

The Pacts of Runaways

[Content: Primeverse, References to abuse, Neutral Starscream, References to (robotic) blood, sassy teenager]

Chapter 2:

As the mech stood and turned towards the door and sheeting rain she had that urge to bring out the slaps again.

“Hey,” she pouted, “If you want me to go out to this energon hole *now* you’re the one who’s pushing it.”

He turned, striking her with a look over his shoulders of genuine surprise.

“What?” he growled, brows quickly lowering and covering up any confusion with a red glower, “You think I’d force you to work in such conditions?”

“Well, excuse me for not knowing where the hell you were going.” She matched his sour expression, giving her hair a sulky flip.

“I come and go as I please,” he snorted. “And as you are unfit to be outside in a bit of water, I was meaning to go and fulfill my end of the deal.”

“But—” Alexis eyed the gray, constant sheet, ear tuned to the heavy drum of the fat droplets. She looked back to him. “But it’s raining *hard*. Doesn’t it bother you?”

“Hmm,” Starscream tilted his head, talons slipping up and picking at a place on his plated neck tubing. “I actually quite like it. That, and there are not any proper cleaning facilities here.”

As an impromptu shower seemed to be what the mech really wanted Alexis returned to sitting; she knew it was probably a conceit to believe this creature—or robot—or creature-robot was ever thinking of any but himself. Though with a little luck his selfishness would result in her acquiring fast food to survive on for the next day or so.

Watching the silvery being step out into the torrent and immediately be

covered in rivulets of water made her wince. Maybe his metallic body wasn't harmed by all the dampness, but a soggy burger was no joke. A soggy box of fries was a tragedy.

Starscream was not thinking that far ahead. The deluge had immediately drenched him, and though having to walk was irritating the earthly grit being rinsed from his greaves and seams was refreshing enough to put a little wiggle back into his wings.

The first thing he needed was to find human habitation, where the "fast food joints" were and where he would be able to snatch the needed organic swill. With a rumble of satisfaction, he noted the weather and approaching darkness decreasing visibility, only a few blurry lights from the edges of a town showing through. It would be in and out fast, with only a slim chance of annoying witnesses. Not that they could really do anything about his presence.

The few townsfolk that happened to be out that evening missed the giant mech stalking through the streets, instead squinting through the dirty water rushing down their windshields and concentrating on getting home. His goal was a buzzy, neon sign in the shape of a dodgy patty and two buns. The word "BURGER" cried out desperately below, the characters Starscream recognized from his time picking up human languages. The dingy building this sign advertised was shorter than the mech; he leaned against it, arm slung onto the roof like a high countertop as he pondered how to go about this mission.

"Suppose I could tear a hole in the wall somewhere..." he shrugged, but immediately frowned. Probably not—in the case that "burgers" and "fries" were fragile substances. In any case, jabbing an arm through a building left a mark, a mark that could be tracked by those who knew what sort of creature left it.

It was then that a strange, backlit box attracted his idle optics; he crouched and studied the foggy images and tiny text printed on its front panel.

A harsh, electronic buzz gave him a start and he jerked his head towards a crackling speaker.

<“Welcome to Knockout Burger, where every patty is a knock out.”> The drained voice, filtered through an intense garbling of static, greeted him. <“May I take your order?”>

“Yes...” The mech nodded slowly, stunned for a moment that anything would be asking him for orders in his current state. Confusing, but oddly gratifying. “I would like a double cheeseburger. Extra onions, uh, no mayo...”

He paused in his choppy recollection, clicking his claws together.

“If you put mayo on I will kill you,” he lowered his tone to a growl. It was such a paltry satisfaction, threatening this automated box thing—but damn it did feel good. A fierce smirk tugged at his mouthplates, “*Slowly...*”

Whether the human operating the drive-thru thought it was a joke or not (or if they were now silent and wondering who in hell was that insistent about mayonnaise) was blown over as Starscream continued.

“Uhh... French fries...” His talons roughly tapped at a small area of images focused on deep-fried forms of spud. He grinned, amused by one image in particular, “Make ‘em the curly ones—I love the curly ones!” His claw rapped harder on the image, knocking out a few bulbs and causing half of the fries section of the board to go dark. “And nothing—*nothing*—that says ‘mega’ on it.”

