

The Pacts of Runaways

[Content: Primeverse, References to abuse, Neutral Starscream, cussing of both robots and humans, sassy teenager]

Chapter 4:

Dull echoes. The shattered lifter engine cooled off quietly where it lay in several pieces, some of which were embedded in the nearest server bank. The destroyed computers ticked softly, electrical trails running through them in their death throes. Abandoned, lifeless place; atmosphere could use some improvement, but at least the remaining energon shone warmly.

There was a dull rumble from the far end of the underground bunker followed by the screech of steel sliding open. The wall seemed to retract, slipping up into itself and revealing a pitch-black passage. Frigid air crept in, killing the warmth of the secret stash and heralding the arrival of something—someone—even more chilling.

Cybertronian for sure—but much smaller than Starscream, with spindly legs arcing over her black exoarmor where wings, winglets, or kibble plates ought to be. Her optics were a shiny but unnatural shade of violet, almost the same ominous shade as the Blood of Unicron. They were sinister even before she froze and narrowed them, mouthplates turning up into an offended sneer as she spied the damages.

“Little vermin returned, did they?” she hissed, pacing over to inspect the broken pieces, flicking metal shards and twisted motherboards over with her thin, spidery extra limbs. Her gaze froze and hardened on the one row of energon-filled crates that was missing a member.

“And they’ve been stealing from me,” she traced the tracks in the dust to the bottom of the emergency exit shaft, thin pinprick of sunlight streaming in and illuminating her horned crown as well as her vengeful thoughts. “Hmmm. Didn’t cover your tracks well. Might come back to haunt you, disgusting pest.”

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He came around to a low “oo-oo” and rustling against his audio guards. *Pigeon*. He recognized those now immediately. Especially since the little airborne creatures made the odd and frequent habit of perching on his extremities whenever he stayed still.

A weight and sigh on his chestplates had him turn sharply downwards to inspect something that was *not* a pigeon at all. Still perched on him, though.

“What’s the idea?” he rumbled, taking care not to sit up from where he lounged yet. Alexis rolled over onto her back, peering up at the giant’s puzzled features. She suppressed a giggle from how odd those features looked while upside down. She looked tired—and quite bored—much like a napper suddenly roused.

“It’s really sore sitting on that concrete for so long.” She yawned. Starscream blinked, one optic squinting down at the teenager.

“I *know*,” he growled, a talon shifting over to rub at the armor greaves on his flank. “So... You’ve decided to just invite yourself up here, hm?”

“I didn’t think you’d mind...” Alexis let out a nervous giggle. To be fair, a few hours ago ‘Scream was high as a kite and weighted down with five thousand pounds of rich, tasty energon—after he’d passed out he minded very little. “I just wanted a break, you know?”

“Ah,” the mech nodded, arching his back slightly in a stretch, servos and plating greaves popping, something deeper in making a cringeworthy grinding noise for half a second. Alexis half-expected him to rise shortly after and had grabbed onto one of his clavicle spars. “It’s no matter. I was just wondering why you would choose this spot. Are you a pigeon?” He started to bare his teeth, a talon indicating the healthy, fat birds still cooing from his pauldrons, crown plates, engine cover, etc.

“If the pigeons are anything to go by, you are the best seat in the house.” She cracked a grin at his widened optics.

The flurry of startled birds was ushered out by the giant’s echoing cackle, “You mean if *you’re* anything to go by.” He stroked his beard spike, eying her embarrassed huff with great amusement. “Organics are strange lifeforms, I see.”

“What’s that look?” He grinned, “Thought it was cozy up here.”

“You always have to *tease*, don’t you?”

“It’s something to do,” his grin shrank into a self-satisfied, crooked smirk. “It’s only teasing. If you’re keen on climbing on top of me I’m happy with that. Just behave yourself—no sticking hands or objects in my heat vents. It’s annoying.”

Alexis’s eyebrows rose. She turned so that she was seated facing his chin.

“Did I say something funny?”

