



SEEKERWERSE

THUNDERSTRUCK



Thunderstruck**By: Sunstar**

The Decepticons find themselves stricken with a plague. Time is ticking away fast and Thundercracker struggles to unravel the mystery behind the deadly illness before he and his wingmate, Skywarp, die.

Chapter 1 Rest Assured

Chapter 2 And Then There Were Two

Chapter 3 A Shadow of Doubt

Chapter 4 Rigorous Measures

Chapter 5 No Mercy For The Stricken

Chapter 6 Who Can You Trust?

Chapter 7 Nowhere Near

Chapter 8 Our Nemesis

Chapter 9 Never Cross a Decepticon

Chapter 10 A Black Shroud

Rest Assured

Starscream sat in a meeting with his two wingmates talking about the upcoming mission. The Air Commander groaned slightly, pressing his hand to his head.

Thundercracker glanced at him with concern. "Are ya feelin' ok there, Starscream?" he inquired.

Starscream made a small frown, "yes, it's only a small complaint." He rubbed the side of his head. The dull but bearable throb had been pounding at his metal skull all day. It came in waves, but now it was making him ache all over. "I'll run a virus scan when I go into recharge tonight," he reassured his comrades.

Skywarp nodded, "Yeah, perhaps you should go now, you don't look so hot."

The corner of Starscream's mouth twitched briefly as he contemplated the suggestion. He exhaled in a windy sigh. "I suppose you are right," he replied, "I've been on the run quite a bit in the past few weeks."

The red Seeker stood up and gave his wingmates a friendly thump on the wing. "I'll see you two at eight am sharp, don't make me come after you. If you are late, there will be slag to pay."

Thundercracker smiled slightly, "heh, ya you rest well."

"I feel like slag, so yes, I will rest very well," replied Starscream. He glanced over his wing at his team mates and exited the break room to return to his quarters.

Skywarp and Thundercracker continued to chat to each other until one am. Then they both parted ways for the night.

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Starscream sat alone in his quarters holding his head. He felt worse upon his arrival. For a few minutes he even considered contacting the Constructicons but decided against it; there was no point.

Silently he hung his weapons on the wall and collected an energon cube from his personal supply. The Seeker crossed the room and sat down on the black couch holding the energon cube in one hand. He studied it intently for a few moments, rotating it with his finger tips. The pink fluid energy gently swirled around inside.

Sighing deeply, the Seeker drank half before he decided it was not helping him any. The energon only served to make him feel even more ill than he was before.

Frowning slightly he placed the cube down on the table and strode wearily to his recharge chamber. He decided he would call it a night. There was much to do in the

morning and he wanted to make sure he was well rested and alert.

"Computer," he said as he sat down on his recharging unit. "Lights off." He heaved his feet over, laying himself down onto his back. He stared up at the ceiling for a few moments and initiated the virus scan.

Starscream exhaled with a painful sigh as he off lined his optics. Despite his aching body, the Air Commander fell into an easy sleep cycle.

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Megatron looked at the monitor, it was displaying the time; eight- thirty am. "Where is he?" demanded Megatron.

Skywarp chuckled. "He warned us not to be late, the hypocrite. He's either slept in or is sneaking around the base."

Thundercracker groaned shaking his head at his friend's comment.

Megatron glanced at Skywarp. "Teleport and find out where he is," ordered the silver Decepticon leader pointing toward where Starscream's quarters were. "And bring him back."

Skywarp nodded and teleported from the control room.

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Starscream's quarters were quiet and dark when he materialised.

Skywarp glanced around. He could see the glowing partially drunk cube sitting on the low table in the main living area. Datapads were neatly stacked in a pile near it.

"Computer, put the lights on to three quarter power," the dark Seeker ordered. He did not want to blind Starscream should he still be suffering from the headache he had the night before.

"Starscream, are ya in here?" he asked in a normal speaking tone; there was no answer.

Skywarp was about to leave when he noticed Starscream's rifles hanging on the wall across from the armoury by the door. Having not entered that way he had not noticed them. *'That is odd,'* Skywarp thought.

"Starscream?" he called again. "Starscream get your afterburner down into the control room, Megatron's having a slag fit." Skywarp exhaled loudly, he remembered how Starscream had said he was being run off his feet the night before. *'Starscream must have been pretty tired,'* he thought.

The dark Seeker knocked on the door to the Air Commanders sleeping room, then pushed it open. The recharge chamber was dark save the light that entered through the ocean window. It cast an eerie shimmer into the room. Sure enough, Starscream lay

sound asleep. Skywarp smiled for a second before he leaned down. Suddenly he stopped and cocked his head; something was not right.

"Starscream?" he asked the sleeping form. Again there was no movement or response. Skywarp then noticed that Starscream's optics were not glowing, not even the dull red of a deep sleep. He felt a cold shiver flow through his body. "Computer, lights on full, one hundred percent!" he said urgently.

The room brightened, illuminating the truth. Skywarp's jaw dropped when his optics relayed the message to his brain. His body went cold from fingers to feet.

"Oh, Primus," he muttered, "Skywarp to Megatron, Thundercracker, Hook! Come to Starscream's quarters, now!" he said urgently.

"Skywarp, what is the matter?" demanded Megatron. Skywarp remained silent "Skywarp, what is wrong? Where is Starscream?"

"He's... in his quarters," said Skywarp unable to remove his disbelieving optics from the dull grey body of his Air Commander, "and he's dead."

And Then There Were Two

Skywarp felt it had taken an eternity for those called to arrive at Starscream's quarters. However, when Megatron did arrive, he suddenly found himself dumbstruck. The Decepticon leader shoved the seeker aside so roughly that he stumbled and almost fell. Skywarp shot Megatron a fiery glare once he caught his balance.

Thundercracker reached out to steady him. "Easy there, 'Warp. It's okay... we are here now."

The Constructicons: Hook, Scrapper and Longhaul, also barged in, pushing past the two Seekers. Thundercracker scowled angrily at the rudeness of his comrades-in-arms. Unable to see, the blue Seeker craned his neck to glance over the shoulders of the others, he felt his fuel lines go cold; it was true, Starscream was indeed dead.

"I had hoped this was one of Skywarp's practical jokes!" Megatron growled in disbelief after Hook had confirmed the death.

Thundercracker heard whispers and peeked around the corner at the door to Starscream's quarters. The Conehead Seekers and a few of the other Decepticons had clustered to watch in morbid fascination. The word had spread alarmingly fast!

The blue Seeker frowned in disgust at the others who chatted excitedly to each other. Thrust made a comment and the other two Coneheads laughed. Dirge seemed to be the most amused, but then he loved situations that involved death, as long as his life was not the one being threatened.

Megatron turned to the Decepticons who started to squeeze their way into the Air Commander's quarters. "Thundercracker, Skywarp... as Starscream's wing mates, you are permitted to stay. Everyone else out, *now!*" he shouted, waving his fusion cannon in a threatening manner. "You have things to be getting on with, do them. This is not a party." Megatron shunted the last of the Decepticons out and sealed the door so no other uninvited guests could enter.

Hook and Scrapper scrutinised Starscream and examined the area where he lay thoroughly. "There's no sign of foul play, I'd say we can move him," stated Scrapper. Hook and Longhaul nodded at each other and prepared to remove the body.

"Slag him, slag that Starscream," Megatron fumed. "Why *now?* Why did he have to do this?!" The tall grey mech clenched and unclenched his hands. Anger and frustration glowed in his brilliant optics.

Thundercracker glanced at Skywarp, who stood silently with mouth slightly open in disbelief. The blue Seeker exhaled in a gusty sigh that caught the attention of their infuriated leader.

"You two were the last to see Starscream alive, what was his condition?" Megatron

pointed his finger at the two Seekers.

Skywarp continued to stand silently. Thundercracker sighed again before he spoke. "He said he was not feeling well. It appeared he was suffering from one of his headaches. He suggested that he would return to his quarters and run some scans and check for viral infestations. Other than that, he seemed well enough," stated Thundercracker, his voice weak. He was highly disturbed by the whole situation. Even though he and Starscream had their differences, he was still a Seeker and a wing mate.

