Making Adjustments

by Fianna9, gatekat

Summary

The first vorn for the gestalt on Aelios is full of changes, especially for Prowl and Thundercracker.

Notes

This one is formatted a bit differently than most. Each ch is an orn, short or long. It just worked out best that way for writing.

See the end of the work for more notes
Chapter Outline

Chapter Summary

Because ch titles are less than useful. I'll update this as I update the story.

**Orn 1**: They land, Wing gets yelled at, the gestalt is brought into the city. Thundercracker has time with the trine, gestalt dinner. Jazz meets Dart and takes an announced walk about the Citadel. Spends the night with Wing.

**Orn 2**: Jazz does his 'observational skills test' on the Knights, Jazz/Dart have a long and serious talk, Jazz does mecha watching in the common room, Jazz's medical exam, Deadlock's breakfast, Deadlock checking out Wing's quarters, Deadlock starting on basic skills assessment, Jazz starts on basic skills assessment, Jazz meets Ghost of the Future, Jazz helps Dart clean blades

**Orn 3**: Deadlock's medical checkup.

**Orn 4**: The keeper's dinner. Thundercracker, Haji, Cheoseo and Aurora have dinner and talk. Thundercracker, Aurora, Sogdo, Northwind and Saamanjasy have dinner.

**Orn 5**: Deadlock encounters Dai Atlas

**Orn 6**: Deadlock gets new optics. Jazz and Wing hold a meeting about their airshow idea

**Orn 7**: Thundercracker gets his first real outing to fly (both with a trine and solo) at a test course in front of the mechling flight class. Flight class 1. Lots of grounder talking while he's there.

**Orn 8**: A detailing for Deadlock.

**Orn 10**: Thundercracker in stasis. Wing's beating penance; he comes to terms with his function in the order. Jazz see the results as well when Wing is brought to medical and demands answers from Dart. Jazz find and explores the penance chambers.

**Orn 11**: Thundercracker boots. Much growling about what Wing didn't tell them. Jazz and Deadlock start to recharge with sound/music playing to ease the quiet.

**Orn 13**: Thundercracker visits Aurora's creation flock for the first time.

**Orn 15**: Deadlock, Kimark, Wing and Thundercracker talk about paintjobs and designs.
Orn 17: Unit time. Comments on Deadlock's new look and some planning for Thundercracker and Jazz. Wing's not there. NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 2.

Orn 19: Jazz and Deadlock get to spend some time on a racetrack with several fast grounder Knights. It ends in Aurora's eyrie for a drinking/mourning night.

Orn 20: Wing's binding in Bronze.

Orn 21: Thundercracker, Wing, Aurora, Haji and Cheoseo in the morning. Deadlock meditation attempt. Thundercracker discusses his desire for a mourning flight with Aurora. Wing is there and jacked up.

Orn 22: Thundercracker is attacked by Gloaming's trine and sets off earthquake alarms stopping them. Thundercracker learns that he's quite the hot item about the mechling seekers and quietly freaks out.

Orn 23: Wing ponders as he watches Thundercracker begin a mourning flight and Thundercracker ponders reality.

Orn 25: Highdive contemplates the future as Thundercracker ends his underground mourning flight and asks for a storm. Wing, Jazz, Deadlock check on him, among others. Deadlock is quietly freaked out by the bare metal.

Orn 26: Thundercracker manages to intentionally send Wing a signal via their bond. Wing meets with his close allies (Marwir, Thorn, Atl, Demeter) and Redline to discuss his plan for watching his priorities and code influence.

Orn 27: Wing's binding in orange (guilt. NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker in stasis. Thundercracker's flight class 3 (he didn't go).

Orn 30: Wing proves his form is still good enough for his rank before the Masters, quite a few Knights and his gestalt.

Orn 32: Thundercracker begins his above ground mourning flight

Orn 33: Firefall (and Klinge) visits Kimark and meets Deadlock. NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker's above ground mourning flight.

Orn 34: Thundercracker ends his above ground mourning flight and says it was enough.

Orn 39: Thundercracker's flight class 4; first where he's in mourning and an evening with Northwind's flock.

Orn 42: Praxian fueling lessons/dinner with Dagger, Talon, Jazz, Deadlock and Kimark

Orn 50: Prowl is booted up, the first conversation with Barasi Lelku and Lord Red Csillag. Meets Dai Atlas, Redline and Dagger. Redline and Dagger grasp the full power of Prowl's AIs. Dagger learns how much Prowl loves clean and hot liquid.

Orn 51: Prowl boots up to a nightmare, drawing Thundercracker, then most of the others in. The gestalt and keepers lounge in hot oil and talk. Sparring and smut for Prowl and others.

Orn 53: Prowl accepts Dai Atlas as his Lord of Law. Dai and Axe discuss who will train Deadlock and reformatted Prowl. Prowl and gestalt go driving.
**Orn 54:** Flightplan is formed and the situation explained to him. Both Prowl's reformat and the editing about to happen. A Praxian priest approaches Dai Atlas about the rumor of a grandmaster of Teris-Spi in the Citadel.

**Orn 56:** Prowl and Dai Atlas spar to prove Dai can control Prowl if he snaps.

**Orn 59:**
NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 6.

**Orn 64:** Prowl testing Blacktip to be a grandmaster. This takes a metacycle of tests every orn.

**Orn 69:**
NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 7.

**Orn 70:** Thundercracker watches/records Prowl testing Blacktip to be a grandmaster.

**Orn 74:** The gestalt watches Wing/Prowl sparring practice ending with Wing/Prowl cuddling in Marwir's quarters.

**Orn 80:** Jazz sneaking into the command center.

**Orn 81:** NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 8.

**Orn 85:** Jazz gives a report on security to Dai Atlas/Axe.

**Orn 91:**
NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 9.

**Orn 95:** Jazz gets a new paintjob. Jazz and Lightwing go dancing at Zabri.

**Orn 101:**
NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 10.

**Orn 113:** A large group of Knights+Prowl go for dinner and dancing at Del Sarineni.
NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 11.

**Orn 123:**
NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 12.

**Orn 130:** Thundercracker recharging with Wing, Aurora, Tornado, Windsinger, Telika and Atron.

**Orn 133:**
NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 13.

**Orn 145:**
NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 14.

**Orn 155:**
NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 15.

**Orn 165:**
NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 16.

**Orn 177:** Jazz earns a trip out into the Shaku market with Talon and Demeter.
NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 17.
Om 187:
NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 18.

Om 197-198: Cuddle time with Wing, Prowl and Thundercracker in the eyrie after Prowl finishes for the Om and Prowl getting ready the next morning. NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 19.

Om 209:
NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 20.

Om 219:
NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 21.

Om 228: Thundercracker is repainted.

Om 229: Thundercracker flight class 22, making dates.

Om 232: Thundercracker has a date with Ciel (Peacekeeper detective) at The Silver Fire.

Om 234: Thundercracker's first date with Highdive followed by an interrogation by Wing, Jazz, Prowl, Aurora, Haji and Cheoseo about it.

Om 236: Thundercracker's first date with Tailslide (at Del Sarineni).

Om 237: Thundercracker's first date with Cavu. Lunch at Azure Fountainfly and flying.

Om 238:
NOT WRITTEN: Highdive gives Thundercracker a flying tour of the city and some of her favorite spots

Om 241:
NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 23.

Om 246: Thundercracker, Highdive, Prowl, Jazz, Dart, Wing, Aurora, Haji and Cheoseo go to Towodi’s gallery opening.

Om 251:
NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 24.

Om 253: Jazz goes over Crimson Sprite's security.

Om 263:
NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 25.
NOT WRITTEN: Jazz hands over his plans to Crimson Sprite.

Om 266: Jazz/Crimson Sprite sign the contract with lawyers there and signing confirmation it's valid. Thorn tells Jazz why the Citadel really had all those upper walkways.

Om 267: Thundercracker is introduced to a military-coded Seeker near-mechling (Photosphere) no one knows how to cope with.

Om 269:
NOT WRITTEN: Jazz works on Crimson Sprite's greenhouses (4-6 joors)

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Gestalt dinner with just Demeter on a shelf.

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Om 292:
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Om 294:
NOT WRITTEN: Jazz works on Crimson Sprite's greenhouses (4-6 joors)

**Om 295:** Thundercracker flight class 28. Jazz works on Crimson Sprite's greenhouses (4-6 joors). Prowl/Dagger go out to a Praxian diner and meet Towodi since Prowl is done parsing his memories and recovered.

Om 296:
NOT WRITTEN: Jazz works on Crimson Sprite's greenhouses (4-6 joors)

Om 297:
NOT WRITTEN: Jazz works on Crimson Sprite's greenhouses (4-6 joors)

Om 298:
NOT WRITTEN: Jazz works on Crimson Sprite's greenhouses (4-6 joors)

Om 299:
NOT WRITTEN: Jazz works on Crimson Sprite's greenhouses (4-6 joors)

Om 300:
NOT WRITTEN: Jazz works on Crimson Sprite's greenhouses (4-6 joors)

Om 301:
NOT WRITTEN: Jazz finishes working on Crimson Sprite's greenhouses.

Om 305:
NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 29.

**Om 312:** Thundercracker/Thorn and Jazz/Demeter meet Crimson Sprite and Tailslide at the debate (should a mechanimal preserve be created) before Jazz leaves with Crimson Sprite to do a security check on her flowers.

Om 315:
NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 30.

**Om 319:** Ceremonially promoting Blacktip to grandmaster.

**Om 321:** Prowl has a binding in light blue and is asked if he still wishes to be reformatted.

**Om 327:** Thundercracker flight class 31. Flightplan has some time out. Highdive and Cavu meet
him.

**Om 332:** Prowl's last night with his gestalt.

**Om 333:** Prowl is reformatted.

**Om 338:** Prowl's frame booting up as a new mech; all white, no markings, designation: Pantera. Quality time with Redline, then with Dai Atlas and Axe before going home with Dagger to the gestalt.

**Om 339:** Booting up with the unit. Sparring with Wing and unit socializing Thundercracker doesn't go to flight class 32.

**Om 342:** Pantera's orientation. Deadlock gets blunt about Pantera's odd behavior. Pantera's seals are broken.

Om 344:
NOT WRITTEN: Pantera's orientation. Pantera manages to ask Wing for a spark merge.

**Om 346:** Pantera's orientation: an orn in the life of a Knight.

**Om 347:** Pantera's orientation: an orn in the life of a priest. Thundercracker's flight class 33.

**Om 348:** Pantera's orientation ends and he begins 14 vorns of 'mechling' training under the guise of being an Initiate.

**Om 349:** After meeting with Deco Pantera emerges a walking thunderstorm with azure mist optics, a cyan visor and a strong sense he just learned something important about himself.

**Om 353:** Cladin and Pantera meet. Kimark tells Deadlock very clearly that he chooses his Daoshi, not the other way around. Deadlock brings it up with Jazz and Thundercracker while Pantera is with Cladin.

**Om 359:** Thundercracker and Jazz chat about current flock happenings.
NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 34.

Om 369: NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 35.

Om 379: NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 36.

Om 381: NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 37.

Om 391: NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 38.

**Om 400:** Deadlock accepts Axe as his Daoshi. The unit celebrates Deadlock's acceptance with a meal at Corundum and a drive in town.

Om 401: NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 39.

**Om 409:** Cladin and Pantera have a date (#7 that's an actual date).

Om 413: NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 40.

**Om 560:** Dagger and Cladin chat about Pantera, their building hub triad and Wing's upcoming punishment.
**Orn 600:** Wing's wings are broken in punishment for escaping, then set, and the Citadel learns how Pantera responds to bond-stress.

**Orn 601:** NOT WRITTEN: Caring for Wing.

**Orn 602:** NOT WRITTEN: Caring for Wing.

**Orn 603:** Caring for Wing.

**Orn 604:** NOT WRITTEN: Caring for Wing.

**Orn 605:** NOT WRITTEN: Caring for Wing.

**Orn 606:** NOT WRITTEN: Caring for Wing.

**Orn 607:** NOT WRITTEN: Caring for Wing.

**Orn 608:** NOT WRITTEN: Caring for Wing.

**Orn 609:** NOT WRITTEN: Caring for Wing.

**Orn 610:** NOT WRITTEN: Caring for Wing.

**Orn 611:** Wing is deemed healed and flies again and Jazz gets his first real gig as an entertainer.

**Orn 636:** Pantera is taken to a gallery show of Towodi's work and meets the mech his former self was quite smitten with.

**Orn 662:** Photosphere's upgraded to mechling and spends the aching time firmly plastered against Thundercracker and not wanting Wing there.

**Orn 665:** Photosphere spends her first orn not aching focused on Thundercracker and then her first flight.

**Orn 703:** Thundercracker and Highdive go on a date to listen to Jazz perform.

**Orn 776:** Thundercracker selects his Action.

**Orn 788:** Photosphere stakes her claim on Thundercracker by driving off Acharaj coming for a date.

**Orn 799:** Aurora, Thundercracker and Highdive discuss what is going on with Photosphere.

**Orn 800:** Thundercracker's spark merge and hardline with Photosphere to determine what her fixation with him is.

**Orn 813:** The Circle of Masters discus the status of the Citadel.

**Orn 820:** Flightplan meets Cladin and Photosphere.

**Orn 890:** While not official Thundercracker accepts that Photosphere will be his Vision.

**Orn 893:** The unit is shown the tower level that they've been given. Talk of the future. Dagger brings up TC+trine raising the Racciapi eggs is going to help ease any civilian tension about them having fledglings.
The resistance of the outer atmosphere began to press against the ship, objecting to its entry and speed. Though it was a fast descent, it was still a fairly safe one. That he'd made it this far without any sign of being noticed was a huge relief. It didn't mean he hadn't been noticed; it meant that they hadn't picked up that there were Cybertronians inside. That the standing policy was to ignore anything non-Cybertronian coming down was a huge asset at the moment and as long as Wing made the ship act like it didn't think there was a reason to hide he wouldn't be any different from the scores of other ships that had controlled landings.

Once the ship was close enough to the surface he flew near the sand towards the city. He kept high enough not to kick up a storm, but only just, aiming for a particular series of dunes and weathered rock formations. Once near an overhang large enough to hide the ship reasonably well with the dunes around it he settled down and sat there, cycling ventilations to calm himself. With everyone in stasis, he decided to mediate and be ready so they wouldn't see just how nervous he was. An extra orn wouldn't make a difference.

Challenger of Ways was humming with pleasure as Wing entered the cave that accessed a tunnel that eventually would open into the city cavern. It was a sense of calm and steadiness he needed and he leaned on it as he made his way through the darkness. Lit only by his optics and the memory of taking this path hundreds of thousands of times, it went easily. Twenty vorns rarely created much change and he was grateful of that now. As he traveled through the familiar tunnel he couldn't help noticing how much more cautious he was as he kept his sensors on alert for anyone approaching. Even though he had only spent those few vorns as a slave and training with his gestalt mates, the experience had changed him and made him a bit more wary, even of those who should be allies and friends.

Light near the end of the tunnel reached him and he paused near the edge. Looking out over the glittering, living city he had done so much to help build he was warmed and strengthened. He could do this. He would. Penalty and penance were transitory and then he would be home and his gestalt would finally have a home as well. With a deep draw of the moist atmosphere, Wing launched and
made no more secret of himself as he flew slowly towards the citadel on the southern edge of the metropolis.

It didn't take long for his approach to be noticed by civilians as he passed overhead, and he spotted several Knight fliers approaching in a cautious formation. Belatedly remembering that his frame had been changed significantly while he was gone, he commed his friends and colleagues. ::Talon, Flashfire, Silk. I have returned.::

The others wavered slightly before Talon responded. ::You have been gone a long time. We did not believe you would return. Follow. The Sovereign will speak with you.::

:::Understood.::: Wing said, drawing for a moment on the steadiness he could still feel from his Great Sword, before falling quietly into formation behind the trio as they headed for the Citadel. Wing could see activity increasing ahead as the Knights learned that the apostate was a penitent now. Many of those who could went airborne to get a closer look, though none got in the way as the four landed and Wing's escort shifted to his own Daoshi, his best friend and two additional members of the Circle of Masters as they made their way to the office of the Sovereign of Light.

It was a long walk for Wing and one that forced him to contemplate on what might have changed between himself and his Daoshi. Marwir was one of the few who could still regularly put him on his aft, but then as a member of the Circle of Masters it was assumed she should be able to. She had been the center of his universe for a long time. Training was intimate in a way that more than slightly reminded him of the gestalt bond. Thorn could beat him on occasion, though compared to the other three he wasn't entirely sure why his friend was here.

All that was put aside as they stepped into the office of the Sovereign of Light to see his own student, his Dai Atlas, standing there with Axe and looking very disturbed.

Thorn remained next to him as the masters took their positions around the room. Marwir and Axe stood on Dai Atlas's right while the two Seekers, Aurora and Tornado, flanked his left. Wing waited respectfully for Dai Atlas to decide to speak, hoping things would go well but preparing for the worst. This conversation would directly impact his entire gestalt and their ability to integrate into the city.

"So you finally return. Do you understand that you put this city and all we stand for at great risk by your actions?" Dai Atlas rumbled in full leadership mode.

There would be no mercy, Wing knew that now, but it didn't mean it would be excessive. He'd remained in his frame this long, he was likely to remain throughout the penances.

"Yes, I do," Wing answered honestly and respectfully, mindful of who was present. "My plan was to go on a short walkabout to see if there were any immediate threats we needed to be prepared to face. It was never my intention to remain gone this long or to travel that far away."

Axe frowned but it was Dai Atlas who spoke. "Then why did you?"

Wing almost vented but kept himself calm as he answered. "I encountered a band of slavers not too far from this system. I was not able to fight them off and was captured. I did manage to convince them I was an explorer from a Cybertronian colony some distance from this system. I was slave coded and sold through several masters until I was purchased by the Nijihito. I spent almost seventeen vorns as a servant-slave for a family line, and I expected that at some point one of masters would free me. The last master I had from that line was a scientist involved in military projects. The project she was working on was creating a Cybertronian slave fighting force using stolen gestalt technology." Wing motioned towards his modified frame. "Myself and four other Cybertronian
slaves were modified and implanted with gestalt coding. The five of us managed to break the slave coding and escaped the Nijihito. We have been traveling covertly for the past two vorn trying to avoid trouble." Wing paused a moment and then continued, "One of my gestalt mates is a Seeker. The gestalt coding broke his trine bond, and he told us they would have a new Order before he could return and rejoin them. We discussed what would happen if we returned to Cybertron, and the likelihood we would be able to do anything other than be confined and possibly experimented on by whichever side we tried to join. The Decepticons and Autobots command structure has been destabilized. The war has decimated the populous, and Megatron long ago descended into madness. From everything I have learned from my gestalt mates, Cybertron is effectively a dead world."

Wing vented heavily and then continued while the others processed. "I know the new arrivals have said that the war became much worse, but they didn't give the full picture or only knew pieces. Praxus wasn't just destroyed, it was almost completely wiped from the planet. One of my gestalt was a Praxian Enforcer; there are now more Praxians here than there are left on Cybertron. Much the same can be said of Vos and the Seekers."

"We knew that was its fate when we decided to leave," Dai Atlas signed, though he did little to hide his grief at the news. "So you are part of a gestalt now. Where are the others? Who are the others?"

Wing nodded. "Yes, I'm now part of a gestalt with four others. They are waiting at the ship we used to arrive until such time as I tell them it is safe to approach. I didn't want to just bring four strangers down here without warning. The Praxian Enforcer is Prowl, who was head of the Autobot Tactical Division. He is in stasis because his coding is forcing him to try to return to Cybertron even knowing what will most likely happen." Wing looked directly at Dai Atlas as he said each designation using all the proper glyphs. "The other former Autobot was in SpecOps and before that ISO. His designation is Jazz. The Seeker who is part of our gestalt is Thundercracker, who was part of the Winglord's trine and before than an Air Martial. The other Decepticon is Deadlock, who is somewhat like Kimark before he joined, although he was a street mech instead of a gladiator."

Aurora was the first to react, a twitch somewhere between a prayer to Primus and disbelief. Marwir growled at her former student, her turbines giving an angry roar.

"Thundercracker was a good mech once," Tornado said quietly. "I knew his flock well. Half Air Martial and half military and very honorable."

"Wing, you would bring three command officers from the war and a berserker into the city?" Dai Atlas just stared at him.

Even though he was already standing at attention, Wing straightened just a bit more and stared up at Dai Atlas. "Yes, Thundercracker was a Decepticon commander and a part of the Command trine. He is loyal and honorable. He has also broken more from tradition than you can imagine. By now every Seeker on Cybertron knows Starscream, the Winglord, is actually a Vision. Thundercracker and Skywarp supported him and helped hide his true status because he was the best candidate for the position. Even though he has spent his entire existence as a high ranked member of his flock, he has accepted that he would be coming here as the lowest ranked Seeker."

"And remain such?" Tornado asked gruffly as both he and Aurora twitched, trying to grasp what they were being told. "Does he understand that he will never be allowed to command again?"

"Yes." Wing said firmly. "He knows that leading a flock is closed to him, and he has been considering different ways of supporting himself. Since he was an Air Martial in Vos, we have spoken of him joining the Peacekeepers, where he would have a senior partner to make certain he is adjusting properly. We've also talked about him becoming a writer or taking a job as a flight instructor. I can tell you that he is a patient instructor and fiercely protective of his fledglings. His
creator coding latched onto me."

Dai Atlas raised an optic ridge at that and Axe actually snorted in amusement.

"So how will this berserker adapt to our city?" Dai Atlas demanded.

"Deadlock is a street mech turned warrior who has survived mostly on raw talent with no real training. He has endured a great deal of trauma and abuse in his existence including his time with the Decepticons. He has never had the chance until now to gain any sort of formal education. Even with this background he has picked up different skills for survival, and he is also willing to learn if he knows how it will benefit him in the long run. Deadlock has been training with me and intends to join the Knights as my Initiate. Challenger of Ways approves of the choice, and he has already had his first binding." Wing braced for their response.

It was a moment in coming.

"You've done what?" Marwir exploded at her former student.

"Smart move," Axe said quietly, causing Aurora, Marwir and Tornado to turn to stare at him. "What else could a berserker with that kind of background be here? He may never be a good Knight, but like Kimark it is possible for a berserker to be an acceptable one. Given the point was to have his gestalt accepted, what else could he have done with this Deadlock?"

Marwir huffed, agitated and still highly displeased, but without an actual counter.

"Tell us of his binding," Aurora directed the conversation to the practical.

"On such a small ship with no medical staff I did not dare try anything too painful given the trauma in his past. It was a light blue cord since peace is something Deadlock has rarely ever experienced in his existence. He handled the experience well, and he came out of the binding as relaxed as I have ever seen him," Wing paused and felt a bit of relief at the nods and thoughtful wings he saw.

"Did he speak of what peace meant to him?" Marwir asked with careful neutrality.

Wing vented briefly, "Yes, we spoke of it afterwards. It was another reminder that Deadlock's sense of honor is very different from mine but it is there. His idea of a good existence is what he had in Simfur as muscle in a criminal organization. Ultimately, he wants to be respected for his fighting skills, to be able to choose his willing interface partners and to have access to energon and a comfortable place to reside."

Several of the Circle of Masters nodded.

"How easily does he berserk?" Dai Atlas asked with an even more serious tone than usual.

"I've only seen it once, after the first time our gestalt was exposed to the sky. Thundercracker and I were both sky hungry, him more than me, and none of the grounders had been able to drive for quite some time. Deadlock did not react well to leaving the ground," Wing shivered briefly. "It was before most of us knew he'd been repeatedly punished by his superior in the Decepticons by being thrown out of a high altitude transport only to be caught by fliers after falling quite a distance through the sky. Once we broke apart inside, he tried to release his frustration in a spar with Prowl, who is a highly skilled fighter. The slave coding punished him for trying to damage another slave."

"Which created a vicious loop of pain-rage-pain until he snapped," Dai Atlas nodded. "How was that stopped, given you all still function?"
"Thundercracker locked the two of us in a cell and kept us quiet and still to avoid attracting his attention. Prowl kept Deadlock busy until our masters opened a door to an empty bay, and he threw Deadlock into it before the door closed again. Jazz helped Prowl distract him. That circumstance should never come up again. Deadlock has been slowly working on his fear of heights and has been making good progress," Wing added quietly, "despite our masters' help."

"If that is what it takes to break his control, we are well-prepared to deal with it," Dai Atlas nodded. "Training will trigger him, you know."

"I am aware of that possibility, and I planned to seek advice from Kimark and his Daoshi on how they handled it during his training. Since I am connected to Deadlock by the gestalt link I should be able to feel the break coming and get out of the way by flying up," Wing said.

"One would hope," Dai Atlas agreed, then regarded his Daoshi. "Your gestalt, are they all in stasis?"

Wing shook his head no, "Prowl has been since shortly after we started our journey almost two vorn ago. The other three were in stasis for the last megacycle of the trip until after we landed. The three of them are online, but they cannot see the sky right now. I have done what I could to keep this system's location a secret."

"You will take us there," Dai Atlas said firmly.

"Yes," Wing agreed immediately. "the three of them would be suspicious and probably aggressive if you arrived without me."

"Then let's go," the Sovereign of Light flicked his wings. "Atl will ride in Redline."

Wing tipped his head slightly and waited for his turn to leave, privately amazed no one had complained yet about Jazz or Prowl being here, but he wasn't going to press his luck since having to defend two gestalt mates was tricky enough. Walking in the middle of the Circle of Masters was an unsettling experience. It hardly mattered that he'd been there for the Initiate stage for three and was the Daoshi of one. It was intimidating and he knew it was intended to be.

On the roof Redline wasn't the only one waiting. Skjöldur was also there, though she wasn't in alt mode yet.

In all that made eight masters to collect a shuttle, three warriors and one stasis-locked warrior.

It would seem like overkill to anyone who didn't know his gestalt and their capabilities, but Wing knew better and just wanted everything to continue going smoothly. He wasn't looking forward to Redline's reaction to his gestalt's mental condition and coding problems but at least he could honestly say that it wasn't their fault.

Wing transformed and waited for the others to do so as well. As he expected the others continued to surround him as they flew over the city. He refrained from pulling any of his normal flight stunts and kept to the same altitude and speed as the others. Now was not a time to play, show off or otherwise push any limits. The walk through the caves told him that these masters knew the way nearly as well as he did.

::How disgruntled are they going to be at all this showing up?:: Atl asked quietly.

Wing thought a moment before replying. ::They are military and battle hardened, and I did warn them that they would be dealing with Knights at first. Dai Atlas in particular still has quite the reputation back on Cybertron. Expect them to be wary and on guard, but a show of strength from the Knights shouldn't be too big a surprise. Deadlock will probably be aggressive if he bothers to speak
to anyone but that is his nature.::

::I heard. Basically it's Kimark all over again. Anything unusual about the ship? I'm along to pilot it back.:: Atl asked.

::It's a fairly standard interstellar shuttle in most ways, but we'll have to disable the traps before you get ready to pilot it.:: Wing answered.

There was a moment of silence.

::You set traps in your own ship?:: Aurora asked as they stepped into the light and transformed.

::Mostly to repel pirates or anyone trying to break in when we were in dock at various ports. There were only two of us online at any given time, and we weren't going to leave those in stasis undefended.:: Wing answered after they'd taken off and he was settled at the front of the formation, flanked by Tornado and Skjöldur.

She hummed her understanding of that and then they flew in silence for a while.

::I should comm them and let them know we are almost there.:: Wing cautiously both warned and asked Dai Atlas as they got closer to the ship's location. ::I didn't have a time frame to give them before I left.::

::Very well.:: the Sovereign agreed.

Wing opened a comm to Thundercracker since he knew the Seeker would be worried about him.

::Thundercracker, we're on our way back to the ship.::

::We?:: Thundercracker replied. ::Who, exactly, is coming?::

::Go ahead,:: Dai Atlas told Wing, confirming that he was listening in.

::The Sovereign of Light Dai Atlas, Master Axe, Master Marwir, Master Tornado, Master Aurora, Chief Medic Knight Redline, Knight Atl and Knight Skjöldur are accompanying me. We are going to be arriving at the ship in about four breems.:: Wing answered, privately hoping that would be enough time for them to finish preparing for their first meeting with the Masters.

::Understood. Greet airborne, in the shuttle or on the ground?:: Thundercracker asked politely.

::On the ground.:: Dai Atlas told Wing firmly. ::We had better not see any weapons::

::On the ground in front of the shuttle will work best. Please remember to leave all the weapons locked up inside, especially your arm cannons and those knives Jazz is so fond of.:: Wing relayed. He'd already warned them about the weapons, but it didn't hurt to keep demonstrating cooperation at this point. He didn't want to do anything to set Dai Atlas off at this point.

::We will.:: Thundercracker promised with a hint of the authority he had so long held. The line went quiet after that, though the Seeker purposefully left it open as he went to wrangle his far less cooperative flockmates into the weaponless status. Or in Jazz's case, as weaponless as the mech ever was. Thundercracker knew for a fact that short of stripping him down to his protoform there was no way to actually remove all his weapons.

Wing could feel his own tension building the closer the group got to the ship, and he took a moment even in flight to settle his spark and processor. So far things were going well. His Great Sword approved of his actions, and Dai Atlas seemed actually willing to consider allowing his gestalt to
remain. Once they were close enough to the rock overhang and dunes, Wing commed the other Knights. ::The ship is down here, under the overhang.::

::You hid it well,:: Axe hummed as they angled around to where they could see the ship and the three mecha, two grounders and a Seeker, standing in the sand and looking up at them. True to instructions, the Seeker's arm cannons were absent.

Wing studied the trio as the fliers came in for a landing, trying to see his gestalt as the Knights would and realizing just how much his time away from the Citadel had changed his worldview.

Thundercracker stood close to the two grounders watching the approach intently, searching for any signs of aggression or damage to Wing's frame. A bit of his tension eased as he took in Wing's undamaged form. Deadlock's stance was a mixture of arrogance and self-confident, although Wing realized that was likely a mask for the annoyance and unease that Thundercracker had stripped them of weapons for this meeting with potential hostiles. Jazz looked like his usual, relaxed, friendly self, only now Wing knew without any doubt that it was a cover to give him an advantage in surprise combat.

Jazz waved in a welcoming way as all but Redline set down in the sand. The big medic had to set down further away to remain in alt mode as Atl was still on board. Wing smiled at Jazz, nodded to the other two and extended to field to confirm that he was indeed in good health and not in distress.

Introductions were made, finishing up as Redline and Atl joined them.

"First things first, make the ship safe for us," Redline took over.

"We already disabled the traps on the majority of the ship," Thundercracker answered calmly although Wing could see some tension in the Seeker's stance and his effort not to focus on the two Seekers among the Knights. "There are a few we still left active in the vents in case any vermin tried to enter the ship."

"Those aren't ones I'm worried about," Redline nodded and motioned them inside. "I'm going to do a brief physical and coding check here. The real repairs will wait for when I've had a chance to fully review your specs, coding and what I have on gestalt technology. Anything that's bothering any of you now?"

"Prowl can't be brought out of stasis here. His coding and tac-net are forcing him to return to Cybertron even though there is almost no chance he will be able to help end the war now. His Praxian Enforcer coding is broken and severely damaged by the war," Thundercracker answered.

"I expect that's a common story," Redline grunted as he walked into the largest of the berthrooms with the four gestalt mates and both Seeker Knights. "Thundercracker, you first, so they can start talking to you about Seeker stuff."

With a glance over at Prowl's form laying in stasis on the berth, Thundercracker followed Readline's instructions and lay down for the examination to begin. He wasn't comfortable having a strange medic checking over his systems and welcomed Wing as the Aerial moved closer, allowing their fields to overlap. Strange as it was to part of him, the two Seekers helped as well. They were both fully trained, but they were Seeker, and even better they were sane Seekers.

The physical went quickly. It was clear that Redline was not thrilled as far as Thundercracker was concerned, but the medic wasn't upset or disturbed either. It was a good prognosis given the situation.

"Open," Redline tapped Thundercracker's medical port.
Thundercracker tamped down his initial hostile reaction to the potential intrusion and reluctantly opened the medical port to allow access. This was a medic that Wing trusted to work on his systems, and it was not a war zone. Redline was not currently a threat, and if he turned out to be one Jazz would take care of the situation. The medic allowed the handshake and firewalls to be dropped at Thundercracker's rate with limited pressure. It was irritating, uncomfortable, yet even in the middle of it Thundercracker recognized skill and full medical protocols from times long ago when he still had access to such medics.

Bits of coding were tagged, some for removal, some for further study, but most were left alone. By the time Redline backed out Thundercracker felt like he has as many tags as code in his helm, even though he knew he didn't.

"You're a mess, coding-wise, but nothing that is an immediate threat to you, the city or its inhabitants," Redline huffed. "We'll work on it later. Jazz." He pointed at the berth as Thundercracker got up.

Thundercracker gave Jazz a small nod as he stepped aside and turned to look at the two Seeker Knights. Tipping his wings respectfully he approached the pair and waited to be acknowledged. It was hard to remember that he was no longer in command, but he would start now showing his acceptance of his new position. The effort earned him both a polite welcome and approval before he followed them outside.

"I understand you are an Order and predate the war," Tornado spoke first. "How long do you expect to have to find trinemates?"

"Within the vorn if I had the option. However I do not expect to suffer issues for a century, perhaps longer. It will take time for the reality that I’m not in a warzone to fully settle into my code. I understand I have much to prove before anyone could accept me," he answered thoughtfully as he tried not to think about just how different his frame now looked compared to theirs. Tornado was of a very similar build and armor to what he'd had as an Air Martial. Compared to Thundercracker's war-build it looked light and dangerously lacking in armor.

"Indeed," Tornado flicked his wings in the true Vosian dialect, not the stripped down and mangled version that Thundercracker used. "Until you have been settled into a flock you will reside with Aurora's trine in the Citadel."

"Thank you for the opportunity," Thundercracker dipped his wings, grateful to have that much immediate acceptance from the Seekers. Being close to real, trined Seekers was going to be both a blessing and a curse as his coding settled. It also meant he would be close to those best able to handle him if he had any problems adjusting. At a minimum they could allow him to see how Seekers were intended to function once more, to be part of a flock, however small, that understood fighting on some level.

"How much do you believe you remember of how to function in a civilian flock?" Aurora asked.

"I know there are large gaps of things I've forgotten or no longer had reason to use," Thundercracker answered, mindful of the difference between his own broken cant and the original dialect he'd once used. He was consciously trying to correct himself but knew it would be a long time before he stopped slipping back into his old habits. "There are very few true trines left on Cybertron since the Visions are almost gone. Most Seekers are in duty trines or going insane flying alone. We do not recharge in piles anymore. It's too dangerous."

The shock that rippled across both frames clued Thundercracker into the fact that it was a far bigger deal than he currently thought it was. He viewed it as a thing regretfully lost to the war. These two
"Too dangerous?" Aurora spoke first, her shock rich and deep in her voice and frame.

Thundercracker tipped his wings and answered as truthfully as possible as he tried to explain wartime realities to Knights who probably had never experienced such things. "My previous trine found it far too dangerous for many reasons. Many of the Seekers left are extremely aggressive and insane. We wouldn't trust them not to try to advance by assassination. There was also the politics of being seen to favor one group over another if we spent more time recharging with one duty trine. Everyone thought we were a duty trine of two Orders and an Action, and it was easiest to continue the charade if we kept Starscream's recharging time to just the three of us."

"How old were you when the war began?" Aurora asked with ill-concealed concern.

Thundercracker had to still himself, working back into memories that were long unused. "I was almost seventeen thousand vorns when Senator Decimus was murdered."

Both Knights relaxed a bit.

"Then despite how long you have been at war, you had a significant number of vorns in civilization," Aurora said.

"Yes, I was an Air Martial in Vos for many vorns before the war began. The memories of civilian life are still there, but until recently I haven't had a need or desire to access them. I was also raised in a partially military flock, so it was easier for me to adjust to the military mindset than for most of the Seekers," Thundercracker agreed.

"No doubt. What is your hope in being here?" Tornado asked.

"To find a trine that can accept that I have a very strange flock," Thundercracker glanced over reflexively to check the ship's hatch for activity that might indicate Redline was finished and belatedly noticed that the only Knights around them were the two Seekers. He glanced around and eventually spotted Axe and Dai Altlas in the sky. A bit of dusty pink was near the nose of the ship and he focused back on the Seekers. "I have no real interest in joining the Knights; it would probably be best for my coding if I find a place outside the military. I lost my first trine to violence and my second when the gestalt merge broke the trine bond. I do not know if I could handle losing a third."

"That is a grief I would wish on no one," Aurora shivered faintly at the pain that meant.

"Agreed," Tornado murmured, then focused. "Does your coding demand you work?"

Thundercracker shook his head, understanding the question too well. "No, I will not shut down or go insane from lack of my function, but I do chafe if kept idle for too long as I have always had a purpose. Wing has been helping with my adjustment. I know he is older than me chronologically, but he doesn't mind if I take care of him. He's lost a lot of his innocence in a short time, and I'd like to see him keep what is left."

"He is an odd one, that way," Aurora smiled softly. "I do understand and you will not lack for things to do. It does allow us to focus on re-socializing you first without the additional complications of training for a function." She paused. "Are they truly your flock, or is that desperation speaking?"

"We are a gestalt and that means we are connected in a way I did not truly understand before this happened," Thundercracker paused to finish collecting his thoughts on what had been a strange process. "I tried to distance myself, keep my connection just to Wing, my fledgling. All I did was make myself miserable and lonely. This gestalt coding has changed me and will continue to do so for
the rest of my existence. We can hate each other, but we will take care of each other. As Jazz reminded me during those long orms in space, flock, unit, clade, whatever we call it ... we will take care of one another."

Both sets of wings flicked in acceptance and agreement with the statement, even if it's application still confused them.

"We will endeavor to keep that in mind in your housing and socialization," Aurora told him. "Redline is satisfied no one is a threat at the moment, though all of you need extensive repair work."

"Thank you," Thundercracker replied. "The repairs are unsurprising given we have been without access to a true medic for some time."

"And the coding additions and damage the slave and gestalt code caused need to be cleaned up," Aurora said firmly. "He may not be able to restore your code to pre-war condition, but he can deal with all the random snippets that shouldn't be there anymore."

A moment later Jazz, Deadlock, Redline and Marwir exited the ship while the larger fliers returned to the sand nearby.

"Deadlock, fly in Redline. Jazz will fly in Skjöldur. Atl will fly the shuttle with Prowl in it. Wing and Thundercracker will fly center of formation," Dai Atlas instructed.

No one expressed surprise at being separated although Thundercracker felt a twinge of unease leaving Prowl alone and vulnerable. Clamping it down firmly, he waited for Tornado and Aurora to move before following them into position. Soon the other unburdened fliers joined them. Redline and Skjöldur joined them as and they circled while the ship powered up for liftoff. Only once everyone was in the formation they headed further into the desert as far as Thundercracker could tell, though he was sure it wasn't.

::How does one enter the city?: Thundercracker asked after two breems of flight.

::There are tunnels, but because of the Sitril we'll be using the access hatch,:: Wing answered, though the harmonics indicated he was inviting correction. None came.

Satisfied with the answer, Thundercracker fell silent again and focused on enjoying his time in the sky; it would be a very long time before he saw it again. The longer he was around Tornado and Aurora the more his concerns about living underground were eased. If they could remain as stable as they appeared and teeked there was a chance it wouldn't be too rough to endure. At the very least he could take comfort with a flock again, even recharge in a pile of wings once he relaxed enough for it.

It wasn't long before he spotted sand shifting in an unnatural way and the glint of metal under it as it was cleared away. It was timed perfectly so they didn't have to circle. Dai Atlas was the first into the darkness beyond, his speed telling enough to Thundercracker that the cavern must be incredibly tall. With that example and Wing's lack of concern, Thundercracker maintained his position in the formation without comment or visible concern as they followed the Sovereign into the darkness. He had never been a coward and wasn't about to hesitate now. He'd flown in much more treacherous conditions back on Cybertron even before the war.

Instead of the cool he expected, it was warm. By the time his optics fully adjusted to take in what was under them he'd accepted that this was indeed a huge space, but to see a full Cybertronian-style city inside a cavern and the tallest tower wasn't even halfway to the ceiling. He had never imagined such a thing could exist, and all his doubts about living here faded the longer he flew through this gigantic cavern. The air currents were different from outside but their presence helped settle him even
Redline and Skjöldur set down in alt mode to release their passengers, then transformed and cleared the open space for the ship to set down.

"Since no one has any serious damage, I'm going to start working on Prowl until I understand his coding inside and out," Redline informed them. "I'll call each of you in for a full physical over the next few orns."

"Each of you, including Wing, will have a Knight you will not leave the sight of unless left in the charge of a different Knight, who will also have you in sight at all times," Dai Atlas informed them firmly. "Aurora has already agreed to take on Thundercracker. Wing, you will be with Marwir again. Deadlock, you will be under the guard of Kimark. Jazz, you will be with Dart."

Thundercracker had already expected something similar with what he'd been told by Tornado and Aurora, so he focused on monitoring the others' reactions to the news. Deadlock seemed torn between disgust at having a keeper and pleasure at being paired up with that particular Knight. It was a good choice as far as Thundercracker was concerned; Kimark sounded like he would be capable of handling Deadlock's attitude and behavior and in many ways they had a common background. Wing seemed as calm and settled as always, but Thundercracker could tell he was a bit nervous about being with his old Daoshi. Jazz was still acting friendly, and Thundercracker couldn't help but wonder if Dart would recognize the danger he would have living with him.

"What about Prowl, when he boots up?" Jazz asked, covertly looking around for his guard, since Dart wasn't among those that had fetched them.

"That will be determined after we know what condition he will be in when he boots up. For now he is in Redline's charge," Dai Atlas answered, his gaze shifting to the small white cycle-former with red highlights and a bright yellow visor that was walking towards them with a warm grin that reminded Thundercracker a little too much of Jazz. "This is Dart. Kimark is the larger grounder behind him," he added to the dark burgundy mech that bore more than a passing resemblance to Deadlock in manner.

Watching Jazz wave cheerfully to the cycle-former, Thundercracker feel a little more optimistic about Dart's ability to handle the saboteur turned entertainer. He should be fast enough to keep up with Jazz if he tried to pull any antics, not that Thundercracker expected many at the beginning given Jazz wanted to integrate into this society. Unlike being under cover, here there was no leaving, no end to the mission. Integration was the mission.

"There is one other thing we need to bring to your attention," Thundercracker said after he belatedly realized he hadn't seen Wing approach the crate in the berthroom. "While we were on our way here two RacciPi bounty hunters tried to apprehend Jazz and Deadlock with the goal of returning the five of us to the Nijihito. After they killed the pair of avians we found their eggs in a stasis crate which is still in the main berthroom. Whether you find someone to raise them or we do it ourselves, it is our responsibility to make certain they are cared for until they naturally deactivate."

All optics went to Wing with various levels of exasperation and lack of surprise.

"I didn't go looking for these," the stunt jet responded cheekily.

"Not going to save you," Marwir snorted and grabbed his arm. "Come up, it's past time you were clean, fueled and meditated. Your field is a mess."
Wing just waved cheerfully to his gestalt and followed her without fuss.

"How many, and how much do you know about the race?" Aurora asked even as Dai Atlas urged everyone to move along.

As he followed Aurora into the open five-spire building that was the Citadel of Light, Thundercracker thought back to everything he'd read and heard Wing babble about during their trip. "There are three eggs in the stasis field, so we assume there will be three sparklings if they follow the typical pattern for their species. All the information we found on their creator's ship is currently stored on datapads in the main berthroom. We purchased live fuel for them at a couple of ports which is also in stasis in two containers in the storage area. I have been studying how to teach them to fly and believe it will not be too difficult."

"Good. We have a few mecha in the city who keep organic pets, some of which are very intelligent. It is not something I follow more than is required to recognize what is a known pet flying about and what may be an invasive creature," she said as they walked through hallways designed with Dai Atlas in mind. Everyone he saw was a Knight with a Great Sword on their back and while fliers were the majority, there were definitely a significant number of grounders as well. "As they are in stasis they are likely to remain so until things are better settled. There is no hurry to make things more complicated that they must be."

"Agreed, but I did not want the eggs lost or damaged before we were able to access them again. Also the supplies we purchased for them are a bit unusual, and despite Wing's assurances that other pets existed here I did not want to lose anything purchased that would turn out to be irreplaceable,"

Thundercracker kept close as he tried to memorize the path they were following. Just because he would be escorted everywhere didn't mean he couldn't start learning how to navigate in this building. Between Wing, Deadlock and likely Prowl, even if he was moved out in a decaorn he'd be back often to visit flock.

"A good choice. They, and their fuel, will be taken care of until a caretaker is selected."

They fell silent again while she guided him to one of the outer towers and towards the top floor.

"Does your flock live here?" Thundercracker asked as they exited a lift into a decidedly domestic colored and decorated hallway.

"My trine does, though my flock does not. Normally I spend a third of my nights here and the rest split between the flocks I have strong ties to. While you are in my charge we will remain here," she said easily, then smiled at the sense of relief at the civilized normal when it clicked in Thundercracker's code.

"I am looking forward to interacting with sane Seekers again, although I know I probably don't count as sane here," Thundercracker admitted as he looked around his new temporary home. It wasn't an eyrie as he remembered it, but it was also only the part time home of a trine. It was still nicely open with everything in the central room. The clearsteel panels that could close it off from the outside were currently all open. The very center held the recharging circle; a large round mattress and piles of pillows and blankets rather than a traditional berth. Around it were smaller spaces defined by furnishings. A dining space, an entertainment space, an office space, and a small work bench.

"You are sane enough to have home. You are far from the first painfully undersocialized mecha we have helped," she promised. "An extra mattress will be brought in before it is time for recharge. I encourage you to recharge with us when you are ready." She shifted to study him as he studied the environment. "Any concerns?"
The idea of finally being able to recharge with Seekers was incredibly appealing, but Thundercracker couldn't help but be a bit wary. "I still come online combat ready most of the time, although my own flock no longer triggers those protocols. It may be dangerous for me to recharge with your trine for some time."

"It will be on your timing," Auora reiterated firmly. "You may decide where your berth will be."

Thundercracker dipped his wings in acknowledgment and relaxed a bit further at the assurance that she did understand. "I have no wish to accidentally cause injuries to anyone. Will your trine be here tonight?"

"My Action will insist on it, Tornado may well insist, but my Order could be convinced to recharge elsewhere if it would be for the best," she offered. "He won't like it, but he accepted long ago that of us I am by far the most able to defend myself."

"I would welcome the opportunity to spend time with them. After all, I am going to be living in their eyrie, and it would be rude to ask them to stay away," Although the situation was very different, Thundercracker wondered if he could find a commonality with her Order since they both had trined with a warrior Vision. He wasn't certain he'd actually be recharging tonight since this was such an unfamiliar place, but it would be worth it to have real company again.

"Thank you," she encouraged the effort to be civilized. "Cheoseo, my Action, is likely to arrive any moment. He is a metal artist and works his own joors for the most part. Our Order, Haji, will be back before evening fuel. He cannot get out of his office nearly so easily," she motioned him to select a seat in entertainment quarter of the space. "How confident are you that you know what the social rules are here in the Citadel?"

Thundercracker thought for a long moment before answering, "Wing has explained the rules and laws of both the city and the Citadel and placed them on datapads for us, and Jazz and I have gone over them thoroughly. For the most part they appear logical and I believe I can follow most of them without too much issue. I am concerned about my reactions in certain situations until my coding finally ends war conditions, which is why I expressed concern about contact during recharge."

Auora flicked her wings in a slightly slower than normal 'understood' as she nodded. "What situations are you most concerned about, besides being startled out of recharge?"

"If someone acts aggressively towards me or my gestalt mates, I do not know if I will be able to pull my reaction," Thundercracker pondered other concerns. "Training and sparring is an entirely different thing; we can all handle that without issue so long as we know what it is. I also do not know how I will react to Wing's punishment."

Another nod and wing-twitch, though this time the 'understood' came with far more emotional content. "You will find much understanding of that here, and especially within this trine. One of my creations is also among the Circle of Masters, and two others are Knights. As devoted as I am to the Order and our ways, it was always difficult to allow them to be hurt. There were orns where I made a point of not being seen for everyone's benefit. Will the others respond the same way?"

Thundercracker flicked his wings as he shrugged, "Possibly, although my creator coding makes the issue more likely for me. We are already expecting Deadlock to have to be isolated if this become an issue. Jazz and I want to prevent issues rather than have to recover from them. We haven't dealt with any serious damage to a gestalt mate since we escaped shortly after the connections were formed. Since there has been no major incidents of injury in the past two vorns we don't know how we will respond."
"Then we will take precautions," Aurora assured him. "At this time the effort to control yourselves and behave in a civilized manner is more important than always succeeding. No one is expecting any of you, not even Wing, to be ready to join society now. It is the effort we are judging you on. For yourself, would topside flight or confinement be safer?"

Thundercracker dipped his wings in thanks for the consideration. "Topside flight would allow me to work off any aggression in flight or destruction of inanimate objects. That might be the best option to start with. I have had far too much confinement since this mess began to want to start with that option."

"Also understood," she smiled gently at him and extended her field in the caress of a creator-caretaker. "Before Wing's penance begins I will take you above ground. While you will never be out of sight, you will not see your watcher. Someone who can fly faster and higher than you can. The others will be asked as well, by their guardians."

"Thank you," he felt a knot of tension relax.

"We all want you to succeed here," her smile was a bit warmer before the sound of thrusters drew their attention outside and her smile turned to a different kind of warmth. "That is Cheoseo."

An orange and silver Seeker transformed and entered the room looking over at Thundercracker with cautious interest. Flicking his wings in greeting, he said, "Hello, are you one of Wing's new strays? Must be 'cause there's not many with that kind of heavy armor here."

"I expect not," Thundercracker agreed as he tried to work out if he'd just been insulted or not. "Wing's strays?" He managed to ask instead of snarl.

Cheoseo chuckled a bit while answering, "Sorry, Wing located and brought in two of the crash survivors that have integrated into the civilian population here. He also had a habit of bringing mecha back to the Citadel with him when we were still on Cybertron. Add his tendency to adopt mecha animals and liking organic pets and the phrase just kind of stuck."

Thundercracker canted his wings in acceptance. "While we were never strays, he did bring us here," he decided it was a relatively harmless phrase.

"Well if Wing likes you that's a point in your favor already with a lot of the Knights and civilians around here. We missed him when he disappeared," Cheoseo walked over next to Aurora. "What can I do to help out right now?"

"Why don't we show Thundercracker to the washracks and help him get properly clean, polished and detailed?" she suggested to them both.

"Sounds good. You up for it?" Cheoseo grinned.

"Yes, a wash and proper detailing would be greatly appreciated," Thundercracker gave a small shiver of delight at the idea of spending time getting properly cleaned. Wing's help had always been appreciated but he was looking forward to spending time with Seekers.

Jazz compliantly followed Dart into the towered complex that was the Knight's stronghold and had to admit for the home base of a military unit, it was nice. Not really in luxuries according to the time they left, but in style. They had taken a real effort to make it attractive, open, airy and everything a normal military base just wasn't. Autobot Orange and Decepticon Purple were both noticeably absent, something that while it wasn't the intent, would go a long way to making the former faction members less edgy. These folks were fans of white, rounded shapes and scrollwork in both bold and
subtle colors that still left the overall effect one of whiteness and open air. There was very little here to remind them of the war they'd left behind.

As he walked behind Dart he took note of the mecha greeting his keeper as they passed. Almost everyone appeared to be a warrior although he wasn't certain yet if they were frontliner level or not. He rather expected a fair number were, given the examples he knew or could read the designations of. He's know soon enough, one way or another.

The quarters Dart lead them to were nice as far as Jazz was concerned. Senior officer level nice. The door opened into a living room large enough for an entertainment section and a table for work, plus there were four doors leading off it. The easiest one was a double door to a balcony, the clear plating that closed it off still giving a nice view of the city for a second story room.

"That door is to your room," Dart motioned to the one on the opposite side of the balcony from the other two. "The one closet to the balcony is my berthroom, and the other door is for meditation and lesser bindings. The washracks are public, and most take energon in the common rooms, though not always."

"Nice place," Jazz said as he carefully opened the door and did a scan of his new quarters. It was a small room with a padded berth open on both sides, a chest of drawers and a simple desk, but it seemed to be civilian level safe. He'd have to do some work to be comfortable recharging in here. On the up side it also had a window that opened and was big enough to shimmy out of if he was careful.

"Thank you. There are extra blankets and pillows in the drawers. Most Initiates don't have enough time to do much more than recharge and do some studying in their room," Dart warned.

"It's be fine, honest. I'm used to my entire quarters being only half again this size most of the time," he walked over to the berth and pressed down. "Ohh, soft." He flopped down on it with a pleasured groan. "So nice."

"Is there anything that will make things more comfortable for you?" Dart watched, curious and a bit troubled to see someone with Jazz's rank so excited by a simple padded berth. The ones they'd seen on the ship were comfortably padded for fliers, so it must be due to the quarters he'd had back on Cybertron. It spoke volumes of the state of the war and world even to him.

"I'd say a sound system, but the one in the living room looks more than good enough," he grinned over at his keeper and stretched out in a mildly suggestive way. "Probably if you get annoyed with my music or something. Some stuff is definitely a DIY thing for me. Security so I can recharge without keeping one optic on."

Dart frowned for a moment at the mention of additional security even though Axe had warned him about an ISO's expected paranoia. "We can have additional nonlethal security installed, but I'll need to have access to your room in case of any problems."

Jazz stilled and looked at him seriously. "Ah get it, really I do. I was planning on stuff that alerts me if anything opens, or comes in, or was here. I know I'm a prisoner, just a willing one."

Now it was Dart's turn to be uncomfortable at Jazz's honest assessment of the situation. "Prisoner isn't quite the word I'd use for it. You're with me to help you integrate into a civilian life so you can be safely on your own. We've learned that giving newcomers someone to act as support helps keep incidents to a minimum. I'm as much here to keep you safe as you adjust as I am to protect the civilians from your wartime reflexes."

"What would you call it, in a glyph?" Jazz asked gently, though his curiosity was honest. "Helps to
have a title to log the status rules under."

"It's closer to being on probation or in rehabilitation than a prisoner," Dart said after some thought. "The initial restrictions are in place to protect everyone but mostly the civilians, and those restrictions will be relaxed as you become accustomed to the Citadel and then the lack of combat and aggression in the city itself."

"Probationary citizen," Jazz rolled it around his processor for a bit, then nodded. "I can work with that. So, what's the gist of the next decaorn?"

"Wing gave you the basic rules for living here before you arrived, correct?" Dart waited for a nod from Jazz before continuing. "I'll get you the complete laws to make certain he covered everything. He's not getting completely out of it either since he's going to be getting some updates on changes while he was gone. Once you're up to speed on that we'll go over job options and what they pay so you have an idea of how to support yourself once the integration is completed. Eventually we'll move to maps of the city so you know where the different neighborhoods are and what to expect in those regions. The local customs tend to vary since they are often based on the origin city and function of the majority of inhabitants."

"Not that different from settling into a new city, just with a guide and more time," Jazz hummed, then glanced at Dart. "You're welcome to sit," he waved to the desk chair, then patted the berth next to him. "I pick up that stuff fast. Part of the job description much of my existence. How common is it for a Knight to have strong connections to a civilian? I know Wing's not going anywhere, Deadlock's probably going to be a Knight, but the rest of us aren't likely to. TC and Prowl might fit in, but from all Wing's said, I'm really not cut out for it."

"There are a few Knights who have partners or mates among the civilians outside the Citadel, although the civilians who can accept our unusual lifestyle tend to be from military or law enforcement related backgrounds which isn't very common here. It isn't common outside the Seeker Knights," Dart admitted. "Several flocks have Knights in their ranks or have trined with Knights. Master Aurora is a good example since her trine mates are not Knights. Actually, the flocks and trines are probably a good comparison to your gestalt bond."

"So there's a basic format to look to for ideas. Good," Jazz relaxed slightly and took Dart's continued standing as a desire not to get too close or relaxed with him yet. "What do you do for fun?"

"Me personally? Mostly I dance and listen to music. Other Knights paint, sculpt, spar, interface, whatever interests them," Dart said, searching for something to connect with his charge.

"Cool," Jazz grinned over at him and rolled to his pedes. "Care to dance?"

"Sure. You want fast or slow?" Dart asked as he headed to the living room.

"Fast," Jazz said with an eager lift to his step at the prospect of some fun.

"Are you good with having a meal with your flock, their caretakers and a couple Master Knights?" Aurora asked when all four of them were satisfied with Thundercracker's fit and finish, and he had helped each of them clean up and polish as well. It wasn't efficient but it did wonders as the social bonding event it was.

"Yes, it would help some of my coding settle a bit if I could see that they were doing well. Being separated often had bad connotations before we escaped," Thundercracker admitted, not bothering to mention that Wing was the one he was the most concerned about at the moment. "It will be better to
relearn proper dining etiquette with those who understand why we lost it in the first place."

"Then come. We are dining in one of the smaller rooms today. Everyone thought it best not to subject you all to the larger common room where most take their energon just yet," she said as the trine turned to the open balcony and took off. Thundercracker transformed and followed after them, making certain to keep himself in the proper position behind their formation. It was here that he really grasped how much extra armor he'd acquired through the war. Yes, as an Air Martial with a heavily military background in his flock, he was heavier and strong than most Seekers. It was that the wartime upgrades had come gradually, each one adding a noticeable but seemingly insignificant amount to his mass until he was looking at the form he used to have. Stripped down to his Air Martial frame he'd lose at least a third of his mass. He was sure the same would be said of Prowl and Jazz.

The entire flight he was careful of his position, the power of his thrusters and the way he held himself. Haji was much more wary about his presence compared to the rather more casual Action, and Thundercracker guessed he wasn't very pleased having such a heavily armored Seeker in their quarters. Anything Thundercracker could do to make the other Order more accepting would only help his own position in the long run.

They came down to land and as suited to the situation Cheoseo landed first, then motioned Thundercracker to land before the two more vulnerable members of a traditional trine gave up their advantage of being airborne. While the pair landed he took in the room they were on the balcony of. Axe and Redline were already there, along with Jazz and Dart, the four seated at a round table set for twelve. Some effort had been made to level their heights, but with a mid-sized grounder and one of the largest triple changers Thundercracker had ever seen at the same table, it only worked so far.

