally, it was catching up to him.

Rainjumper caught Starscream and leaned him against the rock wall. He took a small amount of his energy rations and handed it to Starscream. The Seeker sipped it gratefully. "We'll discuss this plan as soon as we can."

Talon nodded. "Guards!" he called out, "Starscream's made it out. He needs medical help!"

Jolly Jumpers

Few hours later.

Starscream was released from the med-bay. His canopy was carefully taped up. Para said she would get Starscream new canopy glass made; however, it could take up to a week. She had carefully reinforced the fractured glass with thin strips of metal plating and covered the outside of his canopy in a protective coat of mylar sheeting. It was not pretty, but it would hold. Starscream disliked the sound of the fractured glass grating across each other when he moved or twisted. It caused his circuits to prickle and surge, giving him unpleasant tingling sensations shot up and down his back.

The guard said nothing to him when the warning sirens and lights came on. What was even more unusual was the doors to the cells were open and the prisoners were milling around. The air was tense, there was a lot of confusion and he could smell the pungent odour of mech fluids. The guard put his hand to his audio as a transmission came in. He said nothing to Starscream as he gripped his weapon in both hands and dropped the safety catch.

Starscream cocked his head. He could hear a rapid thudding sound coming closer yet at a distance. There was something familiar about the sound.

"SHUT THE CELLBLOCK DOORS!" someone screamed. "IT'S COMING THIS WAY!"

Two guards threw themselves at the cellblock hatch and slammed it shut. They spun the locking mechanism shut. They both took up battle ready positions.

At the end of the hall there was a commotion, a guard screamed a warning cry and there was a shriek, or a growl, or was it a grunt. Within seconds all hell broke loose. Guards and prisoners started to run in all directions. Some of the more cowardly guards bolted into the cells along with the prisoners who inhabited them. Starscream's escort ran off to the epicentre of activity.

Starscream simply stood dumbfounded until the slathering ball of claws and teeth came into view. It was almost larger than life. 'How did that get in here?' Starscream immediately recognised it. The Seeker looked about for an avenue of escape, but the cell doors were almost all shut. The cell block entrance was closed and his only exit was past the creature which was hurtling down the hall.

Starscream watched in morbid fascination as the guard who had escorted him was hit by the creature full force. Almost instantly the beast tore the guard's arm off and bounded off with it. If Starscream had not been without an escape route, he would have been highly amused. It resembled a deranged mechanical puppy, happy to have a new toy.

Starscream's optics widened as the creature bounded for him. It dropped the arm and opened its mouth wide ready to snap at Starscream. The Seeker had already suffered enough injuries and screamed for help. He darted around and looked for a place to run or hide. Moments later Starscream felt a powerful tug on his arm. He screamed shrilly as

he lost his balance and was pulled sideways into the cell beside him. The heavy metal door was slammed shut as the creature smashed into it, denting the bars. It squealed in anger and started to claw at the door, but then noticed that there were other easier, tastier looking targets running around. The creature bounced away with a jovial yipe.

The Seeker inhaled a few sharp breaths and tried to relax as he realised he was safe behind bars. He smiled inwardly at the irony of that thought. He shook his head and wondered how the monstrosity made it this far into the prison complex. "That was close," he exhaled.

"They got into the mine," the voice of Talon said answering Starscream's unasked question. "There were about six of them and they tore it up pretty bad."

From somewhere a prisoner screamed and was abruptly silenced. Gunshots were fired followed by an irate snarl-like squeal. The creature literally bounced off the walls attacking anything that came near. Its powerful legs and razor sharp claws made short work of anything they touched. Starscream was impressed.

"They got out? I thought the blast would have incinerated them," the Seeker said in surprise. "It nearly incinerated me." Starscream grabbed Talon and yanked him to the floor. As he did, bullets whizzed over their heads and impacted the wall and then ricocheted wildly. Luckily no one was hit. The Seeker shook his head. "This is nuts," he mused.

"Yeah, no slag. Anyway, ten minutes after you were taken to Med-bay, they emerged. The 'bots think they followed the smell of your fluids. You were bleeding fluids pretty badly."

Starscream nodded. "My memory of the events is a bit sketchy," he admitted. "I can't stand being in tunnels like that." They remained on the floor and observed as the guards and the irate creature bounded past once more. "How did those things get up here?"

Talon pursed his lips pensively. "Well when the creatures came up, we were removed from the mine, but not before a couple of guys were injured; possibly killed, we don't know yet. So the guards were ordered to get us out. The bots obviously failed to contain them."

Starscream nodded, the creatures were uncontrollable.

One guard levelled his pulse rifle and fired a shot. The creature emitted a gurgling squeal as it exploded. Starscream raised his arm in a futile gesture to protect himself from the mess of fluids and lubricants that sprayed in all directions.

"UGH! That's disgusting," Starscream complained as he wiped the muck from his face. Talon was also wiping his face, he had been closer to the door when the creature exploded.

"That's the last of them," the guard at the other end of the hall shouted.

"Are you sure? Last I heard there were nine."

"Nine?" the guard replied, panic creeping into his voice. "I was told there were only four."

"Someone told me there were six on the run," another voice injected. "How many are there?"

"For crying out loud, get Speedway to the med-bay. The beast took his arm off: find it. Then we need to do a body count on the creatures and find out exactly how many are left..."

Starscream looked over his broken wing at Talon. "So, why aren't we the ones after the beasts? Surely they would prefer to sacrifice one or two of us to the monstrosities, than use their own valuable guards."

Talon smiled slightly. "They were too confused to think of it. So we didn't volunteer"

The guards helped carry the injured guard to the med-bay. A couple guards hung back with some janitorial staff to clean up the mess. The hallway between the cells was a mess. Some lights flickered while others were out. Walls had gouges and scratches in them. Ever so slowly the prisoners crept out of the cells. If they did not have to remain behind bars, they chose not to.

Talon got to his feet and was about to open the door to go out as well. Starscream grabbed his shoulder and stopped him. "Did you look over the map I gave you?" he asked.

Talon shook his head. "Not yet. It's been too chaotic." Talon moved to the recharge platform and poked at the end of it. He pried out a small splinter of metal and used that to carefully dig into the grill of his air intake. It took a moment for the other prisoner to pry out the tightly folded map. Starscream marvelled at how tiny the other Seeker had managed to fold the map. "You never thought to hide something there?" Talon asked.

"It did not occur to me," he admitted. "I have concealed some stuff on me, but I risk being found with it. I suspect punishment, if one is found out, is pretty severe. But as they say, things are best hidden in the most obvious places."

"Yeah, it's pretty severe if you get caught. Just don't ask where Rainjumper hid his," Talon chuckled softly.

"I don't think I really want to know," Starscream replied. "Here, I am often being watched so pass my words on to the others. Then give me some indication that you have spoken to the others."

Talon nodded. "I will do that, you can count on it."

"Good," Starscream nodded, looking toward the cell door to ensure they were not observed.

"Here's my plan. Priority on escape belongs to our group, we help no one else."

Understood? We work together. Here is where I contradict myself...once we get the keys, and we ourselves are free, throw the keys to the other prisoners. They will cause a distraction and pandemonium. Getting it to this point will be tricky and extremely dangerous. Timing has to be exact and I will choose that precise time. Ensure the others of our team do not breathe a word of this to anyone or we are all as good as dead. The chaos that the other prisoners start should give the guards something to worry about. I am hoping we can slip out once we are under the radar and get lost in the throng. The other prisoners won't have as great a chance as we do to escape, but if some get out, all the better. This place is a hole, literally and figuratively." Starscream flattened the map carefully.