Thundercracker stood aside as he watched the Constructicons lift his former Air Commander from his deathbed and into the main area of his quarters.

"Longhaul, go into the hall and transform," ordered Scrapper as he hung onto the still form of the belated Air Commander. Thundercracker watched motionlessly as the Constructicons exited the room. He caught sight of the other Decepticons hanging out in the hall. Megatron burst into their midst, shouting at them again to remove themselves and return to work immediately. A blast of his fusion cannon was fired high as a warning and the troops cleared out of the hall.

Longhaul transformed and his team mates placed Starscream carefully in the bucket part of his alternative mode.

Another curse from Megatron brought Thundercracker's attention back. "*Starscream!*" he snarled, as if the lifeless Seeker could still hear him, "Why did you spoil my plans? Now... I will have to find a replacement!" The Decepticon leader shot Skywarp an accusing glare as he followed the Constructicons out. He left them alone in the vacant room.

"Huh? What did I do?" whispered Skywarp, not understanding why Megatron was also mad at him.

Thundercracker said nothing to his friend as they stood still in the deadly silent room. The blue Seeker cocked his head for a moment as a mournful song of a solitary hump backed whale resonated through the metallic walls breaking the silence. The sound was familiar to the Seekers. They usually tuned it out, but now it seemed to suit the moment and they listened.

"I don't understand how this could happen," Skywarp said shaking his head. He glanced up at Thundercracker, who was scowling at the fish swimming by the window. The blue Seeker still kept his silence. He assumed Thundercracker was lost in thought again. He did that a lot.

The dark Seeker glanced down and spotted something sitting on the side table. "Hey, Starscream's personal data pad..." he promptly picked it up. A slight smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he looked it over, turning it in his hands before placing it in his own cockpit.

"You shouldn't take Starscream's stuff... it's not right," Thundercracker warned his friend.

"Yeah, I know. But this shouldn't be left layin' around," Skywarp tapped at his chest,

indicating he was keeping the Air Commander's most secret possession out of harms way. He turned away from Starscream's recharge platform, stopped and glanced over his shoulder

Thundercracker stayed where he stood. The whale song rose in volume, the groan rumbled deeply and ended in a whine. He had gazed out the window and watched the huge cetacean swimming not far from the Nemesis. The giant animal moved its elongated flukes and huge tail in graceful sweeps, propelling it along. The haunting sound had sent visible shivers through the blue Seeker's fuel lines.

The dark Seeker frowned. He reached out and placed his hand on his wing mate's shoulder. "C'mon... let's go Thundercracker, we have work to do."

Thundercracker nodded and turned away, allowing to be guided down the hall toward the control room.

Shadow of Doubt

A veil of gloom and shock had fallen quickly across the base like a blanket of thick cloud.

Most of the Decepticons made themselves very scarce, avoiding Megatron and his explosive rages. The morale of the base had become evenly balanced. Some of the Decepticons were pleased to see Starscream go. Others, while they were not keen on his attitude and arrogance, felt sad and expressed melancholy for the loss.

Megatron's feeling toward the situation was an enigma to Thundercracker. He was unsure if Megatron was angry at Starscream for dying, or if he was just upset. The leader seemed to display both types emotions in rapid succession. Perhaps he, too, was confused by it all.

Then there were rumours that abounded, stemming from Thundercracker's statement to Megatron and the Constructicons, that the Air Commander was sick with a virus the night before. Fear began to spread and the troops avoided congregating in case someone else was infected. Thundercracker was not going to panic until the word was out that it was indeed a virus.

'What the slag had happened?' Thundercracker glanced at Skywarp, who was pretending to do his work. *'What now? ...was more like it.'* Thundercracker knew that the war between the Autobots and Decepticons was at such a crucial point that losing a Decepticon as skilled and able as Starscream was going to hurt their war efforts.

Thundercracker almost laughed at the irony when he realised why Megatron had never done away with Starscream himself. The leader needed him the most to win and Starscream, with all his arrogance, knew this.

'Now who is going to be new Sub Commander, and who would take on the roll of being the Air Commander? Or was Megatron going to give the new Sub Commander the control of the Decepticon Air Force.' If that was a case, Thundercracker hoped that command of the Seekers would not be given to a non-flyer.

The blue Seeker caught sight of Soundwave striding in with Ravage padding lazily alongside him. If there was one Decepticon who was almost ecstatic about Starscream's demise, it was Soundwave. He, from the moment that Skywarp radioed his report, instantly took over and began issuing orders as if Starscream had never existed. *'Soundwave was not a Seeker,'* thought Thundercracker angrily, *'he was not a made flyer. He did not have the agility, skill or even the know how that a flying leader had.'* However, the blue Seeker knew that Megatron would never choose him as the new Air Commander, nor would he pick Skywarp.

The mission that they were supposed to fly had to be abandoned due to the abrupt death of Starscream. This hardly surprised Thundercracker, though.

He and Skywarp sat in silence, watching the monitor and keeping their audios tuned for

any word as to why, what and when.

"Megatron was sure pissed off," Skywarp broke the silence, as well as Thundercracker's train of thoughts. The dark Seeker rubbed the side of his head unconsciously, squinting at the monitor. It was strange how quiet the base had become. The typical raspy voice of the Air Commander and Megatron's sniping and bickering was gone now. The new silence felt unnatural and uneasy. "You'd think by his reaction that Starscream did it on purpose," he continued.

The blue Seeker scowled in frustration. "That hasn't been ruled out yet...."

He didn't look up, but the possibility bothered him now. *'Was it possible that Starscream had given up? Tired of fighting a war with no visible end in sight?'* The blue Seeker shook his head at his thoughts. *'No, that was not like Starscream, he'd never give up, not that easy. There had to be something else.'*

"Suicide? No way, Thundercracker... he was *sick*. Yesterday he said he was feeling off. You remember... you were there. Starscream *didn't* kill himself," Skywarp was highly agitated by the whole idea.

Thundercracker sighed. 'Why would an ambitious Seeker as vigorous as Starscream suddenly shut down forever when he had so much to live for,' the thoughts continued.

"I didn't say that he had committed—" the blue Seeker's attention was grabbed by the arrival of the two Constructicons who were doing the investigation.

"Hail mighty Megatron," said Scrapper, "we have some clue as to what happened to the Air Commander."

"It's about time," Megatron greeted them sourly.

"It was difficult," said Hook, "but we managed to download his vital statistics for the last twelve hours of his life."

"What was it? What killed him?" demanded Megatron.

Hook handed Megatron a report. "Well, I think it collaborates with Skywarp and Thundercracker's last conversation with him. The read outs of his vital statistics suggest that Starscream was under attack by a malicious virus and he was trying to eliminate it. When his anti-viral immune system picked it up, it quickly spread to all his major systems and effectively shut him down." The Constructicon paused for a moment to let his words sink in before he continued. "The rate of decay of the energy residue within his body suggests that Starscream died at five twenty-three this morning. There is nothing to suggest that he was even aware of his losing battle."

Thundercracker gave Skywarp a quick glance. The dark Seeker looked sickened, he too felt uneasy. *'It was a virus, but how bad?'* Thundercracker asked himself.

"Traces of the virus have been found but we were not able to locate any thing that we could examine closer," said Hook. "We speculate that the virus which attacked him was

engineered for that purpose in mind: to replicate, kill and disintegrate. This virus was mean, it was circumventing the scanning processes and managed to corrupt Starscream's spark in the meantime. That was what killed him, we assume."

Thundercracker's optics flashed for a split second as he felt a chill settle over his body once again. *'Starscream had died of an illness that was engineered to kill? Could Starscream have been murdered?'* he thought as he scanned the room and allowed his optics to rest on Soundwave. The blue Decepticon sat in Starscream's chair, affectionately petting Ravage's head. Soundwave seemed to show neither the shock nor surprise that the others had shown at this report.