His grin spread at that. Not even oblong, weirdly greasy humans’ fuel stuff was low enough to deserve half of that one’s name.

“Thank you,” he purred, now amusing himself by playing with a flapping flag attached to the side of the box, batting it with one digit (and ending up shredding the lettering for whatever fast food junk it was advertising).

<“Thank you, Sir, please drive forward.”> Apparently, such behavior didn’t much faze the one on the drive-thru shift that night. Their voice’s tiredness had remained unchanged, death threat and strangeness ignored.

“Drive?” Starscream muttered as he stood up. After a swift scan of the building he picked out a solitary window with a small awning overhead. “Ah... this must be

where the goods come out.”

The rain had perhaps dulled Starscream’s own senses without him knowing or wanting to admit it, for when he stooped to peer into the window after some auto-dispensed grub he startled. An equally startled human boy’s face had been the first thing he’d locked optics with.

“What!” the staggered mech hissed sharply. He generally did not care whether or not his presence and true form were witnessed by random fleshlings, but in this case it was a bit different. He also generally did not bother to interact when seen, having nothing to do with the organic specie at all.

And with another harsh hiss and a blink he realized this encounter was worse: He recognized the teen within the window.

“Jack Darby?”

The kid cringed, less impressed or frightened than the typical witness to giant alien robots, but alarmed at seeing the former main Decepticon Commander poking helm and talons into his dinky little drive-thru pickup window.

Had he not been concerned that he was alone, in a paper hat, confronted with *Starscream* of all ‘Cons, he might have giggled hysterically.

But this was *freaking Starscream*. Without Arcee, Bulk, Bee or even a ticked-off Ratchet around. And he was uncomfortably aware of his stupid paper hat...

“Umm...” Jack scratched his neck, beginning to slowly back away towards the door to the main room of the restaurant. “I’m gonna try not to question what you’re doing here.”

“Probably for the best, fleshling,” Starscream snapped as he came back out of his daze. One sharp talon tip hooked under the plastic windowguard and forced it further open.

“Whoa, easy!” Jack held up his hands, hoping his mic wasn’t being recorded to be overheard by a very confused manager. “There’s no need to get violent.”

“That depends on your conduct, human,” the mech growled softly as he got back into his own. The talon lingered in the air a few feet away from Jack’s chest

before settling against the sill. “And how quickly and competently you can fulfill my demands.”

“Okay, okay. So, what exactly are your demands?” Jack’s eyes darted to the drawer where his cellphone was hidden, Autobot HQ on speed dial. He could probably distract Starscream somehow, and once he did make a grab for it. The Seeker had just a tiny window to reach in after him, and alone he wouldn’t stick around if he knew protective Autobots were about to be storming through a Groundbridge at him.

With an exasperated snarl the threatening talon retreated to allow it’s owner’s pointed face to bury itself in his servo.

“Does your order-receiving box... thing not even function?”

“You—” The kid had a dizzied look at the realization. *That was you?!* he wanted to say, but considering the circumstances were dicey and the mech even dicier he opted for an alternate version: “You wanted that order...?”

“Don’t give me that look,” he snorted, optics narrowing into menacing slits. “I have my reasons. Now, the stuff.”

Jack eyed the extended talons, wincing as they squeezed through the window and came uncomfortably close to jabbing him.

“I’m going to just assume you’re not going to pay for this.”

“No. Why should I?” Starscream’s snarl was complimented with a harsh smirk, “Now, do you wish to give me what I asked for with no trouble, or would you like for my left digital servos to be introduced to your squishy, weak chest cavity?”

“S-sure...” Jack’s mouth was drawn back in a wide line as he realized he’d been trapped in a little corner, unable to comply, “You, uh, need to give me room to grab the stuff, you know.”

The claws retreated.

Aware of the fierce red glow of impatient optics on his back, Jack scooped curly fries from a fryer basket and tried not to sweat. Starscream made small noises of disgust as he watched the process of two hot patties slapping together with melting

cheese and onions. In a few moments of paper crinkling, Jack turned back to the window with a grease-spotted bag that the mech eyed with curiously combined expressions of... covetousness and general gross-out.