"We need to get down to this passage from our usual mine. Providing we aren't shifted now due to the creatures. That could cause me to rethink our plan, especially if we all get separated to different work units." Starscream pointed to a narrow shaft. "This is an air exchange vent, it leads to the surface. It draws in air and expels the dangerous gases from the mines we work. There is an air exchanger unit over here and we cannot get out from there as the big fans will cheerfully chew us into strips; however, we can get out through this maintenance hatch." Starscream pointed to the different points on the map. "After we pass through that hatch, we will have to get through this area here. If I am reading this right, this is a low security rest area. I admit, we run a fair risk of getting recaptured there, but I think we should be able to pull it off. I would suspect the only real visitors to this area would be medics and fembots. Neither of those types are any good at fighting and we should be able to overpower them. Especially the Autobot medics. They are pacifists and are pretty naive. I will be aiming to get hold of some weapons on our way out. Follow my lead, on that." Starscream folded the map up quickly and handed it to Talon. "Any questions?"

"This plan looks too easy, Starscream." Talon said. "So far no one has managed to escape from this place, or tried and lived."

"Oh it's far from easy, but how many others had a map? How many others worked as a team? As single individuals, we don't stand a chance. We're Seekers; we work best in a group. Also, we will try to start up a riot of sorts. As soon as there are a lot of bodies moving around, our chances of getting out improve that much more. Also the punishment may be less severe should we get recaptured along with everyone else in the mine. In spite of how I feel about Autobots, I doubt they would kill an entire group of miners over a workers revolt. Anyway, we're prisoners, we are expected to do this sort of thing from time to time. Let's not disappoint the Autobots." Starscream chuckled and Talon nodded.

"If you have any thoughts on this at any time, try to let me know, our area of trouble will be getting out of Autobot held territory, once we are on the Decepticon side, we're free." Starscream glanced at his wing wondering how much trouble he would have. "Be ready to move at a moment's notice. You'll know the signal."

Talon was about to reply when a guard passed in front of the cell. He stopped and narrowed his optics at Starscream. Starscream glanced at Talon. "I better leave before I get sent to Med-bay again," the Seeker hissed. Starscream exited the cell and slowly walked to his own.

His mind ran over the plan, over and over again. He had memorised every detail on the

map with crystal clarity. They could take the paper from him, but unless they did a mental purge, they would never take it completely away. Starscream sat on the platform vibrating in excitement. He was eager to start his escape plan, every nerve in his body tingled in anticipation.

He forced himself to calm down so he could rest for a while. His mind was wide awake going over ideas, running through mental simulations of various outcomes. For the first time in many months, Starscream felt like a Decepticon. Starscream knew that he would have to wait for the best time and not jump at the first opportunity.

Starscream nodded to himself as his instructor's voice echoed in his head. "Time makes all things possible. All you have to do is wait."

Midday Break

Twenty two months after Captivity.

The morning klaxon sounded and the prisoners were roused from their short rest. Work day was about to start and they had to get their morning rations. Starscream was exhausted, he had spent many months working hard and his joints were starting to feel the wear. He began to wonder what the life span of a prisoner was. They did get maintenance, for what it was worth, but it was never really enough. His canopy was cracked again and Para could not get the materials to have it repaired. He was lucky enough to get a new canopy after his was shattered in the mine explosion.

To the dismay of Starscream, the plans for escape were put on hold. His team were split up and were sent to work other mines. Unfortunately for him, Starscream was left at the mine under the baleful optics of Gripshift and Ironback. He desperately wished he was the one sent somewhere else.

The line was long, but it moved quickly. Starscream was handed his tray of morning rations. It was the usual fare; over dry oil-cakes. He glanced around until he found himself a spot where he could be alone and set himself to gobble up what he had in front of him; it was, as usual, stale. It was better than nothing, and he had that on far too many more occasions than he cared for. The Seeker was about to start on his second portion of fuel when he was smacked in the back. He looked up and saw Ironback glaring at him.

"Watch it, wingless," the burly guard snapped.

Starscream opened his mouth to protest that he had done nothing, but quickly silenced himself. There was no point in aggravating Ironback this early in the morning. Unfortunately the guard anticipated the reaction and took the oil cake and consumed it himself.

"HmMMMM, that was good. Too good for you. You had enough for the morning anyway," he said with a satisfied smugness.

Scowling, Starscream glanced angrily down at his empty tray. He almost had his breakfast; almost. It looked as though another period of hunger was about to commence, he had just got over one. He looked at the Autobot as he went off looking over some of the newer prisoners and harassed them. The harassment ban was fairly short lived. Fastdraw, the former head of the mine, had been promoted and reposted to a different prison. Fastdraw's replacement was often content to turn a blind optic to the mistreatment of prisoners.

The work klaxon sounded and the prisoners made their way to the mines. At the door each one was given an pickaxe and then lead to their work station. Starscream numbly started working, focusing on anything else but where he was.

If Para had not been a reasonably decent medic, for an Autobot, Starscream would have

found her incredibly irritating. It did not surprise Starscream at all when she admitted that she had developed feelings for him. It did not surprise him at all. Inwardly he cringed, but in an effort to facilitate his escape, Starscream smiled charmingly and tried to play the part.

Para did her best to assist Starscream in any way he needed. There were things that were simply out of her hands, but the things that he needed, she could be counted on to get for him. Pain relievers, fuel, books and even a small game to keep his mind occupied when he was unable to rest.

Starscream shook his head as the axe hit the rock breaking off a chunk of ore. Starscream felt it was strange that she would take to him in the manner she did. She appeared to feel comfortable and safe around the Decepticon. She spoke much about the Autobots and her society and spoke of the greatness and kindness the Autobots stood for.

He paid careful attention to what she said, keeping everything he heard in mind. She spoke of their education systems, their family groups, their favourite fuels and what was considered popular in the way of art, music and drama. Starscream found it rather interesting. The Autobots were much akin to the Decepticons, however, like their insignias, there was also much that was very, very different.

Starscream was astonished when Para described the care of elderly members of their society. The terminally sick and the infirm were given a great deal of care. Starscream could not understand how this was logical. How could they keep weakness alive? How could they consider early termination not merciful. It was at least more humane to not let a terminally ill Decepticon get to a point where he or she could not live comfortably or function within the group. And then there was the whole Covenant of Primus religion that the Autobots had taken to with a great fervour. Starscream did not believe in a god that was never seen. If Starscream had to choose one person to worship, he would pick Megatron; after all, Megatron had done much for the Decepticons and Starscream respected him.

The Seeker did not debate this with Para. He slowly started to agree with her and make it appear as if he had seen the light. Para was thrilled. She had worked hard to convert Starscream from the Decepticon heresy and it seemed her hard work was coming to fruition. She had no idea.

The ore was heavy and Starscream grunted as he placed it into the awaiting cart. He knew Para would be in for a letdown as soon as he broke free of the prison. Starscream looked into the cart and sighed. That was, if he ever had the chance to break free. As far as he could tell, that plan went out the door as soon as the tunnel exploded.

Para had run to his defence on a couple of occasions as Gripshift and Ironback started up their old tricks once more. Starscream had told her once that a weeks suspension would not work on them, and he had been right. Para had even tried to explain to the new head guard that Starscream's injuries were not from any accident. And accidents that occurred to only one prisoner on a regular basis? However, in spite of her efforts, she was told that Starscream only had one wing and was, therefore, unbalanced and clumsy. This was true, but Starscream had compensated for the imbalance reasonably

well.

Para ensured that Starscream had plenty of fuel when he ended up in her med-bay. She knew he had two fuel tanks, which was uncommon in Seekers, and tried to help keep them as full as possible in case he was forced into starvation. Which happened a lot.