The Seekers looked at each other in shock and horror. "Is there any chance that this could possibly spread?" Thundercracker had noticed Skywarp rubbing the side of his head a couple times like Starscream had the night before. He was suddenly very concerned for his own health and the health of his wing mate.

"Yes, there is a moderate to high risk factor. We'll want to check everyone on base, starting with both you and Skywarp, since you two were with him just before he died," Scrapper informed Thundercracker, then turned his attention back to Megatron. "We need to check you too, Megatron."

Skywarp leaned over Thundercracker. "What's he saying," the dark Seeker asked in a nervous whisper.

Thundercracker leaned closer and whispered, "I am not too sure, Skywarp, but it seems that Starscream died of a virus... and that virus may have spread... to us."

Skywarp glanced at Thundercracker fearfully, "Is there a cure?"

Thundercracker regarded Skywarp for a moment. "I don't know," he said flatly.

As the Constructicons made to leave the control room, they beckoned for Skywarp and Thundercracker to follow. The two Seekers glanced at each other, worry shone in their optics as they followed behind.

Rigorous Measures

It was four a.m. Earth time and Thundercracker was alone in his quarters. He sat on the edge of his recharge platform, elbows on his knees and face in his hands. His head throbbed painfully. *'What now?'* he thought, *'Am I also gonna die overnight, like Starscream?'* he wondered. Fear, like the headache, came in waves, steadily getting worse. He counted the minutes in silent tedium wondering if the next minute would be his last.

Then the computer flashed a message icon. Thundercracker stood slowly up to receive the incoming e-mail. It was the roll call. The Constructicons had been sending them out every hour to find out who was infected and who was still uninfected. Thundercracker sat back down again to read the roll. Twelve Decepticons were off base and were ordered to remain away until they were called to return home: the Combaticons, Stunticons, and the two Triple Changers, Astrotrain and Blitzwing.

The list was in order of infection. Skywarp, himself and Megatron occupied the top three positions with the three Constructicons, Hook, Scrapper and Long Haul. Those that remained healthy somehow, Soundwave, his cassettes, and the Coneheads, did not surprise Thundercracker. There was only one occupant alone in the deaths section, and thankfully it was only Starscream. So far no other Decepticons had fallen to the virus.

Thundercracker responded to the roll call and sent the message off. He stopped and wondered how Skywarp was fairing with all this. The blue Seeker slowly stood up and returned to his previous sitting position seat, but stared gloomily at the floor with a sullen expression. He and Skywarp had sent messages back and forth all day since they were quarantined, but the messages had ceased with the last response that Skywarp was very tired and wanted to lay down. He wondered if his wingmate had joined Starscream in the happy battle grounds above.

The blue Seeker did not want to go into re-charge right away, although his body was tired and hurting all over. He was truly afraid. *'How long was Starscream feeling like this?'* he wondered. *'Long enough to infect half the base,'* he responded sourly to his own thoughts. The virus seemed to be spreading at an incredible speed and there was no current explanation.

Abruptly a whirl and a blast of icy cold air swept over him as Skywarp materialised in the middle of the room. Skywarp stumbled for a moment before he regained equilibrium. He squinted at Thundercracker in annoyance, "Slag, Thunder", you have it too fragging bright in here!" The dark Seeker lifted a hand to shade his optics, "Computer, turn lights to half power." The room darkened.

Skywarp's appearance both irritated and relieved Thundercracker. It proved to him that his friend was still functioning well enough to teleport. However, the shock of seeing the dark Seeker triggered a renewed burst of pounding pain.

"Skywarp, what are you doing? You shouldn't be in here," he admonished. The sound of his own voice hurt his audios. Thundercracker curled up, cradling his head in his hands

and pulling his optics off line for a moment.

Skywarp tipped his head apologetically and glanced at Thundercracker. "Sorry, Thunder! It's just that, uh, I don't want to die alone," the dark Seeker whispered to his friend with a hint of shame in his voice.

Thundercracker glanced up. Skywarp's red optics glowed bright with fear in the dim light. It cast a blood red hue across his pale face. "You won't, Skywarp, I promise you," reassured the blue Seeker. Thundercracker was unsure if he could even keep such a promise to his friend. But now that the dark Seeker was here, he was glad at least for the company.

Skywarp settled himself down into Thundercracker's chair and began to drum his fingers noisily against the desk top. "I wanted to rest, but I'm afraid I'll wind up like Starscream too," Skywarp said, "...dead."

Thundercracker nodded. Skywarp's drumming pounded painfully in his head, like the constant thrum of his sonic boom. He couldn't help but cringe as he spoke, "Well Hook said we could rest as long as we don't run any nightly maintenance."

The blue Seeker knew how Skywarp felt. The Constructicons seemed to be no closer to an answer than they were when Starscream was found dead twenty hours earlier. They suspected that the running of the anti-viral programs caused the virus to run rampant and forbade anyone from attempting such maintenance. It had been confirmed as a virus, but how Starscream became infected in the first place had still eluded them. As the hours went by more and more Decepticons had reported the symptoms of the viral attack in the roll calls, such as headaches, aching joints, and sensitivity to light and sound. The situation was grim.

Thundercracker kept his quarters brightly illuminated to fight off the fatigue that the dimness brought on. Nonetheless, he still felt it creeping up on him. "Computer brighten the lights to three quarter power," Thundercracker ordered, in attempt to fight off the drained feeling. Skywarp cursed, when the room brightened again.

"Slag it Thundercracker, my head is *slamming* me!" Skywarp whined in pain as he shielded his optics. The dark seeker groaned and leaned forward, holding his hands against the side of his head.

The blue Seeker stood up quickly... too quickly for his condition. He braced himself against the pain that threatened to send him to the floor. Skywarp slid off his chair to his knees and remained hunched over.

"Skywarp... speak to me," urged Thundercracker, as he crouched down beside the dark Seeker. He rested a hand on Skywarp's black wing and studied his friend intensely.

"I'm ok..." said Skywarp in a whisper that was barely audible.

Thundercracker slung his wingmate's arm over his shoulder and assisted him to his feet. Skywarp moved along unsteadily. Thundercracker began to wonder if not resting was equally as dangerous as running the anti-viral systems. Carefully, the blue Seeker laid

his friend down on the platform. "Get some rest," he insisted.

He realised that Skywarp's condition had gone from bad to critical. *'What am I to do?'* he wondered as Skywarp's optics dimmed. He glanced at the door then back at the dark Seeker. He had to make a decision soon. Do nothing and risk Skywarp dying, or leave his quarters to locate a Constructicon, while risking the chance of being thrown in the brig and having Skywarp die anyway.

Thundercracker decided that he would take the risk and break the quarantine order. The Seeker turned quickly for the door.

"Thundercracker?" came the weak voice, "where are you going?" Skywarp sounded panicked.

An icy ache ran through his fuel lines as he turned back to face his sickened friend. Skywarp had propped himself awkwardly on his arm and was watching him with fear-filled optics. "I'll be back quickly, I promise," reassured the blue Seeker. "Computer, dim lights to twenty five percent."

"Thunder! Please don't go! I *don't* want to be left alone," pleaded Skywarp, "Thundercracker!"

Thundercracker shook his head apologetically to his wingmate and closed the door, muffling Skywarp's weak cries and pleas for him to remain near. He felt guilty about leaving his friend alone while he was in such a grave condition, but he wanted to find Hook to see if he was any nearer to a cure. *'Anything would be good right now,'* he thought, *'even if it was experimental.'* He glanced over his wing at the door. *'I'm sorry, Warp, but if I don't find you something soon you'll die and then what would I have left to live for?'* thought the Seeker as he turned away from his quarters.

The blue Seeker stole quietly down the hall, carefully placing his feet so as to keep the thunder of his footfalls down. The corridors were very dim now. It appeared that someone had taken the liberty to reduce light in the Decepticon dormitories. He was rounding the corner when he heard the sound of familiar voices.