“No, just unexpected.” She had to blink hard. Admitting to liking the company of others was hard for her too. Especially when those feelings came at the risk of exposing her weak points. “I’m glad you’re tolerating me when you could have just run me off.”

“Nonsense.” His brow tipped down into a sharp slant, “And don’t get squishy.” She fought the urge to laugh a bit; seems Starscream, too, was far too prickly to be so open with basic affection.

“I kinda don’t have a choice.” She shrugged with a weak wave of her obviously non-robotic arms. Again ‘Scream laughed, louder and less snarky.

“Thank Primus you’re clever,” he chuckled, optics half-shuttering. He looked her over—in detail for the first time since meeting. It had hardly seemed appropriate given the business-nature of things; he’d intentionally averted himself from the natural bonding process, and that had including not bothering to study her appearance in much detail. Why learn a face that will only figure into your plans for a few days, tops? Now he had finally noticed the knees on her jeans were worn thin, her reddish-toned but dark hair scruffy and unkept, face grimed and weary from sleeping practically outside.

“Yecch—eugh!”

She squirmed away in shock at what he’d done next—dabbed the tip of one claw in oral lubricants and started to reach out to de-grime her face.

“Oh, hold still—” He half-snarled, half-grinned as the claw hovered, other servo barring her escape. “You could use a polish.”

“I could *not* use a ‘polish’—get your big icky finger away!”

“It’s not icky. It’s just mech fluid. No worse than water.”

“Yeah, maybe! But I just watched you *lick* your finger to get it,” Alexis had scuttled back to the very edge of his chestplate. Swatting kept the teasing talon relatively at bay. “So nope.”

“Okay, fine. Be dirty then.”

His playful mood faltered instantly at the sound of an approaching motor. Two-wheeler’s sort of motor noise. The Seeker jolted upright, the claw he’d previously been using to block the girl’s escape snagging her out of midair as she slid off. Her alarmed squeak was cut off, and she squirmed higher in his grip so she could catch her breath.

“What the *hell* is—”

“*Sbbb*.” He hissed, optics wide and caught between a scolding and worried look.

“What the hell is up with you?” She tried again, this time in a sharp whisper. Starscream backed up close to the wall and into the shadows, listening.

The motor approached, seeming to slow at the edge of the abandoned complex before cutting out entirely. His wings tipped up slightly, interest piqued and fears drastically lessened.

Alexis leaned her elbows on the top of the giant mech’s clutches, giving him a critical look. She didn’t know why he’d suddenly relaxed; couldn’t know he’d noticed this motor noise was a bit too genuinely primitive to be who he’d first suspected.

“Someone is here,” he finally grumbled, gaze flicking over to her. “Hrmm.”

“And you’re looking at me like you want something.” Alexis rolled her eyes.

“Go see who it is.” He set her down on her feet, staying far back and ignoring her incredulous stare.

“Why me?”

“It’s a fellow human.” He shrugged with a distant look.

“Yeah, well, they could be a psycho!” She growled, rubbing at one temple. “Just because I’m a lil fleshie doesn’t mean I know every other human on a first-name basis.”

“Well, if they try to harm you, *scream*.” He snorted. “And I will *take care* of it.”

“Fine, fine, I’ll go stick my neck out...” She gave up. After a good look at the stubborn mech in his defensive position, she knew that he’d be no good to hang around if she continued to argue. He was much less nerve-y than he’d started, but he was still anxious about visitors. He just had to know, and without being spotted. But she could not resist, as she passed back into the daylight desert, shooting a quip back his way. “You *baby*.”

He replied with a tense grumble. Neither confirming nor denying her suspicions on his cowardly nature. But she knew.

The bike rumbled to a stop, the teenaged boy on top of it sticking out a leg as it slowed and making the whole vehicle bounce up. The inanimate machine was not the robot in disguise the hiding Seeker first suspected it to be—this bike was considerably smaller, less sleek, and orange-colored. Even odder—it had a sidecar.

A sidecar with an occupant, who pried the sweaty, poorly-fitting helmet off his curly, dark hair and threw a wince the rider’s way.