Remembering to tip his wings respectfully to the seated masters, Thundercracker waited for Haji's trine to select their seats before settling in next to his guard. Dart and Jazz were talking about a dance piece they'd been listening to earlier and appeared to be getting along fairly well so far. Looking at the pair, Thundercracker could see the differences between the two frames that went deeper than just their base frame types. Jazz, who was one of the more lightly armored mecha he'd seen during the war even after being upgraded for the gestalt, looked solidly built next to the cycle-former. When Wing and Marwir landed it was far more apparent. Just at a glance he knew that they'd once been nearly identical in size and mass. Now Wing was significantly heavier.

It didn't surprise anyone when Kimark came in last, literally dragging a grousing Deadlock behind him. Their finish was a complete mess, dented, scuffed and scraped. Yet Deadlock was in a good mood, so the wrestling and whatever else had generated the scuffing had worked to settle him. Kimark didn't seem too displeased either if Thundercracker was reading him correctly. Besides the two massive triple changers, Kimark was the only Knight that Thundercracker had seen yet whose armor came close to what his gestalt had now.

Wing teeked of mild amusement and obligingly extended his field as Thundercracker checked him over once he was seated.

"Good to see everybody's here," Jazz greeted gestalt and Knights equally with his trademark grin before focusing in on Redline. "Update on Prowl, since he can't speak for himself yet?"

"He's still in stasis, but his tac-net keeps trying to bring him online. His coding is a mess of broken links and trauma damage," Redline grumbled. "Physically most of his frame problems should be easily repairable. Since he's offline I'm taking the opportunity to figure out how the gestalt components were added and if they are going to cause any problems long term."

"What kind of problems?" Thundercracker asked with an uneasy twitch of his wings. "We've all had significant mass added over the vorns and not suffered for it."
"The idiots who installed these components didn't understand Cybertronian frames well, and I'm going to make certain everything is integrated properly. I already know Wing would like his maneuverability back so I'll see what can be stripped out with harming any of you. Then there's the mess of trying to figure out exactly what this gestalt coding is doing to the rest of your coding. Wing's already admitted that it has been changing how you interact with each other, and it doesn't completely match up with the records I have from past gestalts." Redline did not look happy with the discrepancy.

"Likely because what we got was Shockwave's creation. War-time, no moral bars, no legal bars," Thundercracker explained. "As I understand it, he all but started from scratch. I'm not sure what version we have, though I know it's one of the stable ones."

"Defined as Decepticon, war-time stable," Jazz said quietly. "But yeah, I have to agree. It's got to be one of the later ones. The early ones didn't have survivors capable of function."

Redline looked appalled by what they were revealing, as did the rest of the Knights. "Gestalt coding created by a rogue scientist implemented by a group of organics that think they know what they're doing. If that's the case I'm going to need to go through all of your coding thoroughly line by line. We need to figure out all the effects it could have on you."

"I listened to Starscream rant about the program and Shockwave enough that I can give you some of the details although I'm no scientist," Thundercracker offered.

"I know a bit of the basics since the Autobots stole it from Shockwave and modified it for our own use," Jazz said before adding, "After we stripped the slave coding out of it and ran it through some legitimate scientific review."

"I don't know as much about this as the others, but as I said it's definitely been altering our opinion of each other," Wing admitted. "I don't know if it has impacted how we interact with Flightplan."

"Creator protocols lining up with self-preservation," Thundercracker spelled out what he perceived.

"We had to slag the slave coding to get out, so that too," Deadlock tried to be helpful.

"I'd really rather do my own edits," Jazz said warily. "I'll show you my code but you're not going in my helm to edit it. It's for your protection."

Redline glared almost insulted for a moment before subsiding and grumbling, "It's that ISO programming, isn't it? That wouldn't be something to take lightly. I'll let you but I'm going to inspect everything before and after you edit it."

"Fine," Jazz agreed. "Can't say it'll be easy to let you look that deep, but I can manage. I'll even do my best not to edit it between when you download and we sort out the changes to make."

"That would be helpful," Redline said with a touch of sarcasm. "I don't want to accidentally sabotage your coding or cause glitches we'll have to try and fix later. The last thing I need is you or your systems tagging me as a threat."

"So true," Jazz grinned and snickered. "I can't rightly recall what a mess I made trying to get Ratchet locked in as 'safe'."

"Ratchet and safe don't belong in the same quadrant, much less the same line," Deadlock huffed.

"Nah, he's good. Now Hook and 'safe' don't belong together. Mech's a menace no matter what he's up to," Jazz replied cheekily.
"How about we just agree that none of us has dealt with a medic that has their full 'do no harm' protocols intact?" Thundercracker suggested.

"True enough. Ratchet's as scary as a warrior as he is good as a medic," Jazz agreed.

"Do all of the medics fight back on Cybertron?" Kimark asked curiously while several of the other Knights looked disturbed.

"First Aid doesn't but he's part of a gestalt that does," Jazz replied immediately. "Although Defensor does tend to stick to his namesake. They're young though. Plenty of time for reality to break the pacifist in him. He's barely a full field medic, even if he's advancing fast."

"Hook is not a medic by primary function; his original function was in construction along with the rest of his gestalt," Thundercracker added. "The Constructicons have learned that acting as medics helps them gain favors and additional resources from the other Decepticons."

"Is anyone on special rations?" Cheoseo asked politely in the break as the Knights mulled over the mess their guest's code and frames must be by now.

"I've got a list of additives to help their frames finish up with repairs," Redline sent the list to Cheoseo. Turning back to his patients, he admitted, "Most of your systems seem to be functional, but I don't completely trust the repairs done by those organics. Especially with what else they've done to your systems."

"Can't blame you for that one," Jazz chuckled and willingly accepted the cube when it was handed to him. Despite not looking like he was checking it out, he paid careful attention to the order the Action handed the cubes out in and tried to make sense of it. It wasn't a simple pattern was all he'd worked out when he decided to just ask Thundercracker when he got a moment with him.

"So, Jazz, do you believe you'll be able to recharge in the berth offered?" Aurora asked politely when everyone had their cubes.

"It's a lot more comfortable than what I had before we got the ones we had installed on the ship," Jazz said agreeably. "Dart helped me move it closer to a wall where I'll be the most secure while recharging."

"Good," she smiled brightly at him and lifted her wings in approval. "Deadlock, will you recharge well enough?"

"Oh yeah," Kimark's optics glittered. "Between wrestling of one kind or another I'll wear him out."

Deadlock snorted, but didn't actually counter the statement.

"I'm good. Between Marwir, Thorn and Atl, I'm going to be well-snuggled tonight and often," Wing told her with a bright smile.

"Good," she hummed, pleased that everyone believed they'd be okay until morning. She didn't expect most to recharge well, but it was a good start.

"I'd like to join you and Thundercracker at some point when you go flying. I want to show him how much fun it can be flying here," Wing asked cheerfully with a glance at Marwir.

"The six of us can go flying after energon," Aurora smiled at the Knight who was older than most, better with his blades than nearly everyone and still managed to come across as a mechling most of the time.
Thundercracker's wings twitched as he glanced skyward over his shoulder. He wanted to get used to this new air space as quickly as possible.

"Great. A lot of the stunt frames like to race between the stalactites, and I need to practice with my new mass," Wing grinned.

"You go ahead and do that. I'll happily stay down here," Deadlock said as he finished his cube and looked around for more.

"Ditto," Jazz grinned with a much easier manner. "I prefer climbing and hang gliders to flying for heights."

"Climbing?" Wing trilled curiously.

"Mag upgrades," he flashed his hands. "I like climbing buildings. Or at least I've done it enough I've decided it's fun."

"You mean you like doing something crazier than free climbing poles with Prowl and jumping on Wing for a ride." Deadlock said.

"Yap. I used to climb the Winglord's eyrie when I could get to Vos," Jazz grinned at him. "I always got a good squawk or two out of them when someone realized a grounder was outside."

"Do you mind giving rides like that?" Dart asked Wing. "It sounds like it could be fun."

"Sure," Wing grinned at his friend.

"Great, more reckless ninnies," Redline mock growled. "No climbing high enough to cause damage I have to fix. Medic's orders."

"Aww, that's no fun," Jazz pouted playfully. "I haven't fallen yet."

"And the wannabe thunderhorns that try to follow you up the buildings don't have the same mag upgrades or experience," Kimark pointed out. "The fliers will be playing catch for ages if you're spotted doing it."

Deadlock shrugged. "Good way to weed out the idiots."

"All right, I'll be good," Jazz sighed with an actual promise not to show off. "No tower climbing for fun."

"Maybe we could work it into a performance later," Dart offered, still interested in the idea and the challenge and encouraged by the way Jazz genuinely lit up. "Mix the climbing with a ride on Wing and a few other interested fliers. We could even see about aerial acrobatics once we're comfortable. That could be an exciting show to watch and demonstrate higher levels of skill."

"You are so on!" Jazz's grin nearly split his face. "Since I'm thinking to go into performing for my credits, it's even under helping me adjust."

"The city still uses the shanix," Dart said, trying to be helpful.

Redline groaned. "Fine, so long as you make sure watchers know it's a display performance."

"So has anyone sorted out what the plans for the next few orns are?" Haji asked.

"Thundercracker asked to work with us on Vosian grammar since the Seekers on Cybertron have
stopped using a portion of it," Cheoseo answered. "It probably wouldn't be a bad idea for the rest of you to figure out how the dialects you know have changed."

"A lot," Jazz grunted. "Only two dialects really exist as living languages on Cybertron. Autobot and Decepticon. Autobot's based on equal parts High Iaconian and military, and Decepticon's based on a combination of Tarnish, Kaonish, military and gladiator. Nothing that's derivative too far that it can't be understood, but it's getting there for the rank and file on both sides."

"If Wing told the truth, no one who knew what I've ever spoken as my first choice was allowed along," Deadlock shrugged, then scowled at Kimark when he was elbowed sharply. "Fine, no one who chose it."

"You might be surprised. We have a lot of former military among the Knights, and more than half of the exodus count were mecha from the lower ranks of society. Common workers of all kinds," Kimark reminded him.

"Still, it wouldn't hurt any of us to brush up on the local versions of our preferred dialects," Jazz brought things back on track and earned an approving look from Dart for it. "I definitely do."

"I would also recommend, such as you are able, to show us around as much as possible. Unknown territory is threatening," Thundercracker spoke to their keepers. "Truly, anything unknown is threatening to some extent, and all of our reflexes are poorly suited to resolve things peacefully. The sooner we have a basic grasp of the layout, rules and people we might encounter, the less stressful this will be on us."

"And less stressed means less likely to strike out when surprised," Jazz agreed, then glanced at Deadlock. "Well, for TC and me at least."

Deadlock glared back before answering, "I promised Wing before we got here I won't start any major fights outside training and sparring. I'm not holding to it if I'm provoked though. Someone wants a fight they're going to get one."

"The problem is your definition of provocation," Thundercracker grumbled. "Same with the rest of us. If they haven't said it outright or punched you, it's not provocation around here."

Deadlock thought for a klik then shrugged, "That'll take some getting used to, but I didn't offline anyone in the ports we visited besides the bounty hunters. I'll learn to behave."

"Now that was unquestionably justified," Wing said, only to earn several scowls. "I'm not that far gone. I was there. It was justified."

"They were going to return us to our former masters even knowing we were escaped slaves," Deadlock said bluntly. "More torture, harder to crack slave coding, more science experiments...no thanks."

"You will face no such threats here," Aurora's voice was firm and held the promise of one with the authority to make it true.

"So what are the interesting things for a warrior to do?" Jazz asked everyone, though he was focused on Kimark.

The former gladiator hummed. "Outside the Citadel, there are bars that cater to a rougher crowd, exhibition displays, exploring beyond city limits, racing..." he looked around at the others for ideas.

"Exhibition displays?" Deadlock perked up. "What kind?"
"Some demonstrate weapons or unusual fighting techniques to see if others are interested in learning. Others spar to demonstrate how well they've learned or how tough they are," Dart offered.

"Not much in the universe tougher than I am," Deadlock grinned. "I'm so in."

"Maybe not right away," Aurora cautioned him. "At least not until we can be sure you won't deactivate someone unintentionally."

"Well, that means I can check out the competition," Deadlock said with a shrug after glancing at Wing. "Most of them shouldn't be too challenging anyway."

"We'll see," Wing smiled serenely back.

"You're an exception," Deadlock grunted before glancing over at Kimark. "I wouldn't mind if we could keep Prowl's fighting skills. Mech's got some moves considering he fought me while I was berserk."

"I'll look into what he was trained in and how far," Redline agreed. "It would do us well to retrain him in it. His frame will remember some of it even with a memory wipe."

"Anything like that we can keep similar would probably be for the best. From what we have learned it seems he picked up most of his martial training before Praxus was destroyed," Thundercracker said quietly.

"Which means any formal training would be known forms," Aurora flicked her wings. "Does anyone know what his Autobot or war-time training was?"

"Well, I'm the best source of knowledge as to what the tactical staff and officers were mandated to learn," Jazz offered after glancing at the two Decepticons. "I don't know if he picked up anything else from Chromia or any of the other warriors."

"Likely," Deadlock grunted.

"We'll deal with that later," Redline insisted as it was noted that the newcomers drank their energon far faster than they did. Only Deadlock gulped his, but even Wing drank fast. "He has a long way to go before getting to wartime training."

"He'll have time to decide how much he wants to relearn. There's no rush here," Wing said with quiet satisfaction as he looked at his flock sitting peacefully with the Knights. Even he was relieved when the talk shifted to things to see in the city, the celebrations, fairs and festivals coming up and the general facts of life around the Citadel.

The sensor on Jazz's window tripped shortly after Dart left him alone in the room to retire for the evening. Getting up from his chair Dart headed over and opened the door to see whether his charge simply wanted some fresh air or if Jazz had skipped out like he'd been warned might happen. Peering into the empty room, he sighed and commed the Knight Axe had asked to assist him for the night, ::Demeter? You tailing my wayward charge?::

::Yes, and based on what he is he's making it very easy on me. He's headed for the medbay,:: she replied with a mixture of understanding and amusement in her harmonics.

::I'll meet you down there,:: Dart said as he headed out the door and down the hall towards one of the windows. It would be faster cutting across rather than trying to follow Jazz's exact route right now. He'd join Demeter tailing him once he caught up to the pair. As he jumped out and scrambled down
the building, he pondered Jazz's destination. He'd half-expected his charge to first head for the city's clubs to feel out some of the local civilians, or to one of the areas on his Citadel map that was intentionally vague. He knew from experience that those blank spots all but demanded such mecha to explore them.

The thing that was in the medbay was a lot of information on the Citadel residents, and Prowl. Was he looking for information on the Knights and their dependents? Everything Dart had heard about those in ISO made it seem likely Jazz would be interested in knowing how to take down those around him, especially given how many unfamiliar warriors now surround him and his gestalt. Some paranoia was to be expected from these refugees, but he knew Redline wouldn't be pleased if his records were breached.

He met up with Demeter outside the window that Jazz had slipped though moments before. She'd angled herself so she could see inside without exposing more than her optics and a bit of her helm.

::He's checking on Prowl right now. Hardlined. Went right for him,:: she reported as he came even with her but didn't look.

::Hardlined? I know Wing said Jazz helped put Prowl in stasis. Maybe he's checking to see if we hacked him?:: Dart asked, even more curious about his charge. He hadn't expected Jazz to head straight for his gestalt mate, but maybe their connection was more like trines than he'd thought. It wasn't as if they knew anything credible about gestalts, much less force-bonded gestalts.

::And that he's still healthy and himself. There is much that could have happened to Prowl since Jazz saw him last. Be glad you can't think of a fraction of what he and I can,:: she hummed thoughtfully.

::If he heads for one of the others next I'd say he's just checking on his team. There's a lot of justified paranoia in their background.::

::Should we try and stop him? Make him go back to our quarters?:: Dart asked reluctantly. ::He is breaking the rules, but if he is paranoid about how his gestalt is being treated he might take that as a sign we're up to something.::

::No, we shouldn't. He intentionally let that alarm on the window sound. He's making it almost painfully easy to follow him. He's ISO. Special Operations. Black Ops. The mecha that don't follow any rules other than don't get caught. This is his equivalent of Wing going "hay, headed down to medbay, going to check on my crew". Like the others, they don't speak exactly the same language we do. But I used to know his and I can remember it when I try.:: She said firmly. ::As long as he's making it this easy to follow him, we let him go where he wishes just like we would if he asked to wander around like a normal mecha. Though if you want to check with the Sovereign I'd hardly blame you.::

::How do you know this?:: Dark asked with polite curiosity.

::Military scouts operate under very similar rules and I was sparked as one,:: she answered simply.

Dart thought for a klik. On one hand, he should bring this up to the Sovereign since Jazz was technically breaking the rules. On the other hand, Demeter said this was his way of following them. Despite his original concerns about an ISO mech in the Citadel, Jazz was his charge. He was supposed to be helping Jazz adapt. ::We'll wait and I'll talk to the Sovereign later. There's no point getting him online for this right now.::

::Agreed,:: Demeter relaxed a bit, then froze as her optics met Jazz's through the window before he turned to slip out the door into the empty medbay with an easy saunter. ::If you had any doubt he knows he's being followed that should end it,:: she pinged Dart the short clip.
Well, we'd best not keep him waiting, Dart said, following after Demeter as he viewed the clip. No, there was no doubt Jazz had known they were there. Any idea where he'll head next? Marwir's quarters is my guess. He seems to like Wing.

Who doesn't? she laughed brightly across the comm. Mech sweet-talks everybody just with his field and smile.

Wing could get away with almost anything just by grinning. Even the Sovereign seems reluctant to punish him sometimes. It'd be weird punishing your own Daoshi, Dart grinned before reflecting. Wing seemed a lot less open when I saw him. I know he was in front of the Masters on serious charges, but I think this might have changed him.

Being force-bonded to that group would do that to a mecha, even if nothing else he experienced touched him, Demeter said quietly as they tracked Jazz around to Kimark's quarters. This time the mech just paused at the window and looked in carefully for a klik before moving on, headed up.

Apparently he's leaving Wing for last, Dart said with a mock pout as they trailed after Jazz. It was a bit daunting realizing how easily the mech kept from being spotted by the other Knights walking the halls or flying about outside while still staying in the pair's view. How many others like him had once infiltrated the Citadel back on Cybertron?

Maybe we'll get lucky and they decide to talk for a while, she said thoughtfully, watching as Jazz poked his helm over the ledge of the Master's open eyrie. He held there, dangling with a relaxed frame like he did it every orn and at as much ease with the height as any flier.

I don't think Thundercracker's online, Dart answered, noting that Jazz was making no move to enter the eyrie yet. That relaxation had to have taken a long time to train into his systems given how most grinders reacted to heights. Dart couldn't help but ponder how easily Jazz could slip inside and offline everyone. He'd get out without being spotted too. No wonder ISO had been so feared by many. Yet here he was showing them his capabilities but doing so in a way that was as passive as possible. He really must want to be accepted by the Knights to give away this much of what he could do.

Unlikely. I doubt he's recharged with anything resembling a trine for many, many vorns, Demeter agreed. He needs it more than most.

Without real warning Jazz let himself drop with only a slight shift in his mass to angle him towards the wall a full five lengths down.

Dart just stared at the fall his charge had casually made, openly gaping as Jazz neatly landed against the wall and stuck there. He's crazy or really just that good. He finally stammered out as the pair scrambled down after him.

At least we know where he's going, Demeter pointed out. And I'd say he's that good, and far crazier than that.

Dart could only grunt softly at that assessment as they worked to Marwir's quarters where Jazz knocked on the Initiate room's window. After a long moment, the window opened and Wing looked out, glancing down at the open space below before looking back over at Jazz.

Figures he'd be the one online, Dart was amused despite himself.

"Hay, free to talk?" Jazz grinned at Wing.

"Yes. Where's Dart?" He asked as he stepped back from the window to let Jazz enter if he wished.
The warframe slipped in easily with a grin. "About twenty lengths thataway, with Demeter," he made a motion towards the pair Wing couldn't see. "I'm being good. Let'm know I was headed out and didn't try to lose'm once."

Wing chuckled a bit before continuing softly, "That's as good as they can honestly expect. How are you doing?"

Jazz sighed and flopped on the berth in a lazy sprawl that welcomed Wing to come close. "It's honestly a lot better than I was expecting and a lot more confusing. They know what I am and still let me move fairly freely. No shackles, no inhibitor, no locks I'd have to really work at opening, not even an airframe swooping down when I stepped out. I can't rightly process the idea of doing the same to one of the Masters."

"They're giving you the chance to prove you're trustworthy," Wing nodded understandingly right before he cozied up next to Jazz and purred softly that the mech was happy to have him there. "Remember, we aren't at war here; it's different than it was on Cybertron. There are no enemies hiding just outside the walls."

"And inside them, and in the vents, and at least once in my berth," Jazz relaxed next to the jet that read as trustworthy in a way that made everything except the part making choices scream warnings. "Plus all the places I got into. Cybertron wasn't exactly a safe place even before the war to me."

"The Citadel has always worked to be a place of sanctuary. Once it was far away from what most considered civilization. Here, it is part of the foundation of the city," Wing reached over and began to stroke Jazz's arm, hoping his field could help continue to soothe the saboteur's jumpy nature. It made sense he was so wound considering this was very different from his original lifestyle, from everything Jazz had been raised to understand.

It didn't take much more to get Jazz to snuggle closer. "Just weird, ya know? I checked in on everybody. Seems they're all okay."

"I'm glad to hear that. We'll all be getting together sometime in the next couple orns so you can make certain they're still okay then," Wing pressed closer to Jazz and enjoyed the company after his tense meeting with the Masters. Hopefully Dai Atlas won't be too upset Jazz came to visit him. Surely the long-time military mecha understood ISO behavior well enough to recognize that Jazz was trying to behave. "Do you have anywhere else to go tonight?"

"Nah, I checked on everybody. Want company tonight?" Jazz offered.

"Yes," Wing accepted immediately before remembering his own probation. Even as he settled back and gladly let Jazz curl up on top of his frame, he commed his fellow Knight and his Daoshi. ::Marwir, Dart?:

::Yes, Wing?: Dart answered first, soon followed by Marwir's ping.

::Jazz would like to spend most of the night. I'll let you both know when he heads out:: he told them.

::You knew he was on the move?: Marwir prompted Dart.

::Yes, Demeter and I have been watching him check on his gestalt mates:: Dart promised.

::Very well. I will keep tabs on both tonight:: she agreed.

::Thank you:: Wing smiled even as he closed the line, pleased his Daoshi wasn't angry enough to deny him the comfort of his gestalt mate. As he grabbed a blanket and settling it over Jazz, he asked,
"One enough or do you want more?"

"You're enough," Jazz purred, both a statement of affection, trust and that blankets were still something of a luxury to him.

"Good," Wing said sleepily as he snuggled just a bit closer to the warm frame next to him. "Recharge well, Jazz."
Wing roused reluctantly when he felt Jazz move and cracked one optic open. "Going back? So early."

"Yeah," he leaned over and kissed his gestalt mate softly. "Trying to be a good probationary citizen and see dawn in my own berth."

"You don't have to sneak out of here if you don't want to," Wing pointed out sleepily. "We can comm Dart to come get you."

"You agreed to tell both our keepers when I headed out," Jazz shrugged as a roll passed through his frame to loosen it. "Though I suppose since everybody's going to be in on the truth, appearances don't matter that much."

"If you want to sneak, go ahead and climb out," Wing said rousing a bit more since they were actually talking. "We can claim it's a test of everyone's observational skills if Dai gets into a sulk about it."

Jazz snickered and slipped out the window as Wing pinged both Marwir and Dart.

::Headed out?:: she asked, though she knew full well the mech was slipping out the window from the sounds.

::Yes?:: Dart answered somewhat blearily.

::Jazz is commencing a test of the observational skills of the Knights roaming the corridors and predawn air.:: Wing responded cheerfully. ::He's heading back to Dart's quarters. I'm certain Axe will be interested in the potential lack of reports about his presence and movements.::

::I'll add them to the report of those that didn't come in last night.:: Dart chuckled. ::I hope the Sovereign isn't too miffed by it. I'd hate to be responsible for observational drills for everyone.::

::They'll appreciate an excuse to shake things up.:: Wing said with a small snicker before getting serious again for a moment. ::Too many of us have gotten complacent here with no immediate threats to worry about. Too many of the Knights have forgotten what being alert actually means.::

::I can't disagree with that.:: Dart admitted to Marwir's agreeing hum. ::Though I can't be that distressed by the lack of danger either. It's nice to feel safe. And I have him in sight.::
Thank you, Marwir told him. Wing, are you up for the orn?:

Now I am, Wing said as he flexed his frame and rose from the berth. Do we have enough time for a quick flight before I start my penance this morning?:

Yes. We have nearly a joor before I expect to get fuel into you, she said firmly and took another lap around the tower she lived in instead of landing on the balcony.

I'm on my way out now., Wing headed out to the balcony eager to stretch his wings again. Transforming and taking off, he arched out to join her, noting how easily she maneuvered around his new frame. He was getting used to it, used to the new baselines, but it stung to be reminded of what he was unlikely to be able to do again. As they moved upwards in the huge cavern he spotted Jazz make a smooth dropping swing onto Dart's balcony, then Dart dropping down to join him.

"So, did anyone see you?" Dart asked playfully.

"Wing, Marwir, you, Demeter, maybe one of the other Aerials I saw doing a flyby," Jazz said with a playful shrug. "Almost everyone pays more attention to the open air; they don't look at the corners and tight spaces."

Dart nodded. "Don't be surprised if you get called in to explain that," he teased gently. "Dai Atlas is likely to cause a fuss that almost no one saw you without being alerted first. Wing thinks he'll enjoy the excuse to drill everyone again. Now, want to head back for a bit more recharge, or breakfast in the commons?"

"No problem, I've done those kind of training drills for a variety of bases in the past during peace times," Jazz grinned. "How about breakfast if you're not too tired?"

"I'm good. I got almost as much recharge as you did," Dart grinned and patted him on the shoulder, only to freeze on instinct at the tiny shift in Jazz frame and field. Gone as fast as it came, it was still enough to warn him he wasn't among those Jazz was prepared to have touch without warning. "Do you have energon preferences?"

"I like anything sweet in mine," Jazz said, moving a bit closer to make up for the earlier tension. "Any copper or gold available here?"

"Sure," Dart grinned and headed for the door. "I think you'd like the solar, unless you're sick of it."

"There's a choice of energon available?" Jazz almost stopped as he stared at Dart in surprise. "Wing didn't mention that."

"Did you ever tell him it wasn't anymore? When we left several varieties and most additives were still available enough," Dart asked in reply. "I doubt it would have occurred to the eternal optimist that it had really gotten that much worse. We might not have quite the variety we had on Cybertron, but this world is reasonably energy rich for this sized population and has most additives."

Jazz thought back over the many conversations the gestalt had had over the vorns. "No, I don't think anyone mentioned it, especially since he started getting depressed when he found out how bad things really got. It was like watching someone kick a circuit-puppy, so we tended to keep the worst from him."

"He does that look disturbingly well for how old and skilled he is," Dart smiled fondly for his friend. "Yes, there are varieties here, though most energon is a mix if you don't specify."

"Solar with copper sounds good this morning," Jazz said as he fell in step behind Dart. It was
interesting how Dart didn't seem to mind having his back to him today. Maybe the outing did more good than he'd expected.

"What really is the state of Cybertron right now?" Dart asked after a bit.

Jazz debated for a moment before deciding that Dart could probably handle the news better than Wing had. "It's a complete wreck and getting worse by the orn. I don't know if the planet could be saved even if the war ended right after I left."

The cycleformer shivered, his field a wave of feeling sick at the news. Still he proved Jazz correct and had settled himself enough by the time they walked into the nearly abandoned commons where most took their energon and many simply hung out to socialize. It was a setup that was familiar enough for Jazz to feel nice.

"So clean and empty," he murmured as Dart lead him to a table platform in the center of the room and the half dozen dispensers there.

"Everyone here, Knight, Initiate, Supplicant and dependent does their fair share to keep the the Citadel grounds clean and repaired," Dart told him easily. "As for empty, it won't stay that way. Dawn isn't for most of a joor and most don't get up for a joor or two after that unless they have to."

"Prowl would appreciate the organization of the duty rosters. The quiet here isn't too bad right now, but I tend to like company overall," Jazz admitted as he followed Dart's lead to fill a cube, only to pause as he tried to work out how to make a selection from the complex machine.

"Here," Dart leaned over a bit to give Jazz a good view on the one he had just drawn from. "If you just want a ration of standard energon, press dispense. If you want to specify, press this," he tapped a spot with 'menu' engraved on it and waited for Jazz to press it. A list of energon types popped up and Dart tapped solar, then waited for Jazz to do so. "You can scroll through the additives you want, tapping on any you want, then tap 'done' to set the order."

"An press dispense to get it," Jazz extrapolated to Dart's smile. It a moment they both had their cubes. "From what I've seen you Knights seem a lot saner than most of the mecha left back home."

"We probably did take most of the sane mecha with us," Dart admitted with a thoughtful hum and motioned for Jazz to pick a seat.

"Well, the crazies have definitely taken over on both sides. Megatron and most of the Decepticon command completely lost it one way or another a long time ago. Autobots honestly aren't much better," Jazz said as he settled into a seat where he could keep track of most of the entrances.

"While that matches what I remember, I'm surprised to hear you say it," Dart admitted as he sipped his fuel. "You were Autobot command."

"And ISO, which means I figure out weaknesses and how to exploit it. Just because I spent most of my time accessing the Decepticons doesn't mean I didn't recognize some of the issues with my own allies," Jazz admitted. "For instance, in a more peaceful time, Optimus could have been a great Prime. Now, he holds to his ideals even when the Autobots are losing ground and Cybertron is crumbling."

"And knowing your side's weaknesses makes your ability to anticipate problems they'll have," Dart nodded thoughtfully. "I know some of ours look at us that way."

"You're thinking of the Prowl type of creepy study," Jazz shook his helm and held down the laugh. "Not everyone who studies weaknesses are so obvious about it."
"Like you," Dart didn't need to guess.

"Well, yes, and it always helps to have the obvious type around to take focus off of the question of who's watching because everyone thinks they know," Jazz agreed.

"How much do you think the rebellion had right?" Dart prompted.

Jazz actually looked serious for a moment, "A lot. Optimus agrees with a lot of the original issues: starvation in the lower classes, corruption in the Senate, abuse of functions especially for pre-progs. ISO was even trying to work to change things before Megatron started gaining power. The problem was how to fix it. Prowl could give you the outlines and speculations about tipping points and when things got to the point of no return leading up to the war."

"And probably more plans for how to end the war that your idealist Prime wouldn't accept," Dart sighed. "Whoever gets him is likely to get an audial full of ranting at some point."

"If Prowl gets going on the subject, yeah. Mech could rant with the best of them if you could trip him out of politically correct mode. Didn't happen much though," Jazz turned over those times in his processor, looking for a commonality. "I think it was always in an officer's meeting. Probably same reason I did. Have to present a united front to the troops and all."

Dart nodded in understanding, "I'm not a Master, but I understand that they voice their disagreements behind closed doors as well. Wing is one of the few Senior Knights that challenges their united front, but he's not a Master so it is different from an open disagreement among them."

"I've gotten the impression that his function is to challenge the status quo and be too cute doing it to get flattened for it," Jazz chuckled. "He's got that 'who me' look down. I swear his spark gift has to be to make folks want to please him. Optimus's got it too."

"That might actually explain some things, including how he's survived this long," Dart said with a snicker. "So Wing reminds you of Optimus Prime? He has to be very different from Sentinel Prime then.""

"Optimus is different from any Prime we've had since before Nova Prime," Jazz said solemnly. "He's everything a Prime should be, which make him a very poor war leader. War's twisted him up, and he's still the best Prime in ages."

Dart nodded thoughtfully as he swirled his energon, then sipped it. "Do you believe there's any way to save Cybertron?"

"If we could remove half the Autobots and about 2/3rds of the Decepticons while somehow keeping the rest from fighting long enough to manage to get at least one city halfway functional...maybe," Jazz said after some thought. "Whether the removal would have to be permanent deactivation or reprogramming like Prowl is probably going to need I can't say."

Dart couldn't help but wince. "That many? What of Prowl's arguments; has he suggested a way?"

"Oh yeah, he has plans. They'd even work. I just wouldn't recommend suggesting them to anyone with less than a 'let Primus sort them out' attitude," Jazz warned him. "Mech's a tactician. Morals don't come standard."

Dart winced again but thought a bit, "I know the Sovereign was instrumental in organizing the evacuation from Cybertron, and he had to make a lot of hard choices on who to bring with us. I don't know if he would be willing to do what Prowl would request."
"Given what he did after he left the military, I'm sure he wouldn't," Jazz shrugged. "Though on the scale of things I know he's done, it's not exactly the top of the list. It all depends on how he feels about ever returning home, or if this really is his home now."

"That's something you would have to bring up to him. I don't pretend to know his thoughts on the matter," Dart said quietly. "Unlike Wing, I have very little direct contact with him."

"I can't say I'm surprised. You don't seem the rebellious type," Jazz smiled gently. "Probably not a bad thing either."

"No, I'm happy with my place in the Knights," Dart said, watching Jazz quickly turn his attention over to one of the side entrances. Following his gaze, he watched Wing bound in followed by a much more sedate Marwir. Either ISO or the war had made Jazz paranoid to have noticed them even before they entered the room. "What clued you in?"

"Mmm? Oh, I heard them. Wing is not a quiet thing unless he's really trying," Jazz grinned and waved and his gestalt mate.

"Axe is definitely going to want you to help test some of the Knights," Dart murmured as he watched Wing wave back. The Aerial quickly filled his cube and flopped down next to Jazz, pressing against his gestalt mate. Dart noted that Jazz didn't seem to mind the contact at all. "So, cleaning or training first today?"

"Cleaning," Jazz said decisively. "You'll get a lot further."

Wing made a curious sound and Jazz chuckled.

"Clean means it's safe enough to spend time looking good. Puts me in less of a hit first, work out who later," Jazz spelled it out.

"Clean is a marker of civilization," Marwir gave a slightly different translation. "Same reason Kimark always showers first thing in the morning. Gets him in the right mindset. Same with most former military."

"Yeah, it's a lot the same," Jazz nodded to her. "A lot of the same reasons too. Only civilization has showers, so it's a reminder to behave like you're civilized."

"Good to know. Sounds like the two of us should make showers first thing a habit. I suppose I'll have to deal with the burden of scrubbing down in blissful heat and applying wax and polish every morning," Dart said with a theatrical sigh.

"Poor thing. I don't know how you're going to handle it," Wing chuckled.

"I'll manage," Dart snickered.

"I'm sure. It's such a hardship to get warm, wet and shiny every morning before work," Jazz laughed in honest good humor. "So what are you doing today?" he looked at Wing.

"Sewer duty followed by penance," Wing shrugged. "I won't bother getting cleaned up until after that's done."

"Fah, yuck. Okay, that's a good reason not to shower first," Jazz made a face. "That's a nasty chore."

"And he will have more like that in the coming vorns," Marwir said calmly taking a drink. "All of the Knights take turns at the more unpleasant duties, although Wing is going to have a larger portion
"I basically have my regular duty shift, and then another half shift of the unpleasant stuff every orn. It doesn't leave much time once I tend to everything," Wing explained.

"Unless they physically can't do it," Dart added. "Imagine someone Axe's size down in the sewers."

"Are the rest of us going to have chores?" Jazz asked. "There's stuff it wouldn't be good to assign Deadlock or TC ... Thundercracker. Not unless you are out to find out how long it takes for them to go ballistic on you."

"You will eventually be asked to assist with maintenance, however, just like with punishments for any future infractions your status as non-Knights will be weighed heavily if one is ill-suited to a task," Marwir said carefully. "What should we avoid?"

"Standard flier stuff for TC. Enclosed spaces, messing with his wings, you probably can guess better than I do," he nodded towards their flight frames. "Deadlock really isn't fond of heights. He's getting better, but I still wouldn't try to make him wash exterior windows or anything a flight frame is better suited to do. He's a grounder of the like I haven't met in a long time."

"Nothing you have listed for Thundercracker is surprising so far, and he will be held to the same standards as any dependent Seeker. Something like sewer duty would be only a punishment for a serious offense," Marwir paused a moment. "Deadlock sounds like a bit more complicated situation. If Redline can confirm that there is legitimate reason for his issues, he can be excluded from certain details although others will be more common as a result."

Jazz nodded. "You'll do what you need to. I'm just giving a fair warning. I feel sorry for whoever has to dig in that processor for what happened. He's a mess in there."

"I think that's a fair statement about all four of you," Wing said softly between sips of energon. "War didn't leave anyone unscarred."

"Not a bit," Jazz agreed. "Some just show it more than others."

"Hopefully between the processor specialists and medics we have here we can help the four of you begin to recover," Dart said.

"You're going to need someone at least as good as Ratchet. If there's anyone like him left," Jazz sighed briefly.

"We have specialists," Marwir reminded him firmly. "We have all the knowledge from before the war and generations more. If it can be fixed, it will be."

"So what are your triggers?" Dart looked at Jazz, seeking to stop the argument he saw building.

"Watching a gestalt mate in real trouble, being starved, tortured..." he paused as Dart lost all his color. "Yeah, probably nothing you'll do."

"Definitely not," Wing agreed even as his field caught Jazz's attention and held it.

"Wing." Jazz kept his voice level and frame language neutral.

"I'm not going to be in danger, and you definitely won't be watching," Wing said firmly.

"That penance thing you don't like to explain," Jazz grumbled. "Just don't be wrong or there will be
some grayed Knights and you know it."

"I know, and it won't happen," Wing insisted with all his authority.

Jazz didn't quite buy it, but he let it go anyway and looked at Dart. "So what's on the lesson plan today?"

"Well, do you want to spend some time socializing with the Knights to start to get more comfortable here or would you like to go and stretch out in one of the training rooms? There's a visit with Redline today as well." Dart said, taking note of Wing's avoidance of what was undoubtedly going to be a touchy subject later.

The question earned a chuckle and grin from Jazz. "Oh, mech, it's been ages since mechawatching and socializing was training. I'd love to get to know everybody."

Dart pondered a moment, thinking about the best way to ease Jazz into the Citadel's social scene. "Well, most of the Knights will move through here even if it's just to grab a cube and head out. Some of them will just stop by and say hello; others will wind up wanting to chat while they relax. It'll give you a good measure of the different frame types and number of Knights in the Citadel. We can see how things go and move on from there."

"Works for me," Jazz grinned and lifted his cube, though he didn't take a drink.

"There's ultra low grade if you like having a cube in hand," Wing said as he dissipated his empty cube and stood. "Have fun," he grinned as Marwir joined him and they left.

"So how many do live here?" Jazz asked conversationally.

"There are about three hundred and fifty Knights and Initiates, and maybe a couple dozen dependents. A good portion of the Citadel's inhabitants are fliers of one kind or another, but we have a fairly broad mix of frame types here," Dart glanced at his own cube a moment. "I'm going to get some more energon. Would you like more?"

"That'd be nice. That ultra light stuff?" Jazz suggested as he took a drink from his cube.

"Be back in a klik," Dart turned and headed over to the dispenser two get them both another drink. He was fairly confident now that Jazz at least wanted to fit in for Wing's sake, and he had to trust that his charge would stay put. After the events of the night it was clear that Jazz believed he was good enough to avoid detection if he wanted to and Dart believed it was true. When he turned smoothly to see the table again Jazz was there, still sipping on the first cube and looking around the empty room to take in all the fine details the tactical scans of earlier didn't catch.

"Rather fancy for a commissary," Jazz said as Dart placed the new cube in front of him.

"Most Knights rarely leave the Citadel, and we've had the time and resources to make it a pleasant place to live," Dart agreed as he sat down across from his charge. "Being a Knight is a life-long commitment, but it does not have to be an unpleasant one."

"Like being military, or ISO, or an Enforcer," Jazz nodded with a thoughtful hum. "What do you pay to have that kind of decorative work done?"

Dart glanced around, though he knew the space well. "I'm honestly not sure. Once the structure was complete I don't think I've seen a civilian that wasn't here because of a Knight. As far as I know it was all done by Knights or a dependent."
"All of it?" Jazz asked curiously as he looked around at the elaborate work. "The entire Citadel?"

Dart nodded, "Yes, the Order has always been independent, and until the Exodus we were almost completely isolated from outsiders. Some Knights take up hobbies like carving, music or painting; others find a calling to things such as metalworking, repairs or engineering. Everyone learned at least one craft before they become a full Knight, many of us know several. Wing did a lot of the surveying for the city and a fair amount of the design work for the Citadel itself."

"Huh, so why bring so many, if you didn't need them to survive?" Jazz asked.

Dart stared almost uncomprehendingly at Jazz, trying to figure out if he was being deliberately callous or genuinely didn't understand. After a moment, he answered, "Because we were trying to save Cybertron's knowledge and culture as well as our species. The goal of the Exodus was to bring as many members of the different frame-types and cities as possible, as long as they agreed to the rules used as a foundation. I understand that it was terribly difficult for the Masters to prioritize who would come and who had to be left behind."

Jazz cycled in optics. "You would have taken more if you could have? How could ... how were the priorities set?"

"Well, the Knights and those who depend upon us were the first priority. We were the ones who came up with the Exodus and organized everything. Sovereign Dai Atlas and Master Axe were critical during that phase. Others whose skills were mandatory but not found among the Knights were also included in that level. Pilots for the ships, for example. After that, I understand that they looked for those who would be able to create the new city and maintain its functionality for the long term, like construction teams, refinery workers, engineers, priests, masters of a lot of crafts and skills and law enforcement. The things even a small city needs, that hold the majority of Cybertron's history and culture, but we didn't need just to survive. Once those positions were filled, those who could keep things running smoothly or were simply part of our society but weren't critical were chosen. That would be merchants, bureaucrats, pleasurebots, singers, dancers, writers, warriors and those like the few nobles who were willing to give up their wealth for a chance at a new life. I wasn't involved in that part, so I don't have most of the details."

"Pretty smart way to do it. Know how they decided how many to bring?"

"Not a clue. I'd guess it was based on time, funding and the number of ships we could manage, or something like that. I know Dai Atlas wanted to bring at least a hundred thousand, and he really wanted much more than that. As it stood we had to evacuate well before we were fully ready and a quarter of the fleet launched right into that big battle. It would have gone much better if we'd been able to select a launch time rather than forced into it. Almost all our losses of mecha were in Cybertron's system. The ships we lost on the search we got everyone and most everything off of before they exploded or were destroyed."

"Always true," Jazz nodded his full understanding of that truth. "Still, what you manage is amazing. Speaks a lot to whatever was used as a psych screening process."

Dart shrugged. "No idea. That's something you would have to ask the Masters. Redline would probably know something about the process as well, but I doubt he was involved in the actual selection process beyond medical."

"Prowl would be interested in learning all the details involved; this sort of evacuation fits with his function," Jazz watched closely as a trio of Knights walk in and headed to the dispensers. The first thing that registered to him was that they were fliers and in a good mood. It actually look a nanoklik longer to realize that these were Seekers, but Seekers as they looked before the war. Lightly armored,
all sleek grace for agility and speed, with ancient alt modes not seen in an age.

"The glittery one is Windsinger, lead vocalist in a band she put together from musically inclined Knights," Dart began the introductions. "Telika is the bright yellow, orange and white one and Atron is the dark blue. They're also a trine."

Telika turned to wave at Dart and wound up staring curiously at Jazz. Altron nudged him sharply and shrugged at Dart, who stifled a snicker and waved the trio over. He was going to enjoy watching other Knights react to his charge over the next few orns. It wasn't as if everyone didn't know about the newcomers, but that didn't change the fact that they were new. "Good morning. You want to join us?"

"Yes, we have patrol in about a joor," Telika said cheerfully before turning to Jazz. "Sorry, we don't get many new faces around the Citadel."

"Especially new faces not from the city," Jazz grinned back with easy frame language and a welcoming harmonic. "I hear you're a band."

"Part of one," Windsinger canted her wings, then remembered to nod. "Just because we've dedicated ourselves to defending the city doesn't mean we have to give up everything we enjoy doing. I sing. Telika plays a cleristal string-horn and Altron plays both the crystal-sax and the keyboard. Do you play?"

"I've played almost everything, although I'm most familiar with the titanium coronet, piezoelectric violin and a cyberharp, although it's been so long I'm probably rusty. Anymore I mostly sing and do some dancing," Jazz admitted.

"Care to come to a jam session in a few decaorhs, once you're settled? See how the local beat feels to you?" Windsinger offered with genuine interest. "It won't just be the band there, or just Knights. Everyone who plays or sings is welcome, and dancers often show up."

"If you want to go, it's easy to arrange," Dart offered with a smile of encouragement to Jazz and one of thanks to the Seekers.

"Sounds like fun," Jazz grinned, and Dart had the strong impression it was genuine. "I'm always interested in checking out new tunes and dances. Especially now that I've got the time start practicing again."

"Great," Windsinger grinned at them both and lifted her wings in excitement. She pinged them both a notice board location. "Just show up when you can. If you need an instrument, let me or Dart know. Between folks there's a spare of nearly everything not custom."

"Were you ever in a band?" Atron asked.

"Custom is going to have to wait to see if I still have any talent. I was in bands off and on at different times, but nothing truly long term," Jazz answered. "I never found one I clicked with permanently. I had a buddy in Communications, Blaster, who loved music as much as I did, and we used to swap tunes all the time. He had some obscure stuff."

Dart pondered a klik then realized Jazz probably used the bands as covers on various missions. He certainly was skilled at deflecting away from the truth without actually lying.

"I remember Blaster!" Atron almost squealed, his wings flaring and flicking in excitement to the amusement of his trinemates. "Best DJ ever. He survived and still loves music?"
"Yeah, he and his symbiots were still running around Iacon last I knew," Jazz smiled a bit. "He's not
playing music over the airwaves anymore, but at least one of his crew shows up at every party
thrown on base. He'll be there if he's not on duty."

"I'm glad he hasn't abandoned everything," Windsinger smiled and sipped her energon. "Do you
have much of a recording collection?"

"I've got millions of songs on my playlists," Jazz said as he sipped his own energon. "From before
and after the war ramped up, and I've got stuff from almost every city. I've been playing Wing some
of the stuff he's never had the chance to hear before."

"You will be very popular for the things created after we left," Windsinger smiled warmly. "You
could earn a few shanixs from the Central Music Archive for anything they don't have. We have
laws in place to cover finder's fees when the actual owner isn't available. It's nothing compared to
compositions you create, but anything you can add will earn you something. Even for Knights some
spending shanixs are nice to have."

"Anything that will help me get legitimately set up and going is a good thing," Jazz said, filing away
that bit of information for later. "I'm not planning to join the Knights, but I'll definitely be around the
Citadel fairly often so you'll see quite a bit of me."

"Becoming a citizen takes time. Don't rush yourself getting out on your own," Telika advised a bit
strongly and got nudged from his Order for it. "It's true," he insisted to her.

"While it is true it is also not our place to tell someone else's charge what to do unless invited to," she
reminded her Action patiently.

Telika turned to Dart and shrugged, "Sorry for speaking out of turn."

Dart tipped a small nod to Telika for the apology. "It is among the many things that Jazz and I are
going to be going over in the coming decaorns. I do not mind others giving advice to my charge,
especially about their specialty."

"Wing already explained at lot of the process before we came here," Jazz pointed out.
"Thundercracker and I know it will take some time before we can settle and there's a lot of
bureaucracy as well as practical stuff involved."

"I'm glad he prepared you with the truth. Sometimes his nature gets in the way of it," Atron said, and
despite the potential of the words, his tone was fond in a frustrated kind of way. "He's a good mech,
but he has such difficulty seeing some things."

"He's a bit more of an optimist than I'm used to dealing with anymore besides Prime, but we grilled
him fairly hard before we agreed to the journey here. He's been candid with us about most things," Jazz bristled a bit at the perceived insult to his gestalt mate.

"I didn't mean offense," Atron fluttered his wings in apology. "Wing is exactly what he needs to be
for his function. What he is isn't a bad thing."

Jazz settled and sent a quick apologetic flicker through his field as well. "Sorry, all of us are a bit
tense in an unfamiliar environment like this, and I haven't had time to settle yet. Thundercracker's
adopted Wing as his fledgling, but we're all fairly protective of him."

"Nearly everyone is," Windsinger smiled fondly. "He has the effect. It's very cute when you aren't
trying to discipline him."
"I'm glad Wing made it back safely. It's been a bit boring without him," Telika said with a snicker.

Dart laughed, "I'll be sure to remind you of that when you start grumbling about his pranks in the coming vorns."

"Unfortunately, we need to finish getting ready before patrol. It has been a pleasure meeting you."

Altron said politely as he rose.

"Likewise. I'm looking forward to hearing all of you play." Jazz said with an honest smile and watched them leave. "So what chores do we have today?"

Dart went over the schedule mentally before answering, "Well, we need to finish moving and restocking some cleaning supplies. We're also supposed to clean up two of the sparring rings after practice is completed."

Jazz nodded. "Doesn't sound too bad."

"It's not. Unlike Wing's, these aren't punishment shifts, just the work needed to do to keep the Citadel in good order. Everyone does a few joors an orn to ensure things run well," Dart smiled at how easily Jazz accepted it.

"Not much different than what it takes to maintain a base when it isn't under siege," Jazz agreed. "Do we need to head out now?"

"No, we still have a bit more time to relax," Dart waved at several other small groups of Knights as they entered. Most simply waved back and glanced briefly over at the new inhabitant. "That's Blueflash and Hydrau," He said as a pair waved and headed out after subspacing their fuel. "I think they're actually midshift right now." As those two left a pair of very different white mechs with black markings entered and waved at Dart. "Lightstrike and Lightwing, they'll be interesting to talk to."

Jazz's reply died before his vocalizer as he took in the smaller one. The mask was rare here, but it was the mech's wings that fixated Jazz's attention. He'd never seen the like. Never even contemplated the like.

"Jazz," Dart hissed in reprimand, though his field didn't carry nearly the sting it should as the pair came over.

"Relax, I still remember the first time you saw me," the smaller one teased Dart. "Good to see a new face plate around here," he smiled and offered a hand to Jazz. "I'm Lightwing."

"Lightstrike," the big black and white Aerial introduced himself and sat down.

Gripping the offered hand, Jazz finally found his voice. "I'm Jazz. Sorry, I'm not usually this awkward. I've just never seen anyone with a frame quite like yours before."

"No one has, not even the Sovereign," Lightwing said agreeably and sat down. "Did you recharge okay?"

"Yeah, once I finally got settled properly. It's always a bit weird being in an unfamiliar place, and the Citadel is just different enough from the bases I've been on to put me on edge." Jazz neatly avoided mentioning his little trip the night before.

"Good," the three lines of bright orange light that made up his wings flared and fluttered, and in one spot proved they were as insubstantial as they looked when one came in contact with Lightstrike's plating. "It's been ages, but I still remember my first few nights in the supplicant barracks. I doubt I
recharged for three or four orns."

"Because you were so excited," Dart chuckled. "I remember too. For someone as quiet and reserved as you were, you sure knew how to vibrate."

Lightwing ducked his helm slightly before taking a sip of his energon.

"So what weapons do you prefer?" Lightstrike asked with the curiosity of it being polite small talk.

"I use knives, blasters and sonics a lot, but anything I can grab will work in a pinch," Jazz answered as he shifted his focus to the larger mech.

"Throwing or combat knives?" the big mech perked up. "I favor throwing blades myself."

"Mostly throwing, but I can use a combat knife fairly well," Jazz smiled, happy to find a fellow enthusiast. "I was teaching Deadlock and Wing how to use them during the trip here."

"Perhaps when you have settled more we can see how our skills compare?" Lightstrike looked between them, well aware that both had to okay it at a minimum.

"I think that'll be possible," Dart agreed. "Might be a while, but I'm sure we can arrange for it."

"That'll be something to look forward to. It's been a while since I've had any competition. Would anyone else be interested in joining us?" Jazz asked.

"There are a couple score or so who are skilled with throwing weapons; daggers, knives, darts, axes, shuriken, maybe other things," Dart nodded. "I'm not the fan Lightstrike is, but they suit my fighting style too well not to become proficient."

"Wing said that most Knights don't use long range weapons, although he did mention throwing knives. He had real issues with the blasters they were making him learn to use," Jazz observed.

"Politics, but mostly culture," Lightwing said with surprising confidence for his relative youth. "The Order was founded on short swords. It became important and unique on the Great Swords. The longer the range and the easier it is to use that range, the more against the founding art of the Order it is. Though it's not thought of anymore, the Order holds the same stance on bows and crossbows. But a small blade, no matter the form, is still a blade and fairly short range. Like Master Axe's ax and Shogun's naginata, they are secondary weapons permitted only after one is well versed in the traditional blades.

"Sound rather limiting in the long run, but I think I can follow why it developed," Jazz said slowly after some thought. "If Wing spent most of his existence under that worldview it explains his horrible aim. He never even tried to learn throwing blades did he?"

"No," Dart said after some reflection. "He doesn't mock my knives but he's never expressed interest in learning."

"We are a martial art order, designed to preserve and pass on the skills of our art. We aren't trying to create versatile warriors like you're used to," Lightwing pointed out. "It's no more limiting than the Science Academy not teaching how to shoot. It's simply not what we do."

"Having been told you are the only warriors here on this planet it's been difficult to think of you as a martial art order and not a military unit," Jazz admitted. "It's getting easier now that I'm starting to spend time around more of you than just Wing."
"Good, and you'll have a long time to adapt," Dart smiled.

"I'm sure if we ever intended to fight again it would be different," Lightstrike added. "But the plan has always been what it was on Cybertron. We retreat if discovered."

"Flee and leave all this behind to start over again?" Jazz looked around at the decorated room and pondered all the civilians he was hearing about but hadn't yet seen. "That'd be difficult for a lot of mecha to do."

"That is no small part of why we are so aggressive about ensuring no one leaves," Lightwing pointed out. "That Wing does it ... he's Wing. His function is to buck the system while still in it. I don't understand his place. I only know it serves a function for those not like myself."

"Not much would be left," Dart added. "We'd take every scrap we could."

"It's still hard to contemplate, especially coming from a war where we were fighting for every scrap and piece of territory we could get," Jazz admitted. "I can believe Dai Atlas would have a plan ready for something like that though."

"We also already did it once," Dart reminded him. "It's easier to contemplate when it was part of society's processor set from the beginning. Everyone who came, came with the idea of never getting into another war, that territory is just a place, not something important to hold."

"You'll have a lot of time to adapt to it," Lightstrike smiled. "Reading the histories from when the exodus was planned forward might help you understand as well."

"Reading history is more Prowl and Thundercracker's thing than mine, but I'll make certain to catch up on that time period," Jazz promised, intending to ask more mecha about it. He'd learn better listening to others and finding out what they really thought.

"It's been good to meet you Jazz," Lightwing smiled and stood. "We need to get going."

"Likewise," Jazz grinned. "I'm looking forward to that throwing competition. I might even drag Deadlock and Wing along to prove it's a useful skill."

"Definitely," Lightstrike grinned before they moved off and Dart went back to telling Jazz who was coming and going, and the occasional brief conversation.

"And you already met Dai Atlas," Dart chuckled as the giant of a triple changer came into the room.

"Where's his better half?" Jazz asked, watching a mech that could have dramatically changed the balance of power at any point in the war collect a cube suited to his size and made note of both the type and flavoriants chosen.

"Axe? He's still in the berth, I expect. Mech hates mornings as much as Wing likes them," Dart snickered. "He doesn't usually move until late morning."

"I could get behind that schedule myself," Jazz chuckled briefly but straightened up as the mech who would ultimately decide his gestalt's fate turned and approached their table with a chair his size in tow. In recognition of the mech's current and previous rank, he rose from his seat and waited to see what Dai Atlas would do.

"We can," Dart said before stilling to watch the pair.

"Sit, at ease," Dai Atlas rumbled as he set the chair near their table and settled. "I understand you ran
an impromptu test on my Knight's observational skills this morning."

"Yes, sir," Jazz kept from glancing over at Dart, having anticipated that his little trip would be reported. "It helps make my unit feel more secure if we know how aware the base security is. I also couldn't recharge without someone safe nearby."

"And safe meant one of your team," Dai Atlas nodded after a drink. "I must admit you were much more polite about it than I expected. I have no doubt you are capable of escaping without alerting anyone and slipping from their notice if you'd tried."

"True," Jazz nodded carefully. That was a truth there was no point in denying. Even if most Knights didn't, Dai Atlas knew exactly what ISO and a saboteur was.

"Your effort to be polite within your social standards has been noted," Dai Atlas told him.

"Thank you, sir," Jazz answered immediately, grateful that Dai Atlas was willing to accommodate his particular coding quirks. It raised his hopes that they would be accepted. "I'm trying not to cause any trouble."

"Continue with that effort and you will adapt to our ways with little trouble from me," Dai Atlas encouraged him. "Are you satisfied that your unit is not being harmed?"

"My coding is currently satisfied," Jazz answered. "I think we're all going to need to check in on each other fairly often at least initially. We came together under rather unusual circumstances so we're all still feeling things out."

"Understandably so," Dai Atlas nodded slightly. "We will make an effort to allow your unit to have regular contact. Separating the five of you is not intended to be permanent."

Jazz didn't try to hide his relief at the statement. "Thank you, we've grown accustomed to having close contact and being separated is a bit odd. We can manage, but we all tend to check on each other fairly often."

"Understandably. You are not the first bonded unit I have in my command," Dai Atlas hummed. "Do you understand the primary reason for the separation?"

"You could be trying to see how we act when we're separated so you can tell how serious we are about being willing to adapt to your rules. There's also the reality that Thundercracker and I are on very different tracks into society, and it's easier to focus on our individual goals when we're learning separately. Some of your subordinates might be concerned about what we can do if we're together and want to cause trouble, and they'll be more at ease if we're being individually monitored since it's easier to keep track of us one on one. It's also less likely we'll try to overpower our keeper if we're separated so one of us can act as a hostage against the other's behavior," Jazz said candidly.

Dart's field flickered in distress at the list, once more reminded that Jazz's concept of normal was well beyond anything he could grasp.

"While it is all true, primarily the desire is to keep you from forming Flightplan before we are reasonably sure you and he can be controlled. While we have weapons capable of taking him down, none are likely to leave any of you alive," Dai Atlas answered just as candidly. "I'd rather not lose Wing."