Thundercracker paused for a moment and peered passed the junction of halls. In the dimness that that enveloped the halls, he could see Soundwave talking to Dirge. They kept their voices low; however, Dirge seemed highly agitated and he kept looking around as if he was worried about being seen.

The muffled conversation went on for a few minutes then they saluted. Thundercracker drew back into the shadows as the two quickly parted ways. The blue Seeker waited a few minutes until Dirge had disappeared down another hall. Silently the Seeker crept from his hiding sport and snuck down to the repair bay. *'What were those two up to?'* Thundercracker wondered as he went along.

No Mercy for the Stricken

The repair bay was bathed in red light casting an eerie illumination throughout the room. The blood glow that illuminated the chamber was easy on the optics, yet he could not see the Constructicons anywhere. *'Perhaps they all died,'* Thundercracker thought sourly as he glanced around.

On a repair bay table, the lifeless husk of Starscream had been disassembled for an autopsy. His cockpit canopy was removed and most of his internal components strung out across the surface. Thundercracker felt sickened at the sight.

'Is there no respect for the dead?' he thought as he stood beside the Air Commander, looking down the length of his frame. Thundercracker's attention was attracted by a movement in a corner by some running machines. There was a small figure strapped down to the table. Thundercracker peered closer and realised it was the Autobot Bumblebee. The Seeker grinned as he realised the Autobot was also afflicted with the virus.

"What are you looking at Decepticreep?" the pained voice inquired, only to be followed by a long whining groan.

"Watch what you say, you *flightless* piece of slag!" responded Thundercracker, "or you'll get my fist in your face." The Seeker balled his fist and gestured threateningly. He wondered what purpose the Autobot was serving.

The Minibot whimpered and fell silent. Thundercracker glanced at him for a moment and smiled cruelly, 'Yeah, that's it. Suffer you piece of scrap, along with the rest of us.' The Seeker felt a feeling of pleasure as he watched the Autobot's mouth quiver in pain as he struggled with the virus.

From behind, Thundercracker heard a sound and turned away from the prisoner. Hook had stepped in from another room and noticed the Seeker standing by the immobilised Autobot. "Ah, Thundercracker, I see you have met our guinea pig." Hook smiled, motioning him away from the Minibot.

'Guinea pig?' wondered the blue Seeker. "What the slag is an Autobot doing in here?"

"We asked Megatron to order those who were still off base to bring us a prisoner to experiment on. Blitzwing and Astrotrain were the first to snag us Bumblebee there," he gestured. "They dropped him on the docking tower jaw and sped away. We want to find out how this virus kills him so we can learn how stop it from killing us." The Constructicon glanced at the readings from the Autobot and compared them to another set. Thundercracker assumed that the second set belonged to Starscream.

The Seeker nodded, that was not an unreasonable request. He had worried for a moment that they were trying to cure the Autobot, not kill him. "Anything useful? Isn't there a cure yet?"

Hook sighed. "We still want to find out how Starscream came to be the recipient of the virus, so far we can't find any evidence of anyone having symptoms before him and recovering. We were wondering if it was a new Autobot weapon that Wheeljack might have created to take us out and tested on our unfortunate Air Commander. So far even that appears unlikely, the Autobots would have surely immunised their own troops. However we won't rule it out as a possibility."

The blue Seeker scowled. *'They appeared to be no closer than they were before,'* he thought. The Seeker decided he'd voice his own suspicion. "Have you even thought to look within our own troops for a suspect and maybe find the cure," Thundercracker said hoarsely.

He wondered about Dirge. *'What was that Seeker doing in the presence of Soundwave? Were they in league? Why did Dirge seem so agitated?'* The thoughts came quickly.

"What do you mean?" inquired Hook, his curiosity was piqued.

"Well don't you think it is a little odd that Soundwave, Dirge and the other Coneheads are free of the illness? Don't you think it's only a bit strange that Soundwave took over Starscream's job as soon as Skywarp announced that he was dead? What about his lack of response to your report earlier, that it was a virus and posed a great risk to us," accused Thundercracker.

Hook paused and gave the blue Seeker a thoughtful glance, "What are you suggesting, Thundercracker?"

"The same thing you said earlier, 'the virus which attacked him was engineered for that purpose in mind; to replicate, kill and disintegrate.' I am suggesting that Starscream was murdered... by Soundwave. He is the Communications Officer and third in command, he knows how to write a virus. I am willing to bet my personal supply of energon that he has an anti-virus somewhere and it is protecting him and his chosen. Look at it this way, Soundwave is fine while Megatron and Starscream are ill or dead. He's trying to take control," Thundercracker explained his accusations. *'Could there be nothing more clearly noticeable about who was sick and who was well?'* thought the blue Seeker. *'It is a coup attempt. Once Megatron was dead the cure would suddenly surface and the rest who lived would be treated and saved.'*

Hook just stared at the blue Seeker dumbfounded. "Ok, interesting hypothesis, who do you think are his 'chosen'," said Hook, unconvinced.

Thundercracker frowned as he glanced over at the still body of his fallen commander. *'I'll find out who did this to you, Starscream, and I'll get them for you,'* thought the blue Seeker angrily. His vengeance clear on his face, the seeker glanced up at Hook. "His chosen, I think, are Dirge and the other Coneheads and of course the cassettes!"

"Ramjet and Thrust have both confirmed that they are feeling the symptoms, so there seems to be a hole in your hypothesis, but all reports haven't come in yet." responded the Constructicon, not deterred by Thundercracker's angst. "Now, tell me Thundercracker, what are you doing breaking quarantine?"

The Seeker glanced up from Starscream, now guilt stricken. He had almost forgotten why he had been here in the first place, and became very anxious that he would be ordered to the brig. "Help Skywarp... he's dying, I know there is little time. Isn't there anything you can do?" pleaded Thundercracker. He hoped that his distractions had not cost his friend his life. But despite this, he noticed a suspicious glint on Starscream's foot. He gasped as he fought against his aches and pains as he knelt to inspect the foot.

Hook cringed as he watched Thundercracker, "Well, we have little to go on. We've been analysing the data we've collected from Starscream and everyone who has the virus now, and we are still perplexed. Nothing seems to make much sense..." The Constructicon had stopped and stared at Thundercracker who now had taken a deep interest in the bottom of the dead Seeker's foot.

"What is this?" inquired Thundercracker, pointing at a tiny silver disk that was stuck to the sole of Starscream's foot.

Hook leaned down. "It's probably nothing. It's either a bullet from a human gun or a small magnet. I am sure if you look at the bottoms of your feet you might find one or the other," he said with a dismissive shrug. "I'm sorry, Thundercracker, I can't help you or Skywarp right now. We must find an anti-virus quickly or lose everyone."

Thundercracker nodded and cast a final gaze over the body on the table and the whimpering Autobot in the corner. *'Could it have been the Autobots that had seeded the virus in our ranks, if so then this was a fitting end for the wingless being. If it wasn't them it was still an enjoyable thought,'* Thundercracker mused to himself.

The blue Seeker smiled briefly at the bound figure. "Hey, Bumblebee," Thundercracker called out, "hurry up and die so we can find a cure."

"Go get scrapped," was the weak response as Thundercracker left the room.

As the door sealed behind the Seeker, Hook turned to the comms panel. "Hook to Soundwave," he said as he pressed the call button, "Thundercracker was just here, breaking quarantine. He suspects you... Do you want me to do anything?"

"Negative. We have a different situation. I shall send someone to intercept, " responded Soundwave.

"Oh one more thing, Thundercracker might have discovered something relating to the virus. Do you wish me to keep you posted?"

There was a long pause and finally, "Affirmative," came the emotionless reply. "Soundwave out."

Without another word, Hook turned to Starscream's foot and promptly removed the small metal object.

Who Can You Trust?

Thundercracker quickly strode through the hall back to his quarters. He paused. There was a noise behind him. The blue Seeker glanced over his shoulder and saw nothing. He felt a bolt of fear shoot through his body and he picked up his pace as quickly as he could so as not to cause his pounding head anymore grief. He wasn't going very fast though.