Twice Starscream was forced into solitary confinement for, at first, ten days then the second offence he was confined for twenty five days. Both of those occasions Starscream had been deprived of sleep prior to him finally snapping and instigating an argument with one of the guards. On those occasions he felt as if he did miss her. He realised that he actually missed the fuel she gave him. He smirked to himself slightly. Perhaps Para thought the way to a mech's spark was through his fuel tanks.

Starscream decided to play her game in returning the talk of his society and what he had done prior to the war. She seemed impressed that he was an explorer and sympathised with him when he spoke of the loss of his friend, Skyfire. Starscream explained that it was the loss of his friend, being left by his long term girlfriend and a number of other things that drove him to school at the War Academy and eventually join the Decepticons. Starscream had also explained that his dual tanks permitted him to travel great distances, especially if he consumed the highest grade fuel possible.

Something caused him to break from his thought. He looked around and cocked his head. 'did someone just call my name?' he thought. He felt a hand land on his shoulder. He jerked in surprise.

"Starscream? Are you going to stop working and take your break?"

"Huh? Talon?" The Seeker turned his head and he was confronted with a bottle of energon. He looked at the hand that held it. "I haven't seen you in months," he said with a smile. Starscream grabbed the bottle and started to suck down the contents.

"Yeah, same here. Wondered if you'd remember me," he teased. "Well, good news is we're working here for a while, part of the mine collapsed. Bad news is Jetstream and Shallowdive are dead."

Starscream nearly spat out his beverage. "What?! How?"

"They were digging the area that collapsed."

Starscream exhaled. "What of the others; are they still alive?"

"They've been transferred back to this mine, Rainjumper and Deepsky are fine and eager, if you know what I mean. Are we still on for that?" Talon pointed down toward the other end of the tunnel where two familiar figures rested against the ore cart and consumed their fuel.

Starscream nodded. He had placed his plans on the back burner and suddenly had to pull them into the front of his mind. "How long are you working in this mine?" Starscream asked.

"Oh...they said they were going to have to get a mining engineer in to see what went wrong and to prevent it in future. Could be a few hours, could be a few days. Really, I have no idea." Talon shrugged his shoulders. Talon waved to get the attention of Rainjumper; he gave him a thumbs up gesture. Rainjumper in turn nodded to Deepsky.

"What was that?" Starscream asked.

"Just saying the plan is still on," Talon replied finishing his fuel. Starscream also finished his drink and nodded. He wiped his mouth and caught sight of Ironback creeping around the corner.

"You to there," Ironback snarled, "Stop talking or I'll stop you from ever talking." He glared at Starscream.

Starscream snorted in irritation. He narrowed his optics and glared at the burly officer. "You can try, bot fragger," The Seeker hissed under his breath.

"What was that you tunnel worm?" Ironback ran over and grabbed Starscream by the throat and lifted him off his feet. "I'll take the rest of your voice now!" He squeezed the Seeker's throat between his powerful fingers.

Electro-adrenaline flooded Starscream's systems and raw power surged into all of his limbs. His optics flashed crimson, he did not hide his hatred. His mind sped up as his perspective slowed, the Seeker's reactions became lightning fast. His neck tensed, preventing Ironback from causing him any further damage and he locked optics with his attacker. Ironback simply smirked smugly.

Moving so fast that Ironback did not have a chance to react, Starscream had removed the modified and overpowered laser scalpel from his hidden compartment, activated it and thrust it upward into Ironback's chest. Ironback's optics flickered in shock at the speed of Starscream's retaliatory attack.

"I said, you can try, bot fragger!" Starscream hissed "But you're already dead!" He drew the blade back and thrust it upward again then twisted it, tearing up the internal circuits until the energy blade found its mark; the spark chamber. Fluids issued forth from the mortally wounded Autobot, covering Starscream in a thick purple ichor. A smile of satisfaction crossed Starscream's lips as Ironback's fingers let go and his optics flickered then blackened. The Autobot's body rapidly faded to the dull grey-black of permanent shut down.

Still flooded with adrenaline, Starscream worked fast and grabbed the keys from the dead Autobot's hip ring. He quickly released himself and threw the keys to Talon, who watched with his mouth open in shock.

Catching the keys in an automatic reaction Talon abruptly snapped out of his shock and released himself. "Starscream! Are you nuts?"

"Yes. Now, we start that little plan of ours," Starscream hissed grabbing Ironback's weapon as well as service pistol, "Let pandemonium break loose," he cried in triumph.

"If we don't get out this round, it won't matter, we're in deep slag," Talon remarked. Starscream ran into the centre of the mine, not hearing Talon's misgivings. The other guards were already running to what would shortly become a huge melee.

As expected, the alarm klaxon was sounded alerting other guards to the situation. The confusion was only just beginning. Starscream was about to up the degree.

Spruts of dirt were kicked up from bullets fired from the guards on the catwalk. Starscream wasted no time in aiming and taking return shots. He scored several hits, and two were downed. Even better the two fell off the catwalk and landed on the rocky mine floor with a sickening thud.

He sped over to their bodies and searched them for their weapons and ammo. Finding what he needed, he threw a gun to Talon and sent him running to the other side of the mine where the other members of their team awaited.

With a great heave, Starscream shoved over an ore cart and used that as protection as he laid cover fire for Talon. Several guards fell, some to Starscream and some to friendly fire. Talon and the others collected the weapons and lobbed the keys that each guard had at the other prisoners.

"This is where it gets entertaining," Starscream said to the others as they joined him. "So far we aren't dead, but the prison is going to be crawling with Autobots; however, I expect them to have locked off all major passages, which will not only stop us, but slow them down too. This is to our advantage, as we are not going to go that way. I do hope you became familiar with the plan prior to this moment as I will not have time to reiterate it."

"We understand the plan, Commander," Rainjumper confirmed.

The mine was teeming with freed prisoners, they ran about throwing rocks at the guards, smashing turrets and upsetting ore carts. They chased down and killed or maimed the guards with pick axes, taking their weapons and keys. More and more miners were milling around. The Decepticon prisoners outnumbered their Autobot keepers by ten to one, a number which continued to grow as the guards were felled.

"Okay, we've got the mob going, we can sneak out now!" Starscream ordered. The group ran toward the entrance "We better make our escape, else we are going to be in a lot of slag. I do not intend to be here when the smoke clears."

Grinning with joy, Starscream and the others made their escape through the mine entrance, their weapons were ready. Starscream took the lead and led the others into the main hall where he collided into Gripshift.

"YOU!" the guard cried in surprise.

Of the two guards, Starscream would have to say that Gripshift was the lesser threat of the two. He was intelligent enough to know when to stop, unlike his blood-thirsty friend. Gripshift had on a few occasions prevented his over zealous friend from causing Starscream greater harm. He hated him all the same; Starscream considered Gripshift a

coward.

"Good afternoon. So nice to see you, Gripshift," Starscream snarled. "I understand there is a big going away party in the mine right now; but unfortunately, I think you're about to be late." Before Gripshift could reply, Starscream fired his weapon and the Autobot hit the ground.

Wind Tunnel

They ran through the hall as fast as they could, their feet pounding heavily against the floor as they pushed onward at full speed. Sirens blared as orders were screamed through the facilities loud speakers. The four ran onward until they came to the junction in the hallway that Starscream had pointed out on the maps. This was their way to freedom.

His breath came out in short raspy bursts as he yanked open the heavy hatch. Starscream waved his companions through the door as he stood ready to take action. He needed to ensure there were no stragglers and no one he did not want following them. The tunnel that lead upward was narrow, barely wide enough to take a Seeker. The shaft was lined either side with high pressure sodium lights. They cast a pinkish-orange glow over everyone making them appear sickly. Wires of various thickness' ran along the walls entering different shafts that spidered out in all directions. Several large pipes with huge valves entered the walls at regular intervals. Most of the pipes were marked with LN2; liquid nitrogen.