"Yeah, Wing's pretty much a favorite of everyone from what I've seen," Jazz agreed calmly, readily accepting what Dai Atlas admitted. "Gestalts are a wild card most commanders don't like being thrown without a lot of preparation, and Wing just came back and said 'Hi, I'm now a part of a
"Must take after Wing," Dai Atlas chuckled, his wings quivering with enough amusement that it drew attention from around the room. "I can't imagine Prowl's gotten any more adorable over the war and I know the rest of you haven't."

"Maybe, but I think it might also be that he's just so young; he's hasn't even been active for an entire decaorn yet. He triggers Thundercracker and Prowl's protective instincts, and Deadlock doesn't even like upsetting him," Jazz chuckled.

That raised an optic ridge. "I would never have expected him to have any protective protocols. It was definitely a learned skill for Kimark. So what do you think of the Citadel so far?"

"It's probably the gestalt coding changing Deadlock," Jazz admitted. "Lovely building with a lot of convenient hiding places on the ceilings, roofs and walls. The Knights I've met so far seem friendly, and it's fairly easy to tell which ones have past military experience."

"It always is to those who share it," Dai Atlas agreed with drink of energon and a faint, knowing smile. "You'll find you aren't the only one who likes to find out-of-sight perches for any number of reasons. I'll see you again soon," he said as he stood and smoothly walked off, almost wandered off, with his half finished cube in hand.

Dart waited until the Sovereign had left before addressing Jazz, who was staring thoughtfully at his own cube. "We need to go see Redline soon. Would you like to get cleaned up first?"

Jazz groaned and tried his best pleading look to get out of it, then huffed and nodded. "I'm not going to see a medic anything less than perfectly clean if I'm not bleeding out."

Dart escorted Jazz down the corridor towards medical and his dreaded appointment with Redline. He could still sense some tension in his charge, but he seemed to be in a bit better mood since they'd spent some time polishing and waxing his frame to a proper shine. Once they reached the doors, he entered, nodding politely to the pair of junior medics on duty and looked around for the chief medic, "Redline?"

"Ah, he can be on time. Good," Redline stepped out of his office and waved to the line of medberths that dominated the room on both sides. "Lay down and we can try to get you out of here quickly."

Jazz stared at the medberths for a few nanokliks before reluctantly laying down on a berth well away from the door and balcony but close to a corner window. "Don't try to stasis me without warning. You won't like what I'll do in response."

"I'll do what I need to and you'll learn that medics around here know how to fight back," Redline shot back at him and stalked up. "Now let's get started on your baselines. How close are you to what you consider in good repair and fuel?"

Jazz stared a moment before answering, "My fuel levels are more than acceptable and have been since shortly after we took off. Repair wise I'm in decent shape with no major issues. I haven't been seen by a real Cybertronian medic since back on Cybertron before this crazy trip started. The Nijihito stripped off all my original armor. They installed what I have now later when they bought me for the gestalt project."

"Do you want proper Cybertronian armor?" Redline asked as he began going over the readouts.
Jazz thought for a long moment about that idea, something he hadn't seriously contemplated since his current armor was functional. "I probably can't go back to my original style and still maintain proper structural integrity as an arm for Flightplan although I still need to be able to work as an entertainer. Something a bit more familiar would be nice and one less permanent souvenir from the Nijihito."

"I'll contact the frame specialist I prefer to work with for major rebuilds and set up your first appointment," Redline nodded and made the note to himself. "You're right it'll never be as light as it could be without needing to support Flightplan, but like Wing we should be able to drop the weight without sacrificing structural integrity. Being the arms you have the least strain inherent in your function in the gestalt. Bringing Thundercracker or Prowl back to a civilian look will be almost impossible."

"I doubt he ever had a civilian look to start with. He's from a war-line. Prowl was an Enforcer, so I doubt he ever had a civilian frame either," Jazz pointed out with a shrug.

"Noted," Redline hummed and studied the readouts while Jazz tried not to fidget. "It looks like you have a significant amount of minor damage, things I'd normally let rest, energon and self-repair work on. If yours doesn't we might need to be more aggressive in repairs."

"Why wouldn't it?" Jazz looked at the medic seriously as a medic for the first time.

"Some of this looks to be very old. It's not unknown for damage left long enough to become stabilized and no longer recognized by repair nanites as damage," Redline explained. "I'm sure Deadlock has far more."

"Thundercracker too, I expect," Jazz shrugged. "Cons aren't much on trusting even their medics, or having spare time and energon."

Redline stared at him a klik, trying to contemplate not being trusted to repair the Knights even though they called him their medic. Finally he said, "If any of you get hurt you are to report it to me. I don't care if you think it is minor damage or not."

"Okay," Jazz agreed easily enough. "Don't take it too personally. Their best medic for the last few millennia has been the Constructicon's engineer, Hook."

Redline physically shuttered for a moment before he grumbled, "Both of them are getting a thorough examination. Based on what you've said I'm going to assume you had access to medics before this mess?"

"Yep," Jazz agreed immediately. "Not all of them finished their training before the war started, but the Autobots have qualified medics at almost every base. It's materials and time that can be really hard to come by in places."

"Well we're short of none of that here," Redline forced himself to focus on the point of this: the exam. "Are there any advanced or specialized systems in you?"

"A few, although the Nijihito tampered with some of them like my sonic attacks," Jazz admitted reluctantly, not really wanting to confess all but knowing the medic would find out about most of them fairly quickly. "I have enhanced audio and visual sensors and those seem to be functioning at close to normal levels."

"Good. How's your balance?" Redline nodded as he began to look at coding blocks that seemed unusual.

"I've had time to adjust to the new mass fairly well," Jazz said slightly distracted and twitching a bit.
as Redline continued his examination. Even just the read-only passive scan the advanced medberth was doing made his processors itch.

"Good. Is the masochism code personal or professional?"

"Both?" Jazz answered honestly. "It comes in handy during interrogations, and it helps get information out of certain types. I also have my orns when I just really enjoy it."

"I don't know who you could indulge with," Dart said hesitantly.

"I do. It's not common among the Knights, but sadists do exist," Redline said smoothly. "I know who to put you in contact with on the outside as well. Though both conversations aren't really for now, unless you expect to feel the need soon?"

"I don't think it will be any time soon," Jazz said after some thought. "I'll let you know if I start getting a stronger urge. Are we done yet?"

There was a brief pause as Redline checked something over, then he nodded. "Yes. You can take off now."

"Bye, docbot," Jazz said cheerfully as he jumped off the medberth and headed over to join Dart. "Now where to?"

Dart headed out of medical and down the corridor. "We should probably head over and start cleaning up the sparring rings; they should be empty by now. We can restock everything from the supply order when we're done."

"So how much damage are we expecting?" Jazz asked with an easy cheerfulness that few managed towards cleanup duty.

"Hopefully not too much actual damage to the room; Kimark and his friends weren't scheduled in these two today. It'll be mostly sweeping up debris, scrubbing the paint and scuffs out, remarking out the sparring areas, and straightening out the observation area. I'll check any stocked practice weapons for damage. We'll may have to mop up some spilled energon but there won't be much of that since no one was in medical," Dart said.

"Redline would have been over there ripping into them like Ratchet does when someone did something dumb," Jazz agreed.

"Dumb or clumsy, though most serious sparring damage is when a glitch of some kind is triggered. It's rare and we work on them when learned, but especially the former military mecha all have some issues if you hit them just wrong," Dart tried to explain something he didn't really understand and hadn't seen often. When he had seen though would be with him to his last spark pulse.

"Flashbacks, battle glitches, berserker ... yeah, I know it. More Cons had issues than we did, but more Bots than anyone cared to admit have serious processor damage of the kind," Jazz nodded. "These chores, do you have a set assignment an orn, or a set time?"

"Assignment. It takes however long it takes," Dart glanced at him.

"Then four hands should make short work of it," Jazz grinned. "More free time for us both."

"I like the sound of that," Dart admitted as they turned a corner, pleased that Jazz was so cheerful about working. It was another good sign that he would integrate well. "I wouldn't mind some extra time to relax and enjoy ourselves before we start going over your actual lessons for the orn."
"How long do chores usually take you?" Jazz asked, still paying attention to their route and who they passed.

Dart chuckled. "It's a bit different right now, but a Knight owes fourteen joors to the Citadel for chores, monitory duty, patrols and such, then ten joors to the Order for meditation, study, sparring, weapon maintenance and such. The other twenty two joors are generally free. While you're in my charge half of my duties to the Citadel are now listed as teaching you, plus whatever I need to use of my free time. I'm expecting about ten joors of obvious study for you at first, plus a lot of general socializing that doesn't seem much like lessons, but we'll see how fast you learn from files and how it'll work best for you. While we're on duty joors, what are your preferred recharge joors? I can adjust my schedule readily enough, but I do need to register when we expect to be in recharge."

"I like evenings free; that's when most mechs relax enough to party," Jazz smiled. "Axe's scheduled sounds good for recharge if you don't mind."

"Then we'll shift to that over the next couple orns," Dart said agreeably as he opened a door to the cleaning supplies room at the edge of the circular section that was the primary sparring rooms. "It will definitely make clubbing easier when you're allowed out with me."

"I can't wait; It's been a while since I've been inside a good club," Jazz admitted and took the small collection of brushes and stringents he was handed. It once more amazed him how trusting Dart was in handing him potential weapons. With what was in his arms and subspace right now he was sure he could demo a fair section of the Citadel and definitely could take out most of its population.

With both their arms containing cleaning supplies Jazz followed him to the nearest double door, something that looked giant to him even after understanding the entire complex was designed with Dai Atlas in mind. Between the height and the wings, the mech needed huge doors.

"Do you want me to start getting rid of the paint and scuffs first? You're right, I don't see a lot of energon splatter in here." Jazz asked as he looked around.

"That'd be great. I'll start on the energon, then get up to dust the beams," Dart grinned at him and immediately went for the largest splotch of energon.

Glancing quickly at labels, he put most of the supplies aside and got to work on a section with a number of blue paint scuffs. Honestly, with what he normally saw on Autobot bases it didn't look that bad in here and was immaculate compared to most Decepticon bases he'd infiltrated. It was another visual reminder for him that this was more a large dojo than a military base. Sparring here meant something very different than it did on Cybertron, he was sure of it.

They worked in silence for a time, the mood relaxed in the easy work that left clear progress. It was something well below Jazz's pay grade, but he honestly didn't mind it. Sometimes this kind of work was therapeutic.

"Jazz, do you mind talking about your masochism?" Dart asked.

"Not at all," Jazz answered, keeping his amusement from his rather sheltered keeper. He'd been wondering if Dart was going to ask given how he'd reacted in medical. "What are you wanting to know?"

"How pain can feel good," he offered a starting point.

"Well, it's kind of complicated so bear with me. Some use pain as a release of guilt over perceived or real wrongs; they feel bad and they have someone inflict pain until the guilt goes away. Others enjoy
letting their partner have control over them physically and emotionally," Jazz scrubbed at a particularly stubborn stain before continuing, "Pain and pleasure can trip the same physical sensors, and you can learn to twist one into another. That's why Redline asked if it was professional coding; it can help you get through torture sessions and is fairly standard in SpecOps playbook. It's also used a lot by pleasurablebots to help them do their function better."

"Okay," Dart nodded. He really could follow that much.

Jazz moved over to another set of scuffs and kept working while talking, mindful of how inexperienced Dart really was, "Some mecha like having control over their partner during interfacing. Many of them just want to control when and how their partner finally overloads, but Redline mentioned sadists because they enjoy inflicting pain during interfacing. In a functional relationship of this type there is a written or verbal contract with rules and safety protocols that both parties are supposed to follow. The one in control is supposed to try to make certain the session doesn't go beyond what their partner can handle, and the submissive has to trust their partner but also be honest with their reactions. If either partner isn't comfortable with where things are going, they need to be able to stop it."

"That trust I understand, if from a slightly different context," Dart nodded as he wiped up the last of the energon and move onto wiping down surfaces that had nothing wrong with them other than dust.

"It can be freeing mentally to let someone else you trust control what happens to you physically," Jazz nodded as he reapplied some stringent to a stubborn streak of paint and scrubbed harder. "There's also the physical reactions as your processor translates the pain to pleasure while not having to worry about whether or not you'll survive the experience. It's like the difference between a sparring match and a fight to the death."

Another nod, though this one came slower as Dart had to work to make any connection to part of what Jazz was trying to convey.

Thinking he might be losing Dart, Jazz tried to explain a little better, "Every mecha is wired differently when it comes to kinks. You probably know some Knights who don't enjoy being restrained during interface. I've had several lovers who liked licking energon off their partner's frame, but I've had a few that didn't enjoy the mess. Seekers don't tend to find grounders appealing." After pausing a moment, he continued, "I've learned to accept and at least try my lovers' kinks, and I've found a few I really enjoy depending on my mood. Pain play is one of those things."

"You have that much in common with Wing. The willing to try anything once part," Dart nodded more readily. "What do you get out of pain play?"

"It depends," Jazz answered. "Sometimes I want that release of guilt and responsibility, especially if one of my agents got killed accidentally due to one of my orders. Other times that shift from pain to pleasure is exactly what I need to get me off."

"Was it always like that, the need for pain sometimes?" Dart asked quietly, his harmonics thoughtful as he worked.

Jazz had to think back for a long klik before he answered, "I think it's always been there in the background at least. ISO training helped nurture those tendencies since it was so useful, and it's become an established kink in my interface habits. It's not something I tend to bring up to new lovers though."

"No kidding," Dart blinked at the idea of doing so, then began a graceful leaping climb up to the rafters more than twenty times his height above them to dust and check the condition of the structure.
"Coming up or staying low?" he called down.

Jazz scrambled gracefully up after him, using his magnets and his natural agility to catch up, "What are we looking for up here besides a good view?"

"First is to dust and clean up here just like down there. The basic maintenance check I'm doing isn't done as often, but I'm just checking for wear and tear or damage from somebody getting thrown or flying a bit too high," he explained.

"Sounds reasonable. We wouldn't want the roof collapsing on anyone," Jazz immediately leaned down, twisted around and began examining the underside of the rafter. "They're more likely to hit this side," He pointed out cheerfully.

"Quite true," Dart grinned at him and went to work dusting and checking the wide expanse.

"Do a lot of fights go skyward?" Jazz asked curiously as he crawled around inspecting for damage and paint scuffs. "I'd think so with so many fliers in the Knights."

"Less than you probably expect. The core of our art is ground based and those with a tenancy to fly usually use a sparring circle without a roof," Dart explained. "It surprised me at first too, but even Wing usually fights on the ground. But one of the big mecha and a thruster-assisted jump can hit a beam in here."

"Weird having so many fliers learn something that keeps them on the ground. That must be why Thundercracker'd give Wing such odd looks after their target practice. He's not used to fliers being voluntarily on the ground. Me, I'd be climbing all over these rafters during a fight," Jazz said from beneath Dart.

"I don't climb much, but I do the same," Dart grinned over at him. "I usually get ropes and bars all over the place so I can jump and swing. Especially up against the big mecha. The Sovereign can wipe the floor with me, but I mark him up pretty good in the process. History says that our art was created by grounders. The Order only became so flier heavy in the last few generations before we left when it became very difficult to reach the Citadel without wings. What's a few orns flight took me over a metacycle, and I had a reasonable idea of where I was going. Plus a lot of that territory is full of raiders and wildlife that can end you as fast as a fall into a deep crevasse. You miss all that by air."

"Safety in isolation seems to be a theme with your Order," Jazz observed. "It makes sense given how nonpolitical most of you seem to be. Even Dai Atlas and Axe joined after they decided to give up planetary politics."

"Is that what was taught in the empire after they left the Prime's service?" Dart asked, very curious where the idea came from.

"It was one of the better rumors after Nova was gone. While he was still around a lot worse charges were leveled at them," Jazz pointed out casually. "It's not like most politicians were going to admit the truth."

Dart grunted his agreement to that. "I can't say it's the truth, but what they told us was that they were tired of the genocide and fueled so far from Cybertron for a leader that was growing ever more insane. It was mostly the pointless slaughter though."

Jazz sighed. "That sounds like what ISO observed. We didn't really look for them too hard when they left. They deserved to be able to retire, and they weren't a threat to the Empire no matter what
"Everyone here thanks your commanders for that," Dart said quietly. "He's the only reason the exodus worked. We wouldn't have even tried if it wasn't for Dai Atlas and Axe."

"My commanders were trying to fix Cybertron long before your Exodus was even debated. Unfortunately, by the time we got a real Prime it was too late to stop the violence." Jazz said just as quietly.

"Sounds like you've been part of the commanders trying to fix things for a long time," Dart glanced at him. "Are you looking forward to a simpler existence?"

Jazz shrugged. "I don't know; I've been involved in ISO for most of my existence, and that is about as far from a simple life as you can get. I've never really had much experience as an actual civilian. Wing probably has more experience outside the Order. I guess it's time for me to find out what it's like being a relatively ordinary mech."

Dart smiled at him, the look soft and a touch sad. "I don't think you'll ever be ordinary. I doubt it's in you, not with what you have said you're inclined to try and be here. Simpler doesn't mean ordinary, it just means less complicated than before."

Jazz grinned suddenly, "Come to think of it, I'm going to be spending the rest of my life bound to a Seeker and some Knights. That's probably pretty odd even for this city."

"That's a major understatement," Dart grinned back. "I would be willing to say that the five of you make the most unique group in the city."

"At least I should never get bored with them around," Jazz agreed and went back to checking the rafters.

Deadlock stretched languidly, enjoying the large, soft berth and momentarily wondering why the engines were powered down. A few nanokliks later his memories caught up to his processor and he tensed, reaching out with his sensors to place who and what was around him.

A small room, a nice berth, one door, one window large enough to escape through and an entertainment center. His optics lit and he confirmed he was alone. There was noise from outside the room though, someone his size walking about smoothly and calmly.

He wouldn't admit it to anyone, but it was more than a bit disconcerting coming online without Jazz or Wing's familiar presence. He took a long klik trying to recall the designation of his new jailor, however pleasant Wing claimed this stay was going to be he was still confined. Kimark was what they'd called him. A former gladiator, the mech was a good fight and memories of that drew a smile. It was fun to finally spar with someone who understood so well and got the same high from it.

The call of energon, a scent he couldn't resist easily, drew him to his pedes and out the berthroom door to look around the living room he'd seen before. It hadn't changed and he focused in on Kimark sitting at the small table and the two cubes of glowing energon there. One the Knight was sipping on. The other sat in front of an empty chair.

"Come fuel," Kimark nodded to him and made a motion to the cube.

Deadlock approached suspiciously, staring at the tempting cube even as his attention would flicker up to the mech sitting near it. Was this some sort of trap? It wasn't likely that a gladiator turned Knight would try something as cowardly as poison but being suspicious had kept him online for a
long time. Putting on a more casual air than he truly felt, he sprawled down into the chair facing his host. Picking up the cube, he momentarily resisted the impulse to down it quickly and said, "Now what?"

"After we fuel, there's a washrack trip, a bit of walking around so you know where things are and getting an assessment of your education. I'm thinking we have a couple rounds of sparring in there to ease the boredom," Kimark listed easily and sipped his cube. "Anything you want to do today?"

Well, if Kimark was going to give him the opportunity to suggest anything he was going to go with something crazy and see what happened. "I want to check on Wing's place since he's been gone so long." He'd been curious about the Aerial for a while now. No one could really be that old without a few empty frames hidden from public view. Raising the cube with a fake casualness, he held a small sip in his mouth checking to see if it was really pure energon.

The bright sweetness nearly made his optics flare. This was better than anything he'd had in ... probably forever. Losing the internal battle, Deadlock swallowed quickly and took several long gulps of the intense fuel.

Kimark cocked his helm, then shrugged. "I can't imagine he'd object. It'd be a first," he said as he pinged Wing and asked. "And not a first. He's good with it. I don't think it's been opened since shortly after he left."

"Sounds good." He could check and see if it looked like anything was missing and scout out the place at the same time.

Kimark nodded and timed his fueling to match his charge so they finished at nearly the same time. "What's your level?"

"Sufficient," Deadlock said immediately, being vague but honest about something that important. He was comfortably at around 92% right now. Really, the trip had almost spoiled him with the luxury of readily available fuel.

"Good, then let's wash up. I've never lost my taste for a good hot shower and light polish to start the orn," Kimark said as he stood and walked to the door out of his quarters.

"All good things," Deadlock agreed immediately as he followed Kimark out the door, careful to check for any trouble before actually exiting. No one was currently around, but that didn't mean they wouldn't run into a problem on the way there. It was grating not to have weapons, but he'd torn mecha apart with his hands before and would do it again. Still the promise of a hot shower kept him moving at Kimark's fairly fast clip.

He felt the heat and heard the rain of solvent before he was sure witch door it was and knew that this wouldn't be as private as he liked. Still, he'd protected himself in the worst of Decepticon washracks. He'd manage here just fine. One step inside and he'd placed the pair scrubbing down under one showerhead, the three empty ones in that open row, and the stall designed for the truly filthy. It was built like the major bases too, with the controls a bit too high for them, but what would be a bit low for a Seeker, convoy or tank.

Kimark glanced at him in a silent offer of choice and Deadlock went right for the middle one. The open space felt safer than a corner. He was a brawler. He'd rather have space than fewer opponents. Yet as he turned the shower on the pair already there barely spared him a glance and went back to work while Kimark stepped up to the showerhead next to his and turned it on.

All in all, it was turning into a nice morning.
It didn't take him long to clean up, and he noted that Kimark was following his lead in speed and efficiency. The Knight was again the first one out of the room once they were dry, and Deadlock followed him outside, still keeping a close optic on the pair still behind them. The walk to Wing's old quarters shared much of the distance with the walk from Kimark's. Wing's was just much higher up in the tower. Whether it was a flier thing, rank thing or age thing Deadlock didn't know yet but knew he'd find out fairly soon.

When Kimark stopped and palmed one of the many doors the burst of air that came out was old and stale with only a hint of freshness at the end.

"Someone must have opened the balcony doors," Kimark said before stepping inside without concern.

Deadlock paused to see if any traps took Kimark out for entering the room. It was almost disappointing when nothing happened, but he'd expected that given it was Wing's place. The mech still had a ridiculously naive attitude even after all his lessons on existence in the real world. How anyone could be like Wing after such a long existence was too much for him to grasp. He couldn't even blame it on stupidity. He knew Wing was smart.

The evidence of a long functioning was all over the central room. From weapons and preserved creatures that had long ago disappeared to artwork by masters even Deadlock recognized. There was a fortune on display here and not a piece of it was guarded.

Deadlock glanced over at the open balcony. "Who would have come in here and done that?" he asked, leaving the besides you implied.

"Atl, Talon, Dart, any of Wing's friends. Maybe even Marwir, Dai Atlas or Axe," Kimark said without hesitation. "No one would want him to come back to a stuffy room. Though probably someone with wings."

"Why Axe?" Deadlock asked as he moved though the space that was fundamentally the same as Kimark's. Only the decoration was different, and the extra set of doors on the outside wall that were open to show a balcony without any railing. Just a platform outside the clear double doors, really.

"Axe is Dai Atlas's mate. They became very close while Wing was training Dai Atlas," Kimark explained.

"So he really did train your Sovereign," Deadlock said almost to himself, pondering how strange it was that light-sparked Wing would train someone with a reputation like Dai Atlas. He felt a twinge of unease that he brutally suppressed at the open platform outside. No railings to stop a fall into open space made sense for a flier. It was something he'd half-expected when he decided to enter the Aerial's quarters.

It made less sense for him to step to those open doors and look out. It was an incredible view. The Citadel had a vantage point of much of the city, though not so much of one that it was truly above the city. Lights and movement on every level, and none of the dim shadows that led to the darkness that he'd survived in for much of his existence before the war. Even when he was a mob boss's lieutenant and chief enforcer he lived and worked in the lower levels. He just lived in luxury that hadn't been topped until he'd escaped with Wing and the others. What the fliers insisted on for berths were far nicer than anything he'd known before. Not even Megatron offered those things to his favored warriors. Or at least not to those who didn't demand them. The Elite Trine probably had them, but they were fliers.
He wasn't.

So why was he standing, wavering slightly at the opening to a platform for a fall that could deactivate him and would definitely hurt.

"He trained several of us. There aren't but a hand of Knights that have been in the Order longer than Wing," Kimark nodded and carefully said nothing of where his charge was or just how amazing it was to see. Wing had sent him a packet earlier containing everything he knew about Deadlock's history to try to help prevent any berserk episodes from occurring. He hadn't expected Deadlock to push himself this quickly, and he was watching closely for signs of stress.

"I knew he was a good fighter, although he's far too polished for actual war," Deadlock admitted.

"I don't think anyone would disagree, including Wing," Kimark agreed. "He's seen real battle, just not war."

"Not enough to give him some common sense," Deadlock grunted. "He's too much like the mechling Thundercracker seems to think he is. Jazz and I had to watch to keep Wing out of trouble in ports."

Kimark winced with a groan. "I can easily imagine. He's not a mecha to let wander unsupervised in those places. Did he get in much trouble?"

"No, Jazz and I kept him away from the pickpockets and con mechs. I'm amazed he didn't run into problems before he was captured by the slavers," Deadlock grunted. "He eventually had it somewhat cushy on Kessai as a personal servant until he was handed over to the gestalt program."

"Or he didn't register it as enough of a problem to remember that long. He can forgive with painful ease and he means it," Kimark shook his helm. "I respect him, like him for what I know of him, but Primus I do not understand him at all."

"I'm a member of that club now," Deadlock agreed. "and I'm stuck with him for the rest of my existence."

"On the up side protecting him from himself isn't nearly as difficult here. His swords keep him safer than any guard could out in the city and here in the Citadel he simply doesn't have any enemies. Despite the raging you'll occasionally hear from our Sovereign," Kimark snickered. "Dai Atlas is simply the latest one to suffer the affliction known as Wing."

"He's been here so long everyone accommodates or tolerates him? Lucky him. He'd never of lasted anywhere I used to live," Deadlock grunted, finally leaving the balcony and going back into the room, returning to his study of the room as his fuel tanks gradually settled. Nothing looked too far out of place. It was a place of open sight lines and very soft, padded and fluffy furniture. It completely matched the hedonist he knew Wing was.

"It's more that Knights don't accept being enemies with another Knight. It's just not tolerated by anyone. Out there the few who might take advantage of a random mecha are more careful about Knights because we do defend our own and any crime against a Knight dealt with in the Citadel. The punishments might be the same as in the city, but the Citadel's cells are far less comfortable. We have them for punishment, not to keep criminals away from civilians," Kimark tried to explain. "But I think it's mostly that Wing is Wing. Not even I can really stay mad at him for long."

"Yeah, he's stupidly fun to be around and even I don't want to see anything happen to him," Deadlock admitted. "Of course he's one of mine now so I guess that makes sense. Is that why no one swiped anything with him being gone so long and no security to speak of?"
Kimark actually cycled his optics before his processors caught up with the time and place Deadlock was coming from. "That's a Knight thing. Knights do not steal, especially not from another Knight."

"Really?" Deadlock said with a doubtful look. "Guess you're all too well off or dangerous to need to worry about that sort of thing."

"Both, but it's mostly isolation. Only Knights or those vouched for by a Knight is allowed in. That's true here too," Kimark tried to explain.

"So you work to keep out the riffraff and don't tolerate them being brought in," Deadlock said trying to understand what Kimark was saying. "Guess you're stuck with me for now."

"True, though you don't seem worse than I was when I arrived," Kimark shrugged. "Anything else here you wanted to look at?"

"Nah. I can't tell if anything is missing or out of place," Deadlock said after one more scan of the room. So far, all he could tell was that the Knights seemed to be almost as trusting as Wing. Which did explain how Wing survived to an extent, but not how the lot of them did.

"So what's on the menu for this sit-down lesson today?" Jazz asked as they left the rec room and another couple dozen introductions.

"Really dull stuff, I'm afraid. Before we can really teach you, we need to know what you already know. Literacy and math are today, possibly economics, culture or law if you get through the first two faster than expected," Dart explained easily as they walked along another path Jazz didn't know, but guessed was headed towards the library.

"Gotcha. I'm sure you've been told what I was taught as ISO, but Primus only knows how much I've forgotten over the war. The rules and everything else has changed a lot on Cybertron," Jazz said agreeably even as he groaned inside. "Please tell me there are breaks. I'm so not a fan of sitting still doing reports."

"There are breaks," Dart promised.

"Good, I'm going to want to take all of them," Jazz followed Dart into the library, habitually taking a quick scanning of the room to see if anyone else was present. There were a couple of Knights sitting off in a corner with datapads, but for the most part the room was deserted. Then it sunk in that he hadn't seen this many datapads in one place in a very, very long time and tried to remember how large a library this would be in peacetime.

"I don't blame you," Dart grinned at him as they entered a nook that while it didn't conceal them completely from the main room, it did give privacy and some shielding from noise and motion. "Make yourself comfortable."

Jazz flopped down gracefully in chair slightly larger than his frame needed and curled up, comfortable and apparently lounging but still capable of springing into a fight if needed. "Okay, let's get this testing started."

Dart nodded and settled nearby after handing a datapad to Jazz. "Literacy test. It'll keep going until you start to regularly miss glyphs. Just tap or write in the answers."

"Gotcha," Jazz said before starting to work on the datapad. At first it was almost insultingly easy for him but remembering how Deadlock had no real training of any kind Jazz accepted that it really was best to start with the true basics. It was a relief when the glyphs got harder, past the level of the
evening news, and the mix of picking a definition from a list, writing in a definition and rewording a sentence soon became rather entertaining. It didn't take him long to work out that the higher the level of glyphs he used when writing the faster the test seemed to accelerate. Even so, he was sitting longer than he liked by the time he'd made enough mistakes that the test ended itself.

"You really are well educated," Dart hummed with a smile. "Ready for a walk and maybe a bit of moving?"

"Yes," Jazz answered immediately, jumping up from the chair and stretching his frame, exaggerating his stiffness from being so still. "Where to?"

"There's a lovely garden with walking paths just outside, and if you just want to dance there's space there too," Dart said as he stood and one of the two huge, largely transparent double doors with gardens and a large patio visible beyond.

Jazz followed him eagerly out into the garden, pausing for a moment to look around before heading straight for the patio. "You want to hear some new songs or do you have some to play for me?"

"I'd love to hear something new," Dart didn't hide his anticipation. "Show me how you move."

Jazz searched through and found one of his favorite dance tunes, a faster paced melody with a good beat. After cuing it up, he started to move, flowing into the familiar patterns from dancing with his friends and colleagues back on Cybertron. "Join me," he offered.

Dart hesitated. "I don't know this."

"It's not a dance. Just movin ta the music."

Another moment's hesitation and Dart nodded. He stepped into the dance and it took Jazz all of three moves to recognize the reason. As hip as the young-seeming mech was, his dance training was very formal and looked a lot like ballet mixed with katas. Even so the Knight moved gracefully with the music. Jazz kept in front of him, showing him some of the more casual moves he knew from the dance floors even as he incorporated some of Dart's own more formal movements. He hoped the mixture of styles would put the less-experienced mech at ease.

For his part Dart tried, mixing in the moves Jazz used and falling back onto the more fluid mindset of his combat training. As much as he liked moving, this just wasn't that enjoyable and he knew it showed.

"Show me the kind of dancing you enjoy," Jazz offered when the song was done. He had to wonder if Dart went to the same clubs Wing described to him on the trip here.

Dart nodded in agreement, but went still as he sorted his options. "What I like most requires equipment, but this is a good second for an option space," he explained as soft music came from his speakers. There was a clear beat, just one of soft instruments rather than a strong drum. To this Darts moves were smooth, his frame relaxed and his field even more so.

It was even a sequence Jazz recognized from dozens of performances before the war. It really was ballet. Fully trained ballet at that.

It had been a very long time since Jazz had thought he'd ever see a ballet again, let alone having someone perform in front of him. He watched closely, admiring Dart's form and movements as the performance continued. It wasn't Jazz's preferred style to perform by any means, but he was definitely enjoying the show.
The song ended and Dart stilled in a bow before straitening. "I enjoy dancing, I just prefer the most formal of them."

"It's not my typical style to dance, but it's beautiful to watch. It's been a long, long time since anyone has danced like that back on Cybertron. It's one of the things Mirage misses," Jazz admitted before elaborating. "My second in command is a former noble."

"Not many of them came, and none of rank," Dart actually said sadly. "I am glad you enjoy watching. Perhaps when you've been cleared to be in the city we'll see a real show with professional dancers and live music. That will be one phase I'm looking forward to. In introducing you to all the culture here I get to watch too. Others will show you to the culture they love as well. The best guides are those who love what they're showing after all."

Jazz nodded in agreement, "I'm going to get to watch all kind of performances, listen to music, view art, and do all the kinds of things I haven't gotten to do for a very long time. Definitely something to look forward to. Even if I do have to do all those tests to get to that point."

"The tests are nothing. Bringing your education up to par is going to be the thing to groan about," Dart teased him. "Though you're lucky. You don't have nearly as much to learn as Deadlock or Thundercracker if what I saw is anything to go by. It seems like you know most of what you need to. Ready to cover math?"

Jazz sighed theatrically before starting back towards the library, "Yes, I'm ready to get that one over with."

Kimark kept his attention on his grumbling charge when he placed a datapad in front of Deadlock as he sulked at the table. "Believe me I know it seems stupid and boring taking all these tests, but everyone needs to know where your education stands if we're going to help you fit in here. It won't be more than one or two tests a day unless you think you can handle more to get them over and done with quicker."

Deadlock look at him with a death glare that made Decepticons and Autobots alike run for cover but didn't make much of a dent in the Knight's manner. "Too much of this and I'll gray somebody," he muttered, then sighed. "What's this one?"

"We're starting with literacy and arithmetic before progressing into specialized fields," Kimark said, not mentioning that both would start with extremely basic concepts and progress from there. "Once you finish two of these tests we'll go spar for a bit and burn off some of that frustration."

"Good. I'll need it," Deadlock huffed, then glanced at Kimark. "You probably will too."

Kimark chuckled. "No doubt. I hate being still as much as you do. I've just had more practice at it."

"Well, let's get this over with," Deadlock grumbled as he started the test. At first it was incredibly simple with basic glyphs he'd known even back on the streets trying to survive. It started getting harder quickly, although the actual difficulty varied as he worked through the test. Some of the glyphs it presented made absolutely no sense; others he'd picked up a long time ago so he wouldn't miss anything important. He'd almost accidentally walked into Mindwipe's idea of a lab once before he coerced Hammer and his team to teach him the necessary glyphs. Deadlock had figured out that implying the Constructicons would know more than Hammer's team would convince the arrogant mech to prove his superiority. Not like Deadlock would have actually approached the Constructicons with that sort of thing, but implying he would meant he figured Hammer would be less likely to lie to him.
It was an incredible relief when the datapad told him the test was over and he handed it back. Kimark glanced at the results and nodded before he stood and stretched. "Why don't we take a walk? I could use some movement."

"You don't have to ask me twice," Deadlock readily bolted from the chair and followed Kimark eagerly out the door and at least temporarily away from the testing. It had been more annoying than trying to learn all those glyphs from the Constructor Squad; at least back then there'd been a valid reason to get them right. Here it was a harder to care but more important on some levels to do. He'd never be without this guard until he knew enough to pass the stupid tests.

They stepped out huge double doors onto a polished patio surrounded by sculpture and Cybertronian plants like nothing Deadlock had ever seen. Letting Kimark take the lead since he had to actually know the place, Deadlock took in the surroundings and tried to memorize the layout. Most of the sculptures were sort of boring as far as he was concerned, although a few that appeared to be of actual mecha caught his optic. One was a femme Seeker with two short swords at her sides. Before he'd met Wing he would have laughed at the idea of a Seeker fighting with melee weapons, but he'd seen that relaxed stance on some of the Knights. If she wasn't one of them she no doubt represented some kind of ideal.

"That's Windsong, the founder of the Order," Kimark said at his focus.

"A Seeker founded an Order dedicated to fighting on the ground with great big swords. So how crazy was she really?" Deadlock asked. "Did Wing tell you that the idea behind this fighting style and how many fliers practice it made Thundercracker twitch?"

"By modern standards she was likely certifiable," Kimark chuckled. "It was a different world back then; most importantly in that was a fundamental absence of ranged weapons. Though if the history is accurate she was little more than a vessel for her Great Sword's wishes when it came to founding a school based on this new form of Metallikato she taught and the moral code she instilled in her students. The Great Swords were borne by many warriors for generations before we began to gather them and their bearers. Wing didn't mention that, though I can't say I'm surprised. I'm sure he'd twitch even harder at the number of fliers I saw in the pits and how they fought."

"Yeah, for someone stuck in a war for as long as he was 'Cracker sure stayed rusted to a lot of his old ways. I wasn't in the pits on Cybertron, but I fought a few organic and mechanoid flier types on Kessai." Deadlock agreed. "Wing didn't say much of anything about the founding of the Order. He spent most of his time trying to convince us to come here with him."

"Understandable. How and why the Order was founded in truly ancient history. Rather akin to the how the Prime or royals came to power. It's important in an historical sense, to the grand picture of our race and Cybertron, but it is of little importance outside that. Especially to those not part of the Order," Kimark agreed with Wing's choice. "If you want to hear the stories, I'm pleased to share them." He paused and thought about Thundercracker. "I wouldn't call him rusted. He may talk it, but his actions say something else. He's incredibly liberal for his background. Pits, he's incredibly liberal on most counts even by Master Aurora's standards and that's saying a lot."

"He doesn't think he is, and neither did most Decepticon Seekers judging by how they behaved around him in public. Most 'Con's would tell you that he's a stuck-up aft that thinks Seekers are better than everyone else," Deadlock pointed out. "I wasn't around him much before this mess happened. Finding out about Starscream being a Vision and what that actually meant culture-wise did make me re-think him. He's a rebel hiding in plain sight; he just doesn't know it yet. It'll be hilarious when he figures it out."

"It will be," Kimark snickered. "Fortunately he's in a place when it won't slag him."
"We'll keep him safe no matter where we are," Deadlock said momentarily serious before chuckling again. "Him and that crazy sparkling Wing."

"Who's older than the rest of you combined and will never show it," Kimark agreed as they found themselves back on the patio. "Ready to get the next test out of the way so we can have some fun?"

"You're spoiling the moment," Deadlock groaned. "Fine, but I expect to have some serious fun once this is over."

Jazz settled unobtrusively into the corner of their quarters where he could monitor both exterior doors and Dart by equal measures. He managed to complete the math test before Dart's duty shift started, and now he would get to learn more about a typical Knight's routine. Dart had both his short swords, his great sword and a number of daggers of varying sizes and blade types neatly organized in front of him. It wasn't the largest collection Jazz had ever seen or had at any point, but it was an impressive array of weaponry for an 'unarmed' city.

The first to be picked up was the great sword. "This is Ghost of the Future," he told Jazz with the warmth most used to speak of a fond lover.

"Hi," Jazz said cautiously. He wasn't certain Dart was actually introducing him to the sword, but Wing had been a bit vague about how aware the Great Swords actually were. Better to sound silly than risk offending something that old.

Dart smiled warmly. "Do you want to teek her?"

"Sure, if she won't be offended," Jazz said as he moved closer. He couldn't help pondering the reaction of many back on Cybertron to someone teeking what would sound like an inanimate object. It definitely didn't seem inanimate as he looked at the ancient weapon in Dart's hands. Reaching out with his field, Jazz tried to teek the sword.

The contact was brief and Ghost of the Future withdrew again.

"Impressive," he said after a long silent pause staring at the blade. "What's it like being bonded to someone like that?"

Dart flicked his armor in surprise, then smiled softly. "Comforting. I'm never alone. Never lost. I have a road I can never lose because I have a guide with me all the time. I can always find my way home because she can guide me there."

"Sort of like how Wing would talk about being confident about bringing us here because Challenger of Ways approved of his choices," Jazz murmured quietly.

"Very much so. Most of them don't talk very much, but you always know if they strongly approve or disapprove of an action or plan. If they think it's a good thing then it likely is," Dart smiled a bit more. "You're taking this better than most."

"I've had some time to get used to Wing talking about his own Great Sword," Jazz pointed out. "I've also had to learn to cope with being forcibly bonded to four other mechs I would have never chosen. My weirdness threshold is a bit different from most civilians."

"Probably from most anyone," Dart had to agree as he began a careful process of cleaning and polishing that was far more like frame care than how one kept a blade sharp. "You've been through a lot just in the past decade."
"If someone had told me back on Cybertron that I'd be voluntarily hanging out with former Decepticons in a neutral martial stronghold while preparing to become a civilian I'd probably have accused them of using too many intoxicants," Jazz agreed, watching the process with interest. Even though the actions were somewhat familiar, seeing Dart use them like this was a new experience. Wing hadn't ever done this in front of him, but Jazz realized he might have done something similar with Deadlock.

"I'm sure. Are there any neutral strongholds left in ... what was the empire?" Dart asked with absent curiosity as he worked, his focus that of a long-time mate caring for a much-loved frame. The sensuality wasn't there, but the look and feel of it was. It was a lot like watching Ironhide and Chromia when one was recovering from serious damage.

"There are some colonies out there on distant worlds scrapping by but no neutrals left on Cybertron. Most aliens don't like or trust our species given our violent reputation," Jazz shrugged, still fascinated by the actions occurring before him. It was unlike anything healthy mecha did and yet he couldn't call it unhealthy given what he'd teeked. It might be an unconventional bond but it wasn't the only one he'd encountered that didn't include interfacing.

"That's why we headed this direction. There's no one this way," Dart nodded. "A few races have come by, but this region doesn't have much by way of habitable worlds or resources for most races."

"Sounds similar to the Citadel's situation on Cybertron; it was in a good location to hide out that most wouldn't go," Jazz agreed.

"It is," Dart agreed, settling into the silence easily. Cleaning and polishing his Great Sword always calmed him, brought him close to center and settled his processors. Jazz continued watching even though he almost felt like he was intruding on a private moment between mech and sword. It was peaceful in an odd way.

When Dart finished with Ghost of the Future and set it in its brackets on his back he picked up one of his short swords to work on. "If you want to, you are welcome to work on the daggers."

"I'd be glad to help," Jazz picked up one of the many throwing daggers and looked it over. There wasn't anything particularly fancy about it, but the blade obviously belonged to a well-cared for set. Picking up the appropriate tools, he started cleaning the blade. The familiar ritual helped him settle further as they worked in near peaceful silence.

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Jazz was far more relaxed when they entered the common room for evening energon. It was far more busy, alive with mecha in good repair, a good mood, relaxed and fueling with no fear of going hungry. It was really nice to have the wartime edge be absent when he got his cube after Dart and followed the Knight to a table that allowed Jazz a reasonable view of the room and a wall against his back. It was also a good sign that Dart was willing to understand and accommodate Jazz's paranoia by picking this table compared to the one they'd used this morning. His keeper seemed to be trying to help him settle and fit in here, and the courtesy was definitely appreciated.

After taking a sip of his energon, Jazz looked around to see if anyone familiar was present. A tiny figure entering the room caught his attention. "Is that Demeter?"

"Yes," Dart smiled and waved to her. "She's the best tracker we have. She's always called out for search and rescue events."

"Nice to finally meet you," Jazz said with a grin as Demeter joined them at the table after dragging a very tall but small stool over. "I've heard only good things from Dart and Wing."
"Thank you. Good to know Wing's gotten over the fact I'm usually the one to drag him back from his adventures when he stayed out too late," she snickered. "You've worked with a beast-former before?"

"I worked with several beast-formers during and before the war. There are some beast-formers still around although most of them are larger than you," Jazz answered easily. "I also hung out a lot with Blaster and his crew. They're not beast-formers, but it's kinda fun to watch them remind mechs not to underestimate anyone no matter what their frame-type."

"Oh yes. That was great fun, and a microbot hobby all around. Somehow no matter how many times we trounced a regular in sparring or just a fight, they never seemed to remember for long." Demeter snickered. "Any you remember the designations of? We're a rare enough type I know most who were created before I became a Knight," she asked with genuine interest.

"Shockwave got a hold of a lot of them on the Decepticon side. He might even have gotten some of them before they voluntarily joined a side. Well, there's Divebomb, Headstrong, Rampage, Razorclaw and Tantrum; Shockwave turned those five into a gestalt team they call the Predicons. Seawing, Skalor, Snaptrap, Nautilator, Tentakill, and Overbite; their gestalt is called the Seacons. Some of the creepiest ones still around are in a gestalt called Abominus; Blot, Cutthroat, Rippersnapper, Sinnerwinn, and Hun-Grr. Besides them, Mindwipe and Weirdwolf are still around on the Decepticon side. Before the gestalts, Shockwave was apparently working on cloning. That's how the Decepticons got Wingspan and Pounce among others," Jazz shifted a bit at the nasty memories. "Repugnus joined the Autobots. Same with Catilla, Chainclaw and Pincher. Sky Lynx isn't exactly a beast-former, but he decided to join us too."

"I knew several," she said softly with a sad teek. "Do you know why so many ended up in the revolt?"

"Probably for the same reason a lot of the military and gladiators did; they didn't fit into the definitions of civilized mecha that the Senate liked to use," Jazz answered cynically. "A lot of politicians were afraid that they couldn't be controlled, and they liked to persecute anyone they didn't have under their pedes."

"I think being small and cute let me escape a lot of that while I was a regular civilian," she signed. "I remember it though, here and there, with the larger ones. War-framed beast-formers. I never really saw how bad it was."

"I hate to say it, but most civilians who saw you probably assumed you were a symbiot, and they had a completely different reputation. Thanks to the politicians when most civilian mecha thought beast-former, they pictured the larger more aggressive frames. It was really bad in some cities even before the war started," Jazz admitted. "There aren't a lot of beast-formers left on Cybertron who aren't war-framed. Of course, almost everyone still around is war-framed or nearly so by now."

"I'm not surprised given what a top level tactician looks like," she nodded. "Former Enforcer or not, he's still Praxian and a non-com. Neither tends to have anything resembling a war-frame. Not like medics, where all those redundancies and heavy systems are useful to keep folks alive."

"And Prowl was often back at headquarters and not in the field constantly," Jazz agreed. "For that matter, look at Thundercracker compared to the Seekers in the Knights. Armorwise Aurora and her trine look nothing like him."

"She's a fairly standard Seeker frame too," Demeter nodded thoughtfully. "he looks a lot more normal to me, but I saw a lot of war-frame Seekers in the army. He's half war-frame too, if I heard his heritage right. So he was probably always on the large and heavy side. I don't doubt he's been
upgraded a few times though just to survive this long. Only two real ways to do it on the front lines. Be crazy hard to hit, or heavy enough to take it. Did you ever have a civilian frame?"

"I used to be a lot lighter than this before everything that brought us here," he glanced ruefully at his own frame. "I had a truly civilian frame a very long time ago. I've slowly added a bit of mass over the vorns of the war, but I tended to prefer the crazy hard to hit route for survival. Makes it easier to sneak into enemy bases."

"Very much agreed," Demeter snickered. "Maybe when you're under less restrictions we can play a real game of hide and seek. There really aren't that many here that are good at it."

"Wing being her most frequent target," Dart grinned. "He's not nearly as good at finding as he is at hiding though."

"That'll be fun and something else to look forward to," Jazz chuckled. "Wing wasn't too bad when we were sneaking out but that was against distracted organics. I haven't had much of a chance to test him out like that yet."

"Oh, he's good. He snuck out on us pretty regularly, though we weren't on guard either. Still, any mecha his age deserves to be given credit for surviving," Demeter reminded them all that the mechling-like Knight was among the oldest beings in the city. "He's seen more than most."

"I don't know if he's a sparkling at spark by choice or nature, but it's kinda soothing to know someone that innocent can still be online," Jazz said and took a small drink from his cube, enjoying the luxury of savoring the flavor as Demeter finished hers and hopped from her stool.

"It is. He's a treasure to have around," she agreed before padding off to her next duties.

Jazz watched her leave for a bit before his gaze began to wander again, his nearly empty cube on the table as he watched this so-military like room. It was like ISO too. Really like any of countless common and rec rooms he'd been in over his life, though far calmer than most Decepticon ones. These mecha simply didn't have the natural and cultural aggression towards each other than the Decepticons fostered so effectively.

He watched the room begin to clear a bit as Dart turned to speak to a Knight settling a seat at the table next to them. Soon it'd be time for them to go back to the library to take more tests so he could learn to fit in here. As he internally groaned about sitting at a table reading more datapads, a hand tried to take advantage of his apparent distraction and reached out to steal his energon. Field flared in a sharp warning his engine backed up, he'd started the swipe to grab it back when a frame lighter than his tacked him from the side and the thieving hand jerked back along with its owner.

Engine growling, he tried to twist away from his captor and grab his fuel. He'd get it back in his possession and then deal with the interloper. He'd learn why no one ever tried to steal fuel from Jazz.

"Calm down!" Dart hissed near his audial as they struggled.

"Mine!" Jazz growled back, still trying to reach his cube and not understanding why Dart was stopping him. Suddenly he was loose and no one was close enough to teek. He lunged for the table and grabbed his cube, subsparing it quickly before looking around for the would-be thief. He'd been lulled to complacency earlier by the Knights' casual attitudes, but he wasn't going to be tricked again.

"Jazz?" Dart's voice was full of concern and confusion from where he was standing two paces away.

"Where's the thief?" he growled, looking around at the Knights surrounding him. One of them had to have seen what happened. Unless they were all going to try and cover up the failed theft.
"Thief?" Dart just looked more bewildered.

"He thought your cube was empty and was cleaning up," a strong, war-framed aerial spoke up. "It looks empty to anyone used to full tanks."

"Why would anyone waste fuel like that?" Jazz looked outraged as he slowly shifted out of his completely aggressive stance. Dart's confusion and the aerial's words were starting to convince him this might not have been a planned theft, but he was still suspicious.

"We produce far more fuel than we need and we haven't even begun to fully tap what is natural to this world," the aerial shrugged his wings. "A few drops don't matter here."

"Jazz," Dart stepped close enough to teek easily. "How much is left?"

"I can still drink it," Jazz replied, still not completely grasping this kind of excess. It'd been so long since anyone on Cybertron had the luxury of wasting fuel.

"Jazz, will you trust me?" Dart held his hand out. "Give me the cube."

Jazz's engine growled in protest and pressed a hand over his subspace protectively. He didn't swipe at Dart's hand though since the Knight hadn't quite abused his trust yet.

"All right," Dart accepted the limit of the trust of the moment and allowed his hand to drop. "Would you like a cube to sip on while we're in the library?"

"Yes, please," Jazz said as he cautiously shifted towards the dispensers. The Knights moved to get out of his way, and he slowly settled at the prospect of more fuel while the room returned to normal.

Wing knelt in the center of the room normally used by Marwir's initiate, when she had one. The chaos surrounding his return had put off the beginning of his punishment and now that had settled enough that there was reasonable confidence that he would not be needed to subdue any of his gestalt mates. Now it was just the effort to center himself for the first binding of what he was sure would be many.

Finally he felt his spark settle, as ready for the lesson of the binding as he could be before sinking into it. With that he stood and joined Marwir for the long walk to the penance chambers under the council chamber.

None of the other Knights spoke to them as they walked through the halls. Wing knew many disapproved of his actions and perceived defiance. He still thought he had done the right thing going on his unauthorized walkabout, but he had to admit he may not have gone about it the best way. Hopefully his penance would resolve the majority of issues between him and the other Knights. His gestalt needed this connection to the city, and he genuinely missed his friends and colleagues.

It was those feelings that left him sure that in the end he would be accepted. He wanted to be back. The Sovereign could have sentenced him to deactivation, but he hadn't. It might be a long path back to the full graces of his Order, but the path was laid out for him.

He allowed the small twitch he felt at entering the hallway with its six doors to show. Five rooms and a simple washrack. It was difficult to call it cramped when the place was design for Dai Atlas to walk unimpeded, yet it always felt that way. It loomed in a way that was purely psychological.

This place always meant pain.
Marwir stopped at one door and palmed it open, allowing him to enter the simple square space with its equally simple berth in one corner near the door and hooks at various levels on the far wall.

Just stepping inside made his hands and shoulders ache.

Pushing aside the phantom aches in his frame, he focused on his preparations for his first penance binding since this long journey had begun. Respectfully placing Challenger of Ways in its proper place on the wall, he turned and held his forearms together for Marwir to wrap the cord around. When she faced him with a spool of green he couldn't be surprised even as he shuddered faintly. It wasn't the most difficult color, not by a significant margin, yet his willfulness was never pleasant to face either.

He watched while she bound him as she had thousands of times, both during while he was an initiate and after. The pattern was familiar, unique to her, and it helped settle him a touch.

Once his arms were properly bound he knelt and allowed Marwir to hook his hands over the Great Sword. As his frame stretched into the familiar position, he tried to once again settle his processor and spark. He knew this wasn't going to be as pleasant as what Deadlock had experienced on the ship. Wing was still a bit amazed that the warrior had trusted him enough to try something as unfamiliar as a binding. It was a warm spot in the darkness of much of his journey, as was the feeling that he could change the warrior's existence for the better.

Softly he settled fully, his weight almost entirely on his shoulders, and gave himself over to the binding.

Not that it was truly so easy. He'd never given up anything easily. He almost never gave up anything at all. It was part of his nature that the Order had merely harnessed but never actually controlled.

Like the blade that had chosen him, he pushed, he shoved, he went his own way without ever abandoning the core of his beliefs. He was convinced the Order needed that defiance, that willingness to push beyond what was comfortable and safe. It prevented complacency and forced change when it was needed. It wasn't always the safest route to take, and that willingness to push out alone had cost him greatly this time. He had been enslaved and forced to serve others for vorns. Bending his will to be the obedient house servant had chafed at his nature, but at the time it had seemed the best way to escape his predicament. It had proven the correct choice as well, even if not in any way he could have imagined. His freedom had also brought freedom to four mecha who desperately needed it, three of which wanted it very badly.

It almost brought a snicker to the surface, thinking about how much his gestalt exemplified himself in so many ways.

Deadlock, fierce and defiant. So determined to prove himself that he'd clawed his way out of the gutter, and now he would have the chance to learn and become something more than just a thug. He'd always be a challenging Knight, defying the status quo and questioning authority. Challenger of Ways would suit him almost as well as it did Wing. Together they would be a force of reckoning for those who would hold the Order back from adapting as needed.

Thundercracker, traditional and yet insanely radical. The Seeker wanted to follow the traditions of his people, but his deal with Starscream was so radical that it had surprised even Master Aurora. He would bend to fit into Seeker society here, but he would always be something more than just a low ranked Seeker. It didn't matter what law or agreements there were. Just his nature and experience would bring him authority, official or social. Mecha would listen to him because of that unusual mixture and his natural thoughtful calm.
Jazz, friendly and cheerful with a dark current of danger beneath the surface. Wing didn't think he would ever be that cynical, but before he'd gone on that walkabout he probably would have never condoned the offlining of those bounty hunters. He could see in Jazz what he could become if given a different path. Faced with the war and survival that Jazz had, he was far less sure than he liked that he wouldn't have become just as dark and cynical. He knew he wouldn't be the kind of sneaky deadly that the former ISO agent was. He'd never be an assassin. He would learn to value life far less, however, and it almost felt good that the knowledge was disturbing. It should be disturbing to kill as easily as Jazz did.

None killed so easily as Deadlock, however. The mech hadn't learned to kill, he'd eventually been taught to not always kill. That there were reasons not to. Those lessons still hadn't settled fully in the incredible warrior, but they were settling.

What wasn't settling yet was Prowl's fate. Talk of a willful mech and Prowl might have to be the choice. He acted as a good, subservient follower, but it hadn't taken long to know that was a thin veneer over a will that still amazed Wing at times. It was one thing to be fierce, willful, defiant and everything else the other four displayed, but Prowl was the only one who had intentionally shattered his own compliance code when society said he shouldn't. No matter how conflicted Prowl was about what he'd done to himself, the simple fact was that he had displayed a will stronger than anyone's. It wasn't knowledge that had broken that code, not like what Jazz did with the slave code, it had been pure determination that pecked at it for vorns, centuries, until the restrictive lines crumbled.

And now it was likely that mech was going to be stripped of all the damage and conflict and allowed to start over in the city. What would he be like without those restrictions and the damage they caused? Would that indomitable will drive Prowl into conflict with Dai Atlas and the established order, much as Wing had often found himself at odds with his former Initiate? What sort of changes could he bring to their home here?

Or would he side with the Sovereign more often than not, as a balance for Wing and Deadlock? Not that Dai Atlas was short on will himself, but it never hurt to have another in your corner.

Wing's thoughts circled back to himself, wondering why he was so driven to challenge authority without ever claiming it. He had more time in the Order than all but one of the Circle of Masters. He could count on one hand the number of mecha still functioning that were older than he was. He was better in the sparring circle than any of them. Yet he'd never tried for the Circle of Masters. Never tried for a position to influence policy before it was announced.

But if he created the policy could he openly challenge it? The Circle of Masters was supposed to present a united front to the Knights and the city. Having him on the outside to argue against it gave some of the other Knights an option to consider other points of view and a voice they wouldn't normally have. If he'd been a Master and left like he did the Sovereign would have had to execute him when he returned.

He wouldn't have had a choice. Wing understood politics that well. What could be accepted in the lesser ranks, paid for with pain and bindings and penalties, couldn't be tolerated within the Circle of Masters. Whatever conflicts they had had to be dealt with privately. Even when it was obvious there was tension, they backed each other and policy up. There was no room there for the public dissent. Wing was the public dissent. It was his place.

He was the voice of opposition: the challenger of the status quo. That role had consequences though. Yes, even he had to admit his walkabout could have gone horribly wrong for everyone. If the slavers hadn't believed his story of being from another colony they might have gone looking for the city. But if he hadn't gone, would the Knights have ever learned about Cybertron's current condition? Would
the slavers have come to their world and stumbled upon them anyway, possibly with a slave-coded

gestalt? No one would ever know for certain.

What he was sure of was that he had returned stronger, better able to defend the city, and those that
came with him would only strengthen the city and the Order. They were all strong, skilled survivors.
His gestalt would do well here.

Why was he so sure of that?

Was it his own determination to prove the doubters wrong? The gestalt coding influencing his beliefs
into unwavering support of potentially dangerous outsiders? He’d had his own doubts about them
when he'd first met the four in the cells. Getting to know them had proven their worth to him, and the
longer they spent here the more the others would learn to recognize the value of their potential
contributions. Yet all of that time had been under the influence of the code. There was no way to tell
how much was truly his belief and what the coding insisted on, and even less ability to tell how
much of their reactions around him and each other were code and what was them.