He fled on foot in a jarring gait that held none of the grace that a Seeker naturally had. He staggered as he ran, his head throbbing with every foot fall. Each step sent agonising pain through his body from foot to head.

Thundercracker paused for a moment to wonder, *'Why am I running? What am I afraid of? Who am I afraid of?'* The blue Seeker decided he did not trust Hook. The Constructicon seemed to be getting nowhere with finding a cure and he also seemed to not be suffering the effects of the virus as badly, if at all. He screeched to a halt. *'Was Hook even trying to find a cure? Was it possible that the Constructicons were also involved with the spread of the virus? They had ample time to infect all those on base.'* Thundercracker wondered what sort of twisted experiments that the Constructicons were working on and were the Decepticons as a group the "guinea pigs".

Thundercracker again heard a noise behind him and quickly he moved off, melting into the shadows. *'Astrotrain and Blitzwing were once with the Constructicons in their attempt to over throw Megatron.'* He remembered how Astrotrain bungled his attempt at converting Earth's railway vehicles to do his bidding. The Seeker chuckled. Abruptly his smile faded as he recalled angrily at how they had tricked Starscream and effectively put both of them out of the way in a hidden location.

"Thundercracker," said a sickeningly familiar resonant voice that flooded his body with icy fear. He stood transfixed as though he had been welded to the spot. *'Dirge,'* he thought as his body slowly responded to his mental requests to move. "Keep away from me Dirge..." Thundercracker warned, "I'll shoot you if I have to," he said, raising his weapon.

Dirge stepped back and raised his hands, "Megatron is going to be unhappy that you are breaking quarantine. Not that it really matters now."

Thundercracker paused but did not lower his weapon. "What do ya mean?" he demanded. He wondered if Dirge was going to take him prisoner and seal him in the brig. The blue Seeker stepped back, not lowering his weapon, and prepared every aching nerve for the likely necessity of fleeing as fast as he could to get away. His optics remained fixated on the grim Seeker that stood before him.

"Didn't you get the notice? Everyone has the virus now... we are all doomed," said Dirge, his voice filled with deep despair. It sounded very genuine and full of fear and worry. This confused Thundercracker slightly.

"Why should I believe you? I was just in the repair bay no more than five minutes ago,

there was no news that 'everybody' was infected then," Thundercracker backed another step away from Dirge, fighting against the fear that was attempting to seize him again. "I must go, I have to get back to Skywarp... before it's too late," the blue Seeker backed away from Dirge, wanting to leave the spooky Conehead as fast as he could.

Dirge followed after him at the same pace, however. Thundercracker gave up to turn and run. Pain seared through his mind and body again as he fled.

"You go to Skywarp. I must hurry... I have to get the docking tower up," said the Conehead Seeker to Thundercracker's back.

Thundercracker stopped upon hearing Dirge's news. His legs threatened to give out from under him too, so he leaned against the wall. "Why? Who is coming... or leaving?" he inquired, glancing over his wing at the approaching grim Seeker.

"Astrotrain and Blitzwing. The virus is no longer confined to base... they're infected too. Scrapper would like to see them," Dirge stood next to Thundercracker again.

Thundercracker's optics flashed in surprise, he could hardly believe that it had escaped the base, *'Was it possible that it was transmitted via radio waves? If this was the case then it had to be Soundwave, he had the technological know how to transmit such a malicious code through the radio waves.'* His thoughts came with more difficulty now. *'But something was not right with that idea. If it was sent out in one quick sweep, then everyone would have been affected at the same time as Starscream... unless he targeted certain individuals to make it seem like a gradual plague. It was entirely possible to fake the roll call, to make it seem that everyone was ill. Or even, in other cases, to deny the symptoms and spread it around to others, a malicious act that was not beneath the morals of many Decepticons,'* he thought.

Thundercracker inhaled deeply, turning to Dirge. "That's impossible! They were not even near the base two days before Starscream died!" he regarded the Conehead with disdain. Then again, Thundercracker felt he was not so sure anymore of what he should believe. Any of his theories were probable, but without any solid proof it was still only an educated guess.

Dirge nodded. "Soundwave said words to a similar effect. Unless they picked up the virus while dropping off the prisoner on the tower... but that is unlikely. They did not land," he intoned.

Thundercracker scowled, "I'm gonna check on Skywarp, and then I'll try to meet you at the tower."

Thundercracker hurried away from Dirge, he had many thoughts running rampant. *'Everyone on base was sick and two off base fell ill, was it feasible that the contagion was not from someone on base? Could it be possible that Soundwave was not the culprit?'* The blue Seeker felt exhausted when he arrived at his quarters, not only from the virus but also from trying to work out the puzzle. He leaned against the door and punched his passcode into it.

The room was still dark and foreboding as he entered and quickly closed the door behind

him. He could see the shadowy figure of Skywarp laying on the recharge platform. Thundercracker was afraid to turn the lights up in fear of what he might find. "Computer, lights on at half power," the blue Seeker said in a worried tone. As his quarters brightened, Thundercracker could clearly see the black, white and amethyst of Skywarp's colours and a dim glow from the optics. He breathed a sigh of relief. Skywarp was still in the land of the living.

Quickly, the blue Seeker strode to his friend's side and shook him, speaking softly. "Skywarp, wake up, come back on line," he urged, hoping that he was not in stasis.

Skywarp's dim red optics slowly brightened. He turned his head slowly and shielded his optics from the brightness of the room. "Thundercracker, you've returned! I thought I wasn't gonna wake again," the dark Seeker said, fear still edging his weak voice. Skywarp propped himself up on an elbow, his face now screwed up in an expression of intense concentration. "You know, the Constructicons might have been right. I feel a bit better after some rest."

Thundercracker had to agree, Skywarp did seem a little more on the better side of things. "Can you stand?" inquired Thundercracker as he helped the dark Seeker sit up. He started to scrutinise his friend for something too.

"I dunno, " Skywarp pressed his feet against the floor and pushed himself into a standing position. "Yeah, I can stand... but why?"

"Bad news, the virus is now off base. I want to see Astrotrain and Blitzwing myself when they return, " Thundercracker walked around Skywarp for a moment, glancing him over.

"Really? Thundercracker, what the slag are you doing?" asked the dark Seeker perplexed as he watched the blue Seeker's activities.

"Hmm? Oh, nothing... let's go to the docking tower before we miss them," Thundercracker sighed wearily as he tried to scratch at his back.

Nowhere Near

The docking tower resonated as it lowered into the sea. The slosh of water as it splashed over the top echoed through the base as the two Seekers awaited the arrival of their comrades. The elevator door opened with a whoosh and the trio stepped out. Astrotrain and Blitzwing cradled their heads in their hands while wearing very sour expressions.

"I want to slag whoever it is that is responsible," Astrotrain searched the length of the abandoned corridor.

Thundercracker and Skywarp approached Dirge and the two Triple changers. Thundercracker wanted to separate the new comers alone and away from Dirge. He did not want the grim Seeker to overhear what he wanted to say. "I want to ask you two a couple of questions," Thundercracker glared at Dirge, "alone."

Dirge frowned deeply at Thundercracker, "I'm supposed to escort them to the repair bay."

Thundercracker gestured with his thumb over his shoulder. "You go on ahead to Scrapper. I'll escort them to the repair bay myself."

"But I was specifically ordered to—"

"I don't care if Megatron gave you the orders. Get lost or I will beat the living *slag* out of you!" Thundercracker threatened abruptly, balling his hand into a fist and shaking it in front of the Conehead's face.

Dirge, unwilling to find out the validity of the threat, quickly backed away and left Thundercracker and Skywarp alone with the Triple Changers.

Skywarp glanced at Thundercracker. "Okay... I'm scared enough as it is, so you better tell me what's going on," he whispered to his wing mate.