“You need to work on your deceleration, man.”

The taller of them took his own helmet off his blonde head, not having the same sweat or fit issues as his passenger.

“I stop fine!” He pouted, “this is a bike, not a car. The rules are different.”

“The shocks are *worse*, though,” The boy inched out of the sidecar, playing up the soreness as if it were crippling pain, “My ass as witness! They’re worse.”

“Well, maybe bring a pillow or something if you want a ride,” the blond reached around and rummaged in a backpack he wore, checking on the crinkling contents which appeared to be mostly bags of chips and other junky snacks. After a

moment he tugged the lot of them out inside their own cheap plastic sack and tossed the bundle to the younger kid. “Enh, they’re not too broken. She probably won’t care anyways.”

“How’d you know she’d be here?”

“It’s a party spot, Carlos. She’d go here because it’s one place her parents aren’t going to know to look.”

“Rad?”

The two boys turned to look up the hill after the voice. Carlos grinned and waved the bag of snacks they’d brought, but as he jogged over the other boy noticed she didn’t look nearly as cheerful to be reunited with her classmates as Carlos did. Rad paced up slower; in fact, she looked downright upset to see the two of them turn up. But not in the angry way. Not at first.

“What are you two doing here?” She hissed, ignoring the bag as Carlos weakly held it out to her.

“Bringing you stuff,” Carlos blinked in puzzlement, “You been out here with nothing, Lex, we got worried!”

“And it’s *just* you two?” Alexis scanned the road behind them. Her fright was beginning to scare Rad. His brows furrowed.

“Who else would we bring—Bill and Fred? Geez, Alexis, we’re trying to help here.” The reassurance brought a guilty look to her eyes for a moment. She quickly scowled to cover it up.

“What if someone followed you?”

“So what?” Carlos rubbed his neck, cringing at the sweatiness still lingering. “Are you in trouble?”

“No...! No, no, it’s fine.” She rubbed at her temple, thoughts racing faster than Rad’s dinky motorcycle was capable of; her friends were stubborn, and if they were more stubborn than the secret mech just thirty yards from the road... she didn’t know how an encounter would go down. Given Starscream’s sudden jolt of paranoia, it would probably go poorly. “I just would rather my dad not know where to find me.”

“Hey, it’s fine, okay?” Rad sighed, “You need a few days away from that place, that’s fine. We’re just a little freaked out you didn’t ask us for help first.”

“Well, I didn’t ask because this isn’t just ‘a few days’, Rad.” Alexis snorted. Carlos’s eyes widened.

“But... you can’t just run away.”

“I can and I have.”

“You could crash with one of us!”

Alexis gave a soft laugh, “Okay, I cannot imagine your mom being convinced to take in another kid. Just saying.” She turned abruptly, “I mean... this is a nice gesture, but I’d really rather not talk about it.”

“Not even to us?” Rad’s brows furrowed further, striding after her, “We’re your friends.”

“And you also have *sober* parents. So, no, not even to you.”

“You could at least explain it to us so we could help you better!” Carlos was left scrambling to catch up to the two bickering teenagers. Alexis struggled to keep ahead of Rad, silently praying their noise would warn the metallic giant to slip out before the boy staggered into him. “This is kind of an old excuse, Alexis. We don’t need a drunken dad each to *listen* to your problems.”

“But it would help you get why I can’t just waltz back into that house!” The girl’s voice took on a genuine snarl; this was an old argument, and the emotion flared up in earnest from underneath her layer of fabricated stand-offishness. *Jesus Christ, just get annoyed with me and leave already!* As the concrete shell of a building came into view her heart pounded, *before something worse happens!*

Rad had stopped, brow ticking furiously and arms crossed, a few yards from the old edifice. Carlos came panting up with the helpful bag of goodies still in tow. He shrugged at Rad’s stern looks. *Third fiddle once again.*

“Why does she have to be so damn stubborn...!” The blond growled to himself.