Talon, who was in the lead, cursed to himself as his wings got snared on some wires. Cables were ripped from the walls. A shower of blue and pink sparks showered down on the other Seekers below.

Glancing upward, Starscream waited, impatiently for the others to make room for him. He was getting worried as he could see Autobots approaching their location. Once the others were out of the way, Starscream slammed the door shut and spun the hatch wheel. He struck upon an idea and ripped some cables from the wall and used them to weld the door shut behind him. He also tied the cables to the handle, snarling in pain as he, himself, was shocked.

"We have issues coming this way," Starscream shouted. "You'd better get your aft's moving. I will guard the rear." He knew his actions would not buy them much time, but it was better than nothing.

Shouldering his weapon, Starscream hurried up the service ladder. He glanced down frequently as the Autobots attempted to break through the door. He was in luck, the open wires caused the Autobots to rethink their plans. He hoped it would be enough. "When you get to the top, remember, turn right, not left. Left means you're fan fuel." Starscream shouted to the others above him.

Without a warning, the lights in the shaft went out. The four Seekers were plunged into darkness. The formerly sparking wires stopped. Starscream realised power had been cut to the shaft. They were blinded. It took a minute for their optics to adjust to the lack of light, however, they had only one direction and up was it. Starscream only hoped the Seekers above him would not slip and fall. If one did, they would either all fall or get jammed somewhere in the middle. Something Starscream did not relish. He considered giving an order to activate their navigation lights, but thought against it. If the Autobots came through one of the access hatches, they would be able to more easily target the

escaping prisoners.

The Autobots finding the original entrance welded and rigged, opened up a hatch on a different level, they shone lights into the darkness and illuminated the Seekers who scrambled upward. Two guards squeezed into the hatch and aimed their weapons up and opened fire.

"ARGH!" Starscream shrieked as a bullet ripped into him. "Take cover in the next access shaft and then return fire," Starscream ordered as he threw himself into a dark shadowy hole. "Ensure you don't hit any of us," he added.

He had taken a wound, that much was obvious. How bad it was he wasn't sure. He used his hands to feel along the leg until he came to the wound. His fingers located the opening, it was sticky and warm. His nervous system sent stinging messages to his mind as his body objected to his fingers probing the wound. He gritted his teeth as his roughened fingers slowly pried the slug out.

Biting back a grunt of pain, the bullet popped free and he exhaled slowly. 'How bad was it?' he wondered looking at his hands and then at the wound. It seemed superficial. Minor penetration and no major arterial damage. He would bleed fluids for a bit until his self repair nanites converged to the damaged area and started to close it. 'How much of a setback would this be?' he wondered as he groped around in a hidden compartment for the shot of the pain killers he had stolen from the medical bay. Starscream jabbed the hypo near his wound and exhaled in relief as most of the pain went. He knew he should have been more careful, but the shaft was small, and there was no room to dodge shots.

There was another shriek from above and he knew another of his team was hit. Which one was it; Rainjumper? Starscream wasn't sure. He checked his cartridge and loaded the gun. He poked his head out and fired downward toward the blinding light. A few pops and the sound of shattering glass reached his audios. Starscream continued to fire into the darkness. The Autobots did not return fire. He waited. The shaft door below was slammed shut.

"Hurry," Starscream hollered up. "They think that they have us pinned so we better move. I am going to guess that they'll be trying one of the doors above us. A shot from above will surely be fatal."

"Deepsky's been hit, Commander," Talon shouted down.

"How severe?" Starscream inquired. He wondered if it might be an idea to cut their losses and terminate the Decepticon.

"Not enough to stop me," the wounded Decepticon replied, as if he sensed Starscream's thoughts. "I can handle this; what about you commander? You took a shot just now too."

Grunting, Starscream resumed the climb. "I can manage, it's nothing serious. Anyway, I've had much worse. Continue on as planned." And there was that. He could not give an order to destroy the wounded Decepticon unless he himself was prepared to face the same fate; Starscream was not.

"Where were you hit?" Starscream inquired as he felt a drop of warm fluid hit him in the face.

"Uh, the backside." the wounded Decepticon grunted. He followed it with a shaky laugh. "Those Autobots are a real pain in the aft."

"Deepsky..."

There was a heavy groan of metal against metal, bearings that were in the need of a lubrication, the groan quickly picked up to a high-pitched whine and the exchange fans fired up.

"We've got some real issues now," hissed Starscream.

"Slag, that fan is firing up...how bad is this gonna be?"

"Oh, I will say...pretty bad," Starscream remarked. "Ever have flight simulations in a wind tunnel trainer, Deepsky?"

"Yeah, Commander, any Seeker in the military has; it's regulation."

Starscream grabbed hold of the ladder as gusts buffeted him and the others. "Well, it is going to be just like that, only a lot worse," he shouted over the roar.

The wind was powerful and Starscream flattened himself as much as he could against the ladder. His fingers gripped tightly to the rungs. He exhaled sharply as the air in the tunnel rapidly dropped below zero. Starscream glanced at the pipes marked LN2. He grew suddenly concerned for their safety. 'What would happen if one of those were punctured or an Autobot opened them up?' He knew they would be almost immediately frozen and sitting ducks; awaiting capture. Capture or death by liquid nitrogen was not the way he planned to go.

The other Decepticons fought against the wind to climb upward, Starscream followed as well. Each rung was an effort of concentration. "It'll last five minutes," Starscream screamed, his voice was nearly lost against the howl of wind and the screech of metal against metal. "We need to hang in there, we're nearly at the crossroads. I am sure the Autobots are waiting at one of the levels for this gale to cease. We must be out by that point."

He watched as his fingers slowly closed around a rung. He could feel the freezing effect of the wind on his systems. Starscream was alarmed. 'Was it nitrogen?' Abruptly the bearings squealed in protest as worn out brakes were applied to the fan's hub. The wind stopped almost as suddenly as it had started. The air was still, yet their audios still rang from the noise. He flexed his fingers as Talon disappeared to the right. Deepsky followed him and Rainjumper as well. Starscream grunted as he forced himself to scramble upward and into the passage.

"Hoooo-Slag, I'll never complain about those training simulations ever again," Rainjumper said looking over at Deepsky who was sitting awkwardly. "How bad is it?"

Deepsky's optics flicked uneasily in Starscream's direction. "Very uncomfortable," he muttered.

"This is going to hurt like a son of a slarg." Starscream hissed as he grabbed Deepsky and shoved him down. "Whatever you do, don't scream, it'll give away our position and I'll have to shoot you. Grit your teeth, be a Decepticon and bear it. Understood?"

"Yeah-hey; What are you doing?"

"Sixty second field surgery." Starscream said pushing his fingers into the wound.

"You're a medic too?" he asked through gritted teeth.

Starscream could feel the bullet inside the Decepticon. It was deep and the amount of fluids indicated a more severe injury. "No, I just know the basic stuff, spent enough time in the medical bay anyway, I plan to learn more later." Starscream said grabbing the slippery bullet between his fingers. "This is where it's gonna hurt." The Seeker covered Deepsky's mouth with his hand and yanked the offending slug out. Deepsky tried to scream but was effectively stifled by his superior's hand.

"Hold him down and silence him," Starscream ordered releasing Deepsky's face, he pulled open a panel in the wall and yanked out several wires until he found a live pair. Quickly he jammed the wires into the open wound; Blue-lavender sparks shot out followed by the acrid smell of ozone and burned circuits. Deepsky thrashed against the others as Starscream cauterised and welded the bleeds shut.