Thundercracker leaned into Skywarp and whispered into his audio. "I have a little hunch." He paused and looked at the back of the dark Seeker. His optics flashed as he brushed his hand along the back of Skywarp's air intake. "Hmm..." A few miniscule pieces of shiny metal came off the intake and slipped into his hand. He glanced at the tiny pock marks that they had left behind. *'I have been thinking that Starscream might have been murdered by one of us,'* he thought as stepped away from the dark Seeker, *'but now I don't quite understand. How could these things have gotten on us like this? Surely we would have noticed it or felt it even.'*

Skywarp's optics flashed in surprise. "What are you doing?"

The blue Seeker grinned briefly and held his hand in a fist, saying nothing. "I am curious," Thundercracker spoke in a low voice to the new arrivals, "where you two got that Autobot."

"Oh, him," responded Astrotrain. "We collected him from that base you, Skywarp and

Starscream attacked the morning before the Air Commander died. Area 51 they called it, isn't that right, Blitzwing?" Astrotrain inquired of the other.

Blitzwing nodded.

"Megatron told us to get a 'bot and we thought that might be a good place to find one, since you three wrecked that base up pretty bad. We figured the Autobots would lend a hand to fix it up."

"And we were right. Ironhide, Ratchet, Wheeljack and Bumblebee were there."

Thundercracker frowned, when his wheels of doubt began to turn again. "Were you attacked?" the blue Seeker remembered the units of human soldiers firing at them. He wondered what sort of ammunition they were using.

Blitzwing crossed his arms. "No, we just walked up and asked Bumblebee if he wanted a free trip. Of course we were attacked by both the Humans and the Autobots. Speaking of which, what are we going to do when they retaliate?"

"Whatever Megatron tells us to do I guess," Thundercracker shrugged. That was something he had not thought about. Surely, the Autobots were gathering themselves to attack the undersea base. They had done it before to rescue a human captive.

"*Bumblebee* is our prisoner?" Skywarp asked surprised. "Alright, let them come over! They'll only get themselves infected and die too," he taunted in a sinister tone, as the four Decepticons walked down the hallway toward the repair bay.

The blue Seeker chuckled at Skywarp's comment, but then he drew in a sharp breath as he noticed a telltale glint on the others. 'Did I have it all wrong? Were the culprits actually someone off base?' he wondered.

"Astrotrain, stop for a second." Thundercracker had faltered behind them, studying the legs, feet and backsides of the Triple Changers. He leaned down and brushed his hand along the back of Astrotrain's leg.

"What in Primus' name do you think you are doing?" demanded Astrotrain.

Thundercracker held up the tiny object on the end of his finger to show his companions. "I found some of these on Skywarp," he opened his other hand to expose four more of the metallic things, "and spotted one Starscream's foot in the repair bay. I think there are a few on me, I feel something between my wings where I can't reach." He tapped his wings slightly to indicate that Skywarp should look. *'Back of wings, legs, air intakes and bottoms of feet... these were placed in locations that would be hard to reach or find. Soundwave does not have this kind of stealth to apply them in such a manner. Nor had any of us here seen a Constructicon for a maintenance check before the virus started. And the Triple Changers were nowhere near the base to begin with. We had to have been infected off base.'*

Astrotrain and Blitzwing looked at each other, perplexed. Thundercracker could see by their expressions that they thought he had lost his mind. Then the blue Seeker wondered

if it was possible that the virus was causing a malfunction in his neural processors and was making him a bit paranoid. *'How far had the virus progressed in me?'* He had been feeling several bouts of disorientation within the past few minutes.

Skywarp had been studying Thundercracker's back closely before he spoke up. "Yeah, you do, there's two and I don't see anymore. Slag, they're tiny." Skywarp plucked the metal disks off. "Hey! Now that I think about it, Starscream said he found about two dozen of those on him. He ditched them in the compactor."

"When did he tell you that?" Thundercracker swiped the things away from Skywarp. That action gave him an unexpected dizzy spell.

"Well... he didn't... I read the last entry of his personal log..." Skywarp's voice trailed off, realising he admitted something he shouldn't have.

Thundercracker now became irritated that Skywarp would be nosy enough to read through someone's logs. "Skywarp you are by far the most nos— argh!" Without warning, a massive onslaught of dizziness caused Thundercracker to crash to the ground as he clutched at his head.

"*Thundercracker!*" shouted Skywarp, kneeling down beside his friend. "What's going on, speak to me!"

Thundercracker lifted his head weakly. The rest of his body refused to respond to his mental commands to move. "Please help me, Skywarp... get me to the repair bay..." he said in a barely audible rasp before going off-line.

At that, Astrotrain and Blitzwing instead rushed in to help pick the blue Seeker up between them. They hurried along to the to the repair bay with Skywarp following frantically behind.

Our Nemesis

Thundercracker and Skywarp lay side by side in repair bay. The dark Seeker awakened groggily. He glanced over and spotted his friend on the platform beside him. "Thundercracker?" he called softly.

The blue Seeker optics came on-line in response to his name being called. "It was the humans..." he groaned, upon awakening. But then he realised to his delight, that he was still alive. However, his head still throbbed with thunder like that of his own engines. He could see Skywarp's fuzzy outline, it was he who had called him. Thundercracker turned his head in response to movement as a shadow fell over him.

Hook stood over him frowning slightly. "What do you mean by that?" he asked the now-awake Seeker.

Thundercracker studied Hook for a moment through blurred visuals. He tried to access his internal chronometer to check the time and date, it was not functioning. The blue Seeker attempted to access a few other secondary sub systems and found they too were giving him error messages. *'How close did I come?'* he wondered fearfully. He had a distinct feeling he should be dead, laying beside Starscream in the other room. *'Perhaps it's still to come,'* he thought as a chill flowed through him. He hated these feelings; helplessness, fear and worry. He realised that if he was still going to pass into oblivion, he had better explain himself before it happened, before it was too late. "It was the humans... They're responsible for all this. It was a technological weapon, similar in idea to their biological weapons..." Thundercracker rasped.

Hook who had returned to studying a datapad, looked down at him, perplexed.

Skywarp propped himself up. "The humans? What the slag... Thundercracker?"

Thundercracker could see the fear and concern still dwell in the optics of his friend, but his face no longer had pain etched across it. *'Was it possible that the Constructicons have come up with a cure?'* Skywarp only looked tired; he did not appear to be suffering from the headache. *'But why the fear, Skywarp? What are you afraid of?'*

"Yeah," Thundercracker responded to Skywarp weakly, after struggling to sit up. "Those flightless worms, they shot us with those things." He struggled to gather his thoughts so he could talk and make more sense. Thundercracker fought to focus his vision and he could see that Hook was again not completely convinced. He felt let down.

"Those things? The disks?" Hook inquired.

"The disks," he agreed. Thundercracker watched Hook as he checked some machines by his platform. He cocked his head and caught sight of a fuel regulator machine. Quickly, he glanced down and noticed for the first time that he had cables and hoses going into and coming from him. Thundercracker realised he had been connected to the life support machines. A cold fear swept over him as he again thought the question he was too afraid to ask. He glanced over at Skywarp who continued to watch him with that

disconcerting worry. He could see that his friend at least was not hooked to any of the repair bay equipment. Thundercracker felt relieved for that.

Hook's attention had turned to Skywarp. "Interesting. You, Thundercracker, Blitzwing, Astrotrain and not the least, Starscream, were more adversely affected by the virus because you had those devices stuck to you in various locations," the Constructicon explained to the dark Seeker.

He could see Skywarp glance over at him frequently. It spawned more nagging questions he was afraid to voice. *'Am I going to live, or is there still a chance that I am not.'* He knew abruptly why he was having system failure messages, he remembered. He lost self-control of the maintenance cycle that they had been ordered not to use, and it activated on its own.

"Yeah," Thundercracker agreed, shifting nervously. "Skywarp had said Starscream had recorded about twenty some odd of them attached to him," he added, now more quietly.

Hook glanced back at the blue Seeker. "This is true... at closer examination of his body we found tiny acid burn marks all over the front of his wings, chest and legs. It appears when the device attaches itself it shoots a strong acid into the armour and injects its viral payload shortly after," Hook elaborated.