“Good. I will take that.” Two claws snatched the small package away, causing the teen to jump back. “Ah, yes, and I was never here. Understood?”

“Got it.” Jack nodded, knowing saying otherwise would win him a free kidney removal. Of course, this would make for something interesting and strange to relay to Arcee later. And give the Autobots an updated “last known location” for the ex-Con, in case he got up to even more misbehavior.

But Starscream further confused the teen with his last actions before stalking off into the blinding rain; he tucked the fast food bundle into his palm, shielding it from the rainwater.

As the sinister, spiky form vanished Jack felt as if he’d dodged a bullet. Now another tough task lay ahead—explaining things to the boss. He squinted and slumped on the counter to settle the shakes; “robbed at machete-point by a crazy drifter” seemed pretty accurate a story. He only needed to leave out the detail of the crazy drifter being an alien robot to sound passable.

And to think, mom had said service jobs weren’t *that* bad.

The rain had slackened a bit during Alexis’s long wait in the construction block, the noise now a gentle, soothing patter. It was almost full dark now. And while this Starscream robot was away, she had decided to snoop a bit.

With her keychain penlight she traced the walls of the edifice, hoping to stumble across anything that was the tempermental alien’s possession. She found next to nothing: It was clear he had removed and rearranged some of the concrete slabs and pieces from the scuffs on the floor, but other than that the only things she encountered was the bizarre liquid.

She'd turned the light off, giving up, when the faint glow from above caught her attention. A few inches over her head, right where the mech's back had been set against the wall, to the right side. It was sticky, a congealed bluish smear. Alexis recoiled a hand back at the tackiness; if it had been on the floor she wouldn't dare touch it for fear of what it was, but on the wall it looked, felt, and reacted like drying blood.

Now, staring up at the faint cyan luminance, she had worries about radioactivity. Maybe this robot was also the source of those rumors? Hopefully this light was just light—nothing pinging off and promising to give her cancer later.

"*Alexis*," she jumped at the booming voice echoing in the chamber. Whirling, she spotted Starscream peeking in, rainwater still dripping from his armor plating, red optics not yet focused on where she stood and seeking her out in broad, sweeping glances.

"Sir, yes Sir!" she stepped forward with a limp and mocking salute. As his stern faceplates turned to her she enough she caught a hiding glimmer of amusement.

"Ah, that's where you got to," he stepped inside a short ways. The paired wings gave a rapid flutter and shook a fine mist of water off; Alexis flinched and staggered back as his head followed suit and sent the spray almost onto her. He grunted, seemingly satisfied with this, and stepped further in, "For a moment there I had thought you had taken the opportunity to run off."

"*Please*, I'd get soaked and freeze to death even in this." She huffed, scurrying to put a hunk of broken cement slab between him and her (in case he suddenly felt the need to dry off a bit more). She looked him over; she couldn't tell if he was carrying anything yet—though maybe he had it stored away in a hidden compartment.

As he returned to his slumped position against the wall Alexis had found the blue blood on he seemed to catch on to her expectant stare.

"You want your *chow*, hm?"

She nodded, biting her lip to hold in the curses she wanted to fling. His slight grin looked positively evil to her, lit only by the ruddy light of his own eyes. His left hand opened, revealing a still-dry baggie of drive-thru takeout tucked underneath his thumb.

He had almost extended his arm to drop the bundle into Alexis's waiting grasp when he pulled it back up out of reach.

"So you would like this carbon-based garbage?" his sadistic tone filled the firl with boiling anger. She glared, not giving up on her reaching gestures. "Seems like some vile stuff to *me*, but I'm no fleshling..."

"And I went to *such* trouble for it, so I hope you appreciate this." He dangled it lower, still a few inches too far for her to grab away from him.

"I *would*, if you'd actually give it to me," she ground through her clenched teeth. The red optics widened.

Starscream chuckled. Finally, he let the package drop, and the angry teen clutched it tightly as she backed to the furthest corner from the teasing mech as she could.

"Don't take any scrap, do you?" the mech purred, her warning glare not bothering him in the least. He gave his jaw and beard spike a habitual stroke, reclining against the wall with a slight wince. This day had brought with it some much-needed luck: He was clean, the wounds those damn MECH meatbags had left him with were closing up nicely, he'd verbally overpowered one of the Autobots' annoying human children with no added drama or risk to himself.