Carlos wisely kept the thought that it was not just Alexis but also Rad who was “so damn stubborn” to himself, instead plopping the bag of snacks onto a nearby

concrete block and hinting: “Well, she don’t have to spill her guts about everything. Yelling at her is not gonna help her get her shit together.”

“No, I mean—” Rad stole a glance up to make sure Alexis wasn’t turning back to chase them from her crumbling sanctuary again, “She keeps blocking me. Sure, she’s always high-strung but she just sounds like she wants us to *leave*.”

“So she wants us to leave,” Carlos rolled his eyes, “I’d want us to leave if you kept picking an old scar while she was tryin’ to get her head together. Let’s just check on her and then go—and not be so annoying.”

“I’m *not* being *annoying*—”

“Will you two just go!”

The boys directed their attention back to Alexis, standing squarely in the doorway to the building. Though she desperately tried not to seem like she was barring the door, Carlos and Rad both instantly noticed she was barring the door despite her not being nearly big enough to block the entire way. They caught each other’s glances before approaching.

“That’s not going, guys.” She frowned, trying to ignore the sweat beading on her forehead. She hadn’t had time to run in and warn the Seeker to get clear of the place, but at her loud protests she started to hear a grinding sound of metallic feet shifting against sand and stone. “I need to be left alone.”

“What’s so wrong with us being in this wreck, ‘Lex?’”

“Nothing. Just that you keep following me around when I specifically asked to be left alone!” She squinted at him and shook her head. “And stop calling me ‘Lex’. I’m Alexis, not ‘Lex’. *Conrad*.”

Rad flinched at hearing his full given name, opening his mouth in indignation and gesturing to the shorter kid.

“You let Carlos call you ‘Lex!’”

“That’s because Carlos is Carlos.”

Carlos almost beamed before his smug look was replaced with wonderment. Something upturned on the ground in the shadows behind Alexis had caught his eye.

“Whoa—those weren’t here last time!” The boy scurried past the girl before she could stop him. He slowed to a stop just a foot away from one of the empty energon canisters and its still slightly warm aura, “Holy shit, ‘Lex, you didn’t think to mention *these big ole things*?”

“What are those?” Rad was less amazed and more instantly worried for Alexis. After all, they had no clue what the human-sized cylinders were or what they had once contained—and he was not keen on letting one of his few friends hang around some potentially dangerous substance.

Alexis was equally worried, but about another potentially dangerous entity. Thankfully, the two teens seemed to have spotted the lightly luminous canisters instead of walking in on a taloned, unbalanced robot. She shot a frantic glare towards the deeper shadows of the room and was relieved to see Starscream had fully slipped out of the way and out of their sight, “Uranium 255 barrels. Of course, it won’t affect you two freaks much.”

Rad’s eyes widened immensely. “Umm. And *you’re* not concerned about that theory being true?”

Alexis sighed. Exasperated. Carlos had edged away from the cylinder just before he’d decided to prod a bit of glowing blue residue.

“Look, maybe they’re giant alien beer cans? I don’t know, just go back home and don’t go spilling to anyone that I’m here.”

Rad scratched his head. Of course, as much as he wished Alexis would consider working things out with her family rather than live out in an abandoned construction project he could not imagine letting her relatives in on her secret spot. Finally he sighed.

“Of course we’re not going to tell anyone,” he assured her. “We just want to make sure you’re okay. This stuff is scary, you know?”

“And you don’t even know what these big oil drum things are from!” Carlos was aghast, “Hell, they could be radioactive waste or something...”

Alexis bit her lip. It was a caring thought even though she knew exactly what the blue glow was from, and that it was harmless. But she played along.

“You at least gotta keep going to school,” Rad pointed out. “I can go sneak your binder over here for you. If you want.”

“Sheesh,” Alexis sat on the ground. Overwhelming relief filled her—there wasn’t going to be a conflict between new friend and old. It was a strange thing to be so scared of, but then again being friendly with what her peers could only classify as a monster beyond their understanding was also strange. She’d been so nasty to them both just to ensure a clash didn’t happen; guilt bobbed up among the relief and softened her tone. “That’d be great. Just... don’t get caught. I don’t know how Dad would react to someone breaking in.”