Was there even a difference now? It was not as if anyone would dare strip the gestalt code from
them. At least not from Deadlock, Jazz and Thundercracker. Once Prowl was reformatted there
would be no difficulty controlling and conditioning him for the city. Likewise, Wing knew that
everyone recognized that his return meant he was still loyal, in his own way. The other three,
however, needed some control, some means of securing their loyalty until they settled fully. Wing
knew it was himself. Beyond all that being Wing's noxa created, the coding meant that they were
reasonably loyal to him. As long as he remained a loyal Knight, they would remain reasonably
compliant. He had always tried to be true to his nature, but he had to be realistic about the current
situation and think about the possible consequences. He could not be the openly defiant Knight, not
now and most likely not for many vorns to come. He had to temper his own stubbornness and think
of the others first. The faster he regained the trust of those in charge and his peers, the better off
everyone would be, including the Masters.

It wouldn't be easy though. Not easy at all. Pushing, arguing, even outright rebellion had been his
calling for so long. No more sneaking out to fly. No more pets. No more yelling at those above him
in rank.

In the end he would have to accept these as the consequences of his previous actions. He had started
down this road and would follow it to the end. It didn't make it any easier to contemplate vorns,
centuries even, of behaving.

His spark cried at the concept. His core code rebelled. Challenger of Ways flared displeasure.

What if all this behaving was for nothing? If Jazz, Deadlock and Thundercracker couldn't adapt then
they would also have to be reformatted. There was no way Jazz and Deadlock would go through that
willingly. For a chance at being fully of the flock again, Thundercracker might, but he still doubted
it. Would reformating even work with mecha so badly damaged? Primus only knew what any of
their reflexes would do without their processors to control them.

After reformating failed came execution.

What would happen to him if one of the others had to be executed? He knew how badly the gestalt
coding would react to that possibility and he didn't know if he could stand by and watch it happen.
They'd have to flee the city and the planet. But could they, after Prowl was reformatted? The same
code that required his reformating now would force it to happen again to break his loyalty to Dai
Atlas and the Order. And what of Deadlock? He'd be a full Knight by the time it got that far.
Would they even listen to reason and flee? None were inclined towards it. He was sure Jazz was capable of assassinating the Circle of Masters and anyone else he had to if it meant preserving his unit. Even now only a few Knights could bring Deadlock down without a lucky blow or their Great Sword. Fully trained he'd be as difficult to put down in a fight as Wing himself, if not harder. If he went berserk not even a Great Sword could stop the frame.

Thundercracker would be devastated by such a choice, especially if he'd actually found a trine at that point. Choosing between his trine and his flock would tear the Seeker apart.

If it came to that would Prowl stand with them or with the Masters his coding said he should protect and serve? If what was happening now was any indication, Prowl would side with the Masters. Their gestalt might tear itself and this city apart if it came down to that kind of a battle. He had to do anything to keep that from happening.

Anything....

Turn on his own gestalt?

Could he really do that?

He had to break the code. It was slave code just as surely as what they had broken to escape. But he had to break it only for himself. The others had to remain bound to him and through him to the city.

But doing that would make them his slaves not his equals. Wouldn't that make him just as bad as the Nijihito?

And what was to say that Jazz wouldn't do the same thing once he realized what had happened?

Nothing. Nothing would stop Jazz from hacking his code. He probably already had. He couldn't rely on the code to keep them in check. He had to rely on himself. On the fact that they'd come here willingly. That in all the shifts where he was in stasis, not one of them had tried to alter the course beyond the expected detours for movement and supplies.

He had to trust them at least as much as they had trusted him.

It was the only way to make this work. Be himself. Be careful, but be himself. It had won their trust so far. It would have to be enough again.

Which meant he'd have to balance the needs of his gestalt with the needs of the Knights and try to keep everyone satisfied. Which meant he might have to defy the Masters to protect his gestalt. It wasn't as if a penance or two was going to make much difference at this point. Between the three of them simply learning the rules he was going to be punished more than usual. Besides, if he was too well behaved, the other Knights might believe he wasn't himself. That wasn't a good thing either.

It seemed he was going to have to endure even more penances for the next few vorn than he had in a long time. That was the price he was going to pay for rescuing and recruiting the four of them, and it should be worth it. Deadlock was going to shake the Knights up in a way that had been a long time coming, just as Prowl would be a valuable addition to their support structure. Thundercracker would bring a new perspective to the Seekers, and Jazz would eventually make his way into the spark of the city. They'd make it, and they'd all excel. He'd make sure of it.

Even with his determination to do his best for everyone, Wing couldn't help a shudder at the knowledge of how much he was going to be enduring soon. As his focus shifted back to the world around him, hazy and exhausted, he felt Marwir lift his aching limbs off of Challenger of Ways. The next moment he was aware for was lying down, his back against her chest and legs, while she
worked his forearms to encourage the energon to begin to flow again.

"It seems your gestalt bond is enough to alert the others of your distress. Thundercracker was extremely agitated and demanding to see you, while Jazz was simply agitated and restless," she said softly when he was able to focus.

"Did Deadlock give Kimark any trouble?" He asked, focusing on the unmentioned source of potential trouble. He took a moment to steady himself; it wouldn't help calm the others if he was unsteady when he commed them.

"Nothing unusual. While looking for it, Kimark said he was more aggressive than before, it was within what Kimark considers the normal range for him," she said softly. "It's late, though I doubt any of them are recharging."

"I'll comm them and let them know I'm fine," Wing shifted a bit against her, slowly stretching tense cables without taking his hand from her care. "At least now they'll be prepared for the next time I undertake penance."

"True," she nodded, working his hands back to their natural glossy black.

Thundercracker responded to the low-priority comm ping immediately. ::What happened?::

::I just finished my first penance binding, and it was a bit stressful.:: Wing replied. ::I wasn't certain if warning you ahead of time that it was happening now would be more or less stressful since we didn't know what would spill through the bond. No one knew if having you aware of it would make it worse through anticipation.::

::For myself, I would like to know beforehand. It felt rather like when Starscream was in the middle of a severe beating,:: Thundercracker explained even as his harmonics smoothed out significantly. ::How long before you are repaired?::

::There is no physical damage other than some stress to my frame. I'll be fine in a joor or two after a little rest,:: Wing answered as he looked down at the color that had returned to his hands and tested them. He made a mental note to let Redline know how the penance distress had passed through the gestalt bond, though not the content.

There was a long pause as Thundercracker tried to process that. ::Do you want to snuggle?:: he finally asked in offer of the only thing he could think of to soothe the stress.

With a glance up at Marwir, he asked, "May Thundercracker and I cuddle for a bit and maybe recharge together tonight? It helps him settle knowing I'm okay."

She nodded. "Just decide whether you will be with Aurora's trine or in your berth. So long as you are with one of us, it is acceptable."

::Would you mind asking Aurora if I can join you when we recharge tonight?:: Wing asked, eager to feel the Seeker's familiar field again. He also thought seeing him recharge with Thundercracker might help Aurora's trinemates feel a bit more comfortable around the military Seeker.

Thundercracker pinged agreement, then a pause before he came back. ::They have agreed. Just fly up and join us. Everyone has settled in.::

::I'll be there in a bit. Let Jazz and Deadlock know I'm fine,:: Wing said as he leaned back against Marwir and drank the energon that was offered. The pause was as much to gather his strength for the short flight before recharge as it was to fuel, something he belatedly realized he would need rather
badly.

::I will,:: Thundercracker promised before the line closed.

"How long was I out?" he asked softly between sips.

"Almost two orns," she answered.

"No wonder Thundercracker got worried," Wing said quietly. "It was an unusual binding for me."

"Do you wish to talk about it?" she offered.

"Challenger of Ways and I settled on my path for the future," Wing said after a pause to collect his thoughts. "As well as my responsibilities for my gestalt and the Knights."

"Then a very important binding," she murmured. "Does your path continue in the city?"

"Yes, my current task is to help my gestalt settle into the city. I brought them here, and they are my responsibility," Wing answered. He felt a flush of pride-relief from his Daoshi.

"Then when you are ready, we can see you to your friend," Marwir said with a smile.

"Give me a bit to finish recovering and we can head out," Wing gave her a tired smile as he finished his energon. It felt good to have Marwir pleased with him again. It felt good to be held and cared for by her again too. It had been so very long, and not just because he'd become a Knight so very long ago. He'd turned away from her more often than not, often because he wasn't ready for the lesson she wanted to give.

With a long, deep sigh he shifted to stand and was released. Steady on his pedes, he nodded. "Ready to fly."

She nodded in return, flicked her wings and lead him up the path to the council chamber, and then to the open air outside the main doors. He waited respectfully for a moment before transforming and following her into the sky enjoying the flight despite his aches. They took the direct route to Aurora's eyrie, where Thundercracker was almost pacing waiting for them. Cheoseo was watching him with almost fond amusement from the far edge of the long balcony. Aurora was relaxed just out of Thundercracker's pacing range while Haji was on the balcony watching for their visitors.

Marwir landed first and flicked her wings in greeting to the four Seekers as Wing landed behind her. It was barely the socially acceptable wait before Thundercracker stalked up to Wing and lifted him by the chassis to check him for damage.

"That is officially adorable," Aurora spoke softly to Marwir.

"Agreed. They've done Wing some good as well," Marwir smiled softly at the scene. "Give me a ping when they're ready to get up."

Aurora tipped her wings in agreement and Marwir took off to get some recharge in her berth, free of guardian duties for a few joors.

Thundercracker eventually set Wing back down and stared at him. "You aren't hurt." It was as much a question as it was a statement.

"Not physically," Wing agreed and pressed against Thundercracker's frame and relaxed into enveloping arms. "Let's recharge now; I'm a bit worn out."
"Yes, recharge is good," Thundercracker agreed and urged an unresisting Wing towards the smaller berth near the large central one where the triad recharged.

Wing waited for Thundercracker to settle before curling up against him, pressing into the Seeker's familiar field. He could hear the three Seekers moving around them, but he didn't stir, trusting them to keep the pair safe.
Placing the cubes on the table and settling comfortably in a chair, Kimark waited patiently for Deadlock to online and leave the berthroom. He knew better than to try to awaken the berserker, even though he'd warned Deadlock they were going to visit Redline today. Listening to his charge sulk reminded him of his own initial reaction to the medic. It wouldn't surprise him at all if Deadlock grumbled the entire way there only to obey almost any order the medic gave him. It was common enough here and he remembered well the feeling from his gladiator vorns. You hated the medic as much as you needed them, but what you really felt was fear. They didn't just keep you functional and determine how good those repairs were, they decided when you weren't worth repairing. The owners may have been in charge publicly, but orn to orn, the medics ruled gladiator culture.

He had the distinct impression things were similar in the Decepticon army.

With enough time and exposure Deadlock would understand that it was different here. There wasn't really a cost-benefit analysis. Redline and his team did *everything* to keep mecha functional and in peak condition.

After a while of listening to the muffled sounds of another mech moving around, the door opened and Deadlock sauntered into room. He stared for a klik at the cube before sitting down, grabbing it and taking a careful drink.

Kimark noted that Deadlock swallowed much sooner this time, as if he was starting to believe that he wasn't going to be poisoned but wasn't convinced just yet. It was good progress for his sixth meal.

"So after Redline, I was thinking we could spar for a while before doing a couple more tests, then enjoy the evening," Kimark suggested.

"Trying to bribe me into cooperating with the medic? How fragged off will he be if we wind up back in medical after sparring?" Deadlock asked.

"At you, none at all. I'll get my audials chewed off but nothing worse," Kimark shrugged. "He's not a fan of working on a mecha twice."

"He won't actually damage us for being stupid?" Deadlock asked looking a bit confused.

"And create more work for himself? Not a chance," Kimark promised. "I'll show you if you want."
"We'll see," Deadlock smirked, wondering if the former gladiator would be easier to take this time in a fight than Wing had been. Maybe he'd find out Redline's reactions by tearing some plating off his opponent. Even if Redline was upset he'd still take it out on Kimark. After all, a guard should be able to control his prisoner.

"Works for me," Kimark almost purred as they finished their breakfast and headed for the nearest small washrack to clean up before facing the medic.

Deadlock tried to stretch out the shower as long as he could without actually antagonizing the medic by being too late. There was a balancing act dealing with medics. Avoiding them over critical things meant you got offline, but going to them for minor damage was a drain on resources and marked you as easy prey for other soldiers. That was before you took into account how much or little a given medic liked their job and you. He knew none of it about this Redline, other than he was big, strong and took no gruff in that first encounter.

"We need to go," Kimark told him evenly.

"Fine," Deadlock finished the last bits of clean up and followed Kimark out the door down to medical. He made certain to memorize all the landmarks near medical, just in case he had to find it later. Not that he expected to get jumped here, but old precautions died hard. They'd never been a bad thing and he couldn't imagine that ever changing. When he stepped into medical it was hard to correlate it to anything he knew. The place was bright, white, high tech and everyone walking around like a medic actually had a medic ID.

"Hello Kimark, Deadlock," a white and red Praxian with a Great Sword that teeked like no Knight or medic Deadlock had ever encountered greeted them.

Deadlock looked the medic over carefully, mindful of the sword and what it represented but still trying to wrap his processor around a warrior that lightly armored. He was fairly certain he could rip this mech in half without much trouble. It wasn't a thought he was used to.

"We're here to see Redline so Deadlock can have his physical," Kimark said politely.

"Of course," the mostly white Praxian nodded and motioned them to follow. "I'm Dagger, Redline's SIC," he introduced himself after they stepped into the private room that Prowl was kept in. "If you'd get on the berth."

"So, is it going to be you or Redline working on me?" Deadlock asked as he shot a quick glance at Prowl, trying to see if the Praxian was still in decent shape without letting his observers know how much he was concerned about his offline gestalt mate. Just like before Prowl would be their best bet if they needed to escape this place without simply blasting their way out. He was telling no one how relieved he felt at the apparent excellent condition and healthy shine to Prowl's armor.

"Redline. I'll be getting to know all of you as well, as the gestalt's secondary medic," Dagger explained as he began to study the readings he was getting.

"Ah, good. Is anything not in perfect condition?" Redline asked as he came in and studied the aggressive mech on his medberth.

"Everything's functional," Deadlock said with a wary shrug, not certain what the medic intended. No warrior, especially not a front line fighter like himself, was ever in perfect condition for long, not even the notoriously vain Sunstreaker. He also hid his confusion at Dagger's statement. Two medics for the gestalt? Apparently they were expecting them to get involved in some kind of trouble or dispute.
Redline shot a look at Kimark, who just shrugged.

"All right," Redline allowed the answer to stand and turned to the readouts. "You're in better condition than Thundercracker, though not as good as Jazz was. You'll be seeing a lot of this place before you're up to my standards though."

"I didn't spend most of my time getting blown up and then patched up. I spent most of my time fighting in an arena. You have to look good before the show starts to give the crowds a thrill," Deadlock said with a grunt, acknowledging the difference in circumstances. "Jazz spent most of his time playing interface toy. Wing was probably in the best condition of all of us."

"He was, though from what I understand he was in exponentially better condition twenty vorns ago as well. He did start off his little adventure up to my standards. The rest of you weren't so fortunate," Redline hummed with a darkening scowl as he turned to focus on Deadlock's optics. "Are those your originals?"

"Haven't a clue," Deadlock answered warily.

"Right, so if the lenses were ever replaced the base structure wasn't or you'd have noticed," the medic huffed. "There's no repairing poor quality. They'll need to be replaced."

"Replacing what? Everything seems functional to me," Deadlock shifted, even more uneasy now that Redline seemed to be suggesting blinding him, however temporary the medic might claim it to be. The idea of being blind and aware during a medical procedure was disconcerting given how vulnerable he would be, but the idea of being offline while a strange medic worked on his systems wasn't settling well in his processor either.

"Because you've never had better," Redline seemed ready to continue before Kimark made a quiet click and got a nod.

"Willing to take a memory clip from me to understand what he's saying? It'll be from when we walked into Medical to when you laid down," Kimark offered.

Deadlock pondered that offer, considering all the potential results of accepting or refusing that memory clip. He didn't trust most of these Knights further than he could throw them, but the gladiator Knight felt more familiar than anyone outside his gestalt. He behaved a lot like a mix of Wing, Megatron and Deadlock himself, and that made him more understandable than the others. Deciding this was unlikely to be a trap, Deadlock grunted, "Go ahead and give it to me before I change my mind."

A chip was quickly produced from Kimark's arm and handed over.

Deadlock studied it for klik, making certain it was actually an ordinary memory chip and not something to tamper with his systems. He was aware of how troubled the medics, especially Dagger, seemed to be at his distrust and hesitation. It was further proof too many of these Knights had little experience with the world outside the Citadel walls. Once he was as certain as he could be of its origin, Deadlock connected it to his systems and accessed the memory segment.

It appeared to be exactly what Kimark had claimed; a simple memory of their walk into Medical. Deadlock immediately noticed differences in what they perceived; far more than their small height and position differences would normally cause. One that quickly caught his attention was the medic; the red on Dagger's armor in Kimark's memory was a shade and saturation he had never seen before.

He looked between Kimark and Dagger with a frown.
Poor quality optics have a limited range of color and detail. Mine weren't that great when I got here. The better ones haven't changed how well I can get around, but it does wonders for understanding what others are talking about on occasion. Makes the world prettier to look at too," Kimark gave a grin and shrug.

Silently Deadlock mulled over the difference between Kimark's memory and his own observations. The color differences would explain some of the cryptic comments he'd overheard about different paint jobs over the vorns. Was making things prettier worth the risk of being vulnerable?

"You can have a guard to keep them in check," Kimark offered and endured the silent death threat from Redline while Dagger sputtered his shocked horror.

"You think I need a guard against them?" Deadlock growled, annoyed that the suggestion was actually settling part of his unease at the situation. Who would he trust enough to actually be vulnerable around? Kimark was out; he was a Knight. Wing was also a Knight, but the Aerial was a part of his unit. The idea of Wing as a guard was laughable though. The mech was too trusting and wouldn't recognize a subtle threat if it flew up and introduced itself. Jazz would recognize any trouble coming. No, it was one thing to have a fun frag with the Autobot, but the saboteur wasn't someone he wanted to be vulnerable around. The offline Praxian was obviously off the list. That left Thundercracker. He was sane for a Seeker. Trustworthy for a Decepticon. He certainly knew a threat of any kind to have survived so long close to Megatron, Soundwave and Starscream.

"Nope, but I know I wanted one for the first couple centuries," Kimark said. He'd had Firefall to watch his back when vulnerable.

Deadlock had to admit his guard was right; having Thundercracker there would help make this situation tolerable. And optical work wasn't spark-threatening, so this was a way to test how skilled these medics actually were. "Let me talk to Thundercracker first." The Seeker was certain to understand paranoia about being vulnerable.

"Of course," Redline accepted the slight with better grace than he once had. "You've got a long list of minor repairs and you're going to be on the supplements all your gestalt are on to fuel your self repairs, but we'll leave it at that for now. Do you like your optic color? Since we're replacing the full structure we can make the lenses any color you like."

Like his optic color? Deadlock had never really thought about it. Decepticons had red; Autobots had blue. There were a few exceptions on each side, but that was the way things were on Cybertron. But he wasn't on Cybertron anymore. "There any significance to a color here?" he asked Kimark.

"Nothing I know," the warrior said truthfully. "Plenty of Knights have red, and plenty have other colors. Yellow and gold are common. Blue less so. Purple, green, amber, orange, even brown and white are here now. Probably some others historically."

"Knights are as varied as the general population," Redline confirmed.

"Keep them red for now," Deadlock decided. If red wouldn't mark him as dangerous it also meant he'd still fit in here. "Can that change later?"

"Easily," Redline nodded. "Once the core components are up to spec undamaged lenses are a few kliks to change. Now, have you ever reacted badly to medication?"

"Not that I know of. I don't know what I've been given after a rage since I'm usually out of it after being dropped. Otherwise most medics don't bother with anything unless absolutely necessary," Deadlock shrugged. He noted the twitch from both medics but let it pass. Redline seemed to be half
expecting it even if he didn't like it. The little Praxian looked horrified.

"And your preferences, when it's not absolutely necessary?" Redline asked carefully.

"If it's not necessary why waste it by using it?" Deadlock looked a bit confused, wondering if this was some sort of trick question. Medical supplies were too valuable to be used frivolously. Every street mech and Decepticon knew that. Even a fair number of Autobots seemed to.

"Patient comfort, ease of doing delicate repairs, improved recovery speed, reduced side effects from repairs," Redline rattled off. "Recharge and rest improves recovery quality and speed and both happen better when the frame isn't uncomfortable. It's also much easier to keep still when you aren't aware of just how deep inside you I am, or what I'm doing there. Not many enjoy the feeling of being taken apart even when they know it's to repair them."

"Yeah, and medical supplies aren't in short supply," Kimark added, earning a sigh and look from Redline.

"He's one of those?" the CMO asked.

"Yap," Kimark shrugged. "He'll learn same as I did."

"So this isn't one of those 'drugs are going bad so we need to use them or they're worthless' kind of things?" Deadlock asked, starting to understand that this wasn't actually a trick question. Looking around, he admitted, "I don't like being offline around strangers. Bad things tend to happen when I online like that...to those around me."

"That I'm used to, though thank you for confirming it," Redline nodded. "Does it matter what state you were in when you went down? I understand you were in stasis several times on the trip here."

"Voluntary stasis with only those four around," Deadlock clarified. "Prowl was in stasis almost the entire time. Thundercracker's about as trustworthy as any 'Con gets. Wing wouldn't think to sabotage anybody in that condition. Jazz knew he was better off with me around if trouble happened. Besides, we're stuck together as a gestalt."

Redline nodded. "Then when you have to be in stasis I'll bring you on line in an isolation room, preferably with a couple of them around. What else would improve your boot-up reaction?"

"Don't restrain me at boot-up," Deadlock said finally after careful thought. "It makes my fight protocols engage."

"It does that for most, which is why it's not normally done," Redline said. "While you talk to Thundercracker, also be thinking about whether you want to be in stasis or restrained for the optical replacement."

"I'll think about it," Deadlock said, already starting to weigh the options.
Chapter Summary

The keeper's dinner. Thundercracker, Haji, Cheoseo and Aurora have dinner and talk. Thundercracker, Aurora, Sogdo, Northwind and Saamanjasy have dinner.

"Who is watching your charges?" Dai Atlas requested formally as they all settled in his quarters. Sweet and lightly bitter high grade had been passed around to enjoy and everyone seemed relaxed.

"My trine. Bladewing is nearby," Aurora answered first.

"Thorn. I except they'll still be awake when I get back," Marwir chuckled.

"Demeter," Dart grinned behind his cube. "I expect they'll play hide and seek half the night."

"I left Deadlock in a sparring room with Atl. He'll be occupied as long as I leave him there." Kimark snorted.

Redline grunted, "I expect I'm here this time because of what we learned with Wing's penance. Prowl's still settled in stasis in medical."

"Yes, it does put his more severe penances in a new light," Dai Atlas rumbled. "I would say it's fortunate that Deadlock does not recognize the bond better. He is the one least able to control himself. I would suggest putting them in stasis for the worst of it. Thundercracker in particular seemed to respond strongly."

"Because he is very familiar with these weak bonds," Aurora spoke up. "The gestalt bond seems to function in a similar way to the trine bond. Something he has had great experience with having damaged members of."

"It's a bit disturbing that he's so familiar with the sensation," Dart glanced over at Aurora. "Marwir said he seemed to handle things better once he examined Wing."

"It's war, and by all accounts, one of his trinmates was almost compulsive about challenging Megatron face to face," Aurora shrugged her wings. "He did calm down once he was sure of Wing's physical health. They were both in much better shape after recharging together."

"Deadlock isn't going to like the stasis option," Kimark said seriously. "He barely trusted his gestalt to put him in stasis during the trip."

"If he's going under, his gestalt should do it," Radline said firmly. "Honestly, I'd like to see what they do with a choice in the matter. It'll tell us a lot about their priorities, both for themselves and each other."

"Jazz won't like the idea either. He doesn't like recharging with someone else in the room," Dart pointed out quietly.
"Really?" Aurora didn't hide her surprise. "According to Thundercracker Jazz was happy to recharge with anyone and did so with everyone."

"That's his gestalt," Kimark said. "Rules are completely different with those you trust. You'll find he's easier about it when he starts to trust you won't damage him while he recharges."

"It's very common for warriors. Nearly universal for military mecha," Dai Atlas said to Axe's agreeing hum. "They may not be military by any definition we've held, but they are military in the ways that matter."

"It's also a sign that the gestalt coding has been significantly changing their coding and behavior. They've been at war on opposite sides since before we left, but now they consider each other trustworthy. They didn't spend that long in captivity together," Dart pointed out.

"Less than three vorns in all before arriving here, I believe," Dai Atlas agreed. "However it is a fairly simple edit to take what a mech already has as trusting behaviors and adding entries to who it qualifies for. Compared to slave coding, it's easy."

"I expect Jazz to be least affected, simply because he's the best coder of the lot and already admitted he does his own edits regularly," Redline huffed.

"Speaking of edits, how are you progressing on their code?" Marwir asked.

"I'm still going through the gestalt coding and trying to figure out what all of it does, and I'm not going to tamper with it in any of them until we've sorted out the differences between the familiar and the abomination Shockwave created." Redline said shortly. "Wing's coding is the least damaged of the group, and I've taken care of the basic maintenance issues for him already. We're making progress on Thundercracker, but Deadlock has to get dragged in for any kind of work. I haven't even tried to touch much beyond the surface of Jazz's coding yet. I'll get the others figured out then deal with the processor ache from the ISO coding."

"He's going to take almost as long as Prowl, I expect," Axe nodded. "It's too bad they can't join up so you can see the code in action. I don't believe a gestalt can form without all the members."

"We can ask them about their experience with other units with this coding since so much has been changed," Kimark pointed out. "It would be practical to adjust that given the likelihood of someone getting damaged during a fight."

"By the way, Jazz slipped out again last night," Dart admitted.

"Did you follow him?" Dai Atlas tempered his rumble.

Dart nodded quickly. "Of course, and Demeter has also followed him on these trips. He spends most of his time exploring the Citadel's layout floor to ceiling. Demeter thinks he'll feel more secure once he's finished and knows the area better. She said in his past line of work that sort of knowledge would help keep him functional."

"Has he tried to go anywhere off limits to him?" Axe asked.

"Not yet. I'm sure he'll try eventually, simply because he's not going to let a lock deter him from knowing. The closest he's come so far is visiting Prowl in medical. He didn't do anything, just checked in on him. He did with the others too," Dart responded.

Dai Atlas chuckled. "Don't worry about it. Just do your best to track him. I'll see about asking a host if we can hire a symbiot or two to track him if she can't."
"He hasn't been trying to lose us on these trips. Maybe he's trying to follow the rules by staying in sight while exploring?" Dart offered.

"Twisting the rules in knots but not quite breaking them. Remind you of someone else you know?" Kimark asked.

"My dear Wing exemplifies it, and how it can exist in a good Knight," Marwir chuckled despite the serious statement. "I expect all five of them are like that, each in their own ways."

"Definitely," Aurora nodded, her wings backing her up. "Thundercracker is wonderfully mellow given his background, but I only have to teek him to know he's a rebel in a lawkeeper's frame."

"Deadlock. Designation says it all," Kimark agreed with a chuckle.

"Prowl isn't, though there's no way to tell under all that coding. His spark could be as wild as Wing's and you'd never know," Redline huffed.

"He's a rebel in his own way to have survived this long, especially with what Jazz has mentioned in passing," Dart pointed out. "Is Wing having any problems adjusting to being back here? You mentioned he's had a few bad recharge cycles."

"He's in better shape than I honestly expected," Marwir admitted. "He doesn't recharge alone, but his form is still good, he knows the Code and the laws. He's suitably remorseful for the important parts, even if he'll never regret his core nature. When Challenger of Ways claimed him, we all knew he'd never settle down."

"What has Jazz mentioned?" Redline focused sharply.

"Well, as far as Prowl is concerned Jazz mentioned that his coding warped and parts of it broke when Praxus was destroyed. He also sustained severe processor damaged before the slave coding was implanted," Dart thought for a few nanokliks as he scanned through their past conversations. "Jazz did imply once that Deadlock and Thundercracker had a particularly rough time while they were with the Nijihito."

"Mmm, yes, Thundercracker was tortured horribly. Used as a living target, shot down, repaired and shot down again," Aurora shivered.

"So was Wing, though I think it was over not shooting well," Marwir added. "It seems rather well down on his stress list right now."

"Good, then nothing I wasn't already informed of," Redline relaxed. "They were of the same faction and both of high rank. How well did they know each other before this misadventure?"

Dart hummed as he thought. "Not well, I don't think. I'm sure they crossed paths, but nothing Jazz has said indicates he really knows Prowl. He seems to know far more about his former enemies than his ally."

"ISO." Dai Atlas and Axe said in unison, then Axe chuckled and continued. "It's about right, really. Allies you knew well enough to pick up if they changed. Enemies you knew in detail. It's what his world was like."

"What happened to Deadlock?" Kimark asked. "I haven't gotten anything out of him all that traumatic other than the loss of freedom."

"Jazz said Deadlock has more reason than most grounders to be afraid of heights, and the Nijihito
grew impatient with their preferred methods of trying to help him and decided to fix it by repeated, forced exposure. He didn't elaborate too much beyond that and I didn't press at the time. I can ask if you need to know more details," Dart offered.

"No, that's enough. I'll ask you to press if it becomes critical and I can't get him to say it," Kimark said firmly. "I'm sure it's a matter of great anger and humiliation for him. Though while we're on the subject, am I to continue Wing's training of him? Is he going to be a Knight?"

"I don't see why not. He needs the self-discipline to help him control his rage," Dart said as he glanced around at the others, well aware that he not a senior Knight by any stretch despite his long-time rank of Archon.

"I say yes; it lets us keep an optic on him, and it gives him a better outlet for his aggression," Redline grunted. "I'm used to you; I can handle repairing him."

"I must agree. Keep it to simple katas and meditations, information that we might not teach a Suplicant, but is available to them," Dai Atlas chose. "You are not his Daoshi. That choice has not been made yet and will not for some time. I know Wing wishes to train him. We will see if that is viable and wise."

"Keeping things to that level will at the least keep Deadlock occupied. Something tells me we don't want to see him bored," Redline agreed. "I certainly don't want to fix the damage."

"If you think Wing is trouble unoccupied, you do not want to see Deadlock looking for entertainment," Kimark agreed almost fervently. "Honestly, I don't think I want to see any of them unoccupied. How long before I can show him what passes for fighting entertainment in the city?"

"Give it a least a few more orns unless you see more signs of potential trouble. We might want to use the trip as a reward for good behavior," Axe said thoughtfully.

"It'll definitely work on Thundercracker. As much rebel as is in him, he wants to know the rules first," Aurora agreed.

"Deadlock will understand the system. How much he'll care is another matter. I'm sure everyone remembers how long it took me to work the anger from my system, and I really wanted to," Kimark said evenly.

"Are we going to count Jazz's sneaking out without losing us as not bad behavior?" Dart asked. "It's not good behavior, but should he be punished for it?"

Kimark shrugged, "From what I've heard it sounds like him sneaking around is trained into him from ISO. I can't blame him too much for following coding, and he is trying to keep to being near a Knight. I'm certain he could have slipped out without Dart spotting him."

"Or slipped away during his exploring," Dai Atlas agreed. "I agree. So long as he makes no credible effort to escape your company, we will ignore it for now."

"So, anything else interesting happening with our new residents?" Axe asked.

"Well, Jazz brought a lot of new music and dances that I'm enjoying," Dart said before turning a bit serious. "He's also got a lot of intel on what's been going on back on Cybertron since we left."

"That will earn him a few shanixs to get him started," Kimark hummed.

"Has he shared anything he hasn't shared with the rest of us?" Dai Atlas asked with interest.
Dart looked a bit bemused, "I got him talking about some of the mecha back home, and I've learned the designations of some survivors. He's also been willing to talk about Optimus Prime and a few of the surviving Autobot officers."

"Any real differences from when we left?" Axe asked.

Dart started ticking off on his fingers, "For starters, most of the cities have been at least partially destroyed, energon levels are running low everywhere, Megatron's completely insane, Optimus Prime is too idealistic for his own good, and Redline reminds him of their chief medic Ratchet."

Redline chuckled. "I'm flattered. Ratchet was a legend even before the war in medical circles."

"Which explains a good deal about why they didn't fight Wing in coming here too much," Marwir hummed. "Certainly Jazz, Prowl and Thundercracker are smart and aware enough to realize there is no future on their world," Axe said thoughtfully. "Has he suggested there is any end-game for the war?"

Dart shook his head, "No, he seems to think it's going to result in the complete destruction of Cybertron. He mentioned that Prowl has had a few ideas in the past, but Prime rejected them."

"I would be interested in hearing those ideas, at least in broad strokes," Dai Atlas said firmly. "It will tell a great deal about both Prowl and the new Prime."

"I'll ask him if he's willing to talk to you about them, but I can't imagine he'd refuse," Dart nodded. "He's rather open about the problems back on Cybertron."

"Agreed. He is not ignorant enough to believe that anything you learn would not reach us," Dai atlas nodded. "Anything else?" he looked around.

"Not much from Deadlock, he's about as uncomplicated as they come," Kimark said. "Although he has mentioned wanting to continue his Praxian lessons with Wing."

"Easily enough arranged," Marwir nodded.

"Pretty sure Jazz is fluent too," Dart added. "I doubt there's a language he's not at least passable in."

"Likely true," Dai Atlas nodded. "Then you may return to your charges."

Thundercracker looked up from his datapad and reflexively stood as Haji landed and entered the eyrie. He appreciated the effort Aurora's Order and Action were making to accept his presence here in their home. Cheoseo had been more openly friendly and didn't seem to mind having such a large war-frame here from the start, but the Action was blunt and unusually tolerant. Haji was still a bit aloof at times but had become friendlier as the orns past. The higher ranked Order's acceptance would go a long way towards helping Thundercracker integrate with the other Seekers. Thundercracker was incredibly grateful that his awkward and occasionally badly delivered efforts to be respectful and submissive without giving up who he was at his core had been taken as intended.

"Did you finish or do you have to go back to working on your case after dinner?" Aurora asked as she greeted her trinmate.

"I can work on it from here," Haji answered with a shrug. "What is Thundercracker reading?" he made the effort to learn about the being who would be in residence for some time, a few vorns in all likelihood, before being sent to live permanently with a flock. Either his flock or Aurora's creation flock most likely. Either way, he'd be seeing the refugee for a very long time.
"Flight rules and regulations for the civilian airspace above the city," Thundercracker replied immediately. "It's been a long time since I've flown in heavily populated areas without having to worry about making evasive maneuvers."

"Very important to know flight regs," Haji agreed with a hint of how disturbed the idea of someone of Thundercracker's age not knowing them on reflex.

"Agreed," Thundercracker dipped his wings in acknowledgment. "Fortunately I seem to remember much of it, even if it was stored under 'obsolete regulations' rather than for current use. The transfer is faster than learning."

"I could quiz you over them later to make certain that everything transferred properly," Haji offered with a glance at Aurora, who fluttered her wings in pleased encouragement.

"Thank you," Thundercracker accepted the offer in the spirit intended. Most of them were familiar, but the high ceiling over the city had added some odd regulations he had never had to deal with back on Cybertron. The further he got into comprehending how much he'd forgotten or archived the more he agreed with having the legal status of a mechling. Everyone would know to be more aware of him than the skilled adult he looked and thought like. It would make the penalties for the mistakes of learning far milder as well. Granted his mistakes were more likely to be because he'd forgotten where he was rather than inexperience, but the results would be the same.

"I'm here! I'm here!" Cheoseo called out cheerfully as he came in for a fairly fast landing. "Who's grabbing energon?"

"I will," Thundercracker offered, glancing over at Haji and Aurora before rising. After all he was the lowest ranked Seeker present. Intellectually he understood that the energon wasn't going to disappear, but he and the rest of his flock from Cybertron were still a bit edgy about getting refueled properly. He knew in an abstract way that the survival lessons of hundreds of centuries would take decades to loosen their grip, but it still made it irritating to have to constantly remind himself that he was in a place of abundance.

She nodded and stood smoothly with him, though unlike much of the time where she was showing him to something he was allowed to move as if he was free. She was there, on his wing, in the place a Vision should be. Not a place Starscream had ever willingly been, Thundercracker recalled with a faint bit of melancholy for his lost trinemates. This reminded him more of his first trine, and he reminded himself to look forward to the time when his own Vision would be in that place and his own Action on his other wing.

Those were good memories. Memories he held onto despite the pain following them caused. Of how they'd deactivated, his Vision taking his first creations with him, still inside in half-developed eggs. He veered away from that place in his memory banks as he veered towards the landing ground near the common room.

After he transformed and landed, Thundercracker reflexively looked around to see if any of his flock were present, but he didn't see or feel any of the grounders close by. He hadn't expected to see Wing who was currently scheduled for cleaning duty and felt slightly bored through the bond. Boredom was much preferable to the intense pain he felt when the fledgling went through bindings.

Many Knights greeted him in passing. Some he could put designation too, some he couldn't yet. Either way he responded with his wings or voice based on how they'd greeted him and teeked approval not just from Aurora but from those he was close enough to as he passed. It was only as he pinged his ID to a dispenser that Aurora said anything.
"Ping these codes as well," she sent them to him, though they were little more than the designations of her trine, just like his was. "It's so the system knows it's for four and not just you. It's not of great importance, but it's a good habit to get into."

He did as ordered but gave her a curious flick of a wing and glance while he selected the order and additives for each.

"Sometimes Redline or another medic will order a special diet. It also puts the cube on the correct account, which only matters if someone is watching their consumption for whatever reason. Mostly Redline reasons."

"I will keep that in mind," Thundercracker said respectfully. Even though it didn't mean quite the same thing here as it would back on fuel-deprived Cybertron, he couldn't help but interpret Aurora giving him her trine's codes for fuel as a sign of great trust that he would not abuse the privilege. It was a trust he would not break so long as he had a choice; something every orn here made it more and more likely would continue.

Cubes gathered and subspaced they left to fly back.

A few Knights acknowledged their departure with a wave or a wing dip, but most stayed focused on their own conversations and fuel.

"So ordering fuel with my flock's codes is how Redline monitors our consumption of his prescribed additives?" Thundercracker asked.

"The primary one, yes," she said as they lifted off. "He also learns during checkups. An alert also pings either him or myself if there is a noticeable shift in consumption, depending on what it looks like. Shifts that are likely a medical cause -- be it self-repair demands or carrying -- go to him. I see more of those that are suddenly no longer drawing their share or doubling it."

"Why you?" Thundercracker was genuinely curious.

"I'm the quartermaster of the Citadel, so large shifts like that need to be accounted for. I'm also alerted because it typically means a Knight has entered a serious relationship and is not fueling here, or their lover now is. A few cubes here and there no one worries about, but if the Knight fuels extensively in the city they need to be watched to be sure they are getting enough and of good enough quality. If a lover fuels here more often than not then the Knight needs to pay for it."

Thundercracker nodded, "It sounds like a good system to help make certain the Knights overall are in fighting condition. A more aggressive monitoring system could be easily implemented if needed during an assault without causing too many difficulties."

"Exactly, and it has been several times before we left Cybertron, and the entire time before the city was stabilized," she smiled brightly at him for the quick understanding. "It's also very useful when there is an outbreak of disease, rare as they have been. Additives and proper fueling become critical when half or more of us are not in full repair, no matter the cause."

"It's also a good way to track fuel hoarding. There were times when we had soldiers trading black market fuel in and out of bases until crack-downs ensued. I'm certain the Autobots also had that problem although probably not as often or to the extent that some of our bases endured," Thundercracker grumbled, remembering some inflicted fuel shortages during different stages of the war.

"It would, though it's not an issue we've had to deal with during my tenure. The occasional hoarder
is expected and counseled through it. It's always been newcomers or those suffering from processor damage in my experience. It seems that not everyone getting what they need predates even Dai Atlas," she said sadly. "Did even officers suffer shortages?"

"Yes, although not to the extent that many grounder soldiers endured on either side. Starscream worked hard to prioritize as much fuel as possible for our Seekers. We weren't any use to Megatron if we couldn't fly, but we suffered shortages at times when things got particularly bad. Or when certain mechs decided to cut the supplies and try to sell part of them off for a profit," Thundercracker sighed. "Kimark and Dai Atlas probably warned you about our potential aggression regarding fuel. It is a very real possibility especially for Deadlock, who endured deprivation long before he joined the Decepticons."

"Yes, we were warned and we are being careful. The shared background was a significant factor in pairing Kimark with Deadlock. Even now Kimark doesn't always think like a Knight when he's startled. He knows what to look for and likely triggers. Dart was our Archon for a long time. It was his duty to oversee and socialize our Supplicants, those who wished to become Knights. Especially on Cybertron it was common to come to the Citadel with issues that needed to be found and addressed to some extent before training began."

"It's been a lot less common since the Exodus and will become even rarer if things continue here as they have so far," Thundercracker observed, shaking off his memories of the war. "It is a very good thing that no one currently starves here."

"I doubt we would be here if we couldn't support several times our population. We passed on several worlds for just that reason," she said as they came in for a landing.

"A logical decision. Better to wait and find something close to ideal rather than settle for the first pace you encounter," Thundercracker agreed as he landed. They joined the pair at the table and Thundercracker handed out the energon, careful to keep the higher-potency and supplement laden one for himself.

Once everyone had their fuel and was relaxing, Cheoseo turned to Thundercracker and said cheerfully, "So, you seem to be finding your way into the cheerful mess that is civilian life. Anything sound interesting so far?"

"I've thought about becoming a flight instructor or a teacher," Thundercracker said, relieved that Skywarp had made him almost immune to being surprised by random comments. "I spent most of my pre-war existence as an Air Martial, but I'm not certain many would want a war-hardened Seeker in such a position in the city."

"I thought about it during our trip here when Wing was talking about the possibilities available to us, but even I consider it too risky at this time. I need time to lose my war reflexes before I think about returning to a position where conflict is likely to occur," Thundercracker admitted candidly. "I used to work with the fledglings in my flock, and Wing has proven that coding is still functioning."

"He's very good at that," Aurora said fondly of their elder troublemaker. "Though it's also very good to know that the coding is intact before Redline verified it. Did you enjoy working with the fledglings?"

"Yes, I found a certain satisfaction watching them learn and develop. It was very satisfactory especially after a long orn trying to corral miscreants and intoxicated imbeciles," Thundercracker said
with a sigh. "Working with fledglings made darker times easier to bear. It was difficult to find joy once there were none left, although Skywarp tried his best."

"Good trinemates always do," Aurora smiled softly.

"He was that," Thundercracker's wings quivered at the loss that still bit deeply. Starscream he only tolerated thanks to the trine coding, but Skywarp had meant a lot to him long before they'd trined. "I'll miss him for a long time."

Haji glanced between Knight and outsider, then focused on Cheoseo. "How's your latest project going?"

Cheoseo flicked his wings happily and grinned. "The first of the three panels is almost complete. I've still got a bit of tin for the wave design left to finish, and once I'm done with that one I'll move on to second panel."

"Is it a commission or your own design?" Thundercracker asked, grateful for a more pleasant subject.

"My own design," Cheoseo answered. "It's inspired by the way the air currents move around the stalactites. I've done a few smaller pieces like this with copper, but this is one of the most intricate works with tin I've done in a while. The challenge has been to stretch it properly without breaking it."

"Can't a break be repaired?" Thundercracker asked with the clueless curiosity of a non-metalworker.

Cheoseo shook his head, "Not for this piece; the weld seam will be visible and won't flow properly in the piece. If I do break it, I'll have to scrap the whole tin section of the piece. That means I'll have to either melt it back down to start over or set the broken part aside and use a new piece of tin."

With a thoughtful hum Thundercracker considered that and long-archived memories of civilian life before realizing there was nothing there to help him understand. "Then I hope it goes well. Do you sell personal work?"

"Yes, I do commissions as well as create my own designs. I've been having some financial success selling my pieces. So far most of my clients have been fliers, and the recognition I'm starting to get outside of the Seeker flocks is nice," Cheoseo chuckled.

"He brings in a good income. Better than mine," Aurora answered the implied question. "It might not be a traditional Action's function, but all three of us have non-traditional functions."

"Orders are no longer common as lawyers?" Thundercracker asked in surprise.

"Common in general, but what I do, business law, is still much more likely to be a Vision's role," Haji smiled, encouraging the effort the newcomer was making. "I almost never see a courtroom."

"That fits with what I remember," Thundercracker admitted after searching through his own memories. "Most of the lawyers I dealt with in the past were criminal attorneys and prosecutors who were almost always Orders."

"They still are. It's a far more aggressive processor set. I prefer the calm, logical, ordered system of contract law," Haji nodded his wings. "Did you have any legal training beyond your function?"

"I know more of the old military code of operation than most, but that was flock knowledge, not training. Otherwise I knew about what an average detective lieutenant did. I'm going to work on now much that still applies after I'm sure I'll no longer break any laws or regulations doing what I think I
"I have connections to a couple of lawyers who practiced back in Vos and continue to work here. I'll speak to them and see if they are willing to help you settle the differences between the old and new law codes," Haji offered, pleased with Thundercracker's open willingness to work to fit into the city. Even with barely more than three orns here his dialect was already coming into line with modern Seeker with common glyphs. It was an excellent sign on every level.

"I would appreciate that," Thundercracker said honestly, his wings giving a thankful wiggle. "Eventually I'll need to update everything, even if I'm no longer law enforcement."

"Why?" Cheoseo asked.

"Because all of my adult existence has been an enforcer of law of some kind. An Air Martial before the war and an officer during it. Those priority trees and behavior standards are not going to go away just because I no longer am one. To keep from causing problems I need to update them all to current standards," he tried to explain. "I'm unlikely to ever completely lose my tenancy to take charge during chaos. It's best if I know what I should do."

"You could look at working with Search and Rescue in addition to teaching," Haji said with some thought. "That sort of commanding presence would help calm injured and frightened civilians. You would additionally be an asset over many of their recruits since you have experience working in dangerous situations."

"If I am allowed, I would willingly do so," Thundercracker perked up a bit at the thought.

"What did you enjoy most about being an Air Martial?" Aurora asked between sips of a half-finished cube.

There was a thoughtful pause as he assessed something he hadn't thought of in ages. "I believe it was bringing criminals to justice; to righting wrongs others did and bring some resolution to the victims."

"Noble," Haji said, still thinking about Thundercracker in Search and Rescue and liking the idea more the longer he thought about it. It would be a good fit for the other Order, especially since that group only had command authority during an actual emergency. It and teaching would give him controlled outlets for something he had been trained to do since he was a fledgling.

"I bet you didn't like the datawork nearly as much," Cheoseo said with a chuckle.

"Not a fan of it, no," Thundercracker chuckled from fond memories. "Though I was far from the one who hated it the most."

"There's going to be a lot of paperwork to fill out during your acclimation into civilian life," Cheoseo said with a small grin. "At least you should be able to fill it out correctly. We can get Haji to help you with anything you get stuck on during it."

"Thank you," he dipped his wings to the lawyer. "My most likely difficulty will be remembering the old dialect. It has been a very long time since I used anything but Decepticon shorthand. Having them reviewed for dialect slips would also be very welcome," he included them all and others in general. "The corrections will assist me in separating the dialects again."

"You're doing very well with remembering the differences in verbal language shifts. We can all work with you on the written part of your language adjustments," Haji said with a small nod.

"Thank you," Thundercracker puffed slightly at the praise.
"So do you feel ready to meet a few adults for evening fuel tomorrow?" Aurora asked and offered.

Thundercracker hesitated barely a nanoklik before answering, "Yes, I would appreciate the opportunity." Even though he was a bit nervous about making mistakes, he desperately wanted to spend more time with his own kind, especially after being stuck for so long with nothing but his mostly grounder flock for company.

"It'll be the most tolerant members of our combined flocks," Aurora reassured him gently. "They're already used to atypical Seekers and they know your story."

"I will do my best to act according to my current rather than previous status," Thundercracker said quietly. "How many Seekers are you planning to invite tomorrow?"

"Three, in addition to the two of us," she smiled slightly. "A small group for now."

"That sounds less intimidating than some of the scenarios I was contemplating," Thundercracker admitted as he relaxed a bit more. "I look forward to being introduced to more members of your flocks."

"These will be civilians," she promised. "Tornado isn't typical of our creation flocks. Most are far less militant than we are."

"And those are the Seekers I need to get used to socializing with since Knights are closer to what I'm used to," Thundercracker agreed.
Dai Atlas strolled next to his conjunx endura on his rounds of the Citadel. He didn't manage it every orn, and half of those were without Axe, but this orn was a relaxed one and they were out to see their new residents in action as well as check on the various Knights who deserved their attention this orn.

"Looks like Kimark is closest; they're in training room 3," Axe commented with warmth in his voice for his bonded's generally good mood.

"Then we will see how the berserker is settling in before observing the others," Dai Atlas said as they headed towards the training room. They passed a few Knights on the way who greeted the pair politely. As they approached, he pinged Kimark to alert him to their presence.

::Yes, Sovereign?: the Knight responded.

::Knight Kimark, Axe and I wish to observe your charge in action,: Dai Atlas commed.

::Sovereign. We're sparring, no surprise. I can make no promises on his reaction if you come in on the floor,: Kimark warned them.

::Better we test his reactions than another less experienced warrior,: Dai Atlas responded as the pair reached the door. Not wanting to push Deadlock too far while sparring neither had their weapons out, although they were easily accessible as always. After all, even they'd respond aggressively to someone coming in with weapons drawn.

The door slid open and they both knew that Deadlock was aware of them even though he didn't take his focus off Kimark. In a move that honestly impressed the old warriors a wrestling move ended with Kimark's startled sound and Deadlock between them and the newcomer with one of Kimark's swords in hand.

"Doesn't anyone in this place have a lick of sense?" Deadlock snarled at the giants. "If I was armed you'd both be graying right now."

"We were uncertain how you would respond to others coming near you during a fight. It was safer to have your first interruption during a sparring match be the two of us than an accidental intrusion by an Initiate," Axe replied calmly, assessing Deadlock's almost protective stance in front of Kimark. It was a good sign that Wing was right and he might be able to adapt to being a Knight. No one as hardened and paranoid as Deadlock was supposed to be would turn their back on someone they didn't trust at least a little.

That he let Kimark step close enough to touch was even more notable.

"Give it back," Kimark's voice was calm and level in the demand while his hand closed lightly around Deadlock's.
Deadlock grunted but let his grip loosen so Kimark could reclaim his short sword back, all without sparing more than a glance for the burgundy warrior behind him.

"The two of us have dealt with berserkers in the past, including Kimark. We are more than capable of handling you if you attacked us," Dai Atlas answered, growling internally at the impertinence even as he kept outwardly calm.

~He's got a point on the blasters,~ Axe reminded him. ~I think his protective posturing if far more good than bad.~

"I'll believe that when you prove it. Megatron could barely take me down," Deadlock puffed his armor up in a display all too familiar to the old warriors, and even the younger one.

~If he had a blaster he wouldn't be in the Citadel,~ Dai Atlas rumbled as he stepped towards Deadlock, towering over the smaller warrior. He would show this upstart why he was a Master and former general to be feared and respected. "I will show you what we are capable of. Megatron doesn't have half the experience and training I have."

Deadlock looked them up and down, then sneered. "Two against one. You might just manage it."

Behind him Kimark gave an audible groan and quietly retreated to the edge of the floor. "Redline's expecting the survivors."

"I will be fighting you alone. Axe will be observing with Kimark," Dai Atlas corrected as his bonded joined Kimark on the sidelines. "We will see how long you last."

"Longer than you," Deadlock's sneer deepened as he shifted his posture slightly; ready to move fast rather than stand his ground with a weapon. They glared at each other for a moment, then both moved. In what would have been a clash of frames for equal sized opponents turned into Dai Atlas faintly overbalanced when Deadlock went between his legs in a suicidal move that left lines of claw-marks along the giant's groin joints.

Dai Atlas shifted and quickly retaliated, kicking Deadlock in the back and knocking him sideways even as he turned to face his opponent. It'd been a long time since he'd fought someone who didn't play by the Knights' formal rules in reflex, but he hadn't forgotten how to handle upstarts like Deadlock. He watched the outsider relax into the roll on his shoulder and come to his pedes smoothly. This time when Deadlock charged him he was ready for the claws and the fearlessness.

One giant fist came down hard, catching Deadlock across the shoulders with half his strength. As the blow struck Deadlock moved with the force by diving in towards one of the triple changer's legs, leaving claw marks along the ankle as he tumbled away. "Is that the best you can do? I'd of crippled you by now if I was actually trying," he taunted.

"And I'd have sent you through the wall and flattened you if I was. Come on, Decepticon. Show me what you've got," Dai Atlas taunted him. "You've barely scratched paint."

"At least they're taunting each other right now. I'll be more worried when they go silent," Kimark observed from the sidelines, wondering when he and Axe were going to have to intervene.

"Or degrade from language to sounds," the smaller of the two giants in the room agreed. "Interesting though, you never irritated him like this."

"I came from the gladiator pits not a war zone," Kimark pointed out. "Not every fight in the pits is intended to be fatal, and actually ticking off someone that much bigger than you is a way of asking for further trouble later on. Deadlock might have spent some time in the pits recently, but that's not
the way he thinks."

Axe hummed his agreement as Dai Atlas actually caught Deadlock across the middle and made a mech-sized dent in the far wall with him. "You also came here looking to change, looking for peace. He's got a ways to go before he's ready to admit it. Have you leaned much else about his early history, before the war?"

Kimark watched Deadlock clamber to his pedes and go for Dai Atlas' arm, clawing it open and using it as a vault point to try and attack his opponent's face. "He doesn't talk about it, and I haven't pressed yet since I don't want to alienate him. I noticed he's suspicious of the abundance of energon, although he seems to be starting to accept that he won't be poisoned or drinking anything contaminated. He isn't used to having available medical care of any decent quality, and his educational levels appear to be inconsistent and don't correspond with any known formal education. All of those things seem to predate the war. He also has substandard parts, particularly his optics. Taking all those things into account, I'd say he's been a street mech since almost the beginning of his existence."

"Then likely sparked as part of a batch of cheap factory workers or the like. With a temper like his he's unlikely to have been tolerated long before he was tossed out," Axe sighed internally at the truth he'd preferred to have not learned. "Nothing that gifted at violence would have been kicked out of the military. Those two are either going to become best comrades or be at each other for ages."

Kimark nodded and watched the pair work each other over. Dai Atlas was oozing energon from a dozen sets of gashes while Deadlock's armor was buckled, dented and torn in places by the impacts.

"I know the feeling. I still haven't worked out why Dai Atlas decided he liked me."

"Neither does he, not really," Axe chuckled. "He'll say something like you changed or you didn't revel in violence anymore, but truth is it's not a logic thing."

"Deadlock's either going to hate him or worship him if Dai Atlas beats him," Kimark said as the pair drove into each other again. "The one time I got him to mention Megatron it was like listening to some mecha talk about the Prime. There was actual reverence in his tone."

"That's a conversation worth having, to find out what about Megatron he feels that way about," Axe said quietly.

"I'll talk to him about it. I know Megatron was a gladiator so I have that as an opening to the conversation," Kimark watched Dai Atlas slam Deadlock into another wall. It was impressive in a way that the smaller warrior just kept getting up and going after his opponent. "I have to admit I'm glad he didn't fight in the same arenas I did. That'd have been a hard fight. We'd have made a fortune, but so many repairs to pay for too."

"No doubt. He's got tenacity, I'll give him that," Axe grunted as Dai Atlas began to bleed from yet another gash from forearm to wrist. "I'm glad they aren't using weapons. Redline's going to snarl enough as is."

"He's not going to be happy have all this to repair on top of Deadlock's upcoming optic replacements," Kimark agreed. "Do you think they're actually going to stop without us intervening?"

"Not a chance," Axe said grimly. "I recommend calling Redline, myself. Find out how well Deadlock obeys him."

::Redline, are you available to come down to training room three?:: Kimlock commed, tagging Axe into the conversation as well. ::It's not urgent yet.::
I'll be there. Will he need to be dropped?: Redline grumbled.

No, Deadlock and my other half are finding out who can take more of a beating.: Axe tried to keep the grin from his voice.

And neither one knows how to stop.: Redline sighed.

I don't think they want to stop any time soon.: Kimark admitted. They seem to be having fun but we should probably stop it before they severely damage each other.: And we all want to know if Deadlock will obey me as well as our dear leader does.: Redline snorted before the line closed. A few kliks later the door to the stands opened and Redline strolled in, taking the measure of the scene before coming over to Axe and Kimark and leaning forward on the railing. You know, if we ever need to put the fear of the Sovereign into someone, this match would no so nicely.

"Yeah, Deadlock offered to take on Axe and Dai Atlas at once," Kimark said with a small grin, happy the medic was present just in case.

"Obviously no shortage of bravado," Redline snorted, then made an easy swing over the railing and gave a sharp whistle. Stand down! came at a roar.

Deadlock snarled audibly and finished his attack on Dai Atlas, slicing his claws once again across the larger mech's left leg. Darting out of immediate reach he took in the intruder. He didn't want to have to fight the medic if he could help it. Repairs didn't tend to go well after doing something like that and he could really use them.

"So, defiance or no clue what that meant?" Redline locked on the defiant mech.

"Decepticons don't tend to interfere in a fight without joining it," Deadlock said still keeping a watchful optic on Dai Atlas. Fewer still are willing to enter an ongoing fight with a berserker.

"If you intend to live here, you are no longer a Decepticon," Redline pointed out instead of the quietly growling Dai Atlas. Though if you need to be dropped into stasis to end such a challenge, anyone in this room can.

Deadlock gave Redline a pointed glance but didn't comment at the insinuation since the medic probably had ways to do it besides just fighting him down. Gruffly, he admitted, It'll take time to suppress those instincts; they've kept me online for a long time.

"That we're all used to," Redline nodded and relaxed his stance into acceptance. Kimark's hardly the only one to come here with killing reflexes. Now, who wants repairs first?

"Deadlock is our guest," Dai Atlas glared at Redline for even suggesting a civilian not be repaired before a Knight.

"He might need to burn off some of that energy. I know you do," Redline shrugged.

"I've got energy to burn," Deadlock admitted, not wanting to show any weakness in front of Dai Atlas. You want to help, Kimark?

"Sure," Kimark nodded and pushed off the railing. We'll leave the big mechs here, grab a smaller room.

"Sounds good," Deadlock glanced at Redline. I'll see you when I've worn him out.
The medic snorted, waited for them to leave and glared at his leader. "I don't want to see you until you've calmed down and understand what's got up your exhaust about him."