"There you go, as good as new," Starscream said with a smirk. "And as your treat for being such a good patient, I have an energon goodie just for you." Starscream pulled out the hypo and gave the Seeker a shot of pain sensor killing medicine. He frowned slightly as he glanced at the hypo. "That was my last one, so no one else get wounded. We better move now, before we lose our chance."

"What's that voice?" Talon whispered, raising his head in alarm.

"Sounds like an announcement," Starscream replied. "What are they saying?"

Rainjumper placed his head against the door and listened; he cringed. "Warning; liquid nitrogen control will be activated in ten seconds, all Autobots must evacuate sections to the main levels. Warning; liquid nitrogen control will be activated in seven seconds...." he repeated.

"So, they do plan on freezing us to death." Starscream muttered with a slight nod. "Not if I can help it."

* * *

Fifteen minutes earlier.

The mine had completely succumbed to chaos. Hundreds of Decepticon prisoners were out and about chasing down guards and other Autobots, killing them on sight with their

purloined weapons. Many of the Autobot guards fell back to several levels above the affected areas. Orders were already being given to evacuate the affected areas.

Some Autobots remained behind to deal with the wounded. Para was one such Autobot. She was on her knees working to repair the severely wounded Gripshift. She gritted her teeth as she struggled to contain the profusely flowing fluids. The shot was accurate, hit a main fuel line. The prognosis was grim.

Gripshift's optics flickered on and he turned his head and focused on the medic. "Para..."

"What happened? Who did this?" she asked putting some of her medi-pack under his head to raise it off the floor.

The wounded Autobot coughed then he took a deep burbling breath. He fought to draw in enough energy from his rapidly fading reserves. "I warned you, Para. I warned you about HIM. That...Starscream...he did this." The Autobot was struggling to hang onto life. "He caused this mess. It was Starscream." The Autobot face contorted in pain from his wounds.

"No...He wouldn't have. Starscream was a changed mech. He was coming to our side. I showed him the errors of his ways," she insisted looking confused, showing fresh signs of panic and uncertainty.

His face wore an ugly expression of hate. "You seriously thought you could change him, Para? He's a Decepticon and will always be a Decepticon." Gripshift shuddered and fluids started to seep out of his mouth. He inhaled sharply and grabbed her hands in his. His optics flashed brightly for a moment. "You are a fool, Para." The dying Autobot exhaled and fluids that had seeped into his mouth bubbled out. All colour drained from him as his spark finally let go.

"It can't be true," she said to the body. She inhaled raggedly as she looked upon the dead Autobot. 'How could it be?' she wondered looking at the row of bodies that were dragged into the medical wing.

"Warning; liquid nitrogen control will be activated in ten minutes, all Autobots must evacuate sections to the main levels. Warning; liquid nitrogen control will be activated in nine minutes and fifty seconds."

"For the love of Primus. Not the nitrogen." Rising to her feet quickly, Para glanced around. "Medics, guards, help get these wounded to the surface."

"But some of them are Decepticons," a guard responded in disgust.

"I don't care what or who they are, they're injured and a freezing will only send them into a fatal shock, you don't want their deaths on your conscience, do you?"

"I couldn't care any less about a Decepticon dying." the guard replied, "It would probably be a benefit to us..."

"Well, I do care. Move them, that is an order," she snapped sharply.

Grumbling, the guards grabbed some of the injured and quickly made their ways out of the medical wing. Para collected necessary tools and supplies in a case then followed behind. She glanced over the various faces, looking for Starscream, but she was unable to find him. She wondered if Starscream really was the catalyst for the riot. There were several stories and a few of them mentioned the absent prisoner and how he had started the brawl that quickly degraded into a prison riot. She shuddered as they piled into the elevator that took them up to the main levels at extremely high speed. How could she have been so cunningly deceived? Shaking her head of her doubt, she decided that she would give Starscream the benefit of being innocent until proven guilty.

The warning was repeated over the loud speakers, each time it counted down ten more seconds. She wondered what would happen to the prisoners left behind. The Autobots had never flooded the mines with nitrogen. She knew that in theory the Decepticons and Autobots would survive the freeze. Wounded would not fair too well in it, some would survive, but the shock would surely kill them after a while. Also there were some people who were horribly intolerant of the cold. They would likely die as soon as their core temperature dropped. And then there were some who loved the cold. They could be dangerous if they hid out until the freeze was lifted and ambushed the retrieval teams.

She wondered about Starscream's ability to survive. He had some differences that set him apart from most of his kind. He might look like a regular Seeker on the outside, however his internal workings were unique. He had an unusual rare double tank system which he could store fuel for extended periods. He seemed to have been created for endurance or short bursts of extreme high speed.

As the elevator stopped and everyone piled out, she noticed that there were a number of Autobot warriors arriving. Heavily armoured Transformers with huge weapons capable of extreme damage. She looked at them with slight distaste. Her purpose was to protect life while theirs was to take life.

She had enjoyed working in a civilian hospital where most of the injuries were typically minor. Sometimes strange illnesses occurred, but they were treatable. She was then transferred to the prisoner's hospital where the injuries were a fair bit more gruesome. Most of the prisoners she personally saw were admitted first day. Most of them were injured, shot down behind Autobot lines or left for dead by their companions. A despicable practice, in her opinion. Para could not understand how the Decepticons could leave their friends behind to die. As for injuries in the mine, most were minor, easy to repair injuries. Some were bad from shaft collapses, however those were rare. Starscream was one of the few prisoners who had been a regular in her medical wing. From the day he had been admitted to the prison, Starscream had suffered some of the worst injuries and suffered the greatest injustices. Perhaps she should not be surprised at all if Starscream was indeed the ring leader of the riot. Could she blame him? Para shook her head.

"Warning; liquid nitrogen control is now in progress. No one may enter locked down areas for thirty minutes."

"I dread going down there, when the deep freeze is off," she said to a guard who carried an injured prisoner.

"At least we'll have peace down there, finally." he snorted.

"Not so sure about that," said a guard who ran down the hall followed by several others. "We got four trapped in the air shaft. We'll need every available guard to help us apprehend these fugitives."

"Are they armed?"

"Hah! Are they armed? Dumb question. If they don't have pick axes, they'll have guns. So yes, they're armed. Come on."

"Excuse me Para, I'm needed elsewhere." the guard who had assisted her turned and ran alongside the leader and others fell into pace along behind them.

"Yeah, sure...I can handle this from here." she agreed, straining to hear them as they passed along the hall.

"We shot one, if not two, for sure. We're positive we shot that son of a slarg, Starscream. But so far, no body has been found."

Para raised her head abruptly. 'Starscream?' "If prisoners have been injured, I insist that I come along. She looked at the wounded that laid on the floor or tables. Other medics were working hard at repairs. They could handle it, for a few minutes at least.

"It's too dangerous for an unarmed medic," the lead guard insisted. "And you'll only slow us down."

"Like slag I will, you haven't seen me in action. Anyway, you don't have much of a choice," she replied falling into step. "I'm here whether you like it or not." She gave them a sweet smile and ran alongside them, keeping her steps light.

* * *

Back in the shaft.

"Five, four..." the countdown continued.

"Not good," Starscream glanced down the shaft, he heard an all new sound; a screech, a clank followed by an ominous hiss. He could see some of the bulkhead doors sealing shut. 'Why did they wait so long in shutting down?' He wondered. Talon grabbed Starscream and jerked him back as a panel started to slide over the opening that lead into the shaft. It stopped part of way. Starscream shook his head and glanced at the others. "Not good at all."

"...three..."

"We have a new brand of problems, Decepticons," Starscream said as he pulled on the

panel door in an attempt to close it.

"...two..."