And finally, this girl, Alexis, was now in his debt somewhat, obliged to aid him in his quest to restore his energon volume. He smiled to himself, wings shifting outwards. It was as good a reason as any to have a casual fondness for the human. They couldn't *all* be as barbaric and disgusting as MECH ops., and not every fleshy child was as much a thorn in his side as the Autobots' little "partners".

Partners. The word sunk into his processor. He'd been very lonely, truth be told. Not just during his neutral run across this organic planet, but all through the vicious back-end of this war. Roaming about with no roof or berth to his name, scrounging to live and with no other goal—well, it wasn't all that different from the conflict, was it? For a thousand years it had mostly been splinter groups and loners, fighting each other for supplies like rival bandits. The only mechs left who looked on him with any respect or memory of better times were out there, simply surviving. Just like him, separated by millions of solar-reks, scattered across the universe.

Alexis was glad of the Seeker's silence, only shooting him a few glances between bites of greasy fried food to make sure he was still spacing out. She was beginning to fear he'd hassle her the whole night, taunting her powerless situation just because he could. Now he seemed able to ignore her completely, even the sounds of her peeling the last stuck-on bits of cheese from the burger wrapper and greedily devouring them too.

Starscream's attention was caught by the arc of the wrapper, bag, box and all that she'd crumpled up and tossed into a random corner. He eyed it, grunted, and turned to her.

"You're quick." His expression was deadpan; it was worrying. Starscream's thoughts were still centered on the unwilling solitary nature of things; his optics flicked over her posture—knees hugged protectively to her chest, defensive scowl plastered on to disguise any fear—and he loosened.

"Must have been running on empty, eh?" He successfully *smiled* rather than smirked, voice low and tired. Talons tapped against his leg plating, never settling on one rhythm but shifting between several before giving up. "Well, that we have in common."

"I know, I know," the fact Alexis was agitated with the banter was as obvious as Starscream's swooping eyebrows. "I owe you a bunch of enerjins or whatever it's called. I would really rather not do it in the rain, though."

The mech's brows lowered over widened optics. At her last huff he growled low in his throat and shifted his weight. So much for some easy and convenient companionship; her fear had given way to protective snappiness, making it impossible to expect an accommodating response. What luck that he had red optics that covered up any signs of flushed faceplates. He hated apologizing. The worse things had gotten, the more apologies he had to craft... though most he'd avoided saying, and others he refused to think on out of sheer principle.

Such was the nature of war. He pushed it out of his mind.

"Oh come on, now." He muttered, wincing at the split in his lower back plating giving him an odd twinge. "What did I say before? You fleshlings are not fit to work in this weather, so that can *wait* until the conditions are mild enough for you." He laid the palm of one servo on helm, obscuring the base of his red crest. "When I agreed to

your little exchange, I expected an *exchange*. An *agreement*. Meaning I want to hear less of these vulgar assumptions of yours.”

Alexis snorted.

“I’m not completely wrong—you obviously don’t think highly of humans.”

“And should I?” Starscream let out a sarcastic laugh. He eyed her tensing up as he sat up straighter, his claws digging into the concrete slab beside him. “After what I’ve been through, should I really respect you fleshbags so much?”

“Come here.” Alexis was stunned and uneasy as the giant shifted tone and beckoned her over.

“...Why?” She backed up rather than stepped forward, clutching the keychain light as if it were any defense, “Can’t we just keep talking from where we are?”

“Yes, but,” he raised a talon, beckoning once again, “I wish to show you something.”

With a sigh Alexis stood. Since refusing his orders would only make this robot more insufferable she stepped over lightly, nervously waiting to the side of his immense legs for what he’d show her. And regardless of anything else, she was curious.

“Stand there. There, just there.” She had climbed atop the raised concrete slab beside him, moving quickly to hasten things. With a hissing breath he turned in place until she was faced with his back.

“Look,” the girl was directed to a spot on the lower, right-hand side of the main armor plate by a pointing talon. Stepping closer she was met with a faint glow—cyan blue—that outlined a deep split.

“Are you bleeding..?” Her eyes widened, knowing the answer before she even asked. The blue smear—it had been blood... or “blood”, but same difference.