"He's too arrogant for his status and abilities," Dai Atlas grumbled at Redline.

"Compared to every other warrior that's approached the Knights." Axe pointed out. "Or is it because he's not impressed with our reputation and challenged you? You know he's exactly the type you'd be sent to break back in the army."

"He is, and he'd be a great frontline warrior. But a Knight?" Dai Atlas huffed into a snarl. "He respects no one."

"He respects Kimark enough to defend him," Axe countered.

"Really?" Redline looked at Axe in surprise.

"Pulled one of his swords from the sheath to do it with, but yes. Went back to Kimark, sword to us," Axe nodded. "You know he's protective of his unit too."

"They are the only back-up he has on this world and he knows it. He's protective of them because of coding forced upon him," Dai Atlas growled, ignoring the comment about Kimark for now. "He shows no real respect for anyone else."

"Kimark said he has a near reverence for Megatron," Axe replied. "He's going to find out what has caused that level of loyalty in a mech rising from such poor circumstances."

"If he still bears that level of loyalty to a war-leader he may never be suitable for citizenship," Dai Atlas scowled. "He'd betray us to Megatron if given an opening."

Redline rolled his optics. "Odds are they all would right now. It takes time to come down from a lifetime of war and you know it, even if you don't like to remember how long it took you to recover."

"There's also the question of whether his loyalty is to the war-leader or the revolutionary that Megatron started out as," Axe pointed out. "From what Kimark and I can tell, Deadlock was cast aside and abandoned early in his existence. When one is that low, a simple offer of energon and a place to recharge might have been seen as a gift from Primus. Add some protection and a function you like and loyalty is pretty much guaranteed. That doesn't mean it lasts."

Dai Atlas grunted, but nodded.

"Well, now that you've stopped bleeding I'll be off to see to our new berserker. Do come by when you finish a binding on this. This should not be common," Redline locked his gaze with a mech that outranked him.

Another grunt, then a snort. "I'll be by when I'm settled."

As he waited with Aurora for their arrivals, Thundercracker took a moment to once again settle his field and processor. Five cubes of energon rested on a tray on the table with what Aurora said were their preferred additives available. Wing wasn't scheduled to do anything more dangerous than cleaning duty tonight, so the gestalt bond should remain quiet. The simple act of meeting three Seekers shouldn't be making him this nervous, but this meeting was a big step towards his integration into civilian Seeker society and there was so much about him that had never been civilian, even before the war. He couldn't help it. He knew that his behavior from their perspective would count towards his status.
He saw a trine headed towards them and even before he could pick out their colors to ID them he knew they weren't *trine*. Two Orders and a third, he was sure, which matched who he'd been told was coming.

"He knows to keep it in check, but try to remember that Sogdo's tactile, even for a Seeker," Aurora spoke to help him focus. "He'll want to hug you before he leaves if you can manage it."

"I was trined with Skywarp and have spent almost two vorns in close quarters with Wing. One hug shouldn't be too much of a problem considering how much physical contact those two prefer," Thundercracker said with a bit of confidence. He would make himself tolerate the contact from the other Order if necessary. He'd done much worse things to gain allies in the past. It was still nice to be warned that it might come and have an extra lock on his relaxes for it. It was also a reminder that Aurora wanted him to succeed, at least enough she wouldn't risk kin for it.

As they landed Thundercracker couldn't help but notice just how different frame-wise the three visitors were compared to Aurora, let alone his own heavy war frame upgrade to be the core of a war-frame gestalt. He knew Redline was still looking into removing armor and mass from all of them, but Thundercracker knew he'd never be as lightly armored as these three, which might be a strike against him in many civilian environments. He was reasonably sure he'd never been that lightly armored. His heritage didn't lean towards such lightly built frames.

The lead Order touched down, his pale green optics giving Thundercracker the judging gaze of a seasoned officer before focusing on Aurora and embraced the Master Knight with the kind of authoritative affection only a creator could get away with given her status in the general world.

"It is good to see you again, creator-Order," Aurora snuggled into the embrace briefly before stepping back to take her authority back. "Northwind, this is my charge, Thundercracker."

"Greetings, Northwind," Thundercracker said with a bow and deep wing dip. Even if he hadn't already been told that Northwind was high ranked, that knowing gaze had stirred up a few old memories of the elders in his own flock back on Cybertron.

The two other Seekers landed behind Northwind and approached. Saamanjasy was in the traditional place for a Vision while flying with his Action's creator, and Sogdo, as the lesser ranked Order was appropriately taking the Action's position. The greetings were just as quick, just as polite, and reminded a grateful Thundercracker of introductions in his creation flock. So this flock was of a similar economic status to what he'd grown up with. Far from wealthy but just as far from poor.

"So charge, not noxa?" Northwind asked his creation with a quiet, sharp tone.

"Just my charge. I have not spoken for him. Wing has. I am merely educating him," she assured him, then focused on everyone once the greetings were complete. "There is energon and seats if we wish to sit."

"Noxa?" Thundercracker asked quietly as the group moved to the table.

"A Knight may vouch for someone to come into the Citadel if there is question about their ability to behave or a standing order to refuse all newcomers. It is a legal status among us and says you are fully responsible for your noxa's behavior. You are Wing's noxa, and my charge. I'm simply agreeing to keep an optic on you, report on your progress and do my best to educate and introduce you into our society, but if you behave badly the punishment does not fall on me."

"I was mildly curious why the four of you were willing to accept us as your charges so easily. So Wing has all four of us as noxa?" Thundercracker asked, trying to conceal his displeasure that this
was another thing Wing had glossed over when discussing the effects of their arrival. He had to
wonder if anyone had told Deadlock this yet. It might be a partial explanation why he was behaving
so well since misbehavior would reflect on Wing not Kimark.

"Yes, and that will continue unless another Knight chooses to take you on as one. I honestly expect
you to be settled and civilians before that much trust is built, though it is not impossible. Wing is not
the only Knight prone to snap judgments at times," she acknowledged.

"Trust is a hard thing to build but easily broken," Thundercracker agreed quietly as he approached
the seated trio. Keeping his status as a mechling Order in mind, he seated himself next to Aurora.

"So, Aurora has told us a bit about you," Saamanjasy said with a warm smile from his place between
the two Orders. "Are you settling in well?"

"Such as four orns allows, it has been good here," Thundercracker put on his best rendition of the
truth for them. "I have found returning to civilization more a relief than trial so far."

"That's good to hear," Sogdo said with a grin. "We're trying to keep the best of the old as we build
the new, so hopefully a lot of things will feel familiar as you're exposed to them. What do you like
best so far?"

"Regular energon that doesn't taste like sludge," he gave the brutal truth. "Such a nice washrack and
recharging near others have also been extremely pleasant."

Saamanjasy and Sogdo both flared their wings a bit with shock at the blunt admission of just how
bad things had been. Saamanjasy rallied to respond, "Well then, the confectioneries and high grade
are going to be welcome treats for you. I'll remember to bring some next time I visit. Do you prefer
sweet, tart or acidic?"

"You've been recharging alone until now?" Sogdo asked. The Order looked like he wanted to pull
the larger Seeker into a hug.

"Sweet, and it would be welcome. Wing spoke often of the confectioneries in the city,"
Thundercracker didn't try to hide the fondness he had for the other flier. "For everyone's safety I
have been recharging enough apart that I won't startle into attacking. I haven't recharged with
Seekers who weren't trine since not long after the Exodus. At first it was too much to take with
everyone traumatized by Vos's destruction, then war-time culture simply began to normalize that
way. No one without a bond was trusted enough to recharge with. On the journey here I recharged
with Wing often and occasionally one of the others. It's not the same when it's not Seeker."

"No, it wouldn't be," Saamanjasy agreed as he placed a hand lightly on Sogdo's arm. "Hopefully
those reflexes will be under control soon so you can join a Seeker pile and recharge properly."

"So Vos is truly destroyed," Northwind said solemnly, confirming something he obviously knew.

"Yes, by a photon missile," Thundercracker shivered. "It hit her below the main tower. Almost no
one survived, the few that did joined with the rebellion, since they were the only ones to offer aid. I'd
say it's fair to say that only Iacon and Kaon are still largely intact, and even those not by the
standards I've seen here."

"We knew someone might attack Vos, but we never imagined such destruction. Such a tragic waste
of life and resources," Northwind said, wings dipped respectfully for those lost so long ago. The
other Seekers joined him in silence.

"That kind of destruction would have been incredibly hard to endure," Sogdo pressed up against
Saamanjasy before straightening again, "Surviving all that means you're strong and willing to work to survive. You'll eventually find a place within the flocks. I'm certain of it."

"I am those things, and stubborn as well," Thundercracker chuckled a bit. "As much as I must unlearn, I agree I will manage it, and it will be worth it to fly with a flock again. I never broke to the point where I felt being alone was normal. It is a relief to be among those who feel the same."

"That's good to know," Saamanjasy said. "Knowing what must be unlearned is as important as learning anything new. Now, Aurora said you are from a Martial flock?"

"Half Martials, half military. Aleno's flock," he dipped his wings, absently thinking how nice it was to talk of before the war with happy intent.

"That might explain why you seem to have been so quick to accept Aurora's choice to become a Knight," Saamanjasy said. "I understand that some of the Visions in military flocks would enter into those careers along with the Actions and Orders."

"The Air Martials as well," he dipped his wings in agreement. "There were several in my creation flock, including a clutchmate of mine. Another in my flock was a military sniper. Visions can be incredibly fierce fighters. My last one was such. He fought his way to lead the entire Decepticon air force."

"A Vision was able to beat all the Orders and act as the military leader over all the fliers?" Northwind stared at Thundercracker for a long klik. The idea that a Vision had done so would outrage the traditionalists even more than the concept of his own Vision creation being a Master in the Knights and likely being the next Sovereign.

"Yes, and in a contest more savage than anything you can imagine. He was a scientist before the war. After Vos he literally tore the wings off anything who challenged him," Thundercracker's wings showed his mixed feelings about it. "He hated what he had to do to make and keep his rank, to conceal what he was, but he did it. If Megatron hadn't begun to suffer from corrupt coding it might really have been enough to end the war in time to save something. As it stands I'm glad I'm more inclined towards a soft Vision, someone more like my first, than Starscream."

"Wow," Sogdo managed, contemplating that kind of a violent society.

"Your first?" Saamanjasy asked quietly, a bit of sympathy in his field.

"I trined well before the city fell. Sound Barrier, Farcry and I were expecting our first clutch to be laid less than a decaorn after the city fell, but none of them made it," Thundercracker's wings flared out, catching them all with how little he'd processed it. "I'd trined again with Skywarp and Starscream only orns later. It was a very unsettled time for everyone."

All three looked distressed at his admission and the nature of his loss. Saamanjasy said, "I'm sorry for your loss of both trines. Someday when you feel comfortable, I would like to talk to you about putting together a list of current survivors to release to the flocks and place in the Archives."

"Thank you," Thundercracker flickered his thanks. As honest as the move was, it was also one that his wings only half remembered how to do. Then he dipped his wings in ready, even eager agreement to the request. "I am also willing to speak to kin or curious about them, if any wish. They should understand nothing I can tell them is good, beyond the survival. Battered as I am, I survived the war relatively well compared to most. There are very few I could recommend for a fate other than reformatting if they had to become civilians again. The list I can compile when I have the laws settled enough to feel I'm safe to fly in public again. Talking will be longer." He hesitated. "I can also detail
the when and how of deactivation of those who survived the destruction of Vos but did not survive to my abduction. I know all of those who fought and most who remained neutral."

"The few Cybertronians we've accepted since our departure have all said that the war was going badly, so most of the flocks will not expect good news. Still, there is some comfort in knowing what has happened," Northwind said quietly.

"Agreed," Thundercracker said quietly, then forced himself out of his mood. "Enough of the past now, please. What would be good to see first, when Aurora feels I can visit sites?"

"Depending on your interests there are some beautiful art galleries," Saamanjasy said, gratefully following Thundercracker's suggestion to change topics.

"We have some flight obstacle courses laid out up near the ceiling if you're interested in that," Sogdo added.

"I'm very interested in both," he perked up sharply, but especially at the obstacle course. "I would be very interested in knowing how my skills fair by city standards. I haven't flown a course in ages. Did many of the old masterpieces survive, at least as copies?"

"We have lots of images, holos and scans of the originals as well as replicas created here," Saamanjasy answered, pleased to have something good pass on to their newest addition. "There is also a large library containing all but the hardest to get classics. Even those have a representation based on memory. We saved everything we could and data storage was unlimited, unlike physical storage."

Medium blue wings shivered with a burst of intense joy it was nearly an overload. "That is wonderful." He looked around after a moment to settle his system. "Do you know if other cities took the same care? Praxus...."

"They did," Aurora spoke up. "Another of my flock is a merchant who knows Praxus well, both here and on Cybertron. He's said that they took great care to recreate their heritage."

"Thundercracker dipped his wings in thanks. "Prowl will be very pleased to hear that. He still grieves for the art and knowledge lost."

"He and the rest will probably enjoy the race tracks scattered around the city," Sogdo offered. "It doesn't look nearly as exciting as flying a course, but the grounders seem to enjoy them."

"True enough. I'm sure they will," Thundercracker agreed with obvious pleasure that the grounders would be cared for and the implication that he'd be able to watch them on occasion.

"I don't completely understand the situation," Sogdo admitted, "but Aurora says the grounders and Knight Wing are your flock and that it is as permanent as any true Seeker flock. It is a good thing that you have others who are working to become citizens as support."

"We were forced to become a gestalt," Thundercracker gave the most basic version, then continued. "The coding forces us to view each other that way. Prowl calls us unit. Wing and I say flock. I'm not sure Jazz or Deadlock have such a glyph, but the effects are the same. We're past the stage where we fought it, and I agree that it's good we're in this together. More complicated for the Knights, I am sure. It's a welcome thing to have those I know and trust with me in this. I'm especially glad for Wing and his willingness to bring us here."

"Haji said you are working to integrate the new law codes with your old ones from Vos. I am a prosecutor, and I would offer my assistance," Northwind said, then smiled at the welcome flutter of
Thundercracker's wings. "I will admit to concerns after I was told another Seeker from Cybertron was being integrated, especially when I found out you were an officer. Sound Burst did not handle the change well and wound up reformatting so he could accept living here. I think you might just have enough will and support to overcome the difficulties and succeed."

"It would have been a very different situation if the gestalt coding had not broken my trine bond the first time we formed Flightplan," Thundercracker admitted, the moment still a painful one for him. "Once that happened and my deception about Starscream was revealed there would be no going back for me. If I still had a trine I would have fought to go back as well." He stilled for a moment, then shook the mood off with effort. "Perhaps it is personality and timing as well. When Sound Burst disappeared there was still real hope that the war wouldn't be long and his Order didn't report his deactivation for centuries. I expect that was his reformatting. I've seen far more of the war and always knew it was far worse than many of the lower ranks knew."

"The gestalt coding and resulting broken trine bond are events that understandably have influenced your responses to these situations. There is no shame in recognizing that you were in an impossible situation. If there was a chance you could successfully return you would have done it; but you cannot do so given who is in your flock," Northwind agreed. "It has been some time since an outsider came here, and I understand that the war grew progressively worse as time passed. Practicality eventually has to overcome unrealistic optimism."

"Very true. How many need an Order in the next couple centuries?" Thundercracker shifted towards the future again.

"There are a few partial trines tentatively developing among the mechlings, but there are five Visions and seven Actions who haven't found an Order yet," Saamanjasy said, having already started looking into this when Thundercracker's situation was brought to their attention. It was a bit unorthodox having this wide an age range in a trine, but Thundercracker could possibly act as a stabilizing influence for younger trine mates. All arguments aside, the truth was that Thundercracker didn't have much choice and neither did the flocks. There weren't any mature adults looking for an Order and deactivations were rare enough it couldn't be expected there would be any. The old Seeker had to trine and his only options would be much, much younger than he was.

"Good," Thundercracker's relief was genuine. "Enough we'll all have some choice in it."

"Choice is important," Saamanjasy agreed, thinking about what Thundercracker had said earlier. Given the circumstances of grief and destruction, the Order didn't seem to have had much of a choice when he trined the second time. This third time, the flocks had to put aside their reservations about him and his age to deal with an unpleasant reality. The last thing anyone wanted was a Seeker with a gestalt destabilizing due to the lack of a trine. He could take them all with him, or worse, make them want to take him elsewhere to find a trine.

"Agreed. How does one find potential trinemates here?" Thundercracker asked politely.

"Most of the mechlings either first meet in classes, especially flight training," Saamanjasy said thoughtfully. "or they get tossed together when flocks have a social gathering. Once they're friends they start hanging out together. In your particular case, the initial meetings with the potential trinemates will probably be when you join the flight classes. I'm teaching almost everyone currently looking for trinemates, so I know which flocks to approach."

"Thank you," Thundercracker dipped his wings. "You do not mind that I might replace you as flight instructor?"

"I enjoy training the fledglings, but I also enjoy my time in the archives," Saamanjasy admitted.
"There is also the possibility of us splitting the workload if you find another interest as well. It may be that we find one of us is better suited working with the newer fliers while the other enjoys the more advanced levels."

"All true, and there will be classes I cannot cover if I'm accepted into S&R when something happens," Thundercracker agreed willingly and honestly. "Will you tell me of your students?"

Saamanjasy brightened and happily began to chat about strengths, weaknesses, placement and personality, along with any likely proto-trine formations happening.
Deadlock reluctantly followed Kimark towards medical for the third time in as many orns. He wasn't happy being here for another medical procedure, even if this one was mostly voluntary. At least he had physical proof Redline and Dagger were at least as competent as Hook at repairing injuries. As crazy as it still sounded to have voluntary surgery, he couldn't lie about the appeal of seeing with the clarity and colors that Kimark did.

"Good orn, Deadlock," Thundercracker's familiar voice rumbled as the pair entered the room. Deadlock relaxed internally although he kept it hidden from his field and frame. So far Kimark had done little to mark him as untrustworthy in Deadlock's optics but having the largest member of his unit present to guard him during this procedure was definitely settling some of his unease at being vulnerable.

"Hi Kimark, Deadlock, Thundercracker," Dagger greeted them cheerfully. "A private room has been set up for the surgery and recovery."

"Less busybodies around me during this the better," Deadlock grunted.

"Kimark and I will watch the door and make certain no one else comes near until you have finished recovery," Thundercracker promised. "Do you wish me to remain in field contact during the procedure or will my presence in the room be sufficient?"

"Being there is fine," Deadlock grunted and followed directions to lay down on the medberth.

"If you would activate voluntary stasis the berth will take it to medical stasis," Dagger requested. "We have found the two stage method makes edgy warriors feel more in control."

Deadlock flared his armor a bit. "I'm not going into stasis. I've handled worse medical procedures online."

"But ... why?" Dagger stared at him in incomprehension. "Why endure that?"

"Trust," Kimark said just before Thundercracker echoed it.

"Current status as refugees or not, we are both Decepticons by culture. Medics are not trustworthy," Thundercracker explained further. "I had my trine to guard me, but Deadlock only had himself."

"You do realize that if you move at all you could damage very sensitive components? You'd be blind for orns," Dagger's distress was genuine.

"Relax. He's not the first one I've done this to. Kimark was aware for his procedure as well," Redline said as he came in and locked the door behind him. "Wing will remain out there unless you say
"Kimark, would you join Wing and guard the door from the outside?" Thundercracker asked respectfully. "This will give us a stronger defensive force outside the doors." ::It will also give you a chance to talk to Wing during this procedure instead of staying silent and focused here. I'm sure he'll need the distraction.::

"Will do," Kimark agreed after a glance at Redline and Dagger confirmed the medics didn't want him to stay. His field agreed with Thundercracker's reasoning too, and the unspoken one of a crowd being a bad thing. He slipped out and the door audibly locked again.

"All right Deadlock, I would prefer to lock everything above the shoulder so there is little chance of accidental movement. It will leave your limbs free," Redline focused on the kind of patient he hated working on the most.

"I can work with that," Deadlock huffed and agreed to the compromise. After all, he'd still have the ability to grab or kick anyone that tried to attack him. Settling fully on the medical berth he waited to see if Redline would keep to his words or try to put him into stasis.

"Dagger, check everything is ready," Redline instructed as they set up the comm-based sync that helped surgery go smoothly. He moved carefully next to Deadlock, making a point of telegraphing his movements as he would with a first-metacycle training spar. When Deadlock didn't object he connected to a medical port and allowed his patient to let him in.

It took Deadlock almost a klik before he reluctantly granted Redline access to his systems. This was a level of distrust beyond what Kimark had shown during his first vorns in the Citadel. It didn't really come as a surprise, even if it was a sad note. All that Redline kept carefully away from Deadlock as he moved slowly enough for Deadlock to follow as he locked down even the smallest and most automatic motor controls of the neck and helm. Then he backed out to the point where he was only monitoring.

Once Redline had finished and backed off, Deadlock flexed his frame one last time and then settled into a comfortable but ready position. If anyone came through that door and got through Thundercracker he'd be able to fight. ::Ready.::

Redline nodded and Dagger came over to assist him in the somewhat messy process of removing the old optics right down to their internal processors. They both knew just how much it had to hurt to be aware of it and Dagger felt his respect for his mentor increase once more in knowing the older medic was feeling this to some extent as he monitored their patient. The fact that Deadlock continued to lay there unmoving during all the whole procedure was disturbing to the younger medic, as it was proof of how much pain the warrior was used to enduring.

Once Redline and Dagger finished removing the old optical systems the utter lack of optical readouts was extremely disconcerting for the warrior. Deadlock focused on fighting the urge to slash at the hands causing both his blindness and the lancing pain in his head as they continued to work. The inability to move his neck even if he wanted to pricked at his paranoia as the two sets of hands continued touching his face. Medical procedures always hurt, he reminded himself. This is no different from when Hook replaced his shattered pelvis after that fight with Ironhide.

He hated it, resented it, resented the past that made him endure the pain like this. Hated so much about his history. Almost everything other than the fact he'd survived it all. Everything the universe had thrown at him he'd endured and conquered. Even some of these Knights. In time he'd beat more of them. They sure were fun in the berth though.
Kimark didn't seem to be a bad one; at least he mostly had the right idea about fighting and 'facing. Though he'd grown softer here without struggle.

Deadlock's unit weren't soft, except for Wing who didn't really count since he was a Knight and Thundercracker liked him that way. Prowl and Thundercracker were tough and capable; Jazz was ruthless and deadly. They'd survive anything Dai Atlas threw at them.

There was a spark deep inside his head and abruptly one optic center began to register input again. It was just fuzzy light, but with each tiny spark more and more came in until he began to get color and shapes. He knew this visual. The optics themselves weren't installed yet but the deeper components were now connected. He could get around like this. Had more than once. Plus even he knew enough to get the optics installed now. He was sure Jazz knew even more.

It was tempting to end the surgery soon and get the lenses later on his own terms. He reminded himself that the parts were already here, and he had Thundercracker and Wing looking out for trouble. Even with medics installing them he should be safe enough for now. It wasn't as if these medics were doing poor work. This was less pain than repairs to his face and cranial structures usually caused.

"Installing the first optics," Redline said before the light to one side was briefly blocked out. A few pricks of pain and everything came into bright, colorful focus far faster than he was used to.

Vivid colors in shades he'd never seen outside Kimark's memory flooded into view. There was no point stopping now; this was faster than any surgery he'd had before. Designations and color codes popped up in his processor in response to background thoughts on what all the new colors were and his entire chassis groaned in pain of the kind of wasn't used to. He'd never felt his processors on fire like this before.

"That will improve as you get used to the new color range and focal speed of these," Redline commented as the other optic came on line and gave Deadlock depth perception back, along with twice the dataload.

"Can I move now?" Deadlock grunted as he restrained himself from punching something, anything he could reach. He hadn't expected this kind of processor pain and it was irritating him. Maybe a darker room for a while until he adjusted to the focal speed?

"Try dimming the input to 20% and gradually increasing it," Redline suggested, then released the lock on Deadlock's movement. "Yes, and drink this," he insisted as a cube of coolant was offered.

Deadlock dropped the input to 25% and stared at the offered coolant. It didn't look right, and he wasn't completely certain it wasn't contaminated. Glancing over at Thundercracker he noted that the Seeker didn't look concerned. Venting briefly, he took a sip and checked the coolant. It tasted purer than most of the coolant he'd had before and almost immediately he felt the fiery, throbbing pain begin to recede.

"If you feel stable enough to leave, you may go now. I want you back in the morning for an integration check," Redline told him firmly with a look at Thundercracker that promised the Seeker would be held responsible for his irascible teammate. Thundercracker nodded his acceptance of the order.

Deadlock checked that all the restraints were removed from his systems before climbing to his pedes. He ignored the flashes of pain in his processor. "Let's get out of here."

Thundercracker nodded and they both heard the door unlock before either reached it.
"There you are!" Wing all but pounced on Deadlock, hugging him before grabbing his cheekguards to hold him still so bright gold optics could fully check out rich red ones. Next to him Kimark almost choked that Wing wasn't already embedded in the far wall.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm here, bratling. If you're done being clingy we can get out of here." Deadlock grunted with almost tolerant amusement of Wing being Wing. If he wasn't like this it would mean something had happened out here during the surgery.

"Why are your optics so dim?" Wing demanded, his grip tightening and gaze sharpening slightly.

"Massive upgrade. They'll be really sensitive for a while until it's all settled," Kimark answered. "Come on, I'm sure Marwir will let you snuggle him all night if he'll let you."

"Will it get you moving if I say yes? I don't like hanging around medical more than absolutely necessary; it gives the medics too many ideas and chances to do something," Deadlock started moving towards the door, trying not to jostle Wing or his own frame too much in the process. It was kind of nice having the flier's attention focused on him again, but the staring was a bit more than he was used to and was starting to make his processor ache. He'd never thought about how complex optics could be too look at. He could keep focusing on smaller and smaller sections seemingly forever.

Wing let him go and cooed happily. Even Thundercracker, who'd just lost his snuggle-mate for the night, seemed more amused than upset by it.

"Let's get back to my quarters. I'm going to crash; you can comm your spark-sitter and ask if you can have a cuddle party with my offline frame," Deadlock grumbled as he pulled away and started out towards the hallway.

Kimark stared at his charge before following after him; that had to have been the most affectionate behavior he'd ever seen from Deadlock and by far the most tolerant of anyone. Maybe there really was something to this gestalt code thing. If that was really what he was looking at it was seriously creepy.

Jazz looked around at the odd cluster of Knights and Initiates around them. He wasn't too surprised that there were more Aerials than Seekers present, but the nice mix of grounders was encouraging. Since this had been his idea, Jazz got to be the first to speak. "Hello, all. All of you know Dart and Wing, and I'm Jazz for the few I haven't spoken to yet. We're glad to see so many of you are interested in our Sky Show presentation concept. To give you a true idea of what we're actually planning on doing, we're going to give you a little demonstration."

With a glance Wing lifted off in a smooth, slow assent to the middle of the largest sparring room decked out with all the bars and cables of Dart's performances, but also with a half dozen poles of varying heights scattered about. Jazz glanced over at Dart and gave a quick nod, and the pair began swiftly clambering up two of the taller poles. Keeping to the same cadence the trio had practiced earlier, the two grounders climbed almost in sync up the poles before spinning and flipping themselves each over to a parallel bar on opposite sides of the room.

Wing wove under and around them as they worked around the room using as much flare as they could, systems trained and perfected by dedication and survival gave speed and energy to what could have been a show of concentration the feel of a game. Jazz was the first to launch himself into the air, ricocheting off a properly angled Wing to reach a cable hanging from the ceiling. Dart followed suit just a few nanokliks later, timing it so the acrobats wouldn't collide in midair. Wing shifted angles immediately, allowing Dart to continue his performance.
The two grounders spun around each other on hanging cables until they reached out and Dart grabbed Jazz's hand before letting go of his rope. While it really was just part of the show, it was also a way to show that Jazz had earned the Knight's trust for more than not stabbing him in the night or running away.

They twirled together for six rotations before Dart let go, flying as well as any grounder could to smoothly ricochet off a wall to land on a pole.

Jazz let himself continue spinning as he spiraled down the cable. Eventually, just before he reached the end, he used the momentum to fling himself upward. Arching through the air he snagged first one bar then another, climbing back up towards the rafters in a series of flips, spins and arched leaps.

All the while Wing dove, banked and climbed among the maze of moving cables and bars. He was always just in the right position as each of the pair vaulted off his frame or take the boost from his hands. It felt amazing, this incredible freedom in agility and his skills that also took a bit of trust.

Wing landed first, his wings tucked in neatly and his field infectious by the time Jazz and Dart landed on either side. Jazz scanned the audience for their reactions as he said, "Now, imagine something like that with a dozen or so performers involved in an even larger area."

"The coordination of this show is going to involve a lot of practice, precision and exact timing on the part of the performers," Dart said seriously before grinning. "but nothing quite like it has every occurred in any sky show I've ever heard of."

"If this is a sky show, where will it be set?" Demeter asked.

"We don't know exactly where yet. It will be over the Citadel if we can't get the city to agree to a tower-based performance," Dart explained. "One of the factors is how many are in the team. The larger the team, and the more fliers in it, the larger the space we'll need."

"The amount and positioning of bars, poles, cables and other structural paraphernalia will be determined by how many grounders are involved," Wing said. "The more grounders, the more aerial obstacles we'll have to maneuver around. This is going to be a complex flight training exercise."

"Trust is going to be critical," Jazz said, even as he recalled how long it had taken him to truly trust Dart with his energon. "Everyone will have to trust the others to be in the right position at the right time if we are to avoid a crash or a fall. Redline is going to be annoyed if there are too many accidents."

"Something we're all motivated to avoid," Bladewing chuckled.

"How many are you hoping for?" Dive asked with definite interest in his wings.

"As many as can safely maneuver up there," Jazz shrugged. "So anywhere from one to two dozen at least. If we have more mecha interested than is safe for one team we could even work on two separate shows. It'll be a balancing act getting the optimum number of fliers and grounders working together in a tight space. Actually, if you know a tactician or two who would be interested in a unique challenge, they could help us coordinate that part of the show. Our gestalt mate Prowl would be another grounder that would probably join us and help out with the logistics, but he's not online yet to ask."

"Talon," Demeter yipped around a snicker and several agreeing grins and comments.

"He may not care about the show, but any excuse to use his tac-net is a welcome one," Lightwing added with a flutter of his unique light-beam orange wings.
"Especially when we start throwing additional variables at him as we discover new things to worry about," Wing snickered. "We're going to run into challenges as we practice. That's going to be half the fun."

"So who's interested in trying?" Jazz asked with a grin when several grounders stepped forward with the expected fliers.
Chapter by gatekat

Chapter Summary

Thundercracker gets his first real outing to fly (both with a trine and solo) at a test course in front of the mechling flight class. Flight class 1. Lots of grounder talking while he's there.

Wing stood next to Dai Atlas and Mawrir watching Thundercracker soar overhead in formation with Sogdo and Aurora. In some ways he wanted to fly the course himself, but this was as much a show for the young Seekers crowded around Saamanjasy as it was a chance for Thundercracker to stretch his wings. From the look of the young wings, the elder Seeker was doing a fine job of impressing them all. From Dai Atlas's teek, the ancient warrior was also fairly impressed.

"I doubt he was ever a fast Seeker, but he definitely knows how to handle his frame even now," Marwir hummed thoughtfully. "Might be worth approaching him to teach many of ours to fly better."

"He taught me how to shoot from the air while we were on Kessai and was very patient with me even as I struggled with the concept," Wing admitted. "He didn't have a problem adjusting his teaching to my flight style. I think he would make an excellent flight instructor."

"When he is better settled. It would not hurt, though there is no rush," Dai Atlas agreed as Sogdo and Aurora pulled out of the formation and transformed to watch the newcomer put on a burst of speed to roar through the course far faster than anyone short of the stunt frames dared to. "Quite impressive for the slowest of his trine."

"Starscream was an incredible flier and Skywarp could teleport practically anywhere on the battlefield. He had a lot of incentive to learn keep up with them," a familiar voice spoke up from behind them. Dart hovered next to Jazz as he walked forward and stood next to Wing staring up at the Seeker. "He'd use those speed bursts to surprise our fliers if they weren't careful. They hated that sonic boom of his."

"I don't doubt it. Well-delivered even a natural one can drop someone out of the sky. A spark gift one would be far worse, I expect," Dai Atlas nodded to the newcomers. "How close to his top performance is this?"

"Well, he doesn't have anyone shooting at him, which is when I usually saw him in the sky and can do wonders for motivation and risk-taking," Jazz admitted as he watched Thundercracker cut very close to a stalactite. "He's also had a bit stuck on the ground or in space so he's stretching his wings. I wouldn't say his pushing himself to the extreme of his upper limits just yet, but it's an accurate demonstration of what he's capable of. I'm curious how fast he'll go on the next pass now that he's flown the course twice."

Dai Atlas nodded his understanding and agreement. One wing cocked in curiosity when instead of angling towards the beginning again, Thundercracker transformed his thrusters forward to slow himself below his stall speed in the shortest distance possible, then completed the transformation to take the course backwards at the same speed he'd taken it on forwards. The youths were predictably
afraid for him, then shocked in amazement that it could even be done.

"That's a new move," Jazz hummed. "I've seen others do it, but they're the top-end speeders like Starscream and stunt frames," he nodded towards Wing and Marwir. "Or the really heavy shuttle frames trying to land in under a half a dozen mechanomiles."

"That's risky to pull off with a frame like his but incredible to watch him do," Wing said with a grin. "I think he's making a strong impression on his audience."

"We're definitely going to have to have him work with some of the Knights later," Marwir said. "Hopefully no one watching is going to decide to try to pull that off without a lot of practice first."

"If they do it will help weed out the stupid," Jazz said with a shrug.

"They don't do that anymore," Dai Atlas told him firmly. "It was a condition on every Seeker who joined us."

"Understood," Jazz said with an accepting nod, even as he privately doubted the practice had completely disappeared. "Most of us got rather callous during the war. Someone getting offline by their own stupidity was better than them taking others with them."

"I remember that processor set, and the cultures built on it," Dai Atlas settled fully. "It's the one that created me, after all. The military has long been far more brutal than any Seeker standard. Are Ironhide or Chromia still surviving?"

"Those two will outlast everyone," Jazz said with a chuckle. "Ironhide is Optimus' main bodyguard and trained a lot of our soldiers. I've got more in common with Chromia than I do him, but they're both among the best to have beside you in a fight."

"Of that I have no doubt," the giant agreed with a smile. "I tried to get them assigned to my unit whenever I could. Even when they were young they were in high demand. I can imagine the demand only increased as the war became more desperate. What other old warriors are still around?"

"Kup is still as stubborn as ever and has even more stories to tell. Ultra Magnus and Prowl don't get along at all, so I wouldn't bring him up when Prowl can hear, but he's doing well last I heard. Omega Supreme is still looming around although he doesn't talk to anybody if he can help it. I don't know if you were still around when Powertrain joined the military, he's still out there. Ratchet isn't a warrior but he's still the terror of Medical," Jazz thought back to few old soldiers still around.

"Ultra Magnus. I'm pleased he's still around. He was one of those I worked on personally just before I retired. It's good to know he didn't revert," Dai Atlas didn't hide his smile. "I will keep talk of him away from Prowl, thank you for that warning. I would have expected them to get along reasonably well."

"I don't know everything that happened between them, but they hate each other. It's one of the main reasons we couldn't go back to the Autobots with the gestalt. Magnus would never let Prowl keep his rank or position being bonded to two former Decepticons," Jazz said as he watched Thundercracker finish a second backward lap.

"Would that not be the Prime's decision?" Dai Atlas asked curiously.

Jazz agreed before explaining further, including some things he'd once thought himself. "You'd think so and he normally would, but the politics among the officers can get intense. Especially if it comes down to who will the troops listen to on the field. Prowl's a genius when it comes to tactics, but too many Autobots think he's close to sparkless. Prowl doesn't make friends easily, and that doesn't help
when the political games start. It won't do much good having Prowl leading tactical if Magnus has convinced the commanders they can't trust him anymore. He makes the hard choices, and a few respect him for it. The twins listen to him, and they rarely obey anyone."

"All true," Dai Atlas hummed. "Then Cybertron's loss is Aelios' gain. Though I could wish for other circumstances, I am glad you will not face comrades demoted and untrusted."

"There were no good options one way or another back on Cybertron. Wing made a good argument for this place, but we did consider all alternatives before following him here," Jazz admitted with a nod toward the Aerial. "We'll adjust and learn to fit in with civilians."

"I'm sure you will. Even Deadlock is a survivor first, though there is no intention of forcing him to be a civilian. It is not in anyone's best interest to deny him an outlet for his nature," the giant said and meant it despite his instinctive dislike of the berserker. "You in particular will find a ready welcome in the city when you have relaxed. There is much for you to do for fun and function."

"Wing and Dart have both told me about the clubs and music scene. I think I eventually learn to fit in there. At least I should have some fun exploring everything for a while," Jazz agreed, not elaborating that it might take him treating it as a long term mission to actually manage to fit in. "Thundercracker seems to be settling back into a civilian role well."

"He is. It's very good to hear how well he's settling down. All of you are adapting far better than I expected, though I admit he was of particular concern. A Seeker that couldn't settle into civilian Seeker society is in far more trouble than anyone else who has issues adapting," Dai Atlas agreed. "How are you getting along with Dart?"

"We occasionally have a bit of a world-view clash when we start talking about certain things, but that's kind of expected given we have very different backgrounds. Otherwise things have been going well so far as I'm concerned," Jazz shrugged.

"Jazz's observations have occasionally given me things to consider," Dart agreed.

"Anything in particular?" Dai Atlas was suddenly interested in his function as as leader of a mech who's world-view might be changing.

"Punishments and the differing views on them, especially pain," Dart thought for a moment about some of the other divisions they'd discovered. "I keep being reminded of the dramatic contrast between life here and back on Cybertron, especially involving energon."

The Sovereign grunted at that. "Very true. Even though the Citadel was isolated from the worst of it for being largely self-sufficient we had to be far more careful than we do here. It's good to know abundance. Better to remember what it is like not to have it."

"It certainly makes me appreciate the variety and availability of energon here," Dart agreed, then looked up at Thundercracker, who was once more flying with Sogdo and Aurora and seeming almost playful with it despite the formation. "How long will he keep going?"

"My guess, until he's ready to drop if someone doesn't order him down," Jazz chuckled, earning a grin from Wing and chuckle from Marwir.

"Which won't be soon, since he just invited anyone to fly with him," she rumbled and glanced at her charge before they both lifted off along with almost the entire class of young Seekers.

Jazz looked over at Dai Atlas as the rest of the fliers took off to join the trio. "You going to join them too?"
"Not yet. I wish to watch them both fly in a group without being too aware of me," the giant rumbled softly. "If they're still up in a couple breems I will."

"They be up there until someone calls them down," Jazz said with a grin as he watch Marwir and Wing circle around the Seekers as Thundercracker chased them.
"So, ever been to a detailers?" Kimark asked as they finished breakfast in the common room. It was a tense thing with so many mecha around, but it was also good for everyone to show that Deadlock could keep himself from striking anything in range.

Deadlock grimaced and finished draining his cube before speaking. "If you mean one of those places where mechs spent more shanix on paint than I used to have in half a vorn, no. I've had mechs touch up my paint before, especially if I was going before Megatron or doing something special like that."

"Those places exist out in the city, but I'm talking about something closer to the second," Kimark smiled. "The Citadel and the Knights are largely self-contained, even here. So there's a Knight here that specializes in it. Deco's good and he's got a nice shop, but it's still his secondary function."

"Makes you better able to take care of yourselves if something happens," Deadlock agreed. "Does everyone here have a secondary function?"

"We all have useful skills, though not everyone's skills are needed often enough for it to be a function," Kimark said.

"Hmm, I can see why some of those skills wouldn't be needed enough to call a function," Deadlock muttered noncomitantly as he fidgeted with his empty cube, pondering his own lack of skills outside the battlefield. Wing seemed to think he'd fit in this place with him, but that might be the optimistic part of him trying to pep talk part of his gestalt.

"Need another cube?" Kimark offered. "Don't worry about the skills. Most of us pick them up after we're Knights."

Deadlock looked around to see if anyone was paying attention before admitting, "I never had a need for any of those kinds of skills before. Being a berserker earned me my place in most Decepticon circles."

"Same with me in the arena," Kimark nodded with complete understanding. "Learned a bit of self repair and how to touch up paint, but it was about it for the skills I arrived with. I wanted to be here and that was enough to buy me the time until I could pass for civilized. Knight are big on the effort and trying being enough."

"Yeah, I'll always take another cube." Deadlock flickered a bit of annoyance into his field before continuing, "I'm not saying I really want to be here, but I can't go back to Cybertron stuck with these four. Nowhere would be safe for us and we aren't strong enough to take out one side or another yet. This is the best option we've got right now, and Wing says this is the best place for me to try and fit in. I'm not foolish enough to go try to find anything I'm used to since I'm stuck with Thundercracker and Prowl keeping an optic on me. Any gangs who might want me as muscle would give me a wide
berth with those two hanging around."

"Around here Wing's a bigger deterrent, but the real issue is the lack of gangs," Kimark nodded and motioned Deadlock to join him on the short walk to the dispensers. "And I get it. But it still comes down to if you're trying you'll get time to adapt."

"I've had Wing wipe the floor with me and I watched him fight Prowl and win, but I still can't picture him as being viewed as a serious threat unless someone's seen him in action," Deadlock admitted as he followed Kimark. No matter what he thought about most of the Knights and the arrogant mech leading them, he really liked the available energon and free repairs. Wing and Kimark were the main exceptions. After all, Kimark actually knew what it was like out there on the wrong side of the real world.

"Oh I know, and it's not Wing, it's that he's a Knight. It's like belonging to the biggest, baddest gang in the city. Anyone who is marked as one tends to make other gangs uneasy," Kimark said as he ordered a cube of low grade for himself before stepping aside for Deadlock to select his own. "If you cross a Knight you've just crossed us all."

"That explains a lot," Deadlock selected mid grade again, even knowing his tanks might not hold all the energon comfortably. He could always see if he could stash it in subspace without anyone noticing if he couldn't finish it. "It probably helps that your gang caused this whole world to be settled."

"It certainly doesn't hurt. The fact that no gang members came with us didn't hurt it either. We're still first generation for the most part. There hasn't been enough time for gangs to establish themselves again from nothing," Kimark agreed as they sat back down. "I was thinking we would visit Deco this orn. Sometimes it's nice to be detailed just because you can be."

"Hey, you want to get fancied up I'm certainly not going to complain," Deadlock took a sip from his energon right after he sat down. Refueling, sparring, interfacing...if it wasn't for mechs like Dai Atlas this might just be a place he'd enjoy settling into for now.

"Good. Then we'll have our fun, see Deco and we can meet up with Wing and maybe someone else for evening fueling," Kimark grinned.

They were both scuffed and covered with scratches but neither were in medical, so Deadlock considered it an acceptable light sparring match and based on the good teek brushing against his field, so did Kimark. It hadn't been as exciting as some of his fights in the past, but not re-visiting Redline this quickly was probably better for both their frames and processors. Following Kimark through a corridor he couldn't help commenting, "We haven't been this way before. Anything else hiding down here?"

"There's a washrack, some workshops and labs and storerooms and such, but nothing I visit regularly," Kimark shrugged and palmed a door with 'Deco's Detailing' embossed on it in glyphwork so delicately fancy it barely registered as writing to Deadlock.

This marked this place as a lot fancier than anywhere else he'd ever been for work, and Deadlock looked around to see how out of place he'd really be in here. There were several benches and chairs, many specifically designed for flight frames. He also couldn't help noticing that one was sturdy enough to hold one of the triple changers. It wasn't quite as bad as he'd expected, but the main clientele were Knights so it figured it'd be a bit more functional than fancy.

"Perfect timing Kimark, Deadlock," a solidly build grounder with intricate scroll work in several
styles as well as fine highlights that glittered from precious metal leaf and gem dust greeted them. "Any color changes or just a good touch-up and polish?"

"Just a better than average finish," Kimark grinned. "And a bit of gold on Deadlock, so he knows what it looks like."

Deadlock glared briefly at Kimark for the dig before taking a closer look at the colors displayed on Deco's frame. He'd never seen some of these hues, and he wasn't certain if it was because of his new optics or if they were long gone from Cybertron before he'd had enough shanix to think of doing something like this. Absently he thought it was likely the optics. After all as a lieutenant and chief muscle for a mob boss he saw a fair number of decked out mecha with too many shanix and not enough sense.

"Then this way so we can get you clean enough for the paint to adhere well," Deco smiled warmly and led them to a back room. It was just as well lit as the front and contained an odd-looking clear cylinder large enough for Dai Atlas to stand with his arms up and spread his wings in. "Just stand inside and follow the directions. It's all automated."

Kimark gave Deadlock a glance before stepping forward to go first.

That was another nice thing about having a former gladiator as a chaperone; the mech knew when to just step up and do something so Deadlock could see it in action rather than waste time trying to convince him to enter an unfamiliar contraption. No one who'd ever lived on a base with Shockwave and Mindwipe would do something like that. Solvent misted Kimark first, then instructions -- to lift his arms or shift plating -- came from the machine as the mist shifted to a solvent rain like a normal shower.

It looked like a waste of solvent, but Deadlock had to admit it looked like an effective way for a solitary mech to get completely clean. It was definitely better than having random hands on his frame, although it didn't look as stimulating as helping each other get cleaned up before interfacing. Once the solvent rain ended heating elements and fans turned on to help dry Kimark's frame. When the burgundy warrior stepped out his plating had a clean, healthy gleam of one who was well-cared for and took reasonable pride in his frame. It was the look Deadlock always strove for when he had the funds. A nanoklik later and Deadlock recognized something was off, but not exactly what.

"It strips the wax and sealant," Kimark explained at the second look.

Well, nothing had happened to Kimark, so Deadlock nodded stepped into the cylinder and waited for the solvent to rain down. In the increasingly unlikely event it turned out to be a trick and he was soaked in acid he'd just break his way out of here. The first mists of solvent proved his still developing trust in Kimark wasn't misplaced. The process he'd seen was repeated for him and he had to privately admit surprise at how clean one could look without being touched.

When he stepped out, clean and dry and slightly warmed, he followed them to the front room.

"Who's getting touched up first?" Deco asked.

"Kimark, I need to look at colors." Deadlock said, all but admitting openly that he wasn't certain he wanted to keep this exact color scheme. There might be shades that would work better for him now that he could see the difference.

"Redline just upgraded his optics," Kimark explained to Deco's slightly confused look. The artisan Knight nodded and smiled before focusing on Deadlock. "There's a rig in the back room that can show your frame with any colors or markings you want if you'd like to begin looking while I work
on Kimark, or I can show you some ideas when I'm done."

"Go ahead with working on him and show me some ideas later," Deadlock said, much more comfortable with the idea of seeing Deco at work before submitting himself to the mech's touch.

Kimark nodded and stood in a circle on the floor that didn't seem to mean anything while Deco collected a few small containers of paint and brushes. As Deadlock watched the artist began with a spray that brightened the larger swaths of dulled paint before he moved to the brushes for detail work. In all, it was what Deadlock expected to see. Long, tedious and no doubt cost too much, but no surprises. Touching up looked the same here as it had elsewhere.

Deco's paints looked to be of better quality than he was used to seeing, but how much of that was his new optics and how much was the thriving economy outside the Citadel remained to be seen. It was obvious even to his inexperienced optics that Deco had worked on Kimark before. There was a comfort there, especially noticeable as his faceplates and interfacing areas were gone over, but also in just how little instruction Kimark required.

He had to admit his keeper looked better from before to now, and that wasn't the new optics. The Knight had always taken noticeable care for his looks, doing touch ups and showering often in just the eight orns Deadlock had known him, but this was more than that. What Deadlock wasn't sure of was why these paints seemed to look better than what Kimark normally used when what he normally used blended in perfectly.

Whatever it was, deep down Deadlock was looking forward to looking better too.

Finally they were finished painting and Kimark was back in the cylinder for sealant and an auto-buffing that was the first step in a good wax and polish. It wasn't long before he stepped out again with the dull haze on his paint. "Is Airstream in today?"

"Yap, go on out, he's ready for you," Deco nodded.

"While he's finishing do you want to look at color options?" Deco asked.

"Yep," Deadlock nodded and followed Deco's motion to a screen mounted on the wall with a control pad angled out under it.

"If you'd stand in the shower area again. It does the scanning too," Deco motioned to it.

"And strips paint for full frame repaints, and applies the base coats and sealants for them," Kimark added with a cheerful grin that was more from his pleasure at looking good than teasing anyone before he left.

"I don't know if I'm ready for that yet," Deadlock grunted as he stepped back into the shower. Scanning was the painless experience he'd anticipated, but part of his processor was wondering if Jazz had ever used a situation like this to kill a mark. It seemed like it would be really easy to do. "We'll see how the color maps turn out."

"This is what you look like now, and if all I do is the touch-up work and a bit of gold leaf," Deco motioned to a rather large monitor that showed a slowly rotating image of Deadlock, right down to his perpetual scowl.

Deadlock looked it over, noting how the colors actually looked together. It wasn't a bad look, but it didn't seem to be quite what he wanted. He absentmindedly wondering how often in the past he'd managed to mismatch his paint, but it wasn't like anyone would have said anything given his reputation. "Let me see it with some different shades of red."
Deco nodded with a happy flicker in his field and the red shifted to a color that looked more brown than red before gradually shifting towards purples, then oranges.

Some of the purples weren't bad although it wasn't quite the look he was going for. He did have to admit that the gold looked pretty good with his current paint job. "How about a with a more vivid red? Purples aren't bad but not what I'm looking for."

Deco nodded and shifted it to primary red before gradually darkening it with an optic on Deadlock to judge his reaction.

As the color changed he noticed that the darker red made the gold stand out even more vividly on his frame. "Shift back two stages. That's the color, can you make it richer?"

"Of course," Deco almost trilled to have such an interactive client.

"Stop there," Deadlock said after a bit. It was a vivid red far richer than anything he'd seen before his surgery. "I like it. What else can we do?"

"I can change any other colors just like the reds, use gemdust paint, metallic paint and metal leaf. Markings and patterns can be added or removed. I can do scroll work and engraved tattoos, both stock or custom, though you'd have to come back for either. I didn't slot enough time for that kind of work today. I can do some gem inlays too, though I don't stock much so it would likely take an orn or two to arrange. I can show you what a visor of any style looks like, though you'd have to get it from medical once I give you the part number and color. I can show you what some common frame mods would look like, though like the visor you'd have to get the parts or work done in medical," Deco rattled off. "Really anything involved in colors and your finish I can do."

That was a bit overwhelming for Deadlock, who hadn't even contemplated that many possibilities existing. Oh, he'd seen mechs wandering around the Citadel with fancier armor than others, but it hadn't really registered that he could look like that. He muttered, "I'm going to need to think about all of this. How much is what we've done going to cost me now?"

"The Citadel is covering the cost of your new look. For what I did for Kimark today I usually charge a hundred shanix, yours is three hundred because of the gold. As long as I only charge for supplies I get to log my time as duties to the Citadel. It gets me out of cleaning and monitor duties on occasion," Deco grinned. "Out in the city it's a lot more but you get a full studio, spa and specialists that do it for their function."

"That's not a bad deal for you," Deadlock agreed. He wasn't certain what the old prices back on Cybertron had been, but it sounded like it fit with the prices he'd seen at some of the ports on the way here. This didn't seem like a place where haggling tended to happen.

"I think it's a great deal," Deco agreed. "There's a version of this software that can run on a datapad if you'd like to play with it for a few orns. It's not as detailed and doesn't have all the options this system does, but it would show you in true color what any colors look like using your current markings. I didn't mean to give you too many ideas at once, but I do love this work."

"Sounds good," Deadlock agreed. It was one thing to have Kimark explaining that his optics hadn't been the greatest, but he'd realizing this was a way to experiment with colors without everyone seeing how ignorant he was.

"Good, then why don't you head out and chat with Kimark while I get the datapad set up and then we can do your touch-ups, red and gold," Deco nodded and turned to collect what he needed without a care that Deadlock was behind him and unwatched.
If Deco was a Decepticon it would have been an insulting move, but he had to remind himself that this wasn't the Decepticons. Deadlock headed to the front room where a flier, not a Seeker but some other sort of flight frame, was polishing Kimark to a fine, rich shine. He looked his keeper over and nodded. "Looks good."

"Thank you. Deco always does good work, and Airstream has quite the skilled hand at polishing," Kimark agreed without moving from the Praxian Aerial's touch.

"Deco's going to get to work on me in a klik, so I'll get to find out for myself," Deadlock flexed a bit and waited for Deco to get done. It felt weird being patient like this, but he was getting free stuff out of it so he waited and pretended it wasn't as weird as it was. Maybe Wing had rubbed off him more than he'd thought.

Either way, he stood still for Deco, did as the artist directed him to and even submitted to Airstream and Kimark polishing him. Normally that would be at least one too many, but Kimark's field was calming. The other warrior knew how to read his field and would keep the lightly build civilian frame from doing anything that might get Deadlock in trouble.

Having someone somewhat trustworthy work on his frame was very pleasant. Sure, Wing and Jazz would help him paint and polish his back if he asked on the way here, but it was different having someone do the whole job for him. All he had to do was relax and only move when told to. Eventually he felt the pair move away from him. "All done?"

"Yes," Kimark gave a soft whistle of appreciation. "You look good too."

"I usually do," Deadlock turned to the mirror to check out his new look. The red when scaled up really did make the gold accent pop like he'd thought it would, and the overall effect was better than he'd probably ever looked, except possibly during some of the biggest ceremonies during his time in the Decepticons. Not that he knew for certain since he had new optics. "You do good work."

"Thank you," Deco trilled and puffed slightly with pride. Next to him Airstream beamed.

"Come on. Let's test the look out on Wing," Kimark grinned and thumped him on the shoulder with a field that left no doubt what he intended to have happen with Wing.

"Let's," Deadlock agreed and followed him out to find the Aerial.
Chapter Summary

Thundercracker in stasis. Wing's beating penance; he comes to terms with his function in the order. Jazz see the results as well when Wing is brought to medical and demands answers from Dart. Jazz find and explores the penance chambers.

Chapter Notes

And here we start skipping orns.
Graphic violence in this one folks.

Wing followed his once-student, a mech who would still called him Daoshi when they were not at odds, into the council chamber and then into the hidden chamber beneath it. This was a place every Knight knew well and, no matter their role in the pence, not one wished to be. It was a place of pain, spilt energon, broken minds and broken sparks. For all the good that came out of it, it was a place of horrors.

Privately, Wing was grateful that Thundercracker had agreed to go into stasis for this. If the Seeker had picked up the relatively gentle binding, what came through the bond during this would be too much. Hopefully Jazz and Deadlock would remain relatively closed to the bond through the penance and suffer no ill effects. For the safety of the rest of the Knights he wished Deadlock had chosen stasis, but the warrior was stubborn and reluctant to trust being that vulnerable here. Honestly, he couldn't blame Deadlock and he couldn't be more grateful that there were Knights were here capable of picking him up by the scruffbar and tossing him in a locked room alone until he calmed down.

When he stepped into the penance room he drew in a calming ventilation and carefully drew Challenger of Ways to hang on the wall. The much larger Strength of Conviction soon rested next to it. The Great Swords would watch over this. They were not part of it. Once the two Great Swords were in place, Wing turned and faced Dai Atlas trying to keep his composure. He had no illusions about what was going to happen next, but he wanted to face it with as much dignity as possible.

In silence Dai Atlas motioned to the center of the room and Wing went to stand, his pedes spread and arms up, then spread. It took a moment of will to spread his slender wings, but he managed before it would look too bad. The light touch that disabled the folding mechanisms belied just how much pain those hands knew how to dish out.

Slowly the giant walked around to stand in front of Wing. "Are you sorry for endangering the city?"

"I regret any danger I may have brought to the city and its inhabitants," Wing answered without hesitation. He couldn't say he regretted leaving on his walkabout but that potential consequence of his actions was something he could freely admit. He couldn't say he regretted following his spark.
"But not the actions that would cause it," Dai Atlas sighed.

"No," Wing admitted truthfully and watched as his former Initiate opened the cabinet for devices and began to select a few.

"Why did you leave?" the giant demanded calmly as he selected a simple whip.

"Because we needed to know what was going on out there in the universe," Wing said simply as he braced for what was to come. "Hiding alone does not help us prepare for future attacks. We need to be aware of the threats."

"That is not your choice to make," Dai Atlas rumbled and struck, the lash making a trail of fire down the channel Challenger of Ways normally resided in. "You could have been Sovereign instead of Vanguard," another blow landed. You could have been Sovereign instead of me," another trail of fire spread along Wing's back. "Instead you chose to pledge to follow us, and never have."

"I serve the Order in my own way, by asking the questions others aren't willing to say but only think. If everyone always obeys without question there is no balance. You didn't object when I questioned Vanguard's decisions before the Exodus," Wing pointed out stoically, enduring the pain. This would not be an easy penance, not with all that had happened.

"Questions I accept. I do not punish you for your words. Only your actions," Dai Atlas pointed out.

"Your actions in leaving were a danger to us all."

"My leaving carried risks," Wing admitted. "If one does not take risks then one does not grow. That is one of the reasons why the Knights always went on true walkabouts that exposed us to the unknown; a tradition we no longer follow by simply leaving to go into a city we know is safe and familiar."

"It is not your place to decide the limits," Dai Atlas growled in frustration, but the lashes came no harder for it. "It could be and you chose not to be the mecha in charge."

"It is not my place to be Sovereign or even a Master," Wing said finally, having reaffirmed his own knowledge of his role in the Knights through his latest penance. "It is my place to serve the Knights by being the one who questions those who do lead. I cannot fulfill my function in your place as leader."

"Then stop doing things that by any sense should have me execute you!" Dai Atlas snapped and stalked around to face Wing. "Your role I respect. Your execution of it I cannot tolerate again. There is too much at stake in being discovered."

Wing stood silent, thinking about what Dai Atlas had just said and what it meant for them and the future. Finally he said quietly, "I am not the same as I was before my walkabout, as all who truly take one come back changed. What that will bring for me and my role in the future I cannot say with certainty, but I have four permanent reminders of that time to affect my actions."

Rich red optics briefly dimmed as the giant sighed, turned and exchanged the whip he had with a much more cruel charged one. Without a word he returned to Wing's back and the real pain began.