"This won't budge. Blast it, I must have torn out the circuit when I sealed his wounds. We better get going now before we find ourselves frozen. Ready your weapons, we don't know who is on the other side."

"...one."

The fans started up with a rumble followed by a hissing. Starscream glanced at the opening to the access shaft. White fuzz of frost was starting to build up and the air was becoming filled with mist as the liquid nitrogen boiled into vapour.

"It will take a minute, maybe two to get to unbearable concentrations at this level, we'd better hurry."

Rainjumper and Talon were already working on the hatch.

"What's the fuzz?" Deepsky asked Starscream.

"It's called frost. They have sent liquid nitrogen into the mines. It is to stop us."

A shocked expression fell across Deepsky's face. "But...there's hundreds of Decepticons still down there."

"Yes there are, and if they are lucky, they will die quickly. No Decepticon should suffer the indignity of assisting their foes to procure materials to fight our comrades-in-arms."

Starscream checked his weapon then readied himself. He aimed his weapon at the exit as Talon and Rainjumper pushed it open. Starscream pushed forward and was outside before the others. He exhaled in relief, the constriction of the area was starting to get to him.

"Maintenance hall: level 8. We are near the surface. We shall leave this door open, it may buy us some time if this level starts to chill too."

"I'm surprised no one's here." Rainjumper whispered.

"They are busy elsewhere." Starscream ran ahead holding his weapon ready. He paused ever so briefly at intersecting halls to ensure they were clear. "Our foes have yet to stake out the shafts, I am most disappointed at their tardiness. I was anticipating some sort of action; however, beggars cannot be choosers, at least we still have a few moments of freedom, before we face them." They ran along the hall. "And you know we will."

"The elevator is over there," Deepsky said gesturing in the general direction of a silvery metal door set in the wall.

"Unwise," Starscream said with a sharp shake of his head. "Those can be stopped and

we will be trapped within. We will take our chances with the stairwells. Quickly!"

Starscream opened the door to a stairwell, Talon ran in and checked to ensure the coast was clear. Rainjumper and Deepsky followed and finally Starscream. Talon took up the rear guard post. Starscream realised that the two Decepticons had corralled the wounded in the middle. A protective guard, he made a face. He was not wounded enough that he needed to be protected.

Open Sky

The group of Decepticons made their way up the stairs quickly and quietly, a feat if one considered the fact that two of them were injured; however, in spite of their quiet escape, the wounded left an almost invisible trail. Below and above them, the intercept teams were closing in on their quarry. Never in the history of the mines had prisoners made it as far as they had.

Para and the guards arrived at the open hatchway only a few minutes after the Decepticons had left. They stood around to examine the fluids while the guards quickly closed the hatch. It was Para who had spotted the trail, a faintly glowing, sticky ichor which conducted energy from the fuel intake system and spread it out to all the major areas, a thin layer of fluid that existed under the chromoderm, rich with self repair nanites.

The nanites in the drops had already started to bridge to each other. They would quickly die while laying on the floor, unable to fulfil their task of repair. They required fresh energy from the body as well as the various elements that were dissolved within the stream.

The guards waited ready while Para set up the equipment to do the check. After a couple minutes of chemical analysis of the energy matrix from the spilled fluids, the scanner retrieved the data from the central computer. It sorted through the thousands of prisoners who had lived within the mines and fished out two positive matches; Para's spark fell.

Quickly she erased the data and then did a recheck. 'What am I doing?' She wondered for a moment, 'Am I stalling and giving the Decepticons more time?' She shook her head to herself knowing that she was only trying to ensure she had the right data and was on the correct track. After a few minutes, her readings identified Starscream and Deepsky. It could not be wrong, it never was. She exhaled sharply "My equipment has positively identified two of the Decepticons. "We're looking for Starscream and Deepsky. I can't identify the other two as there's too much residual energy from everyone else who has been in or near these hatches. The other two Decepticons are obviously not injured. The trail leads that way," she pointed.

The guards nodded. This was what they were waiting for. A positive lead on the Decepticons and a direction to go. "Consider them armed and dangerous then, boys. Lets move, they can't be too far if they have kept the injured amongst them. I am surprised they haven't left them behind."

Para opened her mouth to explain that not all Decepticons were like that, but she closed it quickly. She knew they would not appreciate her input. "We can trail Starscream. He's leaking at a steady rate."

They quickly set themselves a steady jog. They paused by the elevator and Para examined the fluids that seemed to have indicated a short pause. "They are going to the stairs."

"Excellent Para, we shall spring our trap then." The guard nodded and opened up his comms. "Green team, our prey is heading your way, get ready to intercept. North stairwell passage, two are injured; so they should be moving at a reduced pace. Identification positive on two, Starscream and Deepsky. Consider them armed and extremely dangerous. You are authorised to use deadly force if necessary."

Spinning around to face the others, Para was appalled by the order. "No, You can't do that!" she exclaimed.

"Why? What reason could you possibly have? Do you want them to escape?" he asked hotly.

"No, I agree to capture them, but to use deadly force-well it's against the oath I took as a medic."

The guard roughly grabbed Para and shoved his face inches from hers. "These Decepticons are directly responsible for the deaths of at least a dozen Autobot guards and indirectly responsible for the injury and deaths of at least dozen more and who knows how many dead prisoners as a result of us having to ice the mines." He shoved the medic away and thrust her medical kit into her hands. "You are no longer needed here, Para. Return to the wounded."

"But...the-" she started.

"I am in command here and you will leave, NOW!" The guards quickly headed off in the direction of the trail, leaving Para behind.

Mouth hanging open in disbelief, Para wondered if she could reason with Starscream; if she could only get to him before the others. She looked down the hall at the receding Autobot warriors, spun on her heel and hurried down another hall. She felt she knew Starscream well enough that she could reason with him. After all, Starscream was young and only needed a little guidance.

Picking up considerable speed at a solid run, she transformed into a motor bike and sped along the hall to the next stair access. Para transformed back and ran up the stairs as fast as her legs could carry her. How much of an advantage did she have over the guards? How far ahead were the Decepticons? Would Starscream listen to her?

As she ran up the stairs, she picked up the fine splatter trail, the Decepticons had changed their direction, taken the east stairs and were heading up. Cunning. They might evade or even ambush the green team, she wondered for a moment if she should alert the guards and warriors of the change; however, she decided against it. It might give her that chance to speak after all.

* * *

Wincing in pain, Starscream found his leg was starting to hurt more. He felt that it was starting to impede his progress. Deepsky did not look too bad for his wound, but he did not have to actively run on it, only sit on it. The red Seeker let out an involuntary groan.

"Are you going to make it?" Talon asked as he ran behind Starscream.

"I'll be fine," he reassured, "I'll guard the rear, you switch with Rainjumper. Explain to him that I do not need a protositter, understood?"

Talon glanced at the red Seeker and nodded. "As you command, Starscream." Talon pushed ahead and spoke quietly to Rainjumper. The other Seeker glanced behind and looked momentarily concerned, then nodded. Within moments he fell into third position.

Starscream cocked his head as he listened. He turned and raised his weapon, his finger resting lightly on the trigger. "We've got someone on our six coming up fast. Single, light weight...Ah, I recognise that person." he said lowering the muzzle slightly.

Talon glanced over at Rainjumper then at Starscream. "Commander?"

Exhaling sharply, Starscream made a decision. "Keep running, I can handle this easily. It's not a threat to us-or me." Starscream assured them, resuming his escape.

"Who is it?"

Glancing over the railing, Starscream spotted their pursuer and shook his head. "Just a little fembot thorn in my side." he paused.

"That medi-fembot, Para?" Deepsky asked looking a little more than disgusted.