“I’ll just do it when they’re not home,” Rad snorted. Carlos shuffled, uneasy with the topic of what was technically a high crime.

“Can’t you just ask him... never mind.” He dropped the subject as the more stubborn teens glared over at him. Of course, it would be silly to just ask—asking Alexis’s father for her things would be a dead giveaway they knew where she was staying. Neither of the boys liked the idea of confronting the notorious parent anyways. Theft was obviously safer.

The Seeker stood from where he’d leaned a moment against the wall of the crumbling shelter, listening to the echoes of the three humans’ conversation to be sure the two boys were thoroughly distracted. He felt lucky the place had been built with a side entrance in mind, just wide enough for him to pin his wings back and slide out in time to avoid Alexis’s cohorts seeing him.

He padded carefully back from the wall, springy heels and toe struts becoming softer and making much less noise. He crept away until he was sure his ordinary footsteps would not be heard or felt. A raspy sigh fizzled from his vent openings. Thank Primus he didn’t have to deal with any more humans. Alexis was fine—and to be fair, she was far from a typical human youngster—but he was loathe to pick up his own trio of small, squishable partners so soon. Or ever, really. On further reflection and with a few more careful steps towards the dusty roadside, he wondered what on Earth he was going to *do* with this young teenaged girl once he was ready to move on and get to the *Harbinger*? He knew for a fact the Decepticons who had set out on that

ship would never have considered having resources for *mere organics* aboard, and besides he didn't know too much of what a human tagging along would need. Well, beyond the basics. Food, shelter, water—beyond that his knowledge was nil.

Wings flicking up he paused the troubling thoughts to listen. The three's faint chatter did not seem ready to cease, though it had become much quieter. He would not have to remain out here much longer. He turned to take another step in his paces and staggered to avoid tripping on something ankle-level.

“Fragging two-wheeler—” Once he'd regained his balance he crouched to snarl at the inanimate vehicle. He only managed to half-snarl before the little orange motorbike struck him as odd. “—wait... what?”

Both talons planted on the ground to support him as he dipped his head lower, cocking up one brow plate as he studied it. He had occupied Earth for several of its millennia—on and off—and had not once encountered a piece of technology as vexing as this one. This called for a long squint and a stroke of his beard spike.

“So, you're what I heard earlier,” he snorted. “Hah, what a stupid thing... You look nothing like the Autobot.” He gave the sidecar, the one part that was giving him trouble, a curious prod, “What is this malfunction?”

The motorbike never replied, of course, but Starscream continued to mutter along to amuse himself. Another prod to the metal bars holding the sidecar attached to the bike itself, careful to keep his sharp digits clear of the rather dinky tires.

“I wonder if the fleshbag who constructed this *knows* it looks like an asymmetrical tumorous lump!” He chuckled, shaking his head, “Of course not. Human fashions. Ungh.”

In the quiet he pondered whether this thing even counted as a two-wheeler. He stood with a grunt and fanned out his wings to feel an unusually pleasant breeze before his cranial unit clicked. The quiet. Optics widening, he ducked down, wings twitching in annoyance. The kids had silenced—no doubt the two boys were on their way back to their... transportation. With his footfalls muffled again he made for the nearest object large enough to hide his form completely—a thick collection of half-built support pylons, concrete filled with steel rebar bones.

He almost *tsked*—but that would have spoiled his stealth.

Stealth be damned. It turned out timing was a far more crucial factor on this day. Rad and Carlos had left the snacks with Alexis along with promises of helping her work on her school assignments without needing to cross paths with her ominous father figure. At least for a while. At least until she felt safe. They had all of this in mind as they made their way back down the gravel-strewn hill, dodging thorny weeds and almost having forgotten about the strange cylinders and blue residue inside the half-built building.

Until Carlos gasped and shrieked out:

“The hell is *that*?”

The top-heavy shape on two distinct and defined legs was in sight just long enough to see the metallic glint off its wings before it slipped behind wrecked building supplies. The boys realized they’d jumped back and grabbed onto each other, hastily disentangling themselves from each other’s grips and crouching instinctively to hide should their discovery turn around.