Wing fought to stay still, enduring the sharp pain as the whip repeatedly sliced his frame and its charge cracked through him, melting fine wires. He still thought hadn't been wrong to leave and explore, but he had to admit he might have done it the wrong way.

Jazz stood silently in a corner of the medbay, abiding by the terms the CMO set on his being here.
He'd made enough of a nuisance of himself to know that his assessment of Redline being much like Ratchet was very true, and unlike Ratchet, Redline was willing to throw him out an open balcony to make a point. It had been enough to secure a promise from Dart of knowing as soon as Wing was headed for repairs. Being still, quiet and out of the way earned him enough tolerance from Redline to be there when the CMO and two junior medics, both Knights, brought the mangled, armorless frame in on a hover stretcher.

The mental note that one of those junior medics was Praxian was lost to the state of his teammate. Jazz had seen many mecha in worse states during his time in ISO and SpecOps and he'd caused as much or more damage in the past, but somehow seeing the friendly Knight in this condition hit him hard. Wing's frame had been reduced to a pile of shredded metal and torn circuitry. His twisted, broken limbs were completely useless. A stray thought crossed Jazz's processor, *Thundercracker is going to offline someone.*

It was definitely a good thing the Seeker was in stasis, and would be until Wing was fully repaired and ready to try to calm him down. But to do this kind of damage to someone as a normal punishment ... okay, there were mecha Jazz knew that this kind of punishment would be cathartic for, both as giver and receiver. Wing wasn't one of them though. It drove home how much the Aerial had really risked bringing his gestalt here. The comments he'd made during the trip about not being offline for treason seemed a lot grimmer now that Jazz was seeing the results of those actions.

The only difference between this and a brutal execution was how quickly medical attention was called.

Wing really could have gone into that room, one of the few places Jazz hadn't found yet, and not come back out. It was enough to cause an internal shiver in his outwardly still frame.

"He'll be orns being repaired," Dart's voice was quiet next to him. "I'll tell you when he's about to come out of stasis."

"Is he going to go through more of this?" Jazz asked quietly, suppressing his anger at this level of damage to one of his unit.

"This kind of beating, no, at least not for what brought you here. Once the bindings are complete he'll have his wings broken as penance for escaping, but that'll be cleanly done. The break is the point, not pain," Dart answered quietly. "Marwir says that Wing's never found a balance between his duty and his purpose. He'll keep taking these penances until he does."

"Wings broken? Thundercracker can't be online for that," Jazz muttered just as quietly. "He said he'd be damaged coming back with us. He didn't say almost offline and tortured."

"Because we don't view it that way. He was in complete control of when it ended. It ended when he was ready for it to be," Dart tried to explain something he knew had no equivalency outside the Order. "It's not like what you did, even if it looks like it."

Wing could have stopped this punishment at any time and didn't until he was almost deactivated. Jazz shook his head in confusion and half-wondered if this had really been explained to Deadlock yet. Trying to make sense of what he was seeing, he asked, "Did he let it go this long because it proved he was serious about returning?"

Dart's field flickered his surprised at the concept and he was silent for a bit as he looked at Wing and thought. "No," he finally decided with the certainty of conviction. "He wouldn't use a penance that way. It's not what it's for."
Jazz tried to ponder this with what little Wing had mentioned about penance before giving up. "I don't think I'll understand it."

"It's okay. Most Initiates don't understand at first. We'd never expect an outsider to, not even a bonded mate," Dart said gently and put a hand on Jazz's shoulder. It was a careful move, done slowly enough that Jazz couldn't miss it was coming. "Come on, I'll tell you before he's booted up."

Jazz wanted to stay and keep an optic on Wing during his repairs, since he didn't trust these Knights yet. Wing did trust them, though. He'd have to believe that Redline would repair Wing properly, and he'd be back tonight to watch over Wing, Thundercracker and Prowl. Just in case. So with a reluctant look at Wing and the medics working on him, he followed Dart out. He held quiet until they were behind closed doors.

"I want some answers," Jazz said firmly, and was motioned by a serious-looking Dart to the couch.

"I'll answer what I can. Much is a secret of the Order and not for outsiders to be told or shown," Dart warned quietly.

"A member of my unit was just tortured almost to deactivation. I want to know why he consented to that and didn't think to warn us this was going to happen," Jazz said just as serious. "If Deadlock picked this up the way Thundercracker did that binding..."

"We were ready. He is not the first berserker to be among us," Dart assured him first. "Wing consented because he is a Knight. Penances are part of our way. Why he did not warn you better is a question to ask him, though I expect it has something to do with believing the three of you would not allow it."

"Thundercracker would have flipped out at the idea of his fledgling being harmed like that. It's going to be hard to keep him in check when he onlines and finds out what really happened," Jazz admitted. "I'm fairly ticked myself. Wing gave us the rules of the city while we were in space, but he seems to have left some of the critical parts of the Knight's code out. This is the kind of thing we wanted know about before we came here."

"You are not held to the Knight's code or standards. Only Knights are," Dart reminded him. "They are not things a civilian needs to know to live here so there is no need for you to know. As for Thundercracker, if he feels the need to lash out, I am sure Dai Atlas can defend himself and will allow him to vent his anger with minimal repercussions."

"Yeah, he'd probably live through it," Jazz said taking into consideration both Dai Atlas's reputation and Thundercracker's skills. "Are there any other surprises we need to take into consideration?"

"I'm sure Wing prepared you as best he could," Dart said with the conviction of believing the best of a comrade. He fell silent as his face scrunched slightly in thought. "Assuming deactivation was not an option, what you would expect for someone who did what Wing did?"

"Depends," Jazz said giving it the same careful thought they had in the ship after escaping. "Most of the vorns spent away were under slave coding or trying to return, which could be argued to fall under captured by enemies and not count as time truly AWOL. We didn't chose to be gestalt bonded either, so Prowl would argue there isn't much grounds for punishment there. Bringing back Deadlock and Thundercracker would be destabilizing to the power structure given who Prowl and I are, but the two of them are skilled warriors and would be useful in the fighting ranks and valuable for intel. Thundercracker had enough rank to destabilize the enemy air forces for a time as they sort out new leadership."
"So the only punishable offense is likely leaving in the first place. What's the punishment for deserting your post?" Dart asked.

"Anything from a few orns to few vorns in the brig to loss of rank to docked pay to being discharged. Depends on how long and circumstances. If I did what Wing did ... probably brig time. How long would depend on how well my crew covered for me and just how much Prowl's bolts got twisted over it. My official rank would probably be affected by the gestalt bond with two former Decepticons when I came back, though I don't know by now much," Jazz admitted, "But we'd still be valuable in combat. Too valuable to lose by being discharged if we were willing to fight."

"So in a way, you would be punished more harshly than Wing is," Dart dared to suggest. "He will not be imprisoned, and while he is damaged he is being repaired as well. He will not lose rank, nor will he lose standing. The four of you will not be imprisoned either for your crimes from before coming here."

Jazz snorted in disagreement, "My official rank in the Autobots might be affected, but it wouldn't affect most of my connections in SpecOps. I wouldn't be torn to pieces either."

"Instead of being torn to pieces until you were ready for it to be over and repaired in a matter of orns, you'd spend time in the brig. What would the brig time have taught you?" Dart asked.

"If it wasn't for the gestalt making me come in openly, being caught sneaking back in and put in the brig would show my boss that I'm not very good at my job and need a lot more practice if I expect not to get caught sneaking around Decepticon bases," Jazz said simply. "Being put in the brig after coming in with the others is showing the rest of the ranks that I'm getting punished for breaking the rules."

"So you would go there willingly enough for the sake of moral?" Dart worked on understanding this mindset so different from his own. "Not truly for punishment or to learn, but because it's important for other reasons."

"The troops need to know the commanders are accountable for their actions or we're in a mess like before the war. Why would a berserker like Deadlock go into the brig if he knows others can get away with the same thing with no punishment? It's one reason why the soldiers obey Prowl when he orders them into potentially lethal situations. He's fair," Jazz tried to think about how to explain things better.

Dart nodded. "It's been a long time since I've dealt with undisciplined masses, or really anyone who didn't simply do what was right, because it was the right thing to do. Knights don't get out much in general. It sounds much like why there was so much debate and arguing about how to set up the legal system here. To make sure it's fair and that people don't lose faith in it."

Jazz sighed, "Some of the soldiers and support staff still want to do what is right, but there are also a lot of badly damaged and violent mecha in the ranks that have to be kept in line. Keeping everything going is a balancing act. If I have to spend a vorn in the brig it's annoying for me, but if it means that the troops follow orders on the battlefield and stay online it's worth it."

"I would agree with that completely," Dart gave him a soft smile. "From my perspective how we deal with discipline is more effective, but as long as it works for a society, it works. Penances are simply how we do things. If you get in trouble, it's likely to be community service, reparations or jail time once you're a citizen. Which seems like a system you're reasonably familiar with."

"I can work with it," Jazz agreed as he began to really relax again. He still hated what had happened to Wing, but it was harder to find fault with it now. He would have hated seeing Wing in a brig for
vorns too. "It will take a bit of adjusting to what's considered a crime here, but Wing gave us the basic legal codes so we could study them."

"Are there any that don't make sense to you?" Dart focused on helping his charge adapt.

"Remembering what is a proper response to different levels of provocation is going to take a while for all of us. As is training down the wartime reflexes to lash out instantly," Jazz admitted. "Wing explained the legal code and reasons behind it on intoxicants. That's rather different from where we came from, but we should be able to handle it."

"That's good, and no one is expecting you to behave as civilians so soon after being at war for so long," Dart assured him. "It's one of the primary reasons you are staying in the Citadel with Knights. We're peaceful, but every Knight is highly trained. We can handle those startle reflexes that might kill a civilian. Most of us have better armor than civilians as well." He paused at a comm ping that Jazz hacked by reflex and smiled a bit brighter. "What would you like more, energon in the common room, time to yourself, or watching Deadlock spar with Kimark?"

Jazz thought for a moment before answering, "Let's go watch Deadlock and Kimark for a while before getting some energon." It would let he keep an optic on the other online member of his unit for a while and he liked that idea.

Jazz waited patiently on his berth until the pair of Aerial Knights flew past on their rounds. He normally would have commented to the Masters about the predictability of their patrol shifts, but he'd decided to let Prowl have that chore once he was online and functional. Remembering Prowl made him frown, thinking about the events this past orn. What in the pit was Wing thinking hiding something like this penance from them? Jazz knew his processor wouldn't settle until he'd found and examined these penance rooms Dart had mentioned.

First up was to slip out, but until he knew the penance room was a place he wouldn't be allowed to explore he'd be a good mecha and leave the usual way, which meant his keeper and likely someone else would be alerted and following him. The first stop was going to be the medbay, as usual, though tonight he had three berths to visit. Prowl, who should still be in stasis, Thundercracker in stasis until Wing was up and about, and Wing, who should be in recharge but might still be in stasis. He really was wrecked when he'd been brought to the medbay.

Jazz was still annoyed with Wing for not preparing them properly for the full extent of his penance with Dai Atlas. They were soldiers who could understand discipline and be reasonable when they knew the expectations, not sparklings that needed to be sheltered from all the scary things in life. Grumbling, he shoved that concern aside and made his way along the familiar rooftops and rafters to medical. He spotted Dart almost immediately. The mech was an agile climber but no sneak-thief. Inside of medical there were Prowl and Thundercracker, exactly as he'd seen them last. A quick visual and field scan satisfied him that those two were still secure and functioning as well as expected. Hopefully Redline could decipher Prowl's programming enough that they could bring him online soon. It bothered Jazz having a member of his unit so vulnerable for this long. Satisfied with their condition, he slipped between the medberths and headed over to check on Wing in the main room with the other low-risk, or at least low-security patients. It was a relief to see him looking whole and with a healthy gloss on his plating. Granted he'd already seen him repaired, but he was sure it was only because of his reaction to seeing him all but stripped of plating, sparking, dripping energon and his protoform torn into. It was a look Jazz recognized instantly. He'd caused it enough times he could pick out the different marks that whip, blade, needle, bindings and hands did. In all he had to reassess Dai Atlas' skills. The mech knew what he was doing in a torture chamber as well as anyone Jazz knew, and he included the Cons in that.
Gazing down at the recharging mech, Jazz admitted to being partially mislead in his assumptions by paying a bit too much attention to Wing when he was talking about his Initiate, Dai Atlas. That morganite visor made the Aerial someone everyone wanted to shelter, but it also made him a somewhat biased source about the Knights or life here in the Citadel. Jazz needed to know more if he was going to settle in the city and leave two or three of his unit here. They would not be as surprised by this as Jazz was.

Content that they were safe and health, he slipped outside once more by the ever-open balcony in the main room. It was time to check out where these Knights gathered and did their important social business.

It was still far too easy to track Dart as the Knight waited for him to exit medical before following. Jazz had also spotted Demeter, although she did a much better job moving unseen behind him. Her earlier training was still good; she just needed someone to actually challenge her to keep her at her peak. It would be better for everyone here if Jazz was the one that did it rather than an outside intruder.

Taking a new route through the rafters, Jazz started towards the common room where he and Dart had spent so many joors meeting the other Knights. There were branched off hallways there he hadn't yet explored and he intended to visit some tonight. As he moved he absentely wondered about a complex so well suited to move through like this. Almost no structures back on Cybertron were this open unless they were build for ISO or servants to be unseen. As far as he'd worked out neither were here, and yet their architecture was.

Was this hinting at some future action Dai Atlas and Axe had planned when they built the Citadel? Or was this a replica of the old Citadel and a hint at a function the Knights or their predecessors had once held in the distant past? It was possible those Great Swords held the key, but Jazz wasn't going to mess with them without a much better understanding of what they were and why the Knights could spark bond to them.

Pausing high on the ceiling in the common room, he watched the trio of grounders relaxing obliviously below him. They were obviously on a shifted schedule, most likely due to cleaning duties this orn. It'd be so easy to offline them if he was actually an enemy; they obviously didn't expect trouble this deep in their home. Another reminder that this was a peaceful city. He wondered what it would look like during a general alert. How much of their attitude would change if they believed an enemy was nearby. It always changed the feel of a base and those were places were a level of assumed threat was always there.

It didn't take long to move into the hallway that lead to the council chamber and once more he was reminded that the open ceiling and beams were not an artistic statement. The doors that allowed him to follow a beam through the walls was proof of that. Oh, they were invisible from ground level, but up close he could see it clearly along with the simple press panel to open it. When he reached the council room wall there was no such opening. He'd have to get in the main door.

Checking to see that no one unexpected was present to spot him, Jazz made his way down the wall to the ground. He wanted to examine this room, but he was prepared to apologize after the fact if it proved necessary. So far Dart and Demeter had made no move to stop him, so he'd continue to work on the assumption this exploration was still within his security clearance. This room was locked, but if it held true to his experience if it wasn't in use it didn't contact much of tactical importance. Even so they often contained a wealth of social and political intel.

It didn't take much to hack the lock. It was, in the end, what he expected given what he'd been lead to believe was there: a room not to be accessed casually, but not one to be protected. He knew,
without question, there were at least two of those protected rooms in the complex. Wing was open about that and given what they contained Jazz agreed they should be. A weapons vault and a command center. Not places for random mecha to wander in, even if something like 98% of the population had authorization. That 2% still mattered.

The arched double doors that stood a full twice Dai Atlas height unlocked and he stood for a moment, expecting it to open. It was a bit of a shock when the doors didn't actually move after he unlocked them. Examining them again he realized that he'd actually have to pull them open rather than watch them automatically slide into the walls, but he grabbed the large handle and pulled as he would have so long ago. It was also more evidence for his theory that this building was a recreation of the old Citadel. Most modern buildings didn't bother with the clearance for this kind of entry and simply slid them conveniently aside, but it made sense for an ancient building designed to make an impressive statement and be easier to use as a barricade as well as an entrance.

As the door opened he noted that it moved easily despite the size, though his attention was soon locked onto the view beyond. A corridor of sorts in the stadium seating lead to a very large circular space. In another place and time he'd have call this an execution chamber. One of those places where one mecha was judge, jury and executioner. It had that feel. A quick bit of math said that it was designed for the full complement of Knights, not their current count.

This had to be where Wing and any other misbehaving Knight was sentenced. He was also becoming more convinced he was going to need to thoroughly research the Order's history if he was ever going to be comfortable leaving members of his unit here, especially if they reprogrammed Prowl. He might be able to get Thundercracker's help with that research once he was online. Walking quietly into the center area Jazz started exploring, looking at both the designs of the decorations and anything out of place. If this was the place for judgment, then the place for punishment wouldn't be far away.

It wasn't in this room. He was sure of that much. The scent of energon in the amount Wing had lost couldn't be cleaned up this quickly. It could be made to look clean, but you couldn't remove all traces so soon. He focused on the wall in front of the first tier of seats, sure any door would be there. Only it wasn't. The floor was next, and eventually the pattered in the center of the room, the crest of the Order, revealed a very fine line of a door of some kind.

Looking down at the concealed door, Jazz couldn't help but wonder about the other mysteries that must be beneath their pedes in the unknown layers below the surface. After all, this entire city was hidden underground. He couldn't locate a trigger in the pattern around the crest. Thinking about what this room's original purpose must have been, Jazz turned and headed for the most likely location for a trigger; the central podium where Dai Atlas would pass judgment over the accused.

For such a powerful position, the podium was simple. Little more than a rectangle standing on the short side, solid looking and with a slightly sloped top and a simple decorative face that hide the surface from those on the ground. There was nothing to divert attention away from the mech standing there, and Dai Atlas would tower over practically everyone without any assistance. The simplicity probably wasn't original, but it suited what Jazz knew of the Order and its current master.

The trouble with said current master being so large meant that Jazz wasn't tall enough to see the top, the most likely location for the control. A couple jumps showed him a slightly angled surface with a small edge and the same decoration as was on the floor. So it was definitely an important design. He spotted Dart in the rafters, though not the one who no doubt knew the way in up there. If anyone in this place knew the ceiling routes it was going to be Demeter.

He was tempted to just ask Dart, but that would be cheating considering how long the two of them
had been allowing him to explore without incident. Taking the least destructive alternative and curious how his keeper would react to what some would probably consider scandalous behavior, Jazz began climbing up the podium. As he reached the top he saw Dart twitch, but there was no effort to stop him. The surface wasn't smooth; the design was slightly raised, and now he could see the mosaic pattern the floor didn't have.

With careful examination, he eventually spotted the faint lines in the surface around one of the finely shaped mosaic tiles. It could be for sounding an alarm or turning on the lights or any number of other things, but Jazz figured its hidden nature meant it was most likely the trigger for the floor. Hoping he was correct, he pressed it and felt the small tile go down. Nothing happened for a moment, then the door he'd seen in the floor began to slide open to reveal a staircase carefully measured for both regular mecha and giants to walk it with little difficulty.

It was as dramatic and imposing as the rest of this room, and Jazz noted the slightly ominous feeling well in keeping with his opinion of the rest of the room. His keeper was still silent above him, so Jazz decided to take that as permission to continue his search. He climbed down carefully off the podium, making certain to leave as little trace of his presence behind as possible. It was both habit from his centuries of sneaking around undetected and courtesy towards his current hosts.

Three steps down and he heard Dart land. It was soft for the distance, a credit to the mech's acrobatic skill and light frame. Showing no surprise, he turned toward the mech he was starting to consider a bit more than just a keeper and said, "Did I break a rule?"

"Several, though none anyone will care about. You would be shown this if you'd asked. I came down to make sure you don't open the cell in use," Dart said easily as Demeter relaxed at his side.

"Asking to see the nastier side of things gives someone a chance to pretty things up and hide things," Jazz said bluntly. "That's why any inspection that isn't a surprise is pointless."

Demeter chuckled with a knowing grin, but Dart just looked bewildered and glanced between them. "This is one of those military things?" he glanced at her.

"Or at least things those with things to hide think of," she agreed.

"Or those who were supposed to find those hidden things," Jazz said with a small smile. "Red Alert always agreed with me on that sentiment. He was one of the best Security Directors I ever worked with."

Dart simply nodded, accepting it was outside his concerns. "Just don't open the closed door," he motioned Jazz to explore as he wished.

"If I wasn't trying to cooperate that'd be an invitation I wouldn't pass up," Jazz remarked cheerfully before heading down the stairs.

"I'm fairly sure Axe would flatten you for that," Dart said uneasily. "He's very aggressive in protecting his mate."

"Dai Atlas is in the cell?" Jazz stopped and turned to stare at the two of them, not certain he was hearing things correctly.

"Yes. Wing's penance was such that the one giving it must come to terms with what he did. Committing violence against another Knight is not an easy thing," Dart hoped the explanation was enough.

"It's a penance binding," Demeter added. "Axe is watching over it."
Jazz just stared for a bit, trying to reconcile what they were saying with his own experiences. The only way this made sense was when he thought about Optimus and how he reacted to having to severely discipline any of the troops. "I'll leave them alone; I don't want those two angry with me."

"Good," Dart relaxed with an x-vent.

This didn't fit with his memory of the generals and their reputations at all, but Jazz had to admit things probably had changed with them given how long they had been out of the military. Continuing down the stairs, he eventually reached the bottom and a short hallway that went nowhere. It had an oppressive feeling, different from the one upstairs but no less intent. This place smelled of faintly of system energon, pain and the very walls still teeked of the pain and distress of what happened here so recently.

On his left was a one-person washrack, though it was large enough for a couple mecha his size since it also had to serve giants. The two doors following it were open, as were the first and last doors on the right. A glance in the one he was even with showed little more than a square room with hooks around the walls and ceiling and a cabinet in the back corner. This sort of set-up, although different in layout from what he'd worked with back on Cybertron, was very familiar to Jazz. After all, he'd been in ISO and SpecOps for most of his existence, and torture was something he had a lifetime of experience inflicting and enduring. Walking into the square room, he examined the hooks he could reach on the walls, noting that many were smooth and buffed to be very gentle on whatever rested on them. Others looked to be more normal, worn by chains.

Satisfied, he turned to the cabinet and noted that his guards were waiting outside. Dart was clearly uneasy and Jazz was fairly sure it was the place, not what Jazz was doing. He opened the cabinet, an easy thing as it didn't lock, and took in the objects at optic level as what was used most. Spools of soft cords, each in a different color. One stood out as different in the collection of solid colors. A single spool where the cord was a spiral of five colors. Red, green, blue, white and black. He'd listened to Wing enough to know they were significant, something to do with their spiritual beliefs, but the mech always refused to explain what the colors meant.

Above and below were weapons and implements that in context were weapons. Objects designed to cause pain, confusion and distress. Objects Jazz knew how to use entirely too well.

He took in the collection of whips coiled in the cabinet. There were a number of energon whips of varying sizes and strengths; some of them where similar to the ones Jazz knew well from his own interrogation sessions and interface games back home. He felt a bit of the familiar itch to feel those caress his frame. Then he looked over the physical whips, running a hand lightly along one of the coils. This could leave a deep gash on someone's protoform or would barely sting depending on the desires of a skilled wielder.

Moving on from the whips, the daggers and knives next attracted his attention. Jazz liked using them in combat and in pleasure, and these were some well crafted examples of different blade types. Studying the blades he realized that some of them were used to cause certain injuries to Wing's frame. Looking back over at Dart, he placed a hand on one of the blades. "Is this the room Wing was in?"

"No, he was in the room Dai Atlas is in now, as is custom. They are all equipped the same," the younger mech explained.

"So no preferences are shown when mecha are brought in to one of them," Jazz said softly to himself.
"None I know of," Dart nodded.

"Same here. If there is one, it's rare knowledge and not used often," Demeter agreed.

Filing that away for further pondering later, Jazz continued looking through the cabinet. Over to one side he found a few clamps and needles next to a set of hammers and forceps. Fiddly tools for fiddly work to cause incredible pain with limited damage. Except for the needles, it was all familiar, and Jazz had a fair idea of how to use the needles. They just weren't a standard tool.

Just as Wing had claimed, most of these items were designed to maximize pain for minimal damage. You could kill someone with these torture implements, but it would most likely be a deliberate move rather than an accident. For all Dart had talked about not understanding masochism the Knights certainly seemed to understand it as far as disciplinary measures were concerned. In many ways they were even more brutal than Decepticons in that respect. The difference being the Knights were all about discipline and precision even in punishment and the Cons were just about violence. That and the Knights were very firm about their punishments were strictly for their own.

With the same care he'd used to take things out he put them back and looked around the space that was both familiar and alien. He'd been in many rooms like this on many sides of many conflicts, but this was the first time he was sure he'd never be in it as subject or user.

Stepping outside he noted the approval for what he'd done. He couldn't be sure but he expected it was how perfectly he put everything back. He wasn't about to mention it was habit from not wanting to get caught as he looked at Dart and Demeter, "I think I'm ready to go now unless there's something else I should see down here."

"The other rooms are all the same, though you can look if you want," Dart motioned down the hall. "Though I'm more inclined towards recharge if you are."

"Recharging sounds like a good idea," Jazz answered quietly, finally accepting this as a part of the Knights he would accept for Wing, Deadlock and possibly Prowl.
Chapter Summary

Thundercracker boots. Much growling about what Wing didn't tell them. Jazz and Deadlock start to recharge with sound/music playing to ease the quiet.

As the three of them waited for Thundercracker to finish rebooting, Wing took a moment to finish preparing for what was going to be a very stressful conversation. He knew he wasn't going to get much help from Jazz; the grounder was still annoyed with him for not telling them exactly what his punishment for coming back would entail. Even so, Wing was sure it had been the correct choice. His flock would not have handled it nearly so well if they'd known beforehand just how badly he'd need to be beaten to reach the peace his Sovereign needed him to. He knew, right to his spark, that his penance had created a moment of great insight for Dai Atlas, and for that it was worth every scream and every ache.

As he heard Thundercracker begin to boot up under Redline's careful watch, Wing stepped closer and extended his field so the Seeker could teek him as soon as possible. Thundercracker's field wrapped around Wing's own even before the Seeker finished booting, and his first move was to reach over and pull Wing closer. "What happened to you?" he rumbled immediately.

"A painful penance was endured, completed and recovered from," Wing said what he hoped would be enough. "The worst is over with."

"How painful?" Thundercracker stared straight at Wing, determined to know how badly his fledgling had been injured and who he would need to punish.

"Umm, the worst I've endured. Not the worst someone's survived." Wing struggled to explain and shield at the same time.

"You know what mecha look like after a decaorn with Flint?" Jazz prompted, catching Thundercracker's attention. "About like that."

Thundercracker half-rose from the berth, anger flashing through his field as he glared at their keepers at the back of the room. Fighting down his rage for the moment, he thoroughly checked Wing over for residual damage, cataloging every repair he could find on the Aerial's frame.

"I'm okay. Honest Thundercracker," Wing insisted even as he complied with the examination. "I've been damaged worse learning to fly."

"Then your teachers were neglectful bordering on incompetent," Jazz said bluntly. "Forget disputing it Wing, I saw you when Redline brought you in here."

Thundercracker let out a deep rumble that Wing could feel down through his protoform.

"I can't completely disagree with you," Wing told Jazz. "Though mostly I was referring to the startle response, not actual lessons. Young flight frames startle and launch straight up and we don't come online knowing how to land. With a ten to one power to weight ratio, I went high, fast. I crashed into
a few ceilings and buildings before I learned to control it. Landing wasn't always much better at first." He focused back on Thundercracker. "I'm fine, really. No damage left, no pain. Everything's fine."

"You know he's never going to believe you if you say 'I'm fine' ever again, right?" Deadlock asked from his spot beside Jazz. He appeared almost bored with the whole proceedings, but the warrior's stance reminded Wing a bit of when they had entered the spaceport during their escape. It was sweet in the ways of Deadlock and Wing felt warmed by the protection he didn't need.

"He didn't believe it before," Wing teased towards Deadlock, then looked at Thundercracker and kissed his nose. "Did you? No good creator completely trusts self-reporting. Now, can we grab some energon and maybe hang out in a garden for a bit?"

"Don't think I'm going to let this go so easily," Thundercracker said seriously before pulling Wing even closer and cradling him for a moment. "Yes, we need to get out of here and refuel." The Seeker wanted as close to open sky as this Citadel would allow. He also wanted to watch Wing very closely.

"I don't," Wing promised and snuggled into the embrace to the snicker of several fellow Knights.

"Energon's always good, and the stuff here is amazing," Jazz grinned, happy to do his part to lighten the mood.

"Free fuel is always good fuel," Deadlock agreed, before glancing over at Kimark. "We good to get out of here?"

"As soon as Thundercracker's willing to go," the former gladiator grinned at him.

"Yeah, snuggle him in the park. I want to see the starscape they put up there," Jazz trilled at Thundercracker.

"Fine," Thundercracker grumbled and started guiding Wing towards the door to head outside.

Deadlock chuckled and fell into step behind the pair. Jazz and the other Knights followed along, shifting as they walked to the common room so they were each closer to their charge. Already it was easy to see which of the gestalt had made connections with who. Everyone was happy to see Wing. Nearly everyone greeted Jazz. Everyone with wings greeted Thundercracker warmly. Even Deadlock got respectful nods and a couple calls for sparring matches or to spend the evening together.

Wing thought it was a very good sign that his flock was being accepted this quickly, even if the Knights weren't completely representative of the city. The former military mecha here understood the three of them. When they were on good behavior, they were reasonably civilized, too. It was just all the edges that needed to be worn off before they were safe in mixed company. No one even blinked when Thundercracker got rations for himself, Aurora and Wing, while the others got their own.

It was really pretty nice. It felt so wonderfully normal.

Then something Jazz didn't notice soon enough was close to him and a hard elbow cracked hard into metal. Wing turned to look just in time to see Marwir turn Jazz around by the elbow and stare him down.

"Sorry," Jazz seemed honestly sheepish about it and didn't fight to get his elbow back.

It wasn't the best sign, but at least Jazz didn't try to struggle against Marwir. He'd apologized too.
Wing sighed mentally and took a drink from his cube while everyone else got their energon. Then the large group was off to one of the gardens small enough that no one else would be there with the eight of them in place.

Entering the garden they headed for the benches near a small thin oil pool. Wing settled next to Thundercracker and watched a few small silver mecha-koi and a couple of electrum koi swimming around below them. He always found it relaxing to watch mecha fish swim. The shimmer of their scales and the transparent thin oil added to the beauty of the movement.

"So now that the bad part is out of the way, what's left of your penances, and be specific," Jazz focused on Wing visibly, but it was Thundercracker who he kept watch on.

"A lot more bindings," Wing admitted, wanting to start with something they'd recognize. "Some may be almost as bad as the first you experienced through me, but a few of them may be worse. I have a lot of issues to face and reconcile."

"But that's all it is, emotional stress?" Thundercracker asked pointedly.

"And numb hands," Wing nodded. "It's the aftercare that's really different. Snuggling and sometimes 'facing until I'm centered again."

"And the 'facing?" Thundercracker managed to grind out.

Wing rubbed the Seeker's leg. "Thorn and Atl. Otherwise I'll be plastered against you."

Thundercracker didn't look pleased but seemed a bit mollified by the mention of the other flier and the idea that Wing would be with him as well, "Is that all that's going to happen to you now?"

"For a couple metacycles," Wing hedged, then sighed at Jazz's hard look. "Once all the bindings are done, I'll actually be punished for the act of escaping. Redline has to break my wings and leave me untreated for a time."

"Break your wings?" Thundercracker pulled Wing close as he rumbled at the other Knights present.

"I knew it was coming when I returned," Wing tried to soothe him. "It's not as bad as you think."

"Not bad?" Thundercracker asked in disbelief. "How long will you be unable to fly?"

"It happens every time I'm caught sneaking out," Wing tried to reassure him. "It sucks but I can handle it."

"How long?" Thundercracker demanded, ready to focus on another Knight to get the information.

"Umm, four or five decaorns? Dai was really upset. They'll be set but have to heal on their own," Wing offered quietly.

"Barbaric," Thundercracker latched on even tighter and grumbled into Wing's shoulder. "What kind of mecha do something like that to another flier."

"Ones trying to teach a lesson," Wing said, though he didn't expect to get through to the Seeker.

"What would you do to a deserter and traitor?" Aurora asked mildly.

"We wouldn't break their wings," Thundercracker grumbled ignoring the question.

"What is done to Decepticon Seekers to desert, if you do not break their wings?" Aurora asked
"If they join the Autobots they are fought like any other Autobot fliers. Many will seek them out to deliberately fight them," Thundercracker said.

Jazz sorted. "From the ones I saw while under cover, each Seeker gets to tear a part off, with the wings going in pieces to each one of them."

"If we catch them, yes," Thundercracker admitted. "It is wartime. You've said you are not at war."

Aurora hummed acceptance of the information. "We are not at war, and we do not deactivate if we can avoid it. We still must maintain civil order."

"What do Autobots do to deserters?" Marwir asked with a look at Jazz.

"Most who get caught are locked in the brig, the ones who went Con are likely to be executed," Jazz answered evenly. "Not that many make it to base. Like with Cons, Bots weren't much on taking traitors prisoner."

"That's all war time," Thundercracker objected.

"They know," Jazz shrugged.

"So, will you need to be in stasis until I've fully recovered?" Wing asked Thundercracker softly.

"If that is what is going to happen to you, I will need to be in stasis while you are damaged," Thundercracker grumbled. "I would like to be there to help you heal," he ran a hand lightly over Wing's back, brushing his fingers against the small wings. He didn't want to see those wings hurt, but he did want to be there to help his creation's recovery.

"Then you will be," Aurora promised.

"We will all be there to help you," Jazz said quietly. "Units take care of each other."

"Thank you," Wing smiled at him and snuggled into Thundercracker a bit more. "I'm going to appreciate it a lot. Working with broken wings is not fun."

"Why, it's not like you actually need them for balance or anything," Deadlock frowned with a chin motion towards Thundercracker's broad wings.

"They're sensitive and the pain is excruciating," Wing pondered how to explain to a grounder what a pair of damaged wings were like. "For a frame like mine, because of the way they lay, I have to keep my entire spinal strut straight and can't rotate my hips. Moving my shoulders is a fight against keening."

"So it's even worse than for a lot of broad-winged frames," Jazz hummed thoughtfully. "Locking them in extension with the brace isn't an option?"

"For a while I can, but the strain involved it worse than holding my back still after a few joors in a given orn," Wing explained.

"What's the point of going through that?" Deadlock was honestly confused and not so certain about joining these Knights at the moment. It sounded a bit like something Turmoil would come up with as punishment.

Wing opened his mouth to answer, then closed it and regarded Deadlock for a long moment while again.
"It's faster and a more effective use of resources than prison time," Wing offered what he hoped might make sense to the practical warrior. "Instead of imprisoning a Knight for centuries for a serious offense, pain and bindings teach the lessons. The Knight still earns their energon, rather than being a burden on the system by sitting in a cell doing nothing."

"So quick, harsh punishment rather than lots of boredom and monotony," Deadlock thought for a bit. "I guess I could live with that."

"Good," Wing smiled brightly at him. "In the end it is simply how we do things, but there is a benefit to it if boredom and inactivity is not your best teacher."

Jazz suddenly giggled. "I think Prowl's the only mecha I know that would find the brig time more motivational. The idea horrifies him, though I don't have a clue why."

"It might have something to do with being inactive and lacking mental stimulation in a brig," Wing said thoughtfully, thinking back to his conversations with Prowl. "The tac-net may have something to do with it."

"It is a bitchy piece of hardware to manage," Jazz nodded thoughtfully. "It's like trying to feed a black hole sometimes. No amount of intel is enough."

"It's much more likely an Enforcer thing. Not even my Order can fully explain the disgrace and fear associated with being locked up with those one put away," Aurora spoke up. "If his Enforcer coding to obey the law is as strong as has been indicated, I expect it is the personal disgrace being in a cell instilled in him by his culture that is the cause."

"It may be a combination of the two things," Thundercracker said after a pause. "Prowl is extremely ethical in his own way and would be horrified at the idea of appearing corrupt and he is enough like Soundwave to not really cope with the lack of new intel."

"He did say he punished the Autobot commanders who fired on our ships when we left," Wing agreed after a pause. "He has strong morals."

"As frustrating as he can be, I can't disagree there. Sometimes a little on the warped side, but then look who's speaking. SpecOps mastered the concept of strong moral coding that has no issues breaking the law."

"Once he knows the rules of the city and the Citadel I doubt Prowl will ever do anything that will necessitate being placed in a brig or severely punished. And if by some bizarre chance he does do something to warrant it he will undoubtedly be able to argue his way out of the punishment. Probably by pointing out a contradiction in the law," Thundercracker relaxed a bit as he settled further against Wing.

"So true," Jazz snickered. "Mech is a walking codex of legal minutia. He enjoys it too. Though I suspect he'd try a 'it was necessary' or 'it is not strictly speaking, illegal' argument first. Speaking of our resident missing leg, any progress on finding someone who can give him orders?"

"We've spoken to the few nobles from Praxus who joined the Exodus about the situation. A couple of them think they might be able to countermand his orders if he recognizes them as an authority figure," Aurora said. "There is some debate as to whether he will acknowledge orders from someone who left Praxus before it was destroyed."

"Since Prowl joined the Autobots as military personnel would Dai Atlas be able to given his
previous rank in the military?" Dart asked, trying to get a better understanding of the Praxian's situation.

"It depends on where the Prime is in his command tree," Jazz said seriously. "If he's transferred his loyalty to Prime rather than the government, the military or Cybertron in general, then there's no one that could countermand a direct order. If most of his Praxian tree is still intact, then a Praxian of rank might snap him back there, might not. Dai Atlas has good odds if Prowl went military. Unfortunately that's all code based distinctions. Not something that comes across in speech anymore. The Prime is the government, the military, Cybertron itself in speech and practical applications. Prowl's code wouldn't be so general."

"So wake him up and get them to try," Deadlock shrugged.

"Once Redline is satisfied with his knowledge of Prowl's code and made the necessary repairs bringing Prowl online, having Dai Atlas and the Praxian nobles try ordering him to stand down may be the best option available," Aurora admitted. "Hopefully he will remain calm even after he learns he is not on Cybertron."

"Just be ready to drop him back into stasis fast, and know that tac-net hates going off line," Jazz advised.

"Thundercracker, several members of my creation flock would like the chance to spend some time with you," Aurora said quietly, trying to keep the other Seeker from dwelling on Wing's fate.

"I would be honored," he dipped his wings in thanks to her for the risk she was taking. "I will be on my best behavior."

"I am sure," she smiled and lifted her wings in acknowledgment that it would be a challenge for him that she believed he would succeed with. "We will take a full tour of the cavern, then energon in the eyrie."

"I look forward to it," Thundercracker dipped his own wings in recognition of the honor and a discrete thank you for the accommodation regarding fueling. It would be the first time in many centuries that he had been around a normal flock, and he hoped it would go well. Given they accepted a Vision deciding to become a high-ranking Knight, they might overlook the issue he still had adjusting to such a peaceful existence. It was nice that the first activity with them was going to be something he excelled at.

"So what are the odds we can go dancing soon?" Jazz asked Dart with a pleading turbo-puppy look to rival Wing's.

Dart caved slightly even as he tried to be responsible, much to the amusement of his elders. "Well, it's too soon for a club in the city, but we could probably commandeering one of the training rooms tomorrow. I know some of the Knights would love to try out the moves you've been showing me."

"I'll take what I can get. Got a DJ?" Jazz accepted it with good humor.

"A couple of Knights did just that during their walkabouts. They might not be as good as some of the professionals you knew back on Cybertron, but we can help them polish up their old skills," Dart grinned, once again relieved that Jazz was willing to adapt.

"Hay, there hasn't been a real, pro DJ on Cybertron for ages. I'm what passes for one of the better ones, though Blaster is way better with that beat," Jazz grinned. "Even if it's not a dance club, it'll liven this place up some. It's seriously quiet. Kinda creeps me out."
"Why? Marwir asked with a curious lilt.

"Cause quiet means something's really wrong, whether I'm working or not. Autobot bases are never quiet. Neither are Con ones, come to think of it. Quiet means something bad happened," Jazz shrugged.

"That's for sure," Deadlock agreed. Jazz had just pointed out something that'd been bothering him as well. "Quiet usually means someone nasty's on a rampage and no one wants to attract their attention. Or Shockwave or Soundwave are visiting. Which is the same thing really."

"Or everyone's gray because somebody like my boss visited," Jazz added with a nod. "Sometimes because everyone's in stasis in medbay, and the few that aren't are too exhausted to talk. No matter what is going down, it's not good news."

"It doesn't bother me as much as I spent much of time time seeking out quiet, but even I feel it," Thundercracker nodded. "It doesn't have quite the foreboding that it did on Cybertron, but it's there."

"We'll have to keep that in mind. Maybe some quiet music or a vid in the background when you go to recharge?" Dart offered. He'd never thought of quiet as a problem before, but it made sense that it might bother those who spent their existence living in such close quarters and dangerous times.

"I'd like that," Jazz said with a warm smile for Dark. "I've been keeping the music internal so it doesn't bother you, but it'd be really nice to feel it."

"That might be too loud," Dart said carefully.

"Okay maybe, we'll see. I don't need it loud to feel it, even if I normally like it loud."

"Maybe you could adjust the bass a bit and see if that helps," Kimark said, speculatively. "Or run the sound through something so the vibrations could be felt in part of the berth."

"Ohhh, kinky," Jazz grinned playfully. "I'll try speakers. If Dart and I can't agree on a good volume, I'll try that."

"I'm fine with the frame sounds for recharge," Thundercracker offered. "It's nice to have a trine nearby."

Aurora smiled and lifted her wings in pleasure at the admission. It was more than she honestly expected.

"I'm better if we keep a distance during recharge but I can still hear someone around. It's probably safer for everyone if I don't get touched while I'm offline," Deadlock admitted. "Although Kimark seems to know how to handle being around me."

"It's not much different than my time in the gladiator pits and most everybody knows that part from socializing me and the military mecha," Kimark nodded agreeably. "For most of us it's expected that when mecha come to the Citadel they still have some serious edges to smooth. Not so true anymore, but all but a few of us arrived when the Citadel was still in the middle of nowhere."

"Nice to meet mecha with some sense," Deadlock said cheerfully.

"Have you been informed of what The Nightdance is like?" Marwir suddenly asked.

"No, Wing didn't mentioned that particular display when we spoke about the city."

Thundercracker looked over, and Wing could easily teek his interest. "How is it different from what I may have seen
"Or what we had in Iacon?" Jazz asked with interest.

"It's entirely Ankmorian Light Jet stunt frames, like ours," Wing motioned to Marwir and himself, then frowned briefly. "Well, what mine used to be anyway. They're a professional team; this is what they do as their function. The city lights go on and off at various points, turning the air display from watching frames and smoke, to watching frame lights and lit smoke, to light shows. It's all choreographed to music."

"Sound like it will be an entertaining show. We haven't had a real flight show in Iacon in a long time," Jazz said with genuine interest.

"What's the point?" Deadlock frowned.

"It's a way of demonstrating skills. Kind of like a demonstration fight," Kimark offered as an explanation.

Deadlock mulled that over, then nodded slowly. "Right. Peace time. Nothing strategic to give up."

"Yap," Jazz chirped with a grin. "Sometimes they inspired a good after-show. Courting flights are always amazing to watch."

"We do get quite a few Aerials and Seekers who take the opportunity to show off. Having that large an audience for the courting flight makes it very memorable," Aurora agreed with fond memories making her expression momentarily soft.

"Is there any replacement for the Rite of the Storm Flight?" Thundercracker asked suddenly.

"There is talk of it most vorns, but no. We can't risk so many going above ground to fly en mass," she dipped her wings in sadness. "This world has the storms. We do not have the freedom."

"We very rarely managed in war either," Thundercracker accepted the truth he suspected. "Though I suspect it had more to do with not wanting to fly over our destroyed homes than the logistical mess that was officially blamed."

"Its loss is one of the biggest changes we Seekers had to make to our traditions after coming here," Aurora said.

"From the sound of things you've kept more than we managed back on Cybertron," Thundercracker said quietly.

"That is why we left," she inclined her wings to the truth and his pain. "Every group gave up something they held dear, but we survived. Our society, our knowledge, our arts, our beliefs and so many sparklines survived. As much as it hurts when we feel storm season coming, it is worth it to preserve the rest."

"I wish I had been in a position to have known and joined you then, even as I know neither I nor my flock would have abandoned our duties to do so," Thundercracker said very, very quietly.

"Do you still do a Showcase?" Jazz asked.

"Yes, although we only hold it once every three centuries," Dart said excitedly. "Each of the districts take a turn hosting the event. Everyone brings the best crafts, food and music to showcase their talents. There are competitions and prizes throughout the decaorn."
"Rockin," Jazz grinned with a quiver of excitement. "Shorter than it used to be, but I'm guessing that's because of a smaller population and not much new happening."

"Yes," Aurora nodded. "It is not for another thirty two vorns however."

"Well worth it," Jazz quivered all over with genuine excitement. "Those were always the best metacycle of the century for me. I can't wait to see how it's evolved here."

"With the music and new dance moves you brought you should have something to show off during the celebration," Dart offered, wanting to encourage Jazz's interest and the excitement that could well infect the rest of his gestalt. Thundercracker was already looking better, though he wasn't as skilled at reading Seekers as Aurora was. "We also might want to talk about using that as an opener for the combined grounder flier performance we were discussing earlier. It would certain get everyone's attention."

"Really?" Jazz's quiver went to ramrod straight shock. "You think they'd let us?"

"It'd be worth checking into, especially since it'd be something so different from what everyone else does. The Showcase is always entertaining, but it's hard for the performers to come up with something completely new every time. Remember, it's not like there are as many groups competing to attend since this is a city instead of a planet. I know the coordinators would love to be able to display a unique performance," Dart grinned. "And if we can't manage to be ready this time we'll have three centuries to prepare for the next one."

"Oh, we will so be ready," Jazz quivered again. "Thirty two vorns is a metric tonne of time. Shouldn't take more than a vorn or two, even with our other duties."

"Are you interested in helping the three of us prepare, Thundercracker?" Dart deliberately avoided mentioning or looking at Deadlock while talking. He didn't want to appear to be putting any pressure on the other mech to help out given his issues with heights. From the way Deadlock remained relaxed, it seemed to be working.

Thundercracker tilted his helm slightly, then flicked his wings in agreement. "Yes. Though I will not be giving rides. I had quite enough of that in the war."

"You can help monitor us when we're practicing and be ready to catch anyone who falls," Wing offered cheerfully. "Redline would probably appreciate a few fliers being present in that capacity. Less work on his part."

"No doubt. I can also record what the audience will see to help you improve the display," Thundercracker offered.

"That's a great idea. I've got some ideas for some flight maneuvers, but I need to see if I can still pull them off," Wing turned to Marwir and gave her one of his most pathetic looks.

She rolled her optics at him. "Yes, you can try."
Chapter Summary

Thundercracker visits Aurora's creation flock for the first time.

Thundercracker couldn't help the tension filling his field and processor as he followed Aurora towards her creation flock's eyrie, though he tried. He wished he wasn't so nervous and could better enjoy one of his first flights over the actual city. Compared to the devastation he was used to seeing it really was beautiful, although the mixture of architectures was another reminder that he wasn't on Cybertron anymore and would probably never see it again. The flicker of depression that caused was quickly overtaken by his nerves again as they began the landing circle and Aurora exchanged several comm greetings before her Order-creator appeared to lead them down.

Thundercracker stuck as close as possible to Aurora, gladly using his mechling status as a shield to avoid any potential confrontation. He was glad to see a pair of familiar faces in Northwind and Saamanjasy, although the Vision was deliberately standing behind the initial welcoming group as suited his trine's status in the flock. The pair with him were no doubt Aurora's sibling and their Order.

He didn't quite stumble through the complex roundhouse that was being introduced to a flock, but he was far from pleased with how difficult it was. This really was something that should still be second nature to him. It hadn't changed at all. He received a couple very subtle prompts when memory and reflex failed him. It stung even as he was grateful for them and the tolerance he was being shown. He was also very grateful that Aurora remained close, just like any creator would to a nervous creation. He had no trouble believing that she was a fine creator and Vision no matter what her spark had lead her to.

"How are you doing?" Saamanjasy asked as they made their way into the building. The Vision had started fussing over Thundercracker as soon as the introductions were over, while his trinemates followed, fields full of tolerable amusement.

"Improving every orn," Thundercracker tipped his wings to the Vision, thankful for the known presence. "I'm still getting used to the idea that I'm safe."

"You're certainly safe here; no one would dare even think about crossing Northwind or Aurora. Especially if it involves one of her mechlings," Saamanjasy said cheerfully. "It does take some time getting used to dealing with a new flock, but you'll settle in here in no time."

"I have no doubt," Thundercracker brushed Aurora's field with thanks for that truth and making him believe it. "She has raised one extraordinary Order I know. Am I the only mechling in the flock?"

"Currently you're the only mechling in the flock, although there are two fledglings, Airwave and Redtail, who aren't here tonight. Redtail is getting over a minor virus, so their creators are fussing over them back in their own eyrie," Saamanjasy added, not wanting Thundercracker to think that the fledglings weren't present due to concerns about him.
"Ah, yes," he smiled softly at good and miserable memories from long ago when the universe made sense to him and the future was bright and clear. "That always sends creators into a fit. I still remember the first time I got really sick. It seemed like it took mine a metacycle to accept I really was better. I mostly remember being stressed about the Rite of the Storm Flight they went on when I wasn't feeling well."

"That would be hard for everyone involved; you missed their comforting presence and they couldn't be there for you. Illnesses are particularly distressing for a creator when one cannot be near their fledglings due to duty or personal injury," Aurora admitted, remembering times when her own duties had forced her to be apart from her fledglings. "They'll be up and scrambling all over soon enough; you'll get to meet them then."

"I look forward to it. Happy fledglings are always a bright moment in the orn," Thundercracker hummed, his voice betraying very little of the anticipation his wings did. "How often does this flock have sub-adults?"

"When we came we knew we couldn't have creations as often as we're used to. The flight class you attend is every mechling Seeker in the city," Saamanjasy prefaced his answer with something to give Thundercracker a sense of scale. "Most flocks have a clutch about every thousand vorns."

"Then not that far from what my flock did, only back then we had few clutches by most standards," Thundercracker hummed, pleased that at least in this he wouldn't have to adapt much.

"Why so rarely?" Nighteye, Saamanjasy's trine Order, asked politely.

"It's a military and Air Martial thing. Both functions are very difficult to take the time off that hatchlings need, and the military requires you to have your commanding officer's permission to even try. So even the few in the flock who weren't either were bound by the timing inherent in their trinemate's functions. Though if you asked most in the flock they'd have told you it's just how we did things."

"You know more because you were important in the flock," she didn't need to guess.

Thundercracker tipped his wings in confirmation. "My creator was the flock Order and I was expected to be next."

Smoke stared at Thundercracker for a klik, studying the other Order to see if he was exaggerating his importance in his old flock. Despite the nervousness they could all see during a first visit to a new flock, Aurora had said he was a high ranked leader back on Cybertron. That nervousness could even be explained by that reality; he was now the lowest in the flock, and in all of society in many regards. It wasn't a shift anything prepared one for.

"Do you ever want to lead again?" she asked after a moment, something that caught Northwind's attention though not his gaze.

Thundercracker's wings gave a startled flick. "I've never thought about if I wanted to lead, here or before."

"You expected it would happen and accepted that reality," Smoke said almost as a question, teeking of curiosity.

"Largely. I've always known I would lead my flock. I was expected to do well as an Air Martial with so many officers in my flock. I didn't expect to be in the Winglord's trine or command during the war, but the military units were familiar to me and I never resisted when called to command them
after Vos fell. Even here there was never a question with whether I would lead or not, only a
difference in the answer," Thundercracker said after a pause, knowing that he shouldn't expect to
ever be high ranked in a flock here but at the same time knowing that to deny the truth of his past and
what it did to how he thought was a far worse fault. "Whether I will ever be suitable as a leader in
any part of civilian society remains to be seen."

"You will learn before you are granted adult status," she paused and flicked a gaze to Aurora before
asking. "Do you know how long you have to trine?"

"No. I hope I can hold off until they are adults. I would hope I have long enough for current
hatchlings to become adults if need be. My first trine wasn't until I was nearly a thousand. My second
came far too fast. I intend to date as mechlings do and watch for signs I'm pushing the limits of the
coding's tolerance. I would give them as natural a trining as I can."

"We'll be watching as well," Aurora spoke for her trine and every other Seeker Knight of Light. "It
will show its displeasure to everyone long before it does damage. There will be time to deal with any
difficulties he has."

"You would know the signs and be prepared for them," Smoke agreed with a sympathetic dip of her
wings before stepping away towards her trine. "It's almost time to eat. I hope the dating scene goes
well for you, Thundercracker. Unfortunately no one in this flock is currently searching for a trine."

"Thank you, and I understand," he flicked his wings in acceptance even as he caught an approving
look from Northwind as he joined Aurora and the score worth of Seekers around lounging pillows
that dominated the central common area. Though he wasn't about to bring it up, it was a welcome bit
of normal from his early life. He'd become used to chairs and tables, but pillows and low lounges
always seemed more social and civilized to him. It was a pleasant reminder that the future would
contain other civilized luxuries he'd gotten used to doing without for so long. He waited for Aurora
to take her seat before settling next to her, prepared to follow the lead of the other young Seekers and
go get her and himself fuel if the situation called for it. He knew enough of Aurora's preferences that
he shouldn't embarrass her with his ignorance.

"How long have you been in the city?" One of the younger adults asked. After a moment
Thundercracker placed his designation as Asaltar, the Vision trined with Nuage and Cloudbank.

"This will be my thirteenth night here," he answered smoothly, sure that this fell under common
knowledge and likely something the others knew.

"Is this your first gathering outside the Citadel?" Asalter asked casually as he discreetly motioned for
Thundercracker to rise and follow him towards the side counter. As the two of them approached he
noticed others starting to join them. Once there, he grabbed a tray and began selecting small treats
and placing them on plates. "Everyone normally picks up the fuel for their creation trine and
grandcreators; you'll want to get fuel for Aurora and for Northwind's trine since you're officially the
youngest."

"Thank you," Thundercracker accepted the advice and easily picked out what he and Aurora would
like from what he recognized, but for her creation trine, the lead trine of the eyrie, he quietly commed
her for advice.

::Sweet and tart for all three.:: she answered immediately. ::I should have reminded you of
Northwind's preference before we arrived.::

::Most would grow up seeing his preferences before they would be chosen to serve him.::
Thundercracker pointed out respectfully as he finished filling the other plates. When he returned he
served the flock Order first, then his Vision, then their Action before giving Aurora her plate and settling down with his own. There were several subtle but approving wing dips from those close by as he seated himself. It was difficult not to immediate drink the tempting cube in front of him, but he managed to wait for everyone else to beginning fueling before starting himself. He had to remind himself that no one was going to take his fuel even though he was the lowest ranked present. Lessons begun in the Citadel were reinforced here and once again he was not only allowed his cube in peace but no one tried to take his treats.

"Have you tried copper foam before?" Nuage offered a bite-sized spongy cube from his plate.

"If I have it was very long ago," Thundercracker said after trying to sift through his few surviving memories from before the war. Reminding himself that he was a mechling by status so an adult trined Action feeding him didn't mean what it might otherwise, he accepted the bite of treat, letting the flavor fill his mouth. It was sweet, almost all copper, and he quickly realized it was a textural treat. It was different, and it didn't trigger any memories, good or bad.

"I don't believe I've had anything quite like that before. Thank you for the experience," he said formally.

"You're welcome," Nuage replied with a slight smile to the giggles of his Vision.

"Don't mind him. He feeds everyone who'll let him," Asaltar grinned at them.

Thundercracker wasn't entirely certain how to answer, since it had been centuries since anyone besides Skywarp had even thought of trying to feed him. It wasn't something Decepticon Seekers did anymore.

Asaltar's grin dimmed. "Is something wrong?" he asked quietly.

Thundercracker tipped his wings in an apology, "Forgive me, I've grown unaccustomed to such behavior among non-trine mates. I'm still adjusting to the more relaxed and friendly attitudes I am finding here."

"Ah," the Vision relaxed along with several others. "We're a very relaxed flock. It's part of what allows us to accept the more unusual functions some of us have chosen," Asaltar tipped a wing towards Aurora. "You'll get used to it as we get used to you."

Around the room Thundercracker picked up both amusement at the young trine's actions and agreement with the Vision's statement.

"I am grateful for the opportunity and look forward to doing so," Thundercracker agreed as he took another sip from his own cube and glanced down at the small nickel-carbon silicon gel on his plate. No one had tried to take it while he drank his cube, so he took the opportunity to try a bite. It brought him a rich flavor that reminded him of the cavern around them. Deep and alien despite the clean tang at the end. It was arguably one of the stranger things he'd tried to consume out of curiosity.

He decided to sit quietly and Seeker-watch for a bit, noting how the different trines and their members interacted. He couldn't detect any of the underlying tension he was so used to feeling in a group, even without any Aerials or grounders present. This was close to the kind of pleasant interaction he vaguely remembered from back when he was an Air Martial. The jokes weren't cruel. The wings were happy. The harmonics were friendly and affectionate.

It was everything he longed for and still didn't dare admit he wanted. What his spark was ready for he wasn't yet.
Chapter Summary

Deadlock, Kimark, Wing and Thundercracker talk about paintjobs and designs.

Wing sprawled, relaxed and grateful for the indulgence of team-building time with his gestalt, or in this case part of it. He wasn't entirely sure why Jazz wasn't joining them, but it hardly mattered. Jazz wasn't distressed yesterorn and Wing doubted he would be. It was still nice to enjoy late morning energon with Deadlock, Thundercracker and Kimark. That they actually had something to talk about made it even more enjoyable. Deadlock was the last one he expected to be looking at a new appearance, but here he was, the first of them to talk seriously about it.

Wing wasn't interested in changing his own appearance much. Beyond the extra mass that Redline was looking at removing and the unit he'd acquired, his life was still very much the same as it had been before he went on his walkabout. By staying close to what he had been, he was visually telling everyone his priorities hadn't changed that much. His unit though, that they were looking at changing, was a good thing.

"So what have you thought of so far?" Thundercracker asked as he settled in the informal semi-circle the four of them had created.

"I was thinking more metallic paint. Something that catches an optic." Deadlock glared at the datapad in frustration. "There's too many options. Every time I think I know what I like I wind up changing things."

"If you want optic catching, metallics and bright colors work, so does gem paint," Wing suggested. "But what really catches an optic in the Citadel is decorative work. Deco does some great scroll work and his tattoos look good."