'It was an ingenious idea,' he thought sourly. "Hmm," said Thundercracker with a slight groan, "I recall Starscream harrying the humans so we could get away with our cargo. I guess he unintentionally sacrificed himself for us." Thundercracker knew there was a genuine threat to the Decepticons now that the humans had proven they could take out one of the wiliest Seekers that had lived, with something so small and simple. Something had to be done, he wanted to seek revenge on them, to make them pay for the pain they had given him and his kind.

Hook nodded slowly. "You two were part of the reason why the virus spread around the base, having only a couple of the things attached to you, you did not get ill as fast. Starscream, it appeared, had been hit with no less than thirty of them. When we barged in on you, we then became infected. The rate of infection depended on the mech and his subtypes, and the amount of interaction with those already ill. And obviously how many of those things were stuck on you. You two had plenty of time, from after Starscream's death to our announcement, to spread it to the others unintentionally. Being infected ourselves, we spread it to the others while checking them for the infection. I am curious as to how you figured out the connection of the virus to the device, however."

"It's not over yet, is it?" inquired the blue Seeker, sadly, as he laboriously gathered himself to sit up awkwardly. He felt restrained by the array of cables. A new fear began to creep in on him. One that he'd rather not have while he was attached to machines that his very life depended on: claustrophobia.

He inhaled a deep breath before he continued, calming slightly. "I saw something glint in the light of my quarters when Skywarp seemed on the edge of collapse. Then, when I was in here, I saw it on Starscream... the disk on his foot. When we met the Triple Changers, I noticed another glint on Skywarp's air intake and recognised it... and then while I was walking behind the Triple Changers, I saw that they both had some. And

since we all were at Area 51, I saw the connection. Since the humans and their military did experiments there, I decided they had made something new to use against us."

The Constructicon nodded. "No, it's not entirely over. There will be slag to pay." Abruptly, Hook changed the subject. "Skywarp, Thundercracker is now a Decepticon war hero. He spotted something that even I overlooked. But we had been able to create an anti-virus and give it to everyone in time."

The dark Seeker had sat listening to Thundercracker's laboriously spoken story with an expression of pure disgust. He had nothing to say.

The blue Seeker could understand his feelings. *'How dare they do this to us?'* Thundercracker was disturbed by Hook's sudden change of topic. It sounded too good to even be fathomable. *'How come I still feel like slag, if they now have a cure?'*

"Did ya hear that Thunder? You're a war hero!" Skywarp slipped off his bed and Hook made no attempt to stop him. "Thundercracker... are you all right?"

Thundercracker smiled weakly at his friend's enthusiasm and lay himself back down. "I'll be fine, 'Warp," he tried to hide the uncertainty in his voice. "I'm just glad the worst has passed and a remedy found," he reassured his friend, despite his fearful somnolent state.

The Constructicon rested his hand on Skywarp's shoulder. "Thundercracker will take a little longer to recover," Hook informed the dark Seeker. "Upon his collapse his anti-virus systems involuntarily kicked in. He was brought in fast enough so we could de-activate the system, but now his body has to repair the extensive damage this caused, luckily for him and us. It did not get far enough along to corrupt his spark. He will be here for a few days at least... and yes he will live."

Skywarp's optics glowed brightly for a second when he realised how close it had come for Thundercracker. He tried for a moment to imagine a world with out the blue Seeker. Skywarp realised he could not imagine it and did not want to. He glanced at Thundercracker somewhat unconvinced but took Hook for his word. He heaved himself back on his table and lay down. Skywarp too felt exhausted and quickly slipped into a rest cycle.

The two Seekers had been the worst afflicted and it would take them longer to recover than the rest of the force, especially Thundercracker.

Never Cross a Decepticon

One week later:

Life had almost resumed to the normal Decepticon way, except for having to defend against three separate Autobot incursions. In those, they found themselves fighting with a renewed sense of vigour that could only be brought on by the fury of what had been done to them. It did not matter that the Autobots were not the ones who had fired the technological weapons at the Triad or the Triple Changers. They were still allied with the humans.

It was entirely possible that the humans had garnered information on the transformer's internal systems from the Autobots, and made a non faction specific weapon. But it did not matter how the humans had managed make it; there would be slag to pay, as Hook had simply put it.

The overall morale of the base was still low, but it was improving. Had it not been for Thundercracker noticing the tiny devices they might have all perished. Upon closer inspection it was proven that the disks were human-made, like he had suggested. In tiny, almost illegible writing, were the letters: U.S.A.F.

This revelation was enough to send Megatron into another explosive rage. He no longer held Starscream responsible for his own demise, although it seemed to still irritate him somewhat. He was infuriated that he had lost a good Decepticon warrior, and almost many others, so easily to weak creatures like the humans. Thoroughly disgusted, he ordered his Decepticons to the war room.

The leader realised that he hadn't given Starscream the credit he might have deserved, credit he might have received had it not been for the anger he had at all the treachery the late Air Commander had committed. He had very little forgiveness for that type of behaviour, no matter how excellent the warrior. But despite all this, Megatron decided he would have Starscream sent back to Cybertron to be respectfully interred in the Decepticon Crypt.

Thundercracker and Skywarp sat in the war room, awaiting the presence of their Chief Commander. Where there had once been three, there was now only two.

Megatron strode in with Soundwave along side. The tall blue mech was acting Sub Commander until the new Seeker, Ionstorm, arrived from Cybertron.

Megatron's optics glowed with fury as he panned across everyone in the room, before finally resting on the vacant seat that was beside Skywarp and Thundercracker. His optics flashed blazingly for a moment as he frowned.

"Astrotrain and Blitzwing, Vortex and Blastoff, Skywarp and Thundercracker: You six will be responsible for dropping these biological weapons on Los Angeles, Salt Lake City and Miami." He placed three silver canisters down on the table in front of each pair. The Constructicons managed to locate some human biological weapons that they would use

to spread disease and chaos around the USA and hoped it would spread by air travel to other parts of the world.

"Thrust, Dirge and Ramjet: Dispose of Bumblebee's body by the Ark and sprinkle those magnetic devices around him, let's give the Autobots a taste of their human allies' medicine." Megatron dropped a metal box filled with the technological weapons in front of the Coneheads.

He turned back to his gathered warriors. "And I," he pointed at himself with a thumb, "will personally attack the Pentagon." He nodded his head, "you have your orders. Dismissed."

The other Decepticons filed out of the war room, leaving the two Seekers sitting alone in front of the canister on the table. Thundercracker sighed as emptiness filled his spark. He remembered the sound of a whale crying through the metallic walls in his Air Commander's chamber. The blue Seeker cocked his head to tune out the hum of the computers. He pressed his hand against the table and was sure he could hear that haunting melody of the whale song reverberating through all the metal.

He glanced at Skywarp, and he, too, seemed to be listening.

Thundercracker studied the canister. *'What disease does this contain,'* he wondered, *'Anthrax? Ebola? What other types of diseases did the humans create to use against their own kind in their wars?'*

"I don't know," Thundercracker finally broke their silent contemplation. They were about to inflict pain and suffering on so many more humans that had nothing to do with the attack. It was no longer fair.

"You don't know about what?"

"Why is this all necessary? Attacking the humans like this will not bring Starscream back..." Thundercracker did not agree with this drastic measure. "Not every human should be held responsible; a swift attack on military installations should be enough." Thundercracker knew it was the word of his leader, and regardless of his personal opinion it had to be followed with no questions asked. Or he had to face the consequences. A brief shudder ran through him.

"C'mon, Thundercracker, you can't be going soft on us now. Don't forget they almost *killed* you and me," Skywarp admonished. "Have you also forgotten Starscream? Remember, he's *dead* because of them!"

Thundercracker looked at the dark Seeker with doubt-filled optics. His friend's face wore that all too familiar expression of irritation at his moment of hesitation. Skywarp's words rang true, reminding him once more of Starscream's death. As he did, so he also recalled the promise he had made to his dead commander. *'I'll find out who did this to you Starscream, and I'll get them for you.'* Those words and the feelings that came with them were as fresh as the moment he had thought them. His optics flared bright with renewed hate and fury.