“Metal Bigfoot, sorta?” Rad’s first thought sounded stupid to his own ears, but it was all he could come up with from the quick glimpse.

“Looks more like Birdfoot or something...”

“Boltfoot,” Rad swore under his breath, quickly glancing back towards the crumbling building to be sure Alexis wasn’t out in the open, in full view of this... this... something. “It was *metal*. Damn, it was *metal*. Why was it *metal*?”

“I dunno—” Carlos had continued craning his neck after the vast form, pointing out a row of rebar-filled concrete pylons that had once been intended as the backbone of another large edifice. “It’s gone behind those pylon thingies.”

Against the instincts of self-preservation but totally in line with natural curiosity, Rad jerked his head in a goading motion before beginning to crouch towards the wall of half-built pylons. Carlos mouthed a curse word with head shaking, but caught on to the beckoning gesture. He copied the older boy, peeking around the furthest pylon, becoming bolder and bolder as a threat or mysterious creature was absent from their sight and senses. A minute of tentative scouting later they were on the opposite side where the beast was last spotted. Faced with the beautiful, if stark, desert landscape.

The desert landscape was peaceful. More importantly it was empty. Not even a faint sheen of metal mysterious beings moving away in the far distance. Rad almost tripped as he stepped down into a divot, and on looking down he took in the inch-deep depression, edges freshly crushed in. A footprint of some sort. Or several. Well, there were many “prongs”, or toes, or something prong-like or toe-like forming several prints, the smallest of which were slightly larger than his own shoes.

The largest of which were easily ten times larger than his shoes. They belonged to something he could safely guess was enormous. Enormous, and something that had not left any more footprints after this single one he’d stumbled into.

“It’s... highly unlikely the thing’s just flanked us, right?”

Rad shook Carlos, “Right?”

Carlos grabbed his friend’s wrist to stop his shaking. He was otherwise preoccupied with the enormous form currently casting its shadow on them from behind, glaring down at them from its perch on the tops of the pylons.

Glaring with fiery-red eyes, like those of a stereotypical movie monster. For a few painfully long seconds neither the metallic giant or the two boys made a move.

“Oh, *hell no*,” Carlos whispered, still grabbed onto Rad’s wrist, gripping it almost like he’d confused the fellow human’s limb for a weapon. The taller boy grimaced as the huge thing’s wings flared out and gave the impression of even greater size. The mech’s legs bunched just before it sprang down at them, throwing up a cloud of desert dust with a heavy thud.

“What are you doing here,” Starscream’s first words to the pair were a menacing snarl, stooping low over them and inspiring both to scuttle backwards in fright. “...pathetic humans?”

Well, shit. Rad’s thoughts raced. How on earth had Alexis—previously confirmed by himself to be way smarter than the both of them put together—managed to miss a thing like this stalking around just a block or two away? He swallowed, nervous, and then smiled, even more nervous.

“Nothing, we were done, actually.” He took a few more steps back, dragging a speechless and pale Carlos with him, “Nice to meet you, uh, giant robot monster,

we'll just go now..."

The creature's brows slanted down, eyes becoming dangerously narrow. It growled in its throat and stepped forward, planting a silvery toe into the kids' escape route.

"No," he rasped, talons twitching as he raised them. He seemed to mull over something for a moment, gaze passing back and forth between the two and scowling even deeper, "*Not* nice to meet me. In fact, you saw nothing. You were never here."

"B-but... we *were* here, why—"

"*Carlos*," Rad ground his heel down onto the other boy's toes. "*Shut up...!*"

The Seeker's low snarl of frustration almost drowned out the teenagers' squeals of fright as massive claws plucked them from the ground and held them at eye-level. The two sealed their lips and shot each other fearful glances at the nasty look this robot was studying them with; each was bewildered as to how their charitable snack-food run had transformed into this situation.

The mech holding them captive let out a snort as he began the desperate "de-briefing".