"A visor? I haven't see may here," Thundercracker pointed out.

"I've tried looking at visors, but that's as bad as paint. Some highlight optics; some conceal optics. Oh, I changed the shade of gray so now it doesn't look right. There are just too many options," Deadlock looked tempted to throw the datapad. "I sound like a slagging noble. So far all I know is that I like the shade of red I have right now."

"Do any colors mean anything in particular here or in parts of the city," Thundercracker asked as much for Deadlock's benefit as his own.

"There's a shade of red restricted to priests, but it wouldn't even show up on the options here," Wing was quick to point out the only one that came to mind easily.

"Nothing I know of," Kimark added. "Metalsmiths tend to be dark, but that's because their work blackens their armor. Entertainers tend to glitter. Nothing is set though."

"So nothing I pick is going to warn people I'm dangerous give me space?" Deadlock grumbled. That was half the point of colors and highlights everywhere he'd ever lived.
"Your attitude and frame will do that on its own no matter how you mark yourself," Thundercracker pointed out. "Every Seeker I meet will know I'm a potentially dangerous opponent in a fight simply by my out-massing them."

"Your field and how you carry yourself will tell it too, at least to anyone who knows how to read the basics," Wing added.

"That you're both skilled fighters shows clearly," Kimark agreed. "You can mark yourself as dangerous with scroll work glyphs. I did for vorns. Gladiator. Berserker. You could add gestalt to that list.

"I'm not a gladiator but putting berserker on me sounds good. That way no one can say they weren't warned if they tick me off," Deadlock grinned, temporarily satisfied.

"Perhaps we should all talk of wearing some form of the gestalt glyph," Thundercracker said thoughtfully. "We do not have a unified color scheme like the Constructicons or a similar frame type to let others know what they are dealing with when they threaten one of us."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea," Kimark glanced at Wing. "How do you think Jazz would take to it?"

"Poorly, to be honest. I don't think he likes to display like that," Wing shrugged. "Still a conversation to have with him. He might wear something small or discreet."

"Prowl would most likely agree to do it once he is online," Thundercracker said, thinking about their flock mate still in stasis. "We wouldn't all necessarily have to wear the same scroll work design, but it would mark us as being a flock."

"Unit symbols are worn by everyone," Deadlock agreed. "Jazz can put his somewhere out of the way if he's ashamed of being a part of us."

"Not ashamed, just used to concealing his connections," Thundercracker corrected. "He survived by not showing who he was as much as we survived by being blunt about it. And not all units wear insignia. Most don't."

"If we're going to have a symbol for the unit everyone in it should wear it," Deadlock grumbled stubbornly. He didn't like being rejected, even in theory.

"He could look at holographic paint," Kimark offered. "Or something that shows up only under certain lighting. That would keep the symbol on him but still concealed. Or he would work it into another design."

"It's something we can talk to Jazz and Prowl about later," Wing said trying to divert the conversation back to something less likely to create friction. "But you do like the idea of scroll work including the glyph for berserker?"

"Yeah," Deadlock nodded. "I really liked some of the designs."

"Could I see the datapad a moment?" Wing asked waiting patiently for Deadlock to hand it over. Once he had it, he switched to the scroll work section. "This is the basic glyph for berserker. We could try to incorporate it into the designs you like."

"Right, yes," Deadlock grabbed onto the new subject eagerly. "Who can do stuff like that?"

"I'm not half bad at it. Deco is good at it. There are probably a couple score of Knights that are too," Wing suggested.
"Jazz is very good," Thundercracker added.

"So Wing could work on an option now and we could ask Jazz to come up with a design too. That would give a reason to bring up the idea of a unit symbol later," Deadlock said.

"We could also each put together an idea or two for Deadlock's look. If he likes one of them, or a combo of them, it would narrow things down," Wing suggested. "You've got time to sort this out. Shanix are easy to come by for Deco's work if you exceed what the Citadel is covering."

"Might as well. I'm driving myself crazy trying to do it myself," Deadlock admitted. "And it's not like we can't figure out ways to get more shanix if we need it."

"I would be willing to look at options for you," Thundercracker agreed, interested despite himself in what was available.

"Even when you're restricted to the Citadel and no clearance there are plenty of shanix to be earned here," Wing smiled and pulled out a set of datapads for each of them to work on before handing them out. "There are always chores listed for pay."

"So we're allowed to earn shanix while we're here? Are we restricted on what we can buy?" Deadlock asked as he fidgeted with a datapad himself. Letting others help pick his new look was a bit grating, but at least these four weren't likely to show him something he'd be completely opposed to.

"Yes, you can earn shanix while here, and there aren't going to be many restrictions," Kimark nodded. "Mostly things that could pass for weapons. Blades, some interfacing equipment and artwork. The primary issue will be access for now. There isn't much for sale within the Citadel. It'll be a while before you can go to the markets."

"But we could work to acquire them now and spend them later," Thundercracker said thoughtfully. "Or have someone we trust spend them for us at a shop."

"That's how I'm getting snacks," Wing admitted.

"But just about everybody knows what you like and where to get it," Kimark grinned at him. "Even I could treat shop for you."

"True, but we could have someone get us image captures or catalogs for some of the shops," Thundercracker said. "It would help with learning the local exchange rates."

"True enough," Wing hummed thoughtfully. "Examples are always a good thing with economy lessons."

"On that subject, how long would it take to earn enough for the detailing you had done?"
"Mmm, that's probably ten joors work, unless you take on the really nasty or more specialized chores. Things like the sewers pay more because they're awful. Washing the higher windows pays a bit more because you have to fly or have extra gear."

"So if I want to earn more I have to take lousy jobs or climb around up there," Deadlock grimaced. "At least those pay more here. That used to be the poorest paying work."

"Pay structures are a bit different when it's all in the unit. In the Citadel it's assumed that everything's going to be done by a Knight. There's a sense of fairness to your unit that doesn't translate well to the
outside. Still, the safeguards in the city makes sure that even those with very poor paying jobs have energon, shelter and basic maintenance," Wing said.

"Summation, I'm still going to need to do a lot of crap jobs but I'm not going to starve," Deadlock grunted.

"Well, yes, there are chores one does as a Knight, but that's not what we were talking about," Wing looked a bit confused.

"Dai Atlas doesn't like me so I figure I'll get tossed out eventually," Deadlock shrugged neutrally, ignoring the familiar nagging feeling of being unwanted. "Knowing I won't starve is good enough for me."

"Well, you won't starve and you'll have a room of your own and basic repairs even if he manages that," Wing actually growled, something that made Kimark stare at him in shock.

"Things don't work like that here, but I know it doesn't mean much yet," Kimark murmured as he studied Wing a bit longer.

"What? You've watched me in full on screaming matches with in him in front of the circle," Wing stared back.

"Screaming yeah. Over something he did or stated he plans to do. Never over something he hasn't hinted at yet. In all his vorns when has he ever even voted against an Initiate?"

"None that I know of," Wing admitted. "Still, he'll be in for far more than an audial full if he tries to toss Deadlock out without cause."

"From you and the rest of us," Kimark snorted. "It's odd enough to call his state into question."

"Axe would have him in with Redline if he even hinted he was going to do something like that," Wing agreed even as he bristled at the thought.

Thundercracker watched the trio quietly from the side, noting how Kimark was so surprised by Wing's protectiveness of his flock mate even as Deadlock seemed pleased by that same attitude. As Wing's agitation increased as they talked about his potential Initiate, he figured he should interject.

"Perhaps we could address that concern if it actually happens?"

"We will, and odds are I'll have a binding if I haven't settled when Marwir sees me next," Wing rolled his shoulders back before stretching out a bit. "I have a weird relationship with Dai at times. I'm his Daoshi, but I'm also the voice of decent for the Order and he's the Sovereign. We're both still trying to come to a full understanding of what that means to us personally. Add in threats to a flockmate and someone I want to train and I'm kinda a mess on it."

"I understand that protectiveness for a flockmate," Thundercracker agreed, having felt it often for Wing in the past few vorns.

"We don't need to borrow trouble that probably won't happen," Kimark said, watching Wing for a klik before shifting most of his attention back to his datapad. "We have no reason to believe that the Sovereign will go against tradition to do something so outrageous, much less that the thought will make it past Axe."

"I know you're right," Wing promised.

"So, back to economics, do you know what is being covered by the Citadel in this repainting thing?"
Thundercracker asked.

"I didn't get a shanix limit, but certainly enough to cover what we're looking at for Deadlock," Kimark hoped it was enough.

"I know you, you wouldn't want anything outrageous enough to be questioned," Wing said reassuringly.

"No, I wouldn't, but a full frame repaint isn't cheap for a Seeker, even if I keep limited markings," Thundercracker shifted a bit.

Wing cocked his helm slightly. "You mean something different from what Deadlock does."

"I really should take a mourning flight," Thundercracker hesitated. "I'm not sure how here, so it might just be a stripping of paint for a period. There must be a standard method here."

"Mourning flight?" Kimark and Deadlock both looked curious but kept their comments to themselves, figuring the Aerial would be more likely to get an explanation.

"You need to grieve for your lost trine and mate," Wing said quietly. "How would you have done it in Vos?"

Thundercracker took a moment to organize his thoughts. "When a Seeker deactivates a proper funeral includes releasing their ground spark chamber into the high atmosphere. It created the Caelum asa. A mourning flight is taken in it, lasting however long it takes to grind one's paint off, or until you have to come down. It is an official state marked by the look. It's over when you are repainted."

Wing thought for a long klik, thinking about how such a ritual could help with the long-delayed mourning process for his flock mate. "I don't know if they have anything like that here. We've had very few deactivations since the city was settled. I'm not certain if the sand above ground would have the same effect on paint. I think you need to talk to Master Aurora about this."

"But we're restricted..." Thundercracker hesitated.

"Not to the point of harming yourselves," Kimark said very firmly. "Things that are important, like Wing getting time with his gestalt and Jazz getting to move about and pretend he's sneaking around at night. Mourning is even more important than that."

The Seeker looked between the Knights, his wings unsettled. "She's unlikely to strike me for asking?"

Kimark stared at Thundercracker in disbelief, trying to understand where that concern would come from. He would have expected something like that comment from Deadlock or someone in his position, not a high ranked commander. "Strike you? Never for something like that kind of request. Maybe if you glitched and attacked a civilian. If she ever does strike you for something like that, let Redline, Axe, Wing or any of the other Masters know immediately because something is seriously wrong with her."

"It was really that bad so early?" Deadlock almost sounded sad, though it came across more as horrified.

Thundercracker pulled himself together as he shrugged. "Not with Megatron. Starscream."

"He struck you for asking a question?" Wing hissed angrily. He didn't completely understand Seeker
trines, but that kind of behavior was outrageous especially aimed at someone like a flock mate.

"For asking if he would go on a mourning flight," Thundercracker had to work to push those memories back.

"I'll go with you when you talk to Aurora about it," Wing said decisively, sounding more his true age than he normally bothered portraying. "We'll make her understand that you need to mourn everything you've lost before you can properly move on and fit into the city."

"Was he that cruel to everyone or just his own trine," Kimark asked Deadlock quietly while Thundercracker was distracted.

"I thought he was worse, but I never saw him be like that with his trine," Deadlock answered just as quietly. "He mostly took it out on other Seekers. Keeping them in line and all."

Thundercracker nodded to Wing as his wings quivered in relief-thanks.

"Well, that's settled for now until we can talk to her," Wing said as he pressed a steady, comforting field against the Seeker and found Thundercracker leaning into it more than he ever had. Turning back to the pair of grounders he asked, "Do you have any colors you want to avoid, Deadlock?"

"Pastels," Deadlock said with a grimace of disgust.

"But you'd look good in pale pink," Wing snickered, trying to lighten the mood back up and divert Thundercracker from his memories.

"Don't you dare," Deadlock growled at him meaningfully, even if it wasn't with the same overt threat of violence most would face.

"Do you like being mostly black?" Kimark asked with a relieved snicker at the improving teek of the room.

"Yeah, a lot of Decepticons are dark colors," Deadlock said with a shrug. "It was easy and cheap to get black paint."

"Since that is not as much of a concern, are there other colors you like more?" Kimark asked again. "For instance, Wing stands out in a crowd by being mostly white. Others prefer colors which don't require nearly as much maintenance."

It made Deadlock still and think, then he looked at Wing. "Just how much more maintenance?"

"Well, if I want to look this good all the time, at least two showers an orn, usually three, though they're mostly quick ones. A wipe down more often than that. Wax and polish every orn. A visit to Deco once a decaorn if I don't damage my finish enough for Redline to have it done. If I'm trying to make an extra-good impression I spend at least twice as much time on the wax and polish," Wing detailed his maintenance schedule.

"Right. Not doing that," Deadlock made a face.

"Then limit the amount of metallic. That requires a fair amount of maintenance to look good if there's much of it," Kimark said with a knowing nod and made a few changes on his datapad. "What kind of impression are you trying to make?"

Deadlock actually thought, trying to compare his old way of being perceived with what would be vaguely appropriate here. "That I'm dangerous and know what I'm doing in a fight. I know how to
take care of myself but I'm not too fussy about my appearance. I like the red and the gold highlights, but I don't want something like that all over. Too flashy for my tastes and makes you a target."

"A Knight," Wing grinned as his gestalt mate. "That's exactly the message most project."

"Not counting the ones like you that want to attract attention for various reasons, it does fit the majority of us," Kimark agreed. "So no pastels, and white, metallic or gemdust paints should probably be restricted to highlights for now. That still leaves a lot for us to experiment with, and you can always change things as you try out different combinations."

"The scroll work will be the most distinctive feature no matter what else we do," Wing hummed with a thoughtful smile.

"It would stand out much more if the rest of him is largely solid," Thundercracker commented as he finished a design he liked and thought Deadlock might.

"Solid colors are also easier to maintain without constantly going to a professional for touch-ups," Kimark pointed out as he made a minor modification to his own datapad.

"Always a plus," Deadlock nodded, feeling better about accepting the help. They really did seem to be out to make him pleased and not hint of taunting him, not even from Thundercracker. "Were you always that blue?" he asked the Seeker.

"Always something close to this. The exact shade was dependent on supplies," Thundercracker answered.

"Did it have a meaning for you or your flock?" Kimark asked as he put a finishing touch on the highlights on his datapad. "I know some gladiator pairs who always had at least one color in common to show they were a team."

"Nothing I can remember at least," Thundercracker shook his helm. "I believe it was simply the color my armor came in with. Vos was more on symbols having meaning than color."

"That fits with what I've seen from observing the other Seekers here, but I wasn't certain if the military or Air Martials did things differently," Kimark said with an understanding nod.

"The military did in wartime, but that was about respecting resources rather than anything cultural. The only one I really recall was about precious material paints being restricted by permit. Mostly high ranking officers got them, but I heard about a few others where their finish enhanced a gift or tactic they were specialized for."

"That makes sense. Resource management is always important," Kimark said with a nod. "Well, I'm done with my first idea. Everyone else ready?"

"I've got a couple," Wing nodded.

"Yes," Thundercracker offered his to Deadlock.

The grounder took in the offering and to his own surprise kinda liked it. It was the opposite of what he had now in many ways with a solid dark purple base with very few alternate color patches, but that simplicity really set off the scroll work in silver, gold and the red he'd already chosen.

"I haven't tried those colors before," Deadlock admitted as he examined the colors Thundercracker had chosen. It wasn't anything he'd had before, but it did fit well together. It also looked good on a grounder frame, and Deadlock knew Thundercracker would have never done something quite like
this before the Nijihito. "Looks pretty good."

"Thank you," Thundercracker inclined his helm and preened quietly at the complement.

"Good to know you have at least one option to work off of," Wing smiled brightly and offered the pad with his two ideas on it.

With just a glance Deadlock knew exactly what Wing was aiming to do and had to appreciate it. One was bright, not white but an interesting shade of pale orange that he knew without a doubt he'd never seen before. The other was largely black with red scroll work and patches of gold, red, green and two shades of blue. It had one feature he really liked; a spiky scroll work marking around his left optic.

"Never seen that color before," Deadlock admitted as he pondered the first design. "Not something most Decepticons would ever use but it looks interesting. I like that optic scroll work on the darker one. I'm using something like that no matter what else I decide on."

"I came up with two ideas for you," Kimark said offering his datapad. The first was a mostly dark green frame primarily highlighted with metallic black and a few touches of white. The scroll work was in red and bronze and had a pattern running from the right shoulder down the arm ending just above his hand. The second design was primarily the deep red he'd chosen earlier with gold and white scroll work.

"These look really good too. Red makes me look too much like a priest, but I really like that scroll work twisting down my arm," he rumbled thoughtfully. "I like the dark green too."

"Sounds like no matter what you chose you're going to be covered in scroll work," Kimark grinned, pleased his own options had acceptable components. "You can always try them all out or mix and match until you find your new look."

"I did want that," Deadlock grinned back.
Chapter Summary

Unit time. Comments on Deadlock's new look and some planning for Thundercracker and Jazz. Wing's not there.

Deadlock gave a half-sparked glare at Kimark as they reached the door to their quarters. "You going to take off now? I promise to be a mostly good mech and not throw someone out the window."

"I know you won't actually throw anyone in your unit out the window even if they somehow don't like your new look," Kimark said with a chuckle. "I left Demeter in there with Jazz and Thundercracker while Deco was finishing your scroll work. She'll let us know when the three of you are ready to meet us and a few others for dinner."

"So just us and the fox?" Deadlock's surprise was real, but the pleasure in it was stronger. "See you in a few joors then."

Deadlock was almost amused that Kimark only waited until the door opened before heading off down the hall towards some welcome time with Firefall. There was no reason to be nervous. It was just his unit and the little fox in there. Straightening, he walking into the room and waited for their response to his new look. He was disappointed not to have Wing's reaction, but he also knew the Aerial was the least likely to tell him anything was off.

"Damn, you pretty up really nice," Jazz gave a low whistle while Thundercracker was still contemplating the rather extensive color redesign. The visor wasn't on yet as that required Redline. The up side was that without it the spiky bronze tattoo around his right optic showed clearly.

Deadlock turned a bit to let the pair see the entirety of the gold and red pattern of scroll work spiraling down his left arm.

"Loyalty for loyalty," Thundercracker read the gold leaf glyph embedded in the almost blade-like red design of encompassing the limb, shoulder, hand and across his shoulders. "Very appropriate and a valid warning for anyone that tries to betray you."

"Berserker ... one pit of a visible warning too," Jazz added as he spotted the second glyph closer to Deadlock's wrist.

"It's the truth," Deadlock nodded, privately relieved that the glyphs were what he'd asked for. For all he knew about that level of glyphs it could have said anything and he couldn't trust Kimark to snitch on one of his unit.

"Yeah, and it says plenty about how to earn your loyalty too," Jazz hummed as he really took in the largely dark purple frame with so many colorful and meaningful highlights. "So is that central one what folks were thinking of for our unit decal?"

"Something like it, yeah," Deadlock said, pleased Jazz seemed interested in the idea of having a common marking. "We were thinking it might be a good idea to warn civilians what exactly they're
dealing with if they mess with any of us. Nothing about the actual design is carved in crystal or anything. That's why it's all scroll work and not actual tattoos yet."

"I've developed most of the variant I wish to wear, though what I did to it can be used with almost anything circular, or even just a glyph," Thundercracker added.

"Where are you putting it?" Jazz asked, utterly fascinated by the implication that there was a variant and Thundercracker had put thought into it. It wasn't something unit logos usually got.

"My wings, of course. It's where Seekers put their important markings," Thundercracker told him. "Where would you?" his gaze slid to the grounder's chest where the Autobot insignia once was.

"Chestplate insignia aren't always a great idea for an entertainer," Jazz pointed out. "Shoulder or hip is still visible but not glaringly obtrusive during a performance. Something like that could be incorporating into fancier markings like the glyph on his arm."

"We were talking about how you could use some kind of color shift paint as an option," Deadlock admitted. "Maybe something that would show up in normal lighting but disappear under special stage lights. Not like I know how all that fancy stuff works."

"I know a lot of it," Jazz graced Deadlock with a bright smile that showed how much he appreciated the thought, then shifted as he really started to think. A moment later he was on his pedes and moving in a half-dance, half pacing while everyone watched. "Really should try to trust this place though. Incorporating it into something like you did the loyalty glyph, only without the color shift. Yeah, I could put something like that along my arm and shoulder, maybe even in gem or iridescent paint. It'd glitter really nice on stage and distract from what it said unless you're looking for it. It's be easy to put a bit of solid paint on it if it needs to show up clearly for something."

"We will still need to talk to Prowl about this once he can be brought online again, but so far we seem to be in agreement to have some variation on a design like this," Thundercracker said with a wing dip. "Wing hasn't openly said what he thinks of wearing it but he was sitting here when it came up and didn't object."

"That's the nice part about scroll work. It's real easy to change," Jazz grinned and flopped onto the couch. "Nice to know that Deco's good at it too. How much of that is his design?"

"It's a combination of our designs with some of his tweaks to make it flow better. I really like the gestalt glyph having five parts; that's definitely staying," Deadlock said glancing down at the glyph.

"Especially since it informs everyone we are a five part gestalt," Thundercracker agreed.

"Mmm, you know, we could have each of our basic designation glyphs between the arms," Jazz suggested, then paused when he caught Thundercracker shift. "Interferes with your edits?"

"I did have glyphs planned for those locations," the Seeker inclined his helm.

"What were you thinking of having?" Jazz nudged him.

"My personal history. That I am a retired Air Martial Detective, a former Decepticon, a former Winglord's trinemate, trined to Sound Barrier and Farcry, trined Skywarp and Starscream and conjunx of Skywarp. I'm still working on the exact arrangement." he said.

Jazz thought about all those loses and changes before saying, "Those are all important parts of your life to remember. I can see why you'd want to have them displayed."
"We could use the same design to represent the unit and each put our own glyphs into the arms," Deadlock said with a grunt, trying to not show too much sentimentality with the Knight present while still giving some support to the Seeker.

"Yeah, or leave them blank, or use the other's designations," Jazz nodded, his own unease at so blatantly displaying his history easy for those around him to read despite his effort to conceal it. "I can't say designations could be more important than that kind of history if you want it there."

"I wonder what Prowl or Wing would include," Thundercracker gave silent thanks for the support when he knew these two were most unlikely to use it.

"Prowl might display his levels in fighting styles; Wing might just list his favorite sweets," Deadlock said with a small shrug, trying to accept and work with Jazz's quirks. "You could always list the instruments you play or music styles you like once you start your career. I could move the berserker glyph to the gestalt symbol. Gutter mech, thug, berserker, Decepticon...I wonder what else I should list."

"Survivor, a blank spot for your Knight of Light rank if you're still headed there, gladiator, gifted with violence," Jazz suggested as he thought about Deadlock's suggestion and noted Thundercracker's surprise that Deadlock was going to add glyphs. "Might use it for any awards I earn. There are some very prestigious ones they still give out. I'd be leaving any extra glyphs as scroll work, I think." He focused on Deadlock. "Didn't you have some official rank in the Cons? I know you had plenty of status."

"Only real time I was a gladiator was back on Kessai," Deadlock pointed out, although he didn't dismiss the suggestions outright. "According to some of the Cons I was a lieutenant commander but that was mostly when they were trying to decide who was responsible for screwing up a mission."

Jazz chuckled with a friendly grin. "Been there, done that, even if it was long ago. ISO isn't much on rank either, at least not the way the army thinks of it."

"Seekers had a lot more formal ranking structure, but we do as civilians too," Thundercracker added. "I can't say I ever paid much attention to grounder ranks. I was never of a rank to have to listen to any of them but Megatron."

"Not even Soundwave or Shockwave?" Jazz didn't hide the mild surprise.

"I listened to them because they made sense and often were relaying orders from Megatron, but I never had to obey them," Thundercracker elaborated.

"Starscream wouldn't have stopped yelling if his trine had to obey grounders," Deadlock said with a snort. "Keeping Soundwave and Shockwave from being angry with you was always a good idea. Let's just keep the glyph as Decepticon for me."

Jazz nodded and Thundercracker tipped his wings in agreement-acceptance.

"So, TC..."

"Please don't call me that," Thundercracker sighed.

"Thundercracker," Jazz gave in without a fuss. "What's it like being in a class taking instructions from somebody you could probably fly circles around as a mechling?"

"Flying in a cavern however large this one might be is very different from flying in the winds and open skies of Cybertron. Saamanjasy does a very good job instructing the mechlings and keeping..."
serious accidents from happening," Thundercracker said diplomatically. "That being said, it is frustrating being restricted to the current class level when I am used to the freedom of flying almost anywhere I want to go and how I want to fly."

"I can see what you mean," Jazz grunted. "I'm starting to get stir crazy from lack of driving. I can see the roads, see the tracks, and can't go anywhere. I'm so hoping that trip to the racetrack after closing happens soon."

"It is being worked on," Demeter spoke up for the first time, drawing attention to her spot on high shelf next to some award Kimark had. "Please tell Dart before you really are driven to take off."

"Good thing Prowl's in stasis then because the Praxian would be even more affected than the two us," Deadlock grunted even as he twitched in agreement with Jazz. He vividly remembered how much Prowl had needed to race during their enslavement together.

"If Prowl was up and about we'd have been on the track in three orns," Jazz chuckled. "Praxians handle being locked up about as well as Seekers do. But they made the best tracks of every kind. I always loved it when I could get to Praxus. It was the most fun. Good music scene too, if a bit odd."

"I've been told that they still make good tracks," Demeter pointed out, reminding them that Praxians still had a decent sized population here in the city. "Racing is very popular among the Knights."

"Probably do," Jazz agreed with a thoughtful hum. "As important as it seemed to be I think they'd make a priority of bringing those skills along."

"I'm sure most of the fliers use the sky tracks. A lot of them seem to be build light and fast," Thundercracker added.

"Seekers and Aerials both," Jazz agreed. "I don't see many heavily armored ones even here in the Citadel. Wing said they were rare here, but it's been a long time since I've seen this many light builds."

"Something that makes TC stand out even more here. So are you going to try the scroll work now or wait until you repaint?" Deadlock asked, ignoring the earlier groan at the nickname.

"It depends on how long I have to wait," Thundercracker sidestepped the question. "There is little point to putting such work into it if it'll be stripped within orns. I only need to look good. A good touch up and polish will do. If I have to wait metacycles I'll likely add some of the elements soon."

"What's this about your paint getting stripped off?" Jazz looked briefly confused, and the other two remembered he hadn't been present during their initial discussion about paint jobs.

"I intend to ask to go on a mourning flight for my first trine and creation, my creation flock and Skywarp," Thundercracker explained. "I'll remain bare metal until I'm ready to move forward. It's custom to change your appearance with the repaint. Some just change their shade. Some change everything."

"You have many reasons to mourn. Hopefully it will help you make peace with some of your burdens," Jazz agreed quietly, noting that Thundercracker hadn't mentioned Vos or Cybertron in his list. What he wasn't sure of was whether those were just too big to be mourned like this or if he wasn't ready to even try.

"Thank you. Do you have any mourning rituals?" Thundercracker asked.

"Losing agents was always hard, whether it was ISO or SpecOps. Sometimes in ISO we celebrated a
departed agent with a party celebrating their life," Jazz admitted. "Others were mourned with a round of drinks."

"Sounds much like how the military did it for the private event," Thundercracker hummed, then hesitated. "Are there any ... thing ... you would mourn?"

"My boss, Mirage, my other agents," Jazz said after a nanoklik of hesitation. Force of habit meant he wasn't willing to divulge most of the designations, but those were mechs the two former Decepticons already knew about. "Optimus and the possibility we might have had if we found him sooner."

Thundercracker nodded. "Would company help?"

"If Demeter can find a Knight or two who won't mind watching us get overcharged and then help us each to our quarters it'd be welcome," Jazz said with serious appreciation for the effort Thundercracker was making. "Or if you're more comfortable and Aurora doesn't mind I could crash on a bench in the eyrie afterwards."

"I'm sure Aurora won't mind you snuggling with me, or the overcharged warframes," Thundercracker offered. "She's used to Wing being there."

"So, just getting overcharged?" Deadlock asked.

"Normally it's getting overcharged while toasting and remembering the fallen. In this case it includes those we are separated from either by deactivation or distance," Jazz said with a serious expression. "It could be things that are already fond memories, aggravating quirks we will eventually laugh about or unusual quirks about them that we share as we drink."

Deadlock became thoughtful for a lingering moment, then gave a meaningful look at Thundercracker, who nodded, before focusing on Jazz again. "You want to be the only one who shares?"

"No, if you have anything to share or someone you want to remember that would be appropriate," Jazz answered. "Even partially overcharged I shouldn't get too upset if most of what you remember about a particular Autobot is being shot at or shooting at them. It's like all I could toast about Misfire was his ability to miss the broad side of a warehouse if he was inside it."

Thundercracker groaned, but his wings betrayed the humor mixed into his frustration. "Arguably my only failure as a trainer. That mech could not target when his spark depended on it. How he manages to survive has to be Primus."

"I think all four of us could, should be there. Even Wing's lost things," Deadlock stated. "I'm sure he can get permission or something to drink."

"He can, for a good enough cause," Demeter spoke up. "It's not my call, but I would say this qualifies."

"It would be best if it was all five of us, but I don't think we should wait for Prowl. We can have another wake when he is online if he wants to do it or something else if Praxians mourn differently," Jazz said after some thought.

"Then we all bring this up with our keepers tonight and I'll explain it to Wing," Thundercracker stated.

"So, how much are you thinking of changing your paint job? Some purple would look good with a shade of that blue."
"I intend to change the design of my highlights and shift them to black, purple, red and silver on an ultramarine blue base," he gave the basics of his plans. "Most of my thought has been on the insignia."

Jazz pondered those color choices and Thundercracker's current frame before nodding. "There are some shades of red and purple that would look stunning with that shade of blue. Are you thinking about doing the insignia in primarily silver and black? Or do you want to make it stand out more with something like gold or bronze?"

"I haven't decided yet, though the highlights will match the colors of the four trinimates I've lost. Looking stunning is less important than honoring them," Thundercracker thanked and refused the help in the same moment, then he paused. "Though as long as it is significantly darker than my current color I am not set on my base shade. I do want the insignia to stand out very clearly."

"We can use the program I used to try out different shades of blue and different insignia colors for you," Deadlock offered, pleased he could return the help and not be further indebted to the Seeker. "Having the highlight colors set and a base color determined will make it easier than what all of you did for me."

"That would work well," Thundercracker accepted the suggestion willingly, glad that his flockmate wanted to help and felt good about it. "There is time. If I repaint within a metacycle I will be surprised. Even needing a trine I will not short myself in this."

"Visually showing the signs of mourning will also help your adjustment into the civilian world," Jazz said, slightly cynical but being realistic. "It gives the civilians a chance to realize you're not the cold-sparked killer they imagine but a mech with feelings who is coping with losses."

"That is a hope," the Seeker nodded. "It will not take long before every Seeker here will know who I am mourning and why. It will not help with all of them, but it should help with some. Especially those who have little contact with me."

"Gossip, or social structure?" Jazz asked.

"A bit of gossip, but mostly it's how Seeker society is structured. Anything you wear on your frame, whether markings, colors or a lack of paint is deemed an announcement and thus important to pass on if it's new," Thundercracker hoped it was enough of an explanation.

"The other fliers might not know the entire reason you're in mourning, but it should help those that do be a bit more tolerant as well. I know your primary concern is with your standing in Seeker society, but outside sympathetic allies can also be very useful," Jazz offered, accepting Thundercracker's explanation. He'd used how fast gossip could spread many times in his lines of work.

"Allies are rarely a bad thing," Thundercracker said to Deadlock's agreeing grunt.

"So how long do we have?" Jazz looked at Demeter.

"Until you're ready to fuel. That will be in the common room with a small group of Knights," she grinned back to warn them it wasn't as simple as it sounded.

"Any hints who besides one of our keepers?" Jazz asked, curious about the grin.

"Probably not Kimark. He's busy with his mate," Deadlock said with a grunt.

"I wasn't told, just that it's not any of the usual lot," she shrugged. "I plan on tagging along to find
"Out. It'll be the news of the Citadel by morning."

"Anyone else hungry?" Deadlock asked, deciding to take the mystery straight on. "It can't be worse than trying to refuel around the Terrorcons."

Jazz snickered. "I doubt anything on this planet could be."

"I don't think anything on Cybertron was," Thundercracker's wings gave a shudder. "Those were beings that should never have existed."

"I don't know, sitting between Dirge and Dreadwind having a debate on who's more morose might be worse," Jazz grinned. "Come on, let's find out who the surprise guest is."

The three of them stood and waited for Demeter to hop down before heading out to the common room. Deadlock couldn't help preening a bit as he got several admiring looks from the Knights they passed. It was a good sign he'd chosen well.

Meal time wasn't in yet full swing when they arrived and sat down at the table Dart had picked with their energon. Just looking at the empty spots and the table and Jazz was sure who the surprise guests were. Not that many mecha were the size of triple changers beyond the two leaders.

"So the big bosses are joining us for dinner." Deadlock said with a shrug, acting a bit more unimpressed than he felt. He knew Dai Atlas didn't like him, but he didn't really think the triple changer would do anything blatant here even with all his supporters present.

"Well that qualifies as interesting," Demeter trilled as she hopped up to the table twice her height as easily as she took a step up. "Think I'll stick around for this."

"Master Aurora too," Dart grinned at them and saw Thundercracker's hint of relief. "Though as quartermaster, she qualifies as one of the big bosses."

"It's different when the big boss is your adopted creator. Bluestreak never reacted to Prowl like any of the other soldiers partially because he spent so much time with him outside their military roles," Jazz snickered with a bit of melancholy fondness in his field.

"Quartermaster is not someone to frag off," Deadlock grunted, his gaze drawn to the balcony doors by movement there. He took a sip, intentionally making a show of not caring about the rank coming in to join them.

"Definitely not," Jazz agreed completely. "Almost as bad as fragging off your boss."

"Fragging off the quartermaster usually means your boss is going to get fragged off at you," Deadlock agreed, having experienced that scenario too many times in the past.

"Greetings," most of the gathered group said as Aurora, Dai Atlas and Axe entered the room and approached. While Dart gave a small bow, Thundercracker dipped his wings in an appropriate greeting to his adopted creator.

Dai Atlas inclined helm and wings in reply along with Aurora, though she gave a separate greeting to Thundercracker that was all affectionate-proud creator. After nodding to the group Axe took off to collect their fuel while his mate and the Seeker settled with the rest of the odd gathering.

"Did your unit time go well?" Dai Atlas asked with polite but honest interest.

"Yeah, they like the paint job Thundercracker, Wing and Kimark helped me design," Deadlock
answered blandly, pretending he genuinely thought that was what Dai Atlas was asking about.

"I can see why," Axe said as he came up with fuel for the three Masters and settled next to his mate. "Is that the final design of your gestalt insignia?"

"The basics of it," Jazz agreed. "We don't share a frame type, color scheme or a function so finding a way to mark ourselves as a unit is a good idea. We're currently thinking about modifying it with inserted glyphs to suit our individual tastes and needs but the base design, what Deadlock's wearing now, should remain the same among us."

"Not a bad idea," Aurora smiled slightly. "I've been helping Thundercracker fine tune what he wants to show. Wing will have a difficult choice if he decides to make it a display point."

"He certainly has enough to choose from," Dai Atlas agreed with a low grunt and sip of his energon. "Though I doubt he'll give up his youthful display in favor of showing how impressive he actually is so clearly."

"We're debating between him displaying his favorite treats or favorite dance spots," Deadlock said with a shrug before chuckling. "He could just list our designations or some of his past Initiates, although that might be giving away too much for him to want to do it."

"As if anyone here doesn't know," Axe chuckled with a wicked grin for his mate. "A fair number of Knights got to watch it."

"Including me," Dart grinned. "I was the Archon when they arrived. It was quite a sight."

"I kinda wish I'd seen it, but it's better for everyone that I didn't," Jazz said with a grin and a small shrug, leaving unvoiced what ISO might of had to do if they officially knew where the pair were at that time.


"That would have been bad," Axe agreed with a spark-sick flicker through his field.

"It will be Wing's choice how personal he chooses to make his display, as it is for each of us," Thundercracker said quietly.

"Absolutely," Dai Atlas agreed with all the authority his nature and training brought him. "It is good you are finding unity, and it is good to display your differences too."

"We are never going to be as united as a gestalt like the Constructicons, but we already know the coding will shift us even closer together as the vorns pass," Thundercracker said with a small wing dip.

"Strength in our differences," Jazz said with an understanding nod. "We can back each other up in ways a focused group like them can't contemplate. And we're used to being apart so taking one of us out shouldn't have quite the same impact it would on a created gestalt."

"Though if that works the way trine bonds do, the impact will increase with time," Thundercracker said cautiously. "Has there been any advances in Prowl's situation?"

"Redline and some specialists are carefully examining his coding and physical condition to see when it will be safe to bring him online. Prowl has significant prior frame damage which had been previously repaired although not to Redline's satisfaction," Axe answered, remembering the complaints Redline made about almost all of this group's physical conditions. "The tac-net is one of
Redline's biggest concerns, especially given the processor damage you have stated Prowl received before his acquisition by the Nijihito."

"Seems like a lot of studying for something that'll probably need to be wiped," Jazz's tone wasn't quite as cynical as he felt.

Axe gave Jazz an only mildly concerned look, understanding the cynicism behind the comment. "Understanding how damaged Prowl as well as what the gestalt coding has done to him will help Redline's repair efforts for him and for the four of you. He might not need to be wiped, but even if it is determined that he should and wishes to undergo that procedure we want him in the best condition possible."

Jazz's dubious look was mixed with cautious agreement.

"I'm not broken," Deadlock growled.

"We're not saying you are broken," Aurora said soothingly. "We're saying that we don't know what has been modified in this Cybertronian experimental coding. We also don't know if the gestalt coding has integrated properly given who installed it and their intentions towards you."

Deadlock grunted acceptance of it and Thundercracker calmed from his brief moment of tension.

"Sovereign, why did you join us this evening?" Thundercracker asked with a hidden wariness in him.

The giant focused on the Seeker and managed a smile. "The four of you will be living here for some time before you are ready to move into the city if that is your path. I make a point of knowing all the residents here."

"It helps you keep an optic out for trouble if you know everyone," Jazz said as he took a quick drink.

"That way you know who to blame if something happens," Deadlock said as he finished his cube and glanced over debating snagging another. In a choice driven more by seeing how much it pushed his new commander's buttons, he stood without a word to get a cube, and then went further and went for high grade.

The glance Dai Atlas gave the movement suggested he knew exactly what was going on and intended to let it pass.

"Have any of you encountered issues yet?" Axe asked in the silence.

"I'm going a little stir crazy waiting to drive but Demeter said that will be fixed soon," Jazz admitted.

"Yes, Vidrex has agreed to allow us to use the facility after hours. The final arrangements should be sorted within a few orns," Dai Atlas said.

"That's a nice track," Dart grinned with an excited flicker in his field. "The Praxians really do know how to build them."

"Good to know it's a Praxian track," Jazz said with a grin, pleasure easily teekable in his field.

"Race tracks are fun; fighting's better but we can do that a lot here," Deadlock said as he casually settled back in his chair and took a long drink of the high grade in his cube.

"Oh, it's more than just a race track," Dart grinned eagerly to the amusement of his elders. "It's got a
Both grounders put down their cubes and stared at Dart, Deadlock looked more confused than excited but followed Jazz's peaked interest in his posture. "You said just a few orns right?" Jazz glanced hopefully over at Dai Atlas, playing up the excitement he really did feel at the opportunity.

"Yes. Likely two or three," the Sovereign confirmed.

"Very cool," Jazz purred, genuinely looking forward to the outing, and for more than just getting to burn some rubber. "Who else is going?"

"Wing and I are, if he can get time off," Thundercracker stated, though it was in a tone that invited correction from Aurora. She simply smiled and tipped her wings in agreement.

"I will be going. We will see about Wing. It depends on how quickly he works until then," Dai Atlas told them.

"I get to, and Kimark. Maybe Firefall," Dart added.

"I'm sure Dagger and Blueflash will come. They rarely miss an outing to one of the better tracks," Axe chuckled. "They're both Praxian grounders. Is there anyone you'd like to invite?"

"Demeter, you want to come watch the show?" Jazz asked. "You haven't seen either of us really drive yet."

"Sure," she grinned at him with a flick of her long, fluffy brown tail. "I expect it'll be quite a show."

"It should be given how long it's been since the two of us have driven for any length of time. From the sound of it Prowl would love that track," Jazz said with a small shiver and a grin.

"I'm sure he will," she agreed readily. "We'll be better prepared for his needs by the time he's aware again."

"Indeed," Dai Atlas agreed. "Have you found anything you like here?"

"Not being shot at when I fly," Thundercracker answered first.

"Full tanks," Deadlock shrugged. "It's nice."

"New tunes and a medic that has time to actually do non-critical repairs," Jazz said. "The reliable supply of fuel is great."

"All good things, and all things that will continue," Dai Atlas told them before standing. "Enjoy the rest of your evening."

"Good orn, sir," Thundercracker reflexively stood as the former general and his SIC left even as Deadlock deliberately ignored the same departure and Jazz watched but didn't stand.

"Well that was interesting," Jazz hummed. "What's he really looking for?"

"I believe he really does want to get to know you all better and see how you're settling in," Dart said with a confused look at the question.

"He's reminding us he's in charge," Deadlock said with a shrug.

"He hasn't needed to remind anyone of that in a very long time," Aurora chuckled. "Not since the
Circle voted for him as Sovereign instead of me."

"You ran against him for the title of Sovereign?" Jazz asked, curious how the leadership of the Knights was chosen.

"I was the Master who accepted their initial petition to enter the Citadel. He challenged me," she shook her helm slightly. "As Vanguard's SIC, it was long assumed I would lead after him. However when he extinguished just above Cybertron Dai Atlas and Axe would not agree to my leadership. It went to a true vote rather than a confirmation vote and he won. Now it is not the Sovereign's SIC that is likely to lead after him, but a different Master."

"Nice way for them to reward you for the assistance; stabbing you in the back like that," Deadlock grunted interested to see how she responded.

She cocked her helm and regarded him with the steady white optics of a long-ago priest. "They chose for the challenges facing them at the moment. While I would not have removed him from leading that mission, voting him Sovereign did remove the appearance of two leaders."

"So you don't mind being set aside by the Knights for those who were your subordinates?" Deadlock asked, ignoring Thundercracker's warning rumble.

"I was displeased at the time, but I cannot mind one I trained surpassing me for long. Does Wing have a problem with his Initiate being his Sovereign?" she asked with honest curiosity.

"Wait, Wing is his Daoshi, what did you train?" Jazz interrupted.

"To enter the Circle of Masters one becomes an Initiate all over again, only it is to every Master in the Circle. Dai Atlas did well to pass his final tests in only two millennia. Becoming a Knight rarely takes more than three and a half centuries," she explained. "He is an exceptional leader, especially for the trials we would face finding and settling here."

"He would know how to handle a resettlement of a planet," Jazz agreed privately impressed the general had been willing to submit that many times to being a student again.

"Wing seems to find it funny half the time," Deadlock admitted.

"He does," Dart snickered. "But Wing is too playful to understand resentment for long."

"Pain he does, though, even if he hides it well," Aurora agreed. "Sometimes it is difficult to comprehend how old is really is. He's nearly the eldest Knight, by time in the Order."

"You'd never know it by how Wing acts. It is an unusual defense against such time," Thundercracker said quietly.

"It is his very spark's nature," she told him. "I understand he was far more wild in his actual youth, though no less playful. The designation of his Great Sword says much about his spark."

"Challenger of Ways," Jazz murmured thoughtfully. "Just not the usual personality that goes with it."

"Very much so," Aurora agreed and stood, putting a light hand on Thundercracker's shoulder. "I have duties to return to, not the eyrie."

He nodded and relaxed into his seat once more to enjoy both energon and company.
Chapter Summary

Jazz and Deadlock get to spend some time on a racetrack with several fast grounder Knights. It ends in Aurora's eyrie for a drinking/mourning night.

Jazz was not about to admit just how much good five joors on the racetrack and half a dozen obstacle courses did to him, physically and mentally, but he wasn't about to hide it completely either. He felt it right to his core how the activity and speed on his tires settled him. That he was with a group that was enjoying the outing just as much as he was helping. Dart was always fun. Kimark and Deadlock were good racers on and off the track. Dagger, true to his Praxian frame, was blissed out by the track time. Even the fliers watching them were in good spirits.

It was the best evening he'd had in ages. He had to admit having Prowl here would have made it better not just because the Praxian was a skilled and challenging competitor on the track who loved to chase his opponents. He did want the whole unit present. Even Wing had managed to scrape together enough free time to watch part of the show. It would have been informative to see the Knights up against Prowl's processor on the track. He'd just have to wait for it. Even reformat ted Prowl would love to race and have that processor.

"Last race!" Dai Atlas roared from his place on the sidelines.

Jazz headed for the starting line and settled in between Dart and Deadlock as Kimark took his place beside his charge. Dagger put himself to Dart's other side. All six waited eagerly at the starting line for the Sovereign to start the race.

The light went green and they all surged forward, reveling in the speed and competition. After the night of racing them, Jazz knew that Dart was wearing out, Dagger was just warming up in a way and the fighting pair were enjoying the grind. It was an odd group, odd situation, and it still felt very good. His own enthusiasm nowhere near flagging and trained by war to be better at distance as well as speed, Jazz outpaced Dart as they made their way through the first turn. Dagger wasn't his unit mate by any stretch of his imagination but hearing the rumble of the other Praxian's engine so close as they headed down the track did help soothe a bit of that small ache for Prowl.

They passed the finish line with Dagger just barely a bumper in front of Jazz, Deadlock and Kimark on their bumpers and Dart's two wheels not far behind. The cycle may have claimed the early races, but he'd worn out just as fast. It was the expected result from this extended friendly competition, but it still felt good to beat the mech who'd outpaced him so many times in the early stages.

Transforming, Jazz scanned the area the fliers gathered around them, searching out his unit in the small crowd. Wing had just finished giving Dagger a hug and was now latched onto Deadlock who was trying to look like he was only tolerating the enthusiastic Aerial. Thundcracker was the last to land and join everyone, having guarded more than watched the show from high up by the empty announcer's box. It was Dagger that required his focus first by walking up with clear intent to speak.

"Thank you for the amazing races. It's been ages since I had a real challenge," the medic-Knight
offered his hand with a wide, warm smile and glowing field.

"It was fun. I'm looking to racing you and Prowl. That will definitely be an exciting show," Jazz accepted the hand with genuine pleasure in his own field. Racing without having to worry about someone shooting at them or running out of fuel was one of the best things about this place.

"I expect so," Dagger's grin brightened even more and his doorwings gave a flutter. "I'm sure within the metacycle we can. Maybe even a decaorn. There's a lot left to understand despite all the progress."

"He's a unique mech," Jazz agreed, still slightly suspicious of all the work the Citadel was putting into Prowl even with his nightly checks on the offline Praxian.

"We'll need to have a few sky course runs one of these orns so you can see what we can do," Wing said cheerfully.

"Sounds good," Jazz agreed.

"It won't be nearly the challenge racing is. I could never out-fly Wing," Thundercracker rumbled, still more than willing. "It would be informative to fly against a few Knights."

"There are several different fly courses to help change things up when you're ready. Some of them are more speed related and others require agility to work your way through the stalactites," Wing pointed out. "We have a lot of Aerials and Seekers who would enjoy challenging you to a race."

"I'm ready whenever I'm allowed to be out," Thundercracker said with an eager shiver of his wings.

"You'll have your chance when you've passed the appropriate flight test, so fairly soon," Axe said, amusement and understanding in his field.

"I'm looking forward to it. It's been very strange going over such basics again, though a good refresher on how civilians fly. It's been a long time since there was something as civilized as rules in the air," Thundercracker dipped his wings politely to the Master Knight. "Will you join us?"

"It's been a while since we've gone flying like that. We'll have to skip some of the tighter courses up there, but I'll drag him out for a run at some point," Axe said with a grin.

"I'm sure I can't fly some of the tightest courses," Thundercracker said the truth politely, though there was nothing but excitement in him. "Not if there is anything designed to challenge Wing at least."

"Just one. There aren't that may stunt frames in the city compared to other frametypes," Wing spoke up, quivering at the idea of getting to really test himself again.

"I'm pleased the runs have improved your moods," Dai Atlas said as he came up. "It is time to go."

Despite the rush they were still feeling from the races, everyone waited patiently for the large triple changer to transform before the five grounders boarded. Almost notably reluctant Deadlock took the longest to enter and stayed tense.

"We're not going to crash," Kimark tried to reassure him.

"Not worried about that; we aren't high enough up to get offline," Deadlock grumbled, trying to put on a brave front. It'd do a lot of damage if he got tossed out right now, but he knew he'd survive the fall. Actually, Wing and Thundercracker would probably try to catch him. Hopefully that wouldn't trigger old memories and cause him to fight. He knew Thundercracker could handle him. He wasn't
"Then what?" Kimark asked.

Deadlock stared at him for a long klik, trying to decide how much to reveal. Glancing quickly at Jazz's steady presence, Deadlock finally admitted, "I might attack Wing if I get thrown out from up here and he tries to catch me."

That raised an optic ridge, but Kimark let it drop. They were landing anyway.

"Who's escorting us to Aurora's?" Jazz asked as they disembarked.

"Demeter and I will escort you," Kimark offered. "We both know too much about losing friends and fellow soldiers to not understand why you need to do this."

"We're both from cultures that use this method as well," Demeter added after she leaped to Kimark's shoulder.

Jazz nodded and went with the pair, Deadlock not far behind. Above them he noted Thundercracker landing in the eyrie and Wing headed off to his chores. Jazz was more used to getting to the eyrie from the outside; it was a bit novel to go the way grounders were supposed to.

"Where's the trine?" Jazz asked when they entered to only one Seeker.

"They're staying with Aurora's creation flock. She thought it best not to expose her trinemates to what we're likely to say," Thundercracker said from his spot among the lounging pillows of the living room. In the middle of it was a pile of high grade enough to drop all three of them.

"Considering how sheltered almost everyone is here that's a really good idea. These things can get really morbid at times," Jazz agreed settling down on one of the pillows. He knew a few others like Dai Atlas and Axe would understand this, but so many of the Knights were too sheltered to truly comprehend. Never mind a lawyer and artist civilian that were her trinemates.

Deadlock grabbed a cube and sat down, staring at the others almost defiantly. "Okay, who wants to start?"

Jazz thought for a moment for something innocuous that would set a good starting tone. His earlier comment came to mind as a good icebreaker. Raising his cube, he said, "To Misfire. The only mech it was safer to stand directly in front of on a battlefield."

Deadlock couldn't help but laugh and he downed half a cube. "That one earned his designation like few others."

"No kidding. I gave him that one," Thundercracker snorted, yet his wings were in good humor. "First and only Seeker I ever gave up on."

"Hey, he has his uses in combat. I can guarantee that both sides pay a lot more attention when he's on a battlefield," Jazz took a drink and then grinned. "Mostly so they can dodge the random incoming fire. You must have the patience of Primus to try teaching him for so long."

"Trying to teach him required nothing close to putting up with Starscream," Thundercracker assured them and took a long drink. "Misfire actually tried. He was hopeless but generally nice. I just never expected him to survive long enough to become known."

"He's infamous, sort of like Wheeljack. Great mech and a wonderful inventor but he's got a rep that
can clear a battlefield faster than anything. Especially when he pulls out a new gadget," Jazz agreed cheerfully.

"Even I run when he starts to run from one of his own creations," Deadlock snorted with a laugh. "Rather like the bomb squad ... or you for that matter. Never want to be that close to what has you that scared."

"Running from Wheeljack's stuff is always the safest course," Jazz agreed, remembering belatedly Thundercracker's admission that Wheeljack was ultimately responsible for his separation from his trine. Quickly changing the subject, he said "Same thing with Quickmix, although his mistakes are worse because he's so forgetful. He could actually learn a thing or two from Mixmaster."

"Now that is a mech to never anger," Thundercracker shivered with honest respect-based fear. "Between what he could concoct and his gestalt the mech could have taken out anyone. Why they never went after Megatron I'm not so sure."

"I'm sure it had to do with the reprogramming the Robo-Smasher did. Megs is not exactly shy about slave coding those he knows can lay him flat," Jazz said as he claimed a cube, drank a bit and then mixed in just enough jet high grade to change the flavor.

"That's likely why Onslaught and Motormaster rarely challenged Megatron, although both were interested in power and had gestalts at their backs. I know Motormaster is slave coded. I don't know who did the work, but I know Megatron ordered it. The way he was called nothing else could ever control him. Through Shockwave or Soundwave he would have taken steps to neutralize such potentially dangerous foes," Thundercracker admitted, ignoring Deadlock's growl at what the grounder probably considered slander. He needed to learn just how different Megatron actually was from what he portrayed himself to be in the beginning.

"I think Onslaught is waiting. He's as smart as Prowl and nearly the tactician. If my intel's right he'd never claim Starscream's loyalty and he'd never keep the Seekers without their Winglord," Jazz said thoughtfully. "Starscream's fall may well be the opening he needs. If he rules the Decepticons when the new Winglord has been confirmed it will be his best chance of keeping the air forces."

"It would be," Thundercracker nodded. "Your intel's as good as usual. I can't say I understand what's between Starscream and Megatron, but there is something that's more than just lust for power."

"Wanting the forbidden, maybe? After all, a Vision Seeker scientist and a grounder gladiator sounds like someone's bad romance vid." Jazz said with a shrug and a small drink of his new mix. He'd never figured out the pair's dynamics and wasn't optimistic about ever completely understanding them, especially now that they were out of reach.

"Or drawn to power," Thundercracker shrugged. "Megatron's got a thing for Prime too."

This time Deadlock snarled outright.

"It's true," Thundercracker told him. "Megatron is drawn to strength. He wants to own it."

"He wants to own everything," Jazz pointed out.

"He would be crowned Ruler of Nothing because our war has destroyed almost everything of worth on Cybertron," Thundercracker answered then paused. "You know if he wins he will push outward and try to take over other worlds, reclaiming colonies and conquering other races."

"I know. So would Prime, in his more diplomatic way. But have you ever tried to say no to that mech to his face?" Jazz grumbled. "War would have been over with so much faster if he didn't keep
"If you're so good, why not take us out under Sentinel?" Deadlock sneered.

"Because Sentinel refused to feel threatened by the movement," Jazz snorted. "Every leader is delusional in their own ways. Some are just more overtly destructive than others."

"Even down to the squad leaders," Thundercracker agreed. "Barricade, Turmoil, Whisper...they all have serious issues although in different ways."

"True," Jazz said thoughtfully. "I think of those as quirks or issues since their rank keeps them mostly in check, but it is the same thing. Know what yours is?"

"Some would have said I have too many doubts about the Decepticon cause; I think it's that I am torn between tradition and practicality," Thundercracker said after a bit of thought.

"Yeah, I'd go with the second one. It actually transfers to other situations. Your doubts about the cause only apply to when there is a cause," Jazz nodded.

"What about you?" Deadlock prodded their Ops mech.

Jazz grinned at him and downed the rest of his cube and grabbed another. "Like I'm going to admit that around strangers. Ask when we merge again. You?"

"I hate taking orders from idiots," Deadlock said with a shrug. "Wing's too optimistic and can't see the darker parts of reality."

"He can't, but as long as he has good allies who can, us, he's a welcome balance to the darkness we can't avoid seeing," Thundercracker was on his second cube and starting to sprawl back on the cushions. "It's nice having someone close who's that happy."

"It is," Jazz smiled wistfully. "Bumblebee and Wheeljack are a bit like that. Ratchet was when he was young, believe it or not. None of them come close to Wing."

"There really wasn't anyone in the Decepticons like that, none that survived for long anyway," Thundercracker said. "I didn't realize how much I missed it."

"Yeah, it's kinda amazing what Wing is," Jazz purred. "Top notch fighter, playfully as a sheltered mechling and just as hot, can brighten a room better than a pile of high grade. Universe is going to lose one of its brightest stars when he's gone."

"With us at his back he'll be here a very long time," Thundercracker promised even as the creator coding protested at the idea of losing his fledgling.

"Agreed. He's a survivor and so are we," Jazz growled fiercely. "Prowl and Flightplan will make him even more safe. Think about everything the five of us have survived to make it here. The gutters. ISO, gladiator combat, cities falling down around us, heavy bounties, the fall of Cybertron and the rest of the war. Wing made it here against all odds."

"Then he decided to go out on that crazy walkabout and found us; protectors that can keep him safe and still sheltered," Deadlock grunted. "I'll make myself learn to function here."

"You're smart and stubborn enough to pull it off. You might not do badly in the Knights, and there are sports here worth playing," Jazz grinned and lifted his third cube to Deadlock. "Anybody you're going to miss?"
"Won't miss Turmoil, that's for damn sure," he snorted. "I still miss Engineer and Gasket, and I know I'll miss Megatron. Some of the only mecha that even pretended to care about me beyond what I could do for them."

Jazz cocked his helm. "I know about Engineer," he chuckled at Deadlock's surprise, "I was ISO for a long time. You were known to us as someone to watch long before you met Megatron. I never did get what Megatron offered you beyond the larger killing field though."

Deadlock glanced over at their watchers for a long klik before defensively admitting, "He actually valued me. First time I got hurt I didn't just get tossed aside and replaced."

"Ouch, but I getcha," Jazz nodded. Thundercracker remained silent but his field expressed much the same.

"Megatron ... I really hoped my boss was wrong for once early on. If he'd stuck to his stated vision things would have been very different after Sentinel extinguished." Jazz continued after a beat.

"Senate and City Lords wouldn't have left him do it," Deadlock said with a grunt. "They'd have lost too much power during the process."

"By the time Sentinel extinguished there was no Senate and half the royal houses were either subordinate to Megatron to gone too," Jazz shrugged. "Just by then the good mech Megatron had been was also gone. ISO would have backed him if he'd held true to then."

"Maybe," Deadlock grunted again, doubt in his field. "Hard to trust anyone in power when they kept you in the gutter for so long."

"When did you know he was too far gone?" Thundercracker abruptly asked.

"Praxus. There was no possible excuse to level a neutral city, especially one sympathetic to your cause," Jazz sighed. "Praxus would have gone to Megatron if they had to chose and we all knew it."

"I never did know why we did that. Didn't really care at the time," Deadlock admitted.

"Megatron said it was because they weren't on our side," Thundercracker said quietly. "I can't say I ever really believed it, but to challenge him was a dangerous thing by then. Starscream survived it. Whether I would I was less sure."