"The one and only." Starscream agreed sourly.

"Come on Starscream, Lets go quickly. She's just going to slow us down or lead us into a trap." Deepsky cautioned.

Spotting him, Para picked up her pace. "Starscream!" Para called up. "Starscream, Stop! Wait up!"

"Frag-it-all, she's going to give away our position too," Talon cursed.

Starscream checked his ammunition. "Perhaps she will and perhaps she will not."

Waving her medi-kit, Para again tried to get his attention. "Starscream, stop, I can help you, I know you are wounded."

Starscream groaned. "I admit, I didn't anticipate-her."

"You'd better get rid of her, Starscream," Talon said, the others nodded in agreement.

"I will, go on, I will meet up with you on the surface." Starscream slowed his run slightly to allow the small fembot to join him. Without warning he grabbed her roughly and slammed her against the wall. "Why are you here?" he demanded, narrowing his optics.

"You are in grave danger," she replied quickly hoping he would appreciate the warning.

"Do you think I don't already know this? Your very presence puts me into grave danger, Fembot. Tell me something I don't already know," he snarled.

"The guards are going to meet you at the surface, you will all surely be killed."

"You and the guards underestimate me then. My plan will succeed. You have no idea where we are going, anyway why would you even care? "

"Because, I like you, Starscream. That's why I care. Anyway you are wounded and have left a very visible trail that we can follow."

Glancing at his leg and then back at her. "You better go and leave me to my devices." he said sharply, releasing her and started to head up the stairs where his companions had already gone.

She continued to pace the Seeker. "Starscream, what about realising the errors of your ways? What about coming to our side, you said you were convinced."

Chuckling softly, Starscream shook his head and looked into her optics. "If you seriously believed me, then you are more naive than you look, offspark. Good Bye, Para." Too late he heard the heavy pounding of feet of the approaching guards. He wondered if Para had informed them of his location. The doors exploded open, one breaking off its hinge and hung open at a strange angle. The guards came rushing through. "Oh, slag!"

"Halt Decepticon!" they ordered, all weapons clicking into readiness. "Move and we'll shoot."

"Blast it, fembot..." Thinking quickly, Starscream grabbed Para in a choke hold and held the gun to her head. "You'll shoot me anyway; however, now you have to shoot her first to get to me. I don't think you want to do that, now do you?"

All weapons were trained on him, laser sights felt hot on his forehead. One guard approached him slowly, cautiously. Starscream felt a rising surge of panic.

"Starscream?" Para whispered, her voice filled with fright. "What do you think you are doing?"

"You have effectively come in between me and my escape, my dear," he hissed angrily in her audio. He looked up at the guards again and smiled wickedly. "Well, I see you have finally caught up to me, congratulations. I wonder how that was made possible," he tightened his grip around Para's throat to emphasise the point, causing her to gasp.

"We all know that Autobot medics value life, even the lives of their foes. I can tell you guards see things in a very different light; however, I am sure you 'bots won't be so foolish as to risk this fembot's life for the sake of a single Decepticon." He pulled her backward up the stairs. Using her body as a shield to protect himself.

He glanced back and up for a moment. He could see the faces of his team looking down from several levels above wearing "what do we do now" expressions. "Make haste, you fools" Starscream screamed up. They glanced at each other and he could hear them

running off. Starscream blocked the guard's way with himself and his hostage. He was sure any other units were already on their way to intercept the others. His plans were falling apart; another surge of panic.

"Starscream, let Para go and we will work out a deal with you."

"Do you think I believe you?" He spoke clearly and sharply, forcing himself to remain calm outwardly. "What sort of deal do you think you can make that I would even want? That I may continue to dry rot with a single wing in this facility while mining your ores to use against my kinsmech? I think not," he spat. "What sort of idiot do you think I am? Anyway, I did not work this hard to regain my freedom only to be convinced that I will be spared for simply letting loose this-fembot." He considered using other more colourful terms to describe the female who had managed to get into his way. "I will not let her go at the expense of my own freedom, sorry 'bots, but I don't work that way." Starscream tightened his grip on Para even more, then turned his gun on the guards and opened fired in a single swift movement.

The closest guard dropped as a bullet ripped through his helm blowing the back of his head off. Fluids and internal workings flew out splattering against the guards behind him. His body fell to the ground with a sickening thud. Starscream wasted no time and fired again at the others. He did not kill them all immediately, he had a word to say to them first. "I hope I made my point clear," he then fired a shot into each one's head.

Para was horrified.

He grinned with fierce pride surveying his work. Para whimpered and sobbed in his clutches and Starscream smirked slightly at the fallen Autobots. "This is the life of a Decepticon, my dear Para, you surely must realise that we do not enjoy being captives of our-most benign captors," he whispered harshly. "Although, you perhaps were truly a well meaning person, the road to the inferno is paved with good intentions."

Swiftly he spun her around and grabbed her by the throat in his fingers. He could feel the vibrations of her various system functions through the tips of his fingers. Her fear fuelled him and he felt unstoppable.

"Starscr..." she started and the Seeker tightened his fingers cutting off her words. Panic filled her optics.

"I am not done yet, my dear Para. I have much to say, in what little time we-you have." He smirked. "Oh you spoke of wondrous things, and although it did sound appealing, it is not for me. No, I have plans for myself that are far more interesting and a lot more fun than being one of you Autobots. It is great to have a goal, you know, something to live for. Had I not had a goal, such as this escape, I would have died of madness long ago. Yet, you have managed to get in my way. You might have lived longer had you let escaping Decepticons leave. Dear me, Starscream, you spoiled the ending already." He tightened his fingers as his lips formed an angry line. He lifted her slightly off her feet causing her to instinctively grab hold of the arm that held her.

From above, the sound of distant gunfire shattered the air and interrupted his monologue. He knew his team had been located. How bad would it be for him to get out?

Who was being shot at? Were there any survivors? He wanted to know what his chances were for escape. He realised he had taken it this far and knew he had to follow through; it was his unwritten rule.

"Please," she managed before he cut her off once more.

Hate filled him as he stared into her optics. "Please what? Please kill me now? Please let me go? Please let us dance? Please what? Let me guess, you cannot say anything because my fingers are around your throat cutting off your very breath. If I crush just a little harder and then let go, I can do to you, what your guards did to me; wreck your voice for all eternity. But, somehow I have grown to like this voice of mine, it gives me some character, do you not agree?" He laughed caustically. "Oh, I am enjoying this...I am enjoying this too much. So long has it been since I had the opportunity to kill a foe slowly with my very fingers. And you are a foe, did you realise that? Somehow I did not think so." A glint of madness crept into the Seeker's optics. "I get to watch your optics flood with terror as you know very well that I am about to send you walking along that very nicely laid out road to the very inferno that awaits all who die. It is such a pleasure."

He smiled and put maximum pressure on her throat cutting off, not only the air that she needed to speak, but also the vital energy filled fluids to her brain. Para struggled against his fingers banging her fists against his forearm. Starscream stood his ground watching without a hint of remorse. "It will not be much longer, this discomfort will pass fairly quickly."

He cocked his head slightly, almost in a friendly manner. "Be grateful, I did not give you an unpleasant end, such as a messy shot to the head or something that will give you intense pain. You were so kind to me when I needed the care-perhaps I should repay you with kindness too..." In a second he jerked his hand and severed her neck joints. Fluid flowed from her lips as the blue glow in her optics flickered and finally went dark. He laid her on the ground as her body darkened to grey then wiped his hands on his thigh.

"That's it, Para, rest well. I need to run." Starscream bolted up the stairs as fast as he could. He already had lost a lot of time and was not sure on how close he was to being recaptured and he did not want to face that possibility. If the others had cleared a way, then he still had a chance. He arrived at the exit level and pushed open the door. He was ready with his weapon, finger twitching on the trigger.