"No Skywarp, I haven't forgotten. C'mon then, let's get our afterburners moving before Megatron returns looking for us." Thundercracker tapped Skywarp on the shoulder as he stood up from his seat. He took the silver canister, holding it tight in his black fist.

Skywarp grinned as he spoke, "now you're talking."

He and Skywarp had a flight to catch to Miami, and he did not want to be late. It had come too close for all of them, way too close. And now retribution would be sought against the flightless humans who dare strike directly at the Decepticons.

A Black Shroud

The Decepticons had gathered in a double column inside the Decepticon crypt. They had left a wide aisle way between themselves. They stood facing inward.

The very air was thick with a sombre silence until the beat of a double snare drum echoed through the hall of the crypt. The beat was of a slow funeral cadence. With the first stroke of the drums the Decepticons snapped to attention.

The light from huge torches illuminated the hallway casting it's golden light upon the markers of long and recent dead Decepticons.

A huge statue of a Seeker had been erected at the end of the line of others, sculpted out of brilliant steel with a rich copper red body that glistened in the warm fire light. The details of his face were fine yet sharp and his expression was one of pride and reflection.

Megatron strode down the hall and glanced up at the monument. There stood a warrior, a leader and a comrade. He turned to face the way he had come, waiting and watching.

A violent blaze of glory was the manner that everyone had thought that Starscream would meet his end. Or by the hand of his leader, Megatron. But no one had expected that he would suddenly die from a simple human created computer virus. It felt wrong and unreal.

However, it was done and nothing could be changed. Starscream was forever lost to the Decepticons and any useful information that he might have had died with him. Despite Starscream's loss, the situation inspired an attack against the aggressors. The catalyst for human destruction was rapidly spreading across the globe and hundreds of thousands of humans had already perished because of the attacks.

With the Autobots busy suffering their own scourge, the Decepticons now faced the unpleasant but necessary task of interring one of their own.

The beat of the snare drum grew louder and Megatron glanced ahead and watched as the five surviving Seekers entered shouldering the palanquin upon which Starscream lay. He was shrouded in a fine black cloth woven from the finest metals, shot through with gold and silver. The fabric picked up the light from the torches and shimmered like fine satin.

Thundercracker and Skywarp held the front of the platform taking to their usual sides of their Commander. Their expressions were neutral as they held onto the gilded handle.

Ramjet and Thrust held the rear of the platform with Dirge beating on the snare drum from behind.

The cadence was slow and deliberate. The Decepticons stood in silence as they bore the body of the deceased Air Commander along the black-red carpet that lay on the floor.

A myriad of emotions crossed Megatron's mind as he watched the agonisingly slow procession. There were times when he hated this Seeker, through all the pain and frustration he had been put through with the Air Commanders insolence and attitude.

So many times he wanted to kill Starscream himself, but there was no finer Air Commander in the Decepticon force. Few had the expertise that Starscream had and he had the skill and intelligence to utilise what he had very well.

Of all the Seekers, Starscream had been one of the most intelligent he had ever met. With that intelligence came the ability to question orders, something that grated on his nerves. But something that also helped find flaws in plans and plots.

However, Starscream's attitude toward him when he pointed those flaws out was nothing short of sarcastic and insolent. So many times he stopped short of shooting Starscream with a full blast of his fusion cannon but eliminating the Seeker was out of the question; a replacement would be hard if not impossible to find.

But despite the aggravation the Seeker seemed to have enjoyed giving him, Megatron realised that his second set of optics was now gone forever. He would have to train up the replacement Seeker, Ionstorm, a task he did not look forward to.

He realised he had become very used to Starscream's presence on and off the battle field. The Air Commanders advice, no matter how it was presented was, more often than not, very useful and accurate. He regretted the manner of which he had treated his lieutenant. He regretted his own mistake.

'How many times did Starscream suggest something was going to go wrong? How many times did I ignore his advice only to suffer humiliation? And how many times did I transfer that humiliation onto his shoulders? Countless times,' Megatron thought as the procession drew near. *'How long would we have been at odds? Would we have ever tried to heal the gaping wound between us?'* he wondered.

Megatron watched as the five Seekers lowered the resting platform onto the metal altar. *'There should be no funeral such as this for the traitor,'* he thought for a moment remembering all the times Starscream had turned and shot him in the back or tried to take advantage of the situation. Starscream was an opportunist, he did not allow those opportunities to slip by unnoticed. Starscream was ever watchful and that made him a dangerous rival.

'He did do his job efficiently, Starscream was a very good warrior.' And that was enough to allow the funeral to proceed.

Dirge stopped then made an about turn to face the aisle. "Decepticons, centre face!" Dirge shouted as he beat on the snare then stopped abruptly.

The Decepticons turned in a unit and faced the front of the crypt where Megatron stood. Starscream's wingmates arranged themselves on either side of the platform and Dirge stepped solemnly to stand beside Starscream's statue.

The crackle of the flickering flames was the only sound to be heard. Megatron stood in

silence as he contemplated his words. He chose not to prepare a speech, he would speak from his spark.

"Many times we went into battle as Commander and Lieutenant. Many times we stayed up all night plotting and planning our course of action against our hated enemy. Many times we drank together to celebrate victories over our foes and many times we fought against one another in an endless struggle for power and control. Yet despite all this I still *trusted* him enough to use my transformed powers in battle," Megatron's tone was unwavering.

"Starscream was a skilled Decepticon, a fast, intelligent and brilliant tactician. Skills that I have used for many, many centuries. Skills that have helped us gain the advantage in our struggle to reclaim our world and destroy all those who stand in our way." His voice carried over the gathered army.

"For Starscream, the war and conquest was his life. He found thrill in the pursuits of warfare be it in battle or through the will of his science and his hunger to learn. His desire to grow and become much more than he was was his very nature."

"His vigour, energy and love of his life and the Decepticons was astounding. But Starscream was not willing to sacrifice himself for, what he considered, petty issues, he knew that he was more valuable to us alive than dead." It was that very knowledge that Starscream had used to keep his position as Sub Commander despite all odds.

"Yet here we are all gathered and his empty hull lies beneath this shroud, not knowing that he was a victim of a puny human virus that not only cost him his life, but threatened the lives of all of us. This was not the way he wanted it, his aspirations for death were as grand as his desires for life. But not everything turns out the way we have planned or wanted."

"His death made us aware of a new deadly weapon created by the humans, his death aided us in our survival. His loss will be felt hard by all of us as we continue our fight without his skills, intelligence and knowledge. We can only hope we can still learn something from all of this."

"But, we as Decepticons will persevere, Starscream will be honoured. Cybertron and the universe will be ours. May his spark rest in peace." Megatron finished his eulogy and remained silent for a few minutes before he nodded to the two purple Seekers who stood silently by the statue.

Dirge rapidly beat upon his snare and the Seeker warriors opened up the panel in the base of the marker. Thundercracker, Skywarp, Thrust and Ramjet picked up the palanquin between them and slowly walked to the towering Marker.

Skywarp hesitated and removed something from his chest compartment and rested it on top of the black shroud, a datapad. Carefully they slipped the palanquin into the opening until Starscream was set deep within.

The two warriors quickly closed the opening and welded it shut. The procedure took only a few minutes with the Decepticons watching on in silence. The two Seekers stepped

back and snapped to attention.

Dirge resumed a rapid beat upon his snare as Megatron took a flame from one of the burners and ignited a small gas memorial flame in the front of the marker's base. He stood back and glanced up at Starscream's visage.

"I hope you do well wherever it is you are," with that said Megatron turned and started up the hall followed by Skywarp and Thundercracker, then the Coneheads and then by the rest of the Decepticon force. Dirge beat the drum solemnly as the two Seeker warriors followed behind the column and finally Dirge fell into place at the tail.