“That is where they cut me open,” Starscream’s tone was disturbingly soft, mostly for his own benefit. He did not want another emotional fit from this. “And by ‘they’, I mean humans.”

“I gave these particular fleshlings the benefit of the doubt. They had resources;

I was desperate. I gave them information and even helped in their dirty work. And how did they return the favor? Provided me with energon? Watched my back?”

Alexis took a step back, snuffing out the brief surge of sympathy with worry that ‘Scream was losing it. The concrete block echoed with his harsh cackle.

“*That* is how they ‘watched my back!’” He continued to snicker to himself, shaking his head as he came back down from raving, “So, understand this... No, I do not think highly of your kind. They are just as much scum as my own kind. I regard *both* kinds with equal dislike and suspicion. From experience.”

Alexis had backed away fully now. Not out of squeamishness—the wound wasn’t that bad, even from the perspective of a being who had energon for blood, tubing, plates and servo articulators for gore. His dark ramblings had come too close for comfort to her own thoughts.

Starscream peered over his shoulder, concerned by the silence from the girl.

“Just so you know, the only reason I bother trusting you to honor your end of this bargain is that I know you are helpless.” He gave a dry laugh; this was a poor excuse for reassurance and he knew it. He wasn’t sure why he even cared at this low point. “Any more than helpless is too much.”

“You’re paranoid.” She choked on the words. “Helpless” was right, as was “paranoid”, and despite knowing it was a critical-sounding accusation it had spilled out anyways.

“Yes.”

“Because people suck.” Starscream’s audios pricked up; there was something very accepting about her tone.

“Indeed.”

A sullen air enveloped the two, with Alexis silently watching the pulse of brightness from his injury and Starscream blankly observing the dark walls, a strange calm coming over him as he mulled over the girl’s words.

Because people suck. Sad, but amusingly true. Still benefitted from the inclusion of the word “most” to make it perfect (he’d never been a believer in absolutist morality,

even when he had... mostly adhered to his sense of morality).

He peered back again to see her bowed head. Primus, he hoped she wasn't about to let loose with those tears again.

"You may return to your spot, if you wish."

Alexis took up the offer, scooting off the edge of the slab and scuttling back to the furthest corner. On hearing her remove herself Starscream groaned and laid himself down, shoulders, neck, and helm resting against the concrete block like an incredibly rough pillow.

"So I guess this is an 'until tomorrow'?" Alexis sniffled, her throat clogged. The pessimistic exchange had left her antsy and unable to even think of sleep. As uneasy as she was about the mech she found him pitiable—relatable. They'd both come to the same sad conclusions about the world so easily.

"Mm." His response only irked her. Before she knew what she was doing words began pouring out, and by the time she realized what she was saying she no longer cared to stop herself.

"You know, I don't really think people are naturally bad," she sighed. "It's just that there are so many bad things out there, and people get tired or forget when others are relying on them... and they just stop trying."

"I don't guess you know what alcohol is." She shrugged, slumping back against the cool wall.

"I do," His voice was low and raspy. "Though I assume you mean the type imbibed by humans as a recreational drug."

"Mhm." Alexis stared at the back of his head, not really looking at him. "Well, my dad likes the stuff. He likes it so much he forgot about other stuff he's supposed to be paying attention to. Like his job." She slumped against concrete, letting her face smush against the cold stony surface, "And his wife. And his kids. And having a house that isn't covered in cigarette butts and nasty dirty laundry and empty beer cans. He's not *evil*, exactly. He just forgot to care. I love him. I hate him."

"And... you're asleep, aren't you? I'm just talking to a wall now." The girl scoffed. There was no reddish light emanating from the mech's eyes anymore, which

meant the chamber's darkness had increased tenfold. "Figures."

Starscream's internal systems gave a deep thrumming—snore-like, or close enough to pass for snoring. He held off on any response. Too tired; after tomorrow, there would no longer be a point in ingratiating himself to the fleshling anyhow. He'd have energon back up to normal levels and he'd be able to continue on his way. He told himself there was no need to get attached, that she'd cease being useful to him after tomorrow.

Besides, the life problems of a helpless organic creature had never seemed more familiar and depressing. He relaxed as she fell quiet and fitfully fell asleep first.