It did appear that there had been a small skirmish, bodies of the intercepting team lay on the floor by a smashed open wall. He could see his team mates in the sky and ran for freedom. His damaged wing prevented him from transforming; however he was still extremely fast, even in his slower root mode. He fired his thrusters and felt the ground leave his feet. The air was cool and he felt the Cybertronian wind for the first time in almost two years. The smell of the metallic air mingled with the smell of ozone and black powder tickled his olfactory senses. He inhaled deeply the fresh air of freedom.

Something fell over him, tightening to his form, shrinking, binding. Screaming in dismay as the electro mesh nets, restrained him. Starscream fired his thrusters harder as he battled to free himself, tearing at the fine netting. His ability to maintain flight was hampered and the Seeker crashed to the ground. He rolled in agony struggling to free

himself. The Autobots approached his position, weapons primed and ready.

He thrashed on the ground and looked into the sky to watch the other three Seekers escape to freedom. Only for a moment did they hesitate considering returning to help him, but in the end, freedom called. They rocketed onward leaving him, their leader, behind.

Talon's voice was faint, but he could hear it well enough. "We'll get help for you, commande. Hang tight," and then they disappeared into the bright sunlight.

The Autobots arrived and stung him with energy prods. He thrashed for a few moments more before resigning himself to recapture. He rested his head against the ground and dug his fingers into the dirt. He had some regrets when he realised that he had no friends left in the mine who could help him. "I-surrender," Starscream said meekly to the Autobot warriors. "Stop prodding me, please." After a few more jabs, the Autobots ceased, satisfied that Starscream had indeed surrendered.

"What's your name, Decepticon?" the Autobot asked grabbing the Seeker by his intake.

"S-Starscream."

"We've captured the Decepticon designated Starscream, Warden. Orders; execute immediately?"

"Bring him to maximum security holding," the warden replied, "We'll go over the charges against him with him and then decide his fate."

The Autobots had pulled Starscream to his feet and bound his hands and feet in chains. They pulled the net off the Seeker and shoved him slightly to get him moving. Starscream hung his head low and his wing hung in defeat. Escape had been so tantalisingly close; failure depressed him.

"As you order; and the other Decepticons?" the Autobot nodded to the others as they shoved him toward an armoured vehicle designed for transporting prisoners.

"Leave them. We're watching their movements now, it'll be a matter of time before we apprehend them."

As soon as he was chained inside, he was put into stasis. Starscream was now considered an extremely dangerous prisoner.

* * *

Two months later facing execution

FIRE!

Starscream braced for the pain of bullets as he expected them to tear through his body to find their mark in his spark, effectively killing him. Yet the bullets did not hit. Instead there was a perceptible wave of energy and a tingling sensation. The bullets hit

something and bounced off, there was a heavy, yet pained grunt. Starscream quivered in fear, what was out there? Some other twisted method of execution? The fact that he was blind folded and could not see what was going on terrified him. He preferred to face his fate with his optics online, that was the Decepticon way.

The thing that shielded him from the bullets grabbed Starscream firmly in his arms. The Seeker could feel large hands grabbing at the cuffs that bound his arms behind his back. They snapped with little effort. He could feel his hands being released and he instinctively grabbed hold as his knees started to give out.

"I've got you, boy," the heavy voice reassured him in a gentle manner, tightening his grip on the violently shaking Starscream.

Starscream could recognise the form, the other was a Seeker, yet this one was much larger. Nearly half his height taller, wider and stronger. He was still blinded by the hood and was unable to pull it off. The mysterious Seeker held him so he could not move.

"We have unwanted company, boy. Give me a moment and we'll be out of here."

The mysterious being fired his thrusters and flew into the sky. Again a pulse or a wave emanated from the huge Seeker, there was an ominous silence followed by an explosion that rocked the very air. The large Seeker laughed a deep laugh.

"Who are you?" Starscream asked as the being transformed, clutching Starscream within his grappling-talons. The Seeker was held tightly against the belly of the larger Seeker.

"I was informed two months ago about your location," The Seeker explained. "Some boys said you helped them escape from this very prison but you were unable to succeed yourself. It was good news to know you were still alive as our own searches turned up nothing, we feared the worst. The military, as expected, chose to leave you to your fate; however, we felt that you have an important task yet to be done. So we waited until your execution was announced in order to free you. We need to get you repaired and back to the Decepticons."

Although he could not see, Starscream could hear three other Seekers joined them. He could tell by the sound of their engines that they were almost as large as the one who held him.

'We?' Starscream wondered to himself. 'Who were they if they were not the Decepticons?' "Wait, you haven't told me who you are. Who are the others? Why am I important to you and are you not with the military?"

"That doesn't matter, boy. The less you know, the better it is for all of us."

Starscream could feel a numbing cold tingle flow over his systems like a blast from one of his own null rays; however, it did not hurt. Instead his body relaxed and he fell into a pleasant sleep.

* * *

Three Weeks later.

Starscream was not sure how much time had passed when he awoke. He had snippets of images in his mind from being somewhere under intense medical care. He faintly recalled a face, that was dark like his own and wings as black as night...the memory faded quickly as he focused on the others in the room. A large spartan barrack with several platforms, foot lockers and a group of Seekers sitting at a table playing a game at the far end. One was blue, one was black with purple markings. Another was light purple there were others, most of them unfamiliar. One of the Seekers stood up and walked over to where Starscream laid. He smiled. The face was familiar and friendly. Talon; is that you?

The other nodded. "It's me, Starscream, It is good to see you alive and well." he looked Starscream over for a moment.

"No! Wait! We're back aren't we...it never happened?! We never escaped...Those blockheads concussed me again didn't they?!"

Laughing at the panicking Seeker, Talon shook his head. The other Seekers put their game down and wandered over to see the new arrival. "It happened, you are finally a free Decepticon." he pointed to Starscream's wing. "If you were back in prison, think you'd have two wings?"

"How?" he wondered. "Who fixed it?"

"We don't know. You were delivered to an outpost last night all fixed up. You were unconscious, but once the medics gave you a quick once over, they deemed you as fit as ever and sent you here."

"Where is here?" the Seeker asked looking around at the unfamiliar surroundings. Bare metal walls were reasonably clean, although the corners were a little dingy. Most of the lights were bright however the one over the game table flickered.

"Darkmount," Talon said bringing Starscream's attention back.

"Really? That's Megatron's fortress," the red Seeker said excitedly.

"Yes, Starscream. This is Megatron's fortress," said another voice heavy, grating and very familiar.

Starscream's head snapped around to take in the large silver grey Decepticon. He strode in through the barrack doors and the other Decepticons quickly snapped to attention and saluted. Starscream shuddered as he took in the fusion cannon weapon that the Decepticon commander wore. He was impressed, filled with both awe and fear. Starscream realised he alone was not on his feet. Quickly he stood up and saluted. He fought against the light headedness that threatened to plunge him into a faint. That would not be how he would want to see the leader of the Decepticons. Not flat on his back, passed out.

"I am honoured," he said respectfully.

Megatron nodded and glanced over the young Air Warrior. He wasn't quite what he was expecting, but nevertheless, his mind was made. "Seeker. You are here at Darkmount at my request. You have finally been located and returned to us. You've shown some potential and I'm conscripting you into my elite guard. Your plans to return my Decepticons to the sky succeeded, as did your plans to return yourself and others to freedom, if only in part. I can always use such tactical planning, so I do believe that you and I shall get along famously, if you continue to live up to this standard you've set yourself."

"You shall not be disappointed, my lord Megatron," Starscream saluted and beamed with pride.