"Probably not," Jazz sighed and looked at his half full cube. He deemed himself reasonably overcharged when he couldn't recall which cube it was. "Did you say who you'll miss?"

"Skywarp," Thundercracker said and took a long drink, finishing his cube before he grabbed another. "He was my conjunx; we would have been bonded mates, full conjunx endura if things had worked out differently. Will be if we ever meet again."

Deadlock blinked at the Seeker. "Seriously? Mech's psychotic even by my standards!"

"War did that, and made his cruel sense of humor, and made sure he never said anything smart. It was all self defense against Starscream and some of the officers. He was very different as a mechling and young mech, before his existence went to hell," Thundercracker defended his mate.

"His existence before Vos wasn't exactly nice, or peaceful," Jazz pointed out.

"No, but he had his creation trine until the end. Like us, he's a survivor. Probably more than any of us," Thundercracker finished his cube and went for another. His field was beginning to take a sharp
"You don't know for certain that would have happened," Jazz said quietly. "You weren't powerful enough then to stand against the military and politicians involved in what happened to him."

"Maybe not, but if I'd stood up then he'd have had a flock. That would have brought citizenship with it. That brought rights. At the very least he would have known I cared. I wasn't very nice to him those last few orn.s"

"If wishes were wings everyone on Cybertron would have had a pair or three," Jazz said. "You made it up to him after Vos fell. He had to know you wanted him after that."

"He does," Thundercracker's smile was wistful before it turned lustful. "He very much knew, and so did I by then. Had a lot to learn myself that I'd figured out by then."

"At least you had that much," Deadlock said, having finished his cube and started on a cube of jet high grade.

"Was I on your radar before Vos fell?" Thundercracker asked randomly.

"Nope. Ordinary law keepers unless they were extremely good at certain specialties didn't tend to attract our attention," Jazz said. "The ones that did were either corrupt, high ranked, or had unusual abilities like Prowl's tac-net."

"Would I have been if not for Engineer?" Deadlock asked with a definite slur.

"Nah. Killers like you don't make it to my level. The city's ISO commander might have noted you, might have even recruited you if he had an opening, but you aren't the kind that gets bumped up to central command," Jazz shook his head. "Only reason I know you were known or how is because of how close Meg's kept you. That made you of interest to me."

"Do you like Mirage?" Thundercracker prodded.

"Mirage is arrogant like any noble, especially when dealing with the ordinary soldiers. To some degree he treats most of the high ranked officers like nobles of lesser rank. He's also a survivor who adapted to circumstances beyond what anyone would have expected. He's an asset when sneaking into a Decepticon base, and he's really hot in the berth," Jazz said with small grin, remembering his subordinate fondly.

"He treats you like his lord though, didn't he?" Thundercracker grinned back.

"I was his boss. It's the only context he could put it in," Jazz chuckled. "He really wasn't bad to hang out with once you learned how to translate him."

"Sounds like a lot of specialized groups," Thundercracker's gaze began to unfocus. "Not many find it worth the bother."

"I almost always enjoyed learning about them, but a lot of mechs didn't try," Jazz agreed. "If you think about it, ISO, Seekers, nobles...we all had our own quirks."

"Praxians too, Enforcers, Air Martials, professional military ... I suspect between the five of us we have quite a list of quirks," Thundercracker chuckled, then went abruptly dark. "I'll miss him for a long time."
"Yes, you will," Deadlock said with simple candor and took a long drink. "I still miss Gasket. Pain changes but doesn't go away."

"No, it doesn't," Jazz agreed with a mournful sigh. "Same as I'll miss my agents, my boss; Whiplash is going to have his work cut out keeping Prime functional without me or Prowl around. Gonna miss Blaster too. Mech could rock a tune like few others."

"Comm's yours too?" Thundercracker asked randomly, his wings giving an unsteady movement of curiosity.

"Nah, just fun to hang out around. Try not to think of the 'path and he was a real blast," Jazz grinned.

"I won't miss most of them," Deadlock admitted. "Couple of mechs were worth their weight in energon but most of them were just waiting to stab someone in the spark."

"True enough," Jazz huffed. "I might say more than a few were worth it, but yeah, most just exist or would be better off gray."

Deadlock downed his cube and stared over at Jazz, "They're all gone now. Just us left: the survivors."

"Yap; to the survivors," Jazz grinned and downed his cube before reaching over to tug Deadlock against him. "Enjoy what we can while we can," he growled into a kiss.

Thundercracker watching them kiss, still feeling melancholy at the loss of his conjunx. Finishing the cube, he murmured, "To the survivors."
Chapter Summary

Wing's binding in Bronze.

Wing waited in front of his Great Sword preparing for the latest binding as Marwir wrapped a gold cord around his frame. The last one hadn't been too unpleasant although he'd had to ponder his relationship with Dai Atlas and his other former Initiates. Bronze wasn't fun, but it wasn't all that terrible. Looking down at his wrists and the pattern of gold crisscrossing the white plating and he knew this one was going to be much worse. Even at his best his relationship with loyalty was as complicated as it was unquestioned. Now he'd just added a fourth contender to the list, and it was one that he was actually worried about. Unlike the three that had always jockeyed for control, this one was of the outside. Nothing of them was of the Knights despite his subtle attempts to nudge Deadlock that way.

Thundercracker had showed no interest in joining. Although he was enjoying spending time with Master Aurora and her trine, everyone seemed to silently acknowledge that it was because she was the closest thing he had to kin at the moment. He knew Jazz was not a good fit for the Knights, and Prowl was an unknown since no one knew what would happen once he was brought online. He couldn't help but hope that whatever measures were made to give Prowl a chance here meant he was still inclined towards the Knight's existence. There was no doubt in Wing's processors that the Praxian would not just be a fantastic Knight of Light, but also an incredible asset when the universe finally found them again.

With a deep, centering cycle of his vents, Wing hooked his bound forearms behind Challenger of Ways and settled in optic to crystal with the weapon he'd spent so much of his existence with.

He couldn't help continuing to ponder Prowl's part in all this. The mech he had known was practically slave coded between the Enforcer coding and the tac-net. What would he be like when he was reformatted? Would his loyalties fall to the city, Dai Atlas as Sovereign or the gestalt? If the Praxian joined as an Initiate along with Deadlock it would give the gestalt a majority linked to the Knights. That would settle many of the doubts about their loyalties...about his loyalties.

Had his loyalties really changed that much? He knew that his gestalt now held importance to him above that of the civilians he protected. Did they hold importance over his oaths? Over his duty? Over Challenger of Ways?

Could anything hold importance over the Great Sword he was bound to? He and the Great Sword fit together better than he did with any member of the gestalt. It was what he turned to for guidance and understanding of his new situation. Challenger of Ways still held the strongest place in his spark; he was certain of that. Or was he? The gestalt coding had been tampering with his processor since it was installed; he knew he'd been changed just from watching the other Knights react to his gestalt and their actions. He never saw the changes, even in retrospect, but he would not deny they existed because those he trusted said they did.

So it had changed him. Changed his loyalties. Changed his perceptions. Could it really overpower
his spark? Change what he believed on a fundamental level?

Wing wasn't nearly so sure of that. His spark was not part of the things coding could change. Coding could influence the expression, but not the nature. The coding had no sway on Challenger of Ways. If his Great Sword still agreed with him then he could not be that far off true. So he would rely on his the Great Sword for guidance as he had always done. Even as the gestalt coding influenced him it would remain untouched and unswayed. That link between it and his spark would remain his primary guide for his actions.

Still, that didn't address his remaining problem. Challenger of Ways had approved of his bringing the gestalt here in defiance of what the Knights and the city held as law. How was he to balance the Knights and his gestalt?

He knew the answer.

He was far less sure he could manage it if it became a serious issue.

Could he really turn his back on what he was, on giving Challenger of Ways a chance at a new bearer when he fell, to follow his gestalt mates? He could, but how long before he could no longer stand himself?

Despite his words to them, would he really help them leave, or would he obey the demands of loyalty and oaths that insisted he stop them?

If Challenger of Ways approved of their escape, he was sure he would. If it didn't though? Would he condemn them to be reformatted and to face them when they learned the truth?

He was a lot less sure than he wanted to be that he would. Four memories for the city. It shouldn't be a question. More Knights than that had fallen to buy the rest the time to launch the ship at the Citadel.

It was horrifying beyond words that the memories of these strangers were more valuable to him than the sparks of mecha he'd watched grow into fine Knights of Light and known for millennia.

Even worse, would it eventually reach the point where he wouldn't even be horrified by the choice? Where it would be reasonable to him to value even one of these four above all others? He hoped it wouldn't come to that point, but he hadn't recognized the changes so far.

While he still had enough of himself to make that choice, he had to have a Knight he trusted deeply to understand the difference between the defiance that was his function among the Knights and the defiance that was a sign of alien code overwriting Wing. Once again his fundamental nature made it difficult to tell why defiance was given. He would always defy, always argue, always take the penalty and penance that came from it. It was always for the good of the Order though. Even when he couldn't fully articulate why when he was doing it, he knew to his spark he was doing the right thing.

Who could know him that well to see it from the outside? Who could tell function from nature from dangerous?

Who to trust with his spark and his gestalt?

Marwir, who was his Daoshi and knew him like few others.

Atl, so even and balance by nature, Wing's almost exact opposite in many ways and yet best friends and lovers because they agreed on all that was vital.
Thorn, as dark as Wing was bright, as quiet and Wing as cheerful, and more observant than most gave credit to.

Demeter, playful and serious in equal measure, a scout by function and spark even as she was a Knight just as strongly. Created by the coding and systems to find secrets of all kinds.

As much as it hurt, he knew he could never trust his own Initiate. Dai Atlas was too focused on order and discipline to ever see the different flavors of disobedience that was absolutely critical to protect his gestalt from what the coding may do to him.

Perhaps a small network would be best—a circle to stand watch for the tampering he feared was happening. Thorn, Atl, Demeter and Marwir all knew him well, and he was around at least one of the four of them often even when not on penance. They could keep watch on his actions, and if they all agreed his coding had changed dangerously something could be done. Redline would listen to the them, especially once he understood the full nature of the gestalt coding.

Those five, he could trust them when he could not trust himself. They would not take advantage of this, not as a group.

It might be for nothing. His gestalt was settling well. Yet his spark and processors felt better for having a plan to stop himself if the alien code wound around his processors clouded his judgment too much.

He felt rather than heard an amused snort of vents and belatedly realized he’d done it.

Yes, his gestalt was important to him. The Order and all it encompassed was far more important and he would do anything to ensure it remained that way.
Orn 21

Chapter by gatekat

Chapter Summary

Thundercracker, Wing, Aurora, Haji and Cheoseo in the morning. Deadlock meditation attempt. Thundercracker discusses his desire for a mourning flight with Aurora. Wing is there and jacked up.

Thundercracker booted a bit faster than usual, though it was far from the combat boot he once thought of as normal. The small warm frame against his was both comfort and distraction. Wing was welded against him, seeking comfort from yet another binding. As much as the Seeker hated that Wing hurt, he couldn't help but he very pleased that his fledgling sought him out for the comforting.

As for what had roused him ... Aurora and her trine were getting up.

Onlining his optics he looked over at the three, gauging whether to shift away from the Aerial and join them for morning energon. He didn't want to be rude to his hosts but he also didn't want to leave the fledgling alone.

The light from his optics seemed to draw her attention and she smiled even as Wing snuggled closer to Thundercracker's canopy.

"Stay with him. Cheoseo will bring us all energon," she told him easily before the artisan Action took off and she pulled out a bunch of polishing supplies.

Thundercracker settled back and pulled Wing a bit closer. The Aerial's field still held some distress from this latest binding, but it wasn't as bad as some of the others had been recently. Wing wouldn't talk much about them to him, but Thundercracker was learning to recognize when one had been difficult to face because of past trauma and when it was an issue of stubbornness. Even without knowing how bindings worked, he had entirely too much experience dealing with traumatized and stubborn mecha. That this one like to snuggle and be cared for was a relief on many levels.

"I hope you will feel up to a group polishing this morning, though you'll likely do as much holding Wing as polishing anyone," she said with a slight smile for the scene that said so much of Thundercracker's potential to be a civilized being again.

"Whether online or in recharge he does enjoy field and frame contact," Thundercracker admitted. As much as he'd like to spend the morning with Wing, the Aerial did have responsibilities to attend to today. "Still, being clean will help soothe him back to reality for his work assignments today."

"That he does," her smile softened a bit more as Cheoseo set down on the balcony. "He's a tactile one by any standard."

"Yes, he is," Thundercracker couldn't help but agree with a soft smile of his own for the little Aerial. Despite wanting to let Wing snuggle and recharge himself out, he needed fuel, polishing would be good for him and he did have duty to see to. "Wing." His voice was quiet and the nudge light.

"Mmmph," came the unintelligible reply from the frame snuggling closer to his own. Wing's field
indicated he was slowly rousing but obviously wanted to stay in recharge as long as possible.

"It's time to fuel, and to be polished," Thundercracker allowed him the slow rousing. So long as Aurora wasn't agitated they had a few kliks.

"Rather snuggle, but fuel is good too," Wing muttered even as his optics slowly came online. Flexing briefly, he reluctantly pulled away from Thundercracker and started to sit up.

"There is no reason not to do both," Thundercracker dared say as he sat up as well and reached to lightly tug Wing against his canopy again.

Wing cheerfully climbed onto Thundercracker's lap and pressed up against his flock mate. "Great idea. The more time I get to spend with you the better. I hardly get to spend any time with the three of you."

"Soon, I hope, that will change. When the ... penance part? ... is over." Thundercracker glanced between Wing and Aurora to see if he had used the unfamiliar term correctly.

"Once Wing has completed his penance he will return to a set schedule of duties in the Citadel," Aurora agreed after a pause to think of how much to explain to the Seeker who had no interest in joining the Knights. "He will still have his extra shifts and additional duties for at least the next fifty vorns, but he will know in advance when he is available to spend time with the three of you."

"At least until he does something else to aggravate everyone and gets put on even more cleaning details," Cheoseo said cheerfully but with a serious flicker to his field as he handed them their energon. "You might want to hold off a bit on the pranks until all of this mess is settled, Wing."

"I'm going to be on my very best behavior for a long time," Wing said with a flick of thanks through his field for the energon. "The last thing I want is to endanger my flock if I don't have to."

"Why would you have to?" Thundercracker frowned as his wings went up, even though his thanks for the energon when his field brushed against Cheoseo's was deep and genuine.

"Oh, yeah. It's kinda my function among the Knights to be the counter-point to the leadership. To give voice and fight to the dissenting opinion. I won't get in trouble for that, but I'm not always so good about being that dissent in a legal way." He paused and glanced at Cheoseo's snicker. "And I'm kinda a prankster. Which also gets me in trouble."

"To be the one to remind those in power that there are other options is a valuable role, but it's not one that I've seen put in practice for a long time. War doesn't tend to allow for that kind of dissension, and Starscream and Megatron wouldn't have tolerated it," Thundercracker mock groaned and flicked a wing in Cheoseo's direction as he tried to lighten the tone again. This wasn't the time to be pondering the past and spreading gloom; his fledgling was here on his lap. "Skywarp, you, Jazz....why do I always seem to wind up in flocks with pranksters? Oh Primus, you and Jazz were alone for metacycles on the ship while we flew here. I don't want to think about what you two came up."  

Wing giggled and sipped his energon. "Believe it or not, mostly it was plans for when he was civilian safe again. All the confectioners I'd introduce him to. The kind of clubs he likes. Where he might enjoy starting his performing career. Even where he might want to live. We traded stories on a lot of pranks, but most either have been done here or don't really work here. I take pride in never pulling the same prank twice and he won't start until he's sure it won't be taken wrong."

"As relieved as I am that the two of you are planning to show some restraint, I am also pleased that
Jazz has been thinking so seriously about his future here. We want all of you to be happy and productive in your new lives," Aurora said with a smile while her trine easily settled on their berth to fuel with the pair.

"We are all of a practical bent, or at least a pragmatic one," Thundercracker said smoothly. "Once this course was set we are all dedicated to it. The contingency plans were all for if we were not accepted."

"What were they?" Aurora asked carefully.

"Reformat Prowl ourselves. Then become mercenaries. Returning to Cybertron really hasn't been an option for me since my trine bond broke, and having two members of the opposite faction would make joining either side problematic at best," Thundercracker explained. "Settling here was our best option. Even Prowl agreed, such as he was able to."

"From what you have said, being a mercenary wouldn't have settled well with him. He agreed and complied without actually agreeing?" Haji asked slowly after a thoughtful pause. With a satisfied nod, the other Order continued. "From the sound of things that would be one of the only ways around his coding issues."

"Those who knew him said as much. He'd leave suddenly at times when the conversation turned towards where we were going," Wing agreed. "Jazz said he didn't really resist going into stasis either. Given his inherent expectation of making the plans, it was pretty unusual behavior."

"He was the top Autobot tactician," Thundercracker supplied to the civilian Seekers. "I do not believe it was an exaggeration to say that he had a hand in planning and directing every major and most minor battles, and much of the details of their half of the war. For him not to be at the center of any planning is extremely out of character."

"I know the type," Aurora chuckled softly.

"He was heavily involved in getting us off Kessai and away from the Nijihito, and he's impressively controlled during a sparring match. He made Dai Atlas look spontaneous," Wing said cheerfully. "Despite everything he's one of the most serene sparks I've ever encountered."

"Really?" Thundercracker couldn't help but look down at Wing in surprise. "I would have expected more fire in him given what he's endured, and what I've seen of him in battle."

"I can see where you would have found that in him given you were on opposing sides during the war," Wing agreed, but pressed his confidence in his own observations into Thundercracker's field. "but I spark merged with him on the way here. His spark isn't torn and battered like his coding; it's powerful but also feels safe."

Thundercracker hummed thoughtfully as his wings flicked with his thoughts. "He might be the best off of us all, then. Or at least the most suited to living here. Could you tell if it was his spark or his code that prompted him to be so accepting of me?"

Wing gave it due consideration before shrugging, "I'm not certain, but he never showed the same level of antagonism towards you that we saw directed towards Deadlock. One of the only times I felt anything truly malicious from Prowl it was directed at Deadlock."

Thundercracker hummed, but it was Haji that spoke.

"They have history?"
"Not that I know of," Thundercracker admitted. "At least not any more than the average mecha on either side of the war. I wouldn't be surprised if they had crossed paths though. They've both been active for a long time."

"It could have been Prowl's Enforcer coding reacting to Deadlock's openly criminal past. Not that he had much choice in the matter given he was dumped in the gutters and was trying to survive," Wing said slightly defensively; he didn't like bad-mouthing his potential Initiate in front of Aurora.

"We've all done terrible things just to survive," Thundercracker tried to soothe him. "Whatever it was, it's not enough to make him treat Deadlock badly for it. Prowl did a lot to help him cope and teach him while we were enslaved."

Wing nodded in agreement and relaxed against the Seeker. Why was he upset? After all, it wasn't like Deadlock wouldn't admit to his own past if asked. "Yes, he even tried to calm him before he went berserk, but Prowl had such an odd reaction to Deadlock's terror when Flightplan first went skyward. Maybe it was his coding overriding his spark?"

Cheoseo cocked his helm. "It might have been the only outlet he had for his negative feelings. It wasn't Deadlock so much as it was an opening to express something."

"It wouldn't surprise me," Wing lingered over the last of his morning energon. "He had a lot to be frustrated over. I think he had it the second worst of us in slavery."

"That would be me," Thundercracker responded to the silent, only half asked question. "Wing was a personal servant. Deadlock was a gladiator. Jazz a dancer and pleasurebot. Prowl's processors were very badly damaged and he was used as a warehouse drone until he needed repair. I was used as the mobile, thinking target for prototype planes and weapons."

All three Seekers flinched and flattened their wings in sympathy at the thought of being treated so cruelly. "I am sorry you went through such an experience," Haji said quietly. "but I am pleased it does not seem to have effected your joy in flight."

"Nothing could take that," Thundercracker's frame shivered from tip to tip. "Even knowing I'd be shot down it was still a relief to feel air under my wings." He paused. "Though it's possible my experience in war made it easier to endure. While being shot down was not common on Cybertron, it did happen. Dogfight was particularly good at it."

"Well, it won't happen here any time soon if the Knights have anything to say about it," Haji said before staring over at Wing. "Don't you have chores to get to soon?"

"The sooner you get them done the sooner you can come back here and snuggle," Cheoseo remarked cheerfully before glancing over at Aurora. "As long as Marwir doesn't mind that is."

"She won't. We agree it's good for them to bond," Aurora said smoothly as Haji stood and gave her, then Cheoseo a quick kiss.

"I have to get to the office, but have fun with them," the Order smile and took off.

Walking out of his room, Deadlock stopped and stared suspiciously at the two cubes resting innocently on the table. The one closest at his seat looked a little different from his normal ration, and he thought he saw small flecks of sparkling silver in the mix. Looking from the apparent bribe over to Kimark, he grumbled, "What stupid test do I have to take now? I thought we were done with those."
"It's not a test. You don't have to do anything for it," Kimark said levelly and motioned to the cube. "I would like to try something new, since you're done with testing."

Deadlock grunted and took a quick drink, draining a quarter of it. Energon was energon and this was fairly tasty. Looking over at his keeper he sighed, "Testing's done and you know how well I fight. What's next, more medical tests?" If that was it he wasn't looking forward to it, but he didn't need to be bribed to go visit Redline if it kept him on the medic's good side.

Kimark shook his helm with a bit of a smile and sipped his morning energon. "I was thinking we relax today. See what form of meditation you take to. I know Wing showed you a bit. I'm going to show you more."

"Is this going to involve more cords and staring at swords?" Deadlock asked, remembering that particular session fairly well.

"Not today," Kimark shook his helm. "That was a binding meditation. I was thinking more the kind where you still your processors rather than focus on something. There are many ways to achieve a calm center. Most will still their frames. Mecha like us often do better with an activity. Cleaning a well known weapon, a kata, a dance, even playing an instrument. I began with my weapons but I prefer katas now, since I know many of them well."

Deadlock just looked at him and said flatly, "I'm not allowed my favorite weapons right now or anytime soon. I have no training in katas and fight by instinct. I don't dance unless it involves interfacing. You could tell me that table is an instrument and I'd have no real reason to disbelieve you since I've rarely seen any let alone played one. Staring at a wall puts me in recharge or makes me want to punch something. What other options are there?"

"Perhaps not your favorite weapons, or to keep it, but if you keep this between us I'll let you use one of my small blades for this. We can clean it at first, and I can teach you some simple katas. I'm not expecting you to clear your processors today. Just being willing to try it out," Kimark laid out his plans. "What do you say?"

His first thought was that it was a trick to get him in trouble, but Deadlock pushed aside the old paranoia and actually thought about it. Kimark didn't act like someone trying to con him; the mech had actually been friendly so far but not in a Swindle type way. Weighing his options, he grunted, "Okay."

"Good. Have you used small blades much?" Kimark smiled.

"Mostly I used guns unless I berserked in combat, but I have used a few blades over the vorns. Jazz and I did play with small ones like that some on the trip here," Deadlock admitted, not mentioning the kind of skills they'd been practicing.

"Then we'll see how well you take to them," Kimark said as they finished their energon. He pulled out a couple well-cared-for long daggers from his subspace. "Did Jazz cover basic care of them?"

"Yeah, I've cleaned and sharpened blades before," Deadlock looked them over without touching them, still a bit wary of a trick. They were definitely larger than the ones the pair had worked with on the ship; these weren't going to be hidden under his plating. They would be good in a fight though. Kimark no doubt had them because they were good in arena fighting.

"You can handle one now. It'll be in your hands soon enough," Kimark encouraged him before pulling out two basic care kits and nudged one towards Deadlock.
Deadlock picked up the care kit and waited a moment, listening for any trouble coming. Not hearing anything, he shrugged and opened the kit. Now that he was committed he was going to enjoy finally having a weapon again, however long it lasted. He knew Kimark was watching him for more than just aggressive moves. It was expected given the Knight was allowing him to work on one of his blades.

After several kliks Kimark hummed for casual attention. "What has you uneasy?"

"Back on Cybertron that would mostly likely have been a trick to get me in trouble with the higher-ups. Stuff like that has happened before," Deadlock admitted looking down at the blade. "You don't seem the type but I still half expect someone to come in and haul me off for touching this. Never mind that I can do more damage with my hands."

"I'd be the one in trouble," Kimark pointed out. "I'm the one that broke a rule."

"That assumes the higher ups play fair," Deadlock pointed out cynically as he worked on one side of the blade. "Dai Atlas doesn't like me. It'd be easy for him to back a claim from you that I swiped it."

"With me sitting here, watching?" Kimark blinked. "Beyond the fact that I wouldn't, I'd still be punished for being careless. There is no situation where I don't get in trouble no matter what I said."

"All depends on how much trouble both of us get into whether or not it'd be worth it. I've been around you long enough I figured you wouldn't do something like that; that's why I picked up the blade," Deadlock said with another shrug. "Wing wouldn't even think of something like that, on your side or mine."

Kimark nodded thoughtfully. "You're right, he definitely wouldn't. It's not in his nature, even if he is quite the prankster. I've probably been a Knight too long to think of the Sovereign being unfair."

"You don't have Starscream in your ranks deciding what he thinks is right," Deadlock grunted. "Swindle and Gutcruncher would sell anyone for scrap parts if they had the chance and thought they'd get away with it."

Kimark winced. "I know the type. None of them made it to planetfall. Sovereign made a point of it for the couple that made it past screening. Greed is an acceptable evil. Uncontrolled greed is not."

"I'll have to pass on to 'Cracker we don't have to worry as much about that kind of backstabber," Deadlock said almost cheerfully as he turned the blade over in his hands. "This probably saw you through a lot of trouble."

"They did. I started with blades like this, though these are the fifth set I've owned," Kimark's smile turned a bit sentimental. "This pair did see me through some of the hardest fights I was in. The last two that convinced me it was time to get out of the arena."

Deadlock shrugged. "I never did do gladiator combat on Cybertron. The Nijihito put me to use there, but they didn't like how many of their slaves I kept offlining in the ring."

Kimark snorted. "Given your age, I'll say I'm glad you didn't. We'd have met in the arena eventually. Champions always do."

"That would have been messy," Deadlock agreed, remembering the aftermath of some of his fights with Sunstreaker. "You ever fight Megatron?"

"Once," Kimark nodded. "He left pieces of me across the entire floor. I was a champion, but I wasn't at his level. I'm better now, though I expect so is he."
"He's one of the best," Deadlock admitted, admiration clear in his voice and field. "There aren't many out there that can stand up to him in a fight."

"Can't say I'm surprised. Mecha like that don't tend to slip away. They go out with a display. Even if they have to goad someone into it. Not that it's always easy to tell it from normal showmechship," Kimark chuckled. "Did he teach you any moves?"

"He showed me a few ways to take down my foes and keep them down, especially if it was a target we actually wanted to interrogate instead of just kill. We didn't have much use for the showy flash of the gladiator pits during real combat," Deadlock admitted. "Unless I berserked I tended to stick to guns during a fight."

"It's the smart thing to do, given most everyone else did. It takes a lot of skill and a bit of luck to be a close quarters fighter on a field of ranged weapons. It can be done, but it's not worth it if fighting is your function," Kimark nodded and examined his blade critically before going back to work. "Did you enjoy the blade work you did?"

"Yeah, I was a bit skeptical, but Jazz showed me a few tricks that made them more practical. Throwing blades at a target was a lot easier to practice in the ship than guns. It helped me keep my accuracy up," Deadlock admitted, avoiding mentioning most of what Jazz had been training him to do.

"I bet. I never had to deal with such a small ship. The ones we came here on were huge, thousands on each ship and built assuming we'd live there for hundreds if not thousands of vorns," Kimark hummed thoughtfully. "Space was something we had enough of, at least for the grounders. Flight frames grumbled."

"Wing and Thundercracker would get out and fly when we were near a moon or planet, same as Jazz and I would go and drive," Deadlock agreed. "It kept all of us from going crazy during the trip. I know the two of them would occasionally stop and fly if it got to be too much when they were on their own."

"Helps that neither needs a surface," Kimark said. "Not like us, but they can handle the enclosed spaces far less too. I guess it evens out. Happy with the state of it?"

"Yeah, it looks good," Deadlock said glancing at the blade in his hand. It wasn't quite as finely polished as the one Kimark was holding, but he knew it was proper maintenance work and in serviceable condition. "Now what?"

"How about I show you a couple simple moves with it and we see how easily you settle into them," Kimark offered and stood.

"Let's see what you can do," Deadlock agreed much easier than he would have before his time training with Jazz. Standing, he waited to see what Kimark would do next. He still wanted his guns back, but he'd have to settle for blades like these here.

Kimar grinned at him. "Want to see what I can do, or what I plan to teach you in the next few decaorns?"

"Both because I'll bet I pick it up faster than most here expect," Deadlock grinned even as he acknowledged that at least Kimark and his gestalt wouldn't underestimate him.

Kimar nodded and relaxed his frame into a stance that Deadlock knew well from the unarmed sparring they enjoyed. When he began to move it was sharp and focused, deadly in a way that most
Katas didn't look to be. He was fast too.

Deadlock spent the first cycle of the kata admiring the deadliness while paying close attention to the frame movements, noting the differences between the armed and unarmed versions he'd seen. This actually looked practical, unlike most of the katas Wing liked to do which looked more like dancing. This looks relatively simple too, so Kimark was probably starting with what he intended to teach before moving on to what he could show off his own deadliness with.

Thrust, slice, jab. One handed and two. When Kimark began to get to the advanced stuff where he was showing off, here and there Deadlock was sure he could see the slight off balance with only a single blade. That was a weakness he'd need to fix as he mastered this style. He would never depend on having both weapons available at all times since an enemy could disarm or destroy one. Those imperfections could be lethal in a real battle against a competent opponent.

If Kimark really intended to teach him this, the Knight was definitely putting himself at risk. He'd never see a deadly strike coming when he expected Deadlock to be moving and flashing the weapon about.

"Care to show me where you're at now?" Kimark asked after he stopped and settled his stance before motioning and giving the space to Deadlock. "Give me an idea of your instincts."

Deadlock spun the blade for a moment before starting with the more efficient strikes Jazz had shown him as a warm-up. It wasn't difficult to start integrating the moves he'd practiced with Wing on the trip. He knew he wasn't nearly as smooth as Kimark, but the deadly intention behind his strikes was evident. He was sure neither were what Kimark was really looking at. If the mech wanted to know how comfortable he was with a long dagger he'd been looking at balance, grip, openings ... the things a beginner did wrong because they simply couldn't learn it all at once.

Deadlock knew he needed more practice. He also knew that Kimark was reasonably impressed by what he was seeing.

"I'd say Jazz taught you some good basic moves and you learn fast. Do all physical skills come that easily to you, or just combat ones?" Kimark asked.

"Scrounging kept me online for a while. Combat skills came easily once I started learning them. I didn't have much use for anything else besides piloting," Deadlock said with a shrug.

Kimark nodded his acceptance and didn't comment on what was to come. "Can you copy the first thrust you saw me do?"

"Yeah," Deadlock grunted as he positioned himself as close as was comfortable to what Kimark had shown him. He figured that the variances were from the differences between their frames, but he could tell Kimark was already seeing flaws. "Go ahead and correct me; I'm not going to stab you. I'd rather learn it right the first time."

Kimark nodded and stepped forward without fear, though he still displayed the innate caution Deadlock deserved as he moved the other as needed.

Thundercracker mentally braced himself as Marwir dropped Wing off for what should be their normal recharge cuddle session. Unfortunately, he knew it wasn't going to start peacefully tonight. Wing had been pestering him over the last three orns with increasing frequency about approaching Aurora for a mourning flight. He needed it and they both knew it just as they both knew Wing wouldn't stop pushing until Thundercracker gave in. He knew Aurora and her trine had picked it up
as well, though they'd accepted his uneasy statement of 'not yet' when asked what was bothering him.

"Tonight," he murmured to Wing as the small Aerial came close.

"Good," Wing answered as he hugged the larger Seeker. "You need to bring this up; you can't be the only one here who's needed it."

"I think every Seeker here has lost kin, some even lost flockmates," Thundercracker agreed, thinking about more than just his own flight for the first time. He drew a deep breath, let it go, and turned to Aurora. He knew just by the set of her wings that she was hoping he was ready to talk.

"Aurora, I need to request a moment of your time before you join your trine for recharge," Thundercracker said much more formally than he usually addressed his adopted creator.

"You have it, Thundercracker," her stance and tone shifted slightly to accommodate his formality. "What do you require?"

"Master Aurora, I need to properly mourn my trines, my creation, my conjunx and my flock," even as he tried to control his emotions Thundercracker let some of the grief flicker into this field. In truth he still hadn't fully grasped the extent of what he was mourning. Some was so old that he couldn't remember what it was like not to have that pain.

Her wings gave relief to the smile that crossed her features. "I had hoped you would be ready soon. Mourning flights are a bit different here, though the results are the same."

He blinked in surprise but settled back to listen to her while Wing sank into a relieved relaxation next to him.

"Several of the scientists developed a powder that will hang in the air of the cavern for an orn before gradually settling to add to the sandy dust that is everywhere. We give a few orn warning so other fliers know to stay clear of the layer as it comes down."

"That means you don't have to risk using the sand and wind out on the surface," Thundercracker nodded in understanding. He didn't need to know how the powder worked, only that it could do the job and help him show properly the grief he felt over his losses.

"And if someone comes down hard there is medical care near if they wish it," she added. "Do you wish to fly alone?"

"This is not a common request here, and it will cause an inconvenience to other residents," he said rather than asked, having noted the confusion in Wing's field. "It would be better received if anyone could join."

"Not if their presence will disturb you," Wing growled protectively.

"Mourning ... normally all who would grieve a loss would be there. It's unusual for only one survivor to exist," Thundercracker shook his helm. "I don't mind. They are Seekers mourning a loss. In that we have a common cause. I'll fly myself dry. I know that much."

"How long is that?" Aurora asked.

"It's hard to know with all the frame modifications, but I used to manage just over two orn before I can't stay up any more," he hedged his bets on being correct. "Certainly no longer than that."
"We can make the arrangements for that long of a flight but it will take a few orns to get everything in order and all the proper warnings issues," Aurora said after taking into account Thundercracker's time frame.

"I have waited the entire war for some of these. I can wait a few orns," he assured her while his wings all but vibrated his thanks. "Who will fly with me?"

"I'm not sure yet. We are likely to do shifts so no one has to fly themselves to exhaustion unless they need to for their own reasons. I will tell you before you fly," she promised, her field and wings happy to do this for him.

"Thank you," he answered, dipping his wings formally before letting Wing once again press against his side, drawing comfort from his fledgling's presence as he pulled him towards the berth. He suspected they would both recharge better than they had in a while.
Chapter by gatekat

Thundercracker is attacked by Gloaming's trine and sets off earthquake alarms stopping them. Thundercracker learns that he's quite the hot item about the mechling seekers and quietly freaks out.

Thundercracker reveled in the freedom to fly largely at will. Yes, it was underground. Yes, he had to let his watcher keep close. Yes, he was heavily restricted on speed and maneuvers. None of it mattered yet. Just getting to fly when he wished for the most part was still too new for restrictions to chafe. Absently he noted an unfamiliar pair waylaying Haji and Flashfire stopping with him. He banked wide and slow to stay in optic range of the now-hovering quartet. The newcomers were highly agitated and Haji seemed calm, almost resigned. Business, if Thundercracker was any judge, so he settled into a slow, wide orbit and let them argue it out. He still wasn't entirely sure why Haji was out with them but who was he to question it? If his adoptive creator's trinemate wanted to watch out for him and fly with him it couldn't be a bad thing.

It wasn't the first time his flights had been interrupted when he had a substitute keeper; Cheoseo had been waylaid twice by a potential client during other trips. The Knight along had kept Thundercracker close and circling those times as well and made sure the artist wasn't being harassed. Knights or not, both Seekers seemed to be under the protection of the Knights as much as he was. It made sense given Aurora's rank, although it wasn't as extreme as what Starscream would have probably insisted upon in her place.

Scanning the ground below the arguing newcomers, he noted a pair of rotors going into what looked to be one of the confectioneries Wing had rambled on about during their trip. Maybe they wouldn't mind stopping on their way back? After all, pricing treats for his flock was a legitimate way to start looking at expenses. That the stop was likely to produce treats to bring back didn't play a role in the idea. Nope, not at all.

His contemplations were interrupted by an indigo and amber Seeker swooped down barely a winglength in front of him, causing Thundercracker to bank sharply. His effort to dodge was complicated by the first's wingmates coming down on either side in a move that forced Thundercracker to transform to get his thrusters pointed the right way to break fast enough.

"Watch your nose!" Thundercracker snarled at them with irate wings and a raised fist.

The trine didn't respond verbally but peeled around and shot straight at him again, forcing Thundercracker to drop to avoid being rammed by the lighter Seekers. Well, they'd made it perfectly clear that they were aiming for him. Fine then. Time for them to find out why you didn't challenge Thundercracker.

His turbines roared to full power as he transformed and pushed his spark gift into his systems and the atmosphere around him as he surged to the ceiling as fast as he dared, then flipped on his nose and dove down on the trine that had briefly lost track of him. He only took enough notice of the falling
rocks to avoid them.

All three plummeted towards the ground as he strafed them from above, stunned and unable to avoid the debris crashing towards them. A trio of grounders walking far below gaped up before staggering towards cover in a building, dragging one of their number to safety. All around the city below alarm sirens began to blare, causing more mecha to rush for cover in the buildings.

::Thundercracker!:: Flashfire yelled over the comm as the trio darted out of the way. ::Stop! Get back here immediately!::

Slightly confused by the seemingly excessive reaction of the city to a few falling rocks, Thundercracker did as ordered anyway and was calm, ready for instructions when he got close.

Haji stared at the fallen rocks and panic below them and commed his trine mate. ::Aurora, it's Thundercracker not an earthquake. He just attacked a trine in midair.::

::Why?:: her calm voice hid her tension well as Flashfire was tagged into the conversation.

::I'm not completely certain, but there's a stunned trine collapsed on the street below him.:: Haji growled, frustrated with the situation and the events he was trying to piece together. ::One of my clients approached me with a dispute while we were out flying.::

::I have no idea what happened.:: Flashfire said with both frustration and anger.

::Open the line to him.:: she instructed and paused as it was done. ::Thundercracker. What happened?:: she kept her voice as calm and level as she knew how.

::The glitches dove on me while I was circling, waiting for Haji to finish talking. I yelled at them and they came at me again. So I knocked them down.:: He answered calmly for the non-event it was to him. ::Hatchlings being stupid.::

::You used your spark gift just now?:: Aurora asked, starting to piece together the whole fiasco.

::Yes. It stunned them, nothing more. They were low enough the landing won't leave more than dents and bruised egos. What's with the sirens?::

::Your sonic boom triggered warnings that the cavern might collapse. I'll get the earthquake alarms canceled.:: Aurora said, trying to keep from venting her frustration directly at her charge.

::Peacekeepers will be arriving shortly if they aren't already there. Flashfire, the three of you and that trine need to go with them to sort this mess out. I'll be there as soon as I can.::

::Oh.:: Thundercracker's tone spoke of his surprise at the reaction, but also his recognition that it would not be something he did again so casually.

On a private comm to Aurora Haji grumbled, ::I'll make certain they bring my client and his associate along with us. This interruption was a little too convenient even in my optics.::

::Agreed. At least you know who provided the distraction this time.:: she huffed, then closed the line to take care of what she needed to.

"I suppose we should land," Thundercracker motioned to the largely ground based responders around the stunned Seekers. "I didn't intend such a commotion."

"They probably did. I don't image they expected it to go quite like this," Haji sighed before turning back to his two distractions who had been slowly edging away while he was distracted. "Brightspar,
Elliptic, you'd better follow us down. The Peacekeepers will want your statements as witnesses."

The pair paused for a long moment before heading towards the ground after the three Seekers.

"What caused this?" The ranking Peacekeeper asked politely enough while medics checked over the still Seekers.

Haji nodded towards the trio sitting on the ground as he addressed the Peacekeeper, "From what I understand, those three decided to provoke my trine mate's charge while I was discussing business with my client. Thundercracker," he said the designation stressing the mechling status the other Seeker held, "had never been this far underground until he came here and didn't realize that his response to their antics would trigger the earthquake alarms. Under open sky a sonic boom wouldn't do that kind of potential structural damage. My apologies for the trouble, Peacekeeper Bluesweep."

"What allows you to create the boom?" she focused on the medium blue Seeker as one of the medics came up and spoke to her, earning a surprised look, then a nod.

"Spark gift enhanced by hardware," Thundercracker answered smoothly before dipping his wings in a politely submissive greeting to the copper and red Seeker coming in for a landing with his duty trine. "I have excellent control of it. It will not happen again without extreme need."

"It better not," the new Seeker said. "We're getting panicked comms from all across New Ibex."

"Captain Sonic Flare," Haji said, dipping his own wings politely to the higher ranking Order. "I'm sorry you're being bothered with this incident. This is Thundercracker, Aurora's charge."

Sonic Flare gave Thundercracker a sharp look, recognizing the new Seeker's designation and the status Haji had just stressed again. Even though his expression didn't soften, the agitation in his wings eased. "What's the argument over?"

"I don't know, sir," Thundercracker responded to the military-like authority on reflex. "I do not believe I've been introduced to any of them yet. I would like to know, if you find out."

"We'll figure out what's going on," Sonic Flare glanced over at his trine mates who had separated and were interviewing Brightspar and Elliptic. Both witnesses were responding more than they had to the grounders who'd been talking to them earlier. Elliptic kept glancing over at Thundercracker as if being near the war frame made him nervous. Seeing that they had things well in hand, he turned back to the trio in front of him and asked, "What happened?"

Haji started, "We out flying so Thundercracker can familiarize himself with the city layout and flight rules in practice. Brightspar hailed me as we passed. He's just finished a new addition to his eyrie and Elliptic is one of the contractors who worked on the project. They've been having some disagreements about two of the clauses and a delay during construction. He told me they wanted to work things out and was trying to set up a time to meet. That's when I felt Thundercracker rattle the area, looked up and saw those three fall from the sky."

"Is it normal for either of them to do so like this rather than by comm?" Sonic Flare asked.

"Not usually," Haji said, and continued after a pause, "but Brightspar said he had just spotted me and wanted to set up a formal meeting while Elliptic was still agreeable."

Sonic Flare flicked his wings in understanding before turning to the newcomer and the uncharacteristically silent Knight. "Is there anything else you'd like to add?"

"No, Haji covered it sufficiently," Flashfire said gruffly.

"What was that all about?" Sonic Flare asked, obviously still a bit agitated.

Haji shrugged "I'm just trying to get things sorted out. If you find it's a problem we can find other witnesses and We'll keep you informed."

Sonic Flare nodded, "Okay, I'll do that. Keep me informed. I'll be here if you need me."

Haji dipped his wings in a polite salute before turning and walking away with his trine mates. Sonic Flare watched until they were out of sight, then turned back to the new Seeker. "I don't think we've met..."

"Not yet," the Seeker replied, "but I'm sure we will."

Sonic Flare gave him a hard look, "I hope so, Aurora's charge."

"Aurora's charge?" the Seeker repeated.

Sonic Flare nodded, "Yes, Aurora. She's my trine leader."

"I see," the new Seeker said, "I'm sure she'll like me."

Sonic Flare smiled, "I believe she will."

"And you?" the new Seeker asked.

Sonic Flare narrowed his eyes, "Me?"

"Yes, you. Are you Aurora's...?"

"Yes, I'm Aurora and the new Seeker's trine leader."
Despite wishing to point out just how much he’d held back, Thundercracker simply flicked a negative. He had a sense that it wouldn't help in this situation the way it would among the Knights.

"Not at the moment," Haji looked over at the slowly recovering Seekers surrounded by grounder Peacekeepers, "I don't know why they would provoke a warframe, even one who wishes to become a civilian. Most of the flocks have heard or seen how skilled Thundercracker is in the sky."

"He's still a warframe, something we took some pains not to include," Sonic Flare shrugged his wings, then focused on Thundercracker. "Why are you still wearing that frame?"

"I was forced into a gestalt. While Redline will be able to take some of my mass off when he has finished studying it, most will have to remain," Thundercracker said with more ease than he felt and watched as the captain processed that.

"Not much to be done about that then," Sonic Flare huffed. "You may leave. You will be contacted when we decide what to do and to whom."

"Thank you. We will contact your department if we recall anything else later," Haji said dipping his wings politely and stepped back away from the captain before taking off with Flashfire slightly awkwardly at his right while Thundercracker fell smoothly in place on his left wing as easily as if they'd been flying together for vorns. The flight back to the Citadel was in uneasy silence, all of them thinking on what had happened from very different angles.

The trio spotted Aurora, Cheoseo and Tornado waiting for them as expected. What surprised Haji more than Thundercracker was the additional presence of Jazz and Dart, and he noted Flashfire seemed unhappy to see the pair of grounders. The saboteur looked extremely unhappy and pointedly checked his gestalt mate over once the trio landed. Even more to Haji's surprise was how tolerant the war-hardened and non-tactile Order was of it, even speaking quietly to Jazz in the mangled dialect they shared.

"Jazz. Don't." Dart reacted first to the building growl in the grounder's engine.

"They attacked him for his looks," Jazz snarled back.

"Don't stoop to their level," Cheoseo said as he stared warily at the angry grounder.

"If we are going to learn to fit in here, we must let the Peacekeepers do their job," Thundercracker pointed out to his flock mate. "We will see what they determine happened."

Jazz glared at him, then shook it off with a huff. "Fine. They can do their job first."

"Do you recognize who was involved?" Tornado asked, filing away but ignoring Jazz's hidden threat for now. It wasn't worth bringing up in front of Aurora's trine mates just yet. It wasn't even that inappropriate a statement for an Action who's trinemate had been attacked, even if Jazz wasn't an Action.

"The trine involved were unfamiliar," Flashfire answer stiffly.

"I didn't recognize the trine that attacked me, though the Peacekeepers know. They were still being interviewed when we returned here," Thundercracker said, tipping his wings respectfully to the Master Knight. "I admit I wasn't as concerned as I should have been about the interruption given it's happened before when I was out with Cheoseo."

"We'll know why they said they attacked soon," Aurora reminded everyone. "This is a matter involving a Citadel resident. Even if we did not ask it is expected that the Peacekeepers will let us
"Flashfire, you may return to your quarters and contemplate what happened today," Tornado said with a bit of disappointment in his field although his voice remained neutral. The Knight had failed to maintain awareness of his surroundings and allowed his charge to be attacked forcing a retaliatory response. Fortunately Thundercracker hadn't actually offline anyone.

The Seeker stiffly dipped his wings and left the eyrie.

"If they even admit to doing it," Jazz grumbled quietly. "They might try to blame Thundercracker and claim he provoked them."

"I would like to know the penalties for what I've done during this incident," Thundercracker admitted, wondering how this would affect him and Wing, since Wing was responsible for any of his infractions. "It's never been an issue before, but I've never lived underground until now."

"When was the last time driving anybody to the ground was a crime?" Jazz half chuckled. The question made Thundercracker pause, then really think back into archived and occasionally corrupted files. "When I entered my second vorn at the Academy of Vos," he finally decided. "I had authority to demand it of anyone by then."

"It depends on what is determined to have happened," Aurora answered carefully. "Since you claim that they attacked you, nothing. Self-defense, especially when it results in no damage, is not a crime. A Knight will generally wish a binding to help them understand when the situation left their control, however it is not demanded of us and is not suitable in this situation. If wrongdoing is determined on your part Wing will be expected to pay for your portion of any damages and your flight restrictions may be increased. He may have to spend an orn or three in the brig, though I would be surprised for a first offense given the situation."

"Captain Sonic Flare did not seem to welcome what I represent, but I believe he is interested in finding the truth to the situation," Thundercracker said with a nod of understanding at the potential penalties.

"It's the same story all over again, mecha fear or hate what they don't understand," Jazz grunted.

"In this case it is more that they hate and fear what cost us our homeworld," Haji countered. "For all you are trying to change, you still look and represent what we came here to avoid."

"My boss tried to stop what he had seen coming for longer than you've been online," Jazz grunted. "Not enough people in power wanted to make the changes necessary; even after it was too late."

"Something that is regrettable and the reason we left," Aurora agreed. "The majority of civilians fled the war and by extension warframes. In time you will be seen as heavy frames, known as the city's gestalt. Until that happens it will not be easy for many to see the mecha and not the frame."

"Mecha like that will hate us until the need us," Jazz pointed out cynically. "Then they'll want to shove us aside as soon as the crisis is over. Just like what happened back on Cybertron."

"The majority of the civilians will adjust their opinions as they see your willingness to integrate into society. Allowing the Peacekeepers to do their duty right now is an important first step. Especially since it is the first incident outside the Citadel involving one of you," Dart said.

"The fact that you are a flock of five is going to be a major influence on how civilians see you," Cheoseo said bluntly. "Your flock is a support structure that the other arrivals didn't have, but it's also
"I am most interested in why that trine felt strongly enough to risk attacking me. Surely they knew nothing good could come of it," Thundercracker frowned.

"Depends on their definition of good," Jazz shrugged. "If it got you in trouble, that might have been the point."

"But if I acted as a typical warframe I would have shredded them. I certainly am capable of it," Thundercracker countered.

"Thundercracker, have you been in contact with any untrained Seekers, beyond the couple group events?" Aurora asked.

"No. A few seemed mildly interested, some unsettled, a couple confused that I was untrained at my age. None have tried to contact me," he answered.

"This is all speculation until we know more from the Peacekeepers," Haji pointed out.

Tornado glanced over at Aurora before speaking, "Agreed. How about we drop this speculation for now and find something else to talk about. I'll contact Marwir and Wing and see if they can drop by later tonight for some energon." The additional distraction would hopefully help calm Jazz down; the saboteur was the one he was most concerned about right now.

"That sounds good," Thundercracker answered for them both, and it wasn't lost on anyone that Jazz allowed it without a twitch.

Aurora stood with Cheoseo behind Haji, impressed with how calm Thundercracker appeared to be as he waited next to Tornado. That Sonic Flare had requested to enter the eyrie with his duty trine meant they should have the results of the investigation soon. It was typically a little bit strained when the Citadel dealt with New Crystal City's Peacekeepers. The Peacekeepers didn't like the jurisdictional status that the Citadel held, but they appreciated having the back-up on call if needed. There was the possibility that having someone of Thundercracker's status involved might make things even more difficult, but she was hoping that the Captain's professionalism would prevent any prejudice from coming into play. As frustrating as this incident had been, it might provide a good opportunity to prove to the gestalt that the old, corrupt ways truly had no place here.

Both Knights and Thundercracker were also well aware that Jazz was there, hidden to watch and listen on his own. He didn't trust, not yet, maybe not for centuries, but he'd watch, listen and learn.

It didn't take long for the Peacekeeper trine to settle, Sonic Flare in the lead. "Thank you for being here. After our investigation I am not inclined to file charges on anyone."

"Before we agree, I would know why they claim they attacked Thundercracker," Tornado spoke up.

Sonic Flare looked directly at the clustered group. "Gloaming's younger sibling is one of the youngsters considering trining with your mechling here. He and his trine don't like the idea of her with someone that much older, especially given your status as a war frame."

"So he decided to prove that Thundercracker was too dangerous to be in civilian society?" Tornado asked.

"Something like that," Sonic Flare nodded with his wings as he caught the undisguised shock written across Thundercracker's frame and focused there. "Then Highdive has not made much of an
impression?"

"I've spoken to her, though only as part of her flight class. I didn't realize she was nearly that interested," Thundercracker shook his wings out to settle himself and really process that he would have to address training soon. "I wasn't aware than anyone was actually interested yet."

"You haven't had access to the youngsters' gossip," Sonic Flare said dryly. "Your display on the race course was all any of them could talk about for orns."

"Oh," was all Thundercracker managed for a long half klik. "Is it really that impressive here?" he glanced between Aurora, Tornado and Sonic Flare. "I'm a solid flier for my former rank, but hardly the best on a course."

"There are Seekers here who can outfly you," Aurora answered calmly, indicated that she was one of them. "None that are available to trine. No one has lost a trinemat in longer than those mechlings have been functioning. For the skill level they expect that they'll get to fly with you are very impressive. There have also always been a few who are drawn to those outside their age bracket, whether older or younger."

Thundercracker gave a wing-dip of understanding and settled down to mull the new information over.

"Anyway, Gloaming wanted to bring Thundercracker down a peg in his sister's optics and drive home that you didn't fit in to civilian society," Sonic Flare looked sharply at Thundercracker. "It's a good thing you took them down without damaging them; an actual fight would have been a different matter. It would have brought charges and turned most of the Seekers against you. Instead they embarrassed themselves by being taken down that easily in a civilized matter. We're willing to list the earthquake warnings as an accident if you agree not to press charges and keep that gift under control."

"I agree," Thundercracker dipped his wings readily. "I've already given my word to the Knights that I will not create my thunder again without serious need. I did not intend to cause the alarms, only to stop the fight without damaging anyone."

"Then it is agreed," Tornado spoke as the ranking Order among the Knight's Seekers. "We will also work on addressing Gloaming's issues in a civilized manner."

"Copies of the written reports will be sent to the Citadel tomorrow. Thank you for your cooperation in this matter," Sonic Flare said with a polite wing dip before his trine turned and departed.

Cheoseo waited until the Peacekeepers were gone before he couldn't resist commenting, "Well, that went well."

"Agreed," Thundercracker voiced his opinion as an invitation to be corrected. When no one did, he focused on Aurora as his immediate superior, Vision or not. "I would like to speak with Saamanjasy before the next flight class I'm in. It seems I am not as familiar with interest signals as I should be for this group."

"I'll get that arranged as soon as possible," Aurora nodded, already thinking about the opportunities and processor aches this might cause in the short term. "He'll know what to go over with you."

"I'll talk to some of my flock mates again," Cheoseo offered. "They should be able to help figure out who else might be unhappy. Most trines won't do anything blatant since this try went so poorly."

"Thank you," Thundercracker dipped his wings to the artist.
"What signals were you expecting?" Aurora asked, honestly curious given he'd been a civilian when he'd first trined.

"A suggestion to spend time together, asking about me, my flock and intended function. From an Action I wouldn't be surprised to ask to spend the night," Thundercracker answered.

"So bold," Tornado chuckled.

"Bold?" Thundercracker hummed his curiosity-surprise at the statement.

"Definitely. As the elder by a fair margin and the Order they'd expect you to make the first move, yet you can't for many vorns yet and it's not recommended even then given the reaction of Gloaming is far from unique."

"Maybe Saamanjasy can let the interested ones know, quietly, that they need to make the first move?" Cheoseo suggested. "It's not like it'd be safe for him to so."

"We can discuss it with him when we meet to learn more about the mechlings," Aurora suggested.

"His help to any extent would be very helpful. Even if it is just pointing to those who want me to show more interest in them," Thundercracker agreed with it all.

"I'll contact him tomorrow. Jazz, do you and Thundercracker recharge together tonight or would you rather Tornado escorted you back to Dart?" Aurora asked.

"I'd stay, if that's okay," Jazz glanced between Thundercracker and Aurora.

"Stay," Thundercracker answered after glancing at her and getting a near-invisible okay. Recharging tonight with Jazz and Wing felt like a good idea. Having even half his flock present would help him prepare for the coming mourning flight.
Chapter Summary

Wing ponders as he watches Thundercracker begin a mourning flight.

As he circled close to the cavern roof, Wing acknowledged another ping from the automated network warning of a flight hazard in progress. It was different from the priority earthquake alarm yesterday after Gloaming's attack on Thundercracker. This was the high density grit cloud warning; one Wing had seen occasionally over the centuries but had always thought was linked to surface dust storms. It was only dangerous to one's paint. Watching Thundercracker and about a dozen other Seekers rise and begin to climb into the air, he couldn't help pondering how important this truly must be to Seekers for them to have spent so much effort and time recreating it on Aelios. As far as he knew none of the others had gone so far, but then none of the others likely had such a difficult cultural expression.

He admitted he didn't understand and felt no shame in it. A bit of regret that something so important to one of his unit was beyond his understanding, though it was no more distressing than not grasping how important it was for Praxians to drive. It was simply a truth; not everyone would understand everything.

After the incident yesterday Aurora had requested a couple of additional non-Seeker Knights monitor the flight. It might be disgraceful to attack someone in such a public spectacle, but the Masters had agreed it was a valid precaution given Thundercracker's sigma ability and current emotional state. He would be within his rights to defend himself violently if attacked right now. Wing and Marwir had volunteered for the duty immediately. Neither were too worried about their paint. Coldbolt, Alese and Sheerwing had volunteered to spell them. All three were big endurance flight frames, well suited to the staying power Thundercracker had indicated would be needed.

::I admit I have never watched this before,:: Marwir commented conversationally. ::I knew they did this. I just never watched.::

::I didn't know until Thundercracker told us recently,:: Wing admitted. ::I don't think he's ever had a chance to truly mourn anything until now. They were too caught up trying to survive.::

::War does that,:: she sighed softly with regret for the truth of it. ::What else did you learn about it?::

::He's going to stay up here until his paint is stripped completely off, and he'll remain bare metal until his grief subsides and he feels ready to move on,:: Wing watched the Seekers finish their climb and begin their long flight circling the city. ::Once he reaches that point he'll repaint in his new colors and symbols. He hasn't given any indications that he wants to change his designation, but now would be the time to do it.::

::Have any of your gestalt indicated a designation change is desired?:: she asked.

::No, but I think Jazz might depending upon what kind of entertainer he becomes. Deadlock has a history of it with major changes, but he's never changed it on his own. Someone else gave him a new
one. I don't know about Prowl, but I don't intend to do so.:: Wing answered. ::It might depend on how well they adapt and what everyone winds up doing in the future.::

::He may also use a stage designation instead of a formal change. It is common among that group,:: she agreed.

::I've got the impression he's used to switching designations with his SpecOps work, so that might be something he'd consider doing.:: Wing agreed even as he ran a scan of the surrounding area. ::No intruders so far. Not that I expect any given what Aurora and Thundercracker have said about mourning flights, but no one really expected the last attempt to provoke him.::

::All things considered he reacted very well to that assault. He could have and by wartime thinking he should have shredded them,:: she reminded her student. ::It says a lot about his temperament, will and desire to be a civilian that he did as little as he did. I don't expect any intruders either. It's one thing to buzz a perceived challenger in general airspace. It's quite another to interrupt a funeral for it.::

::I don't think the Peacekeepers or the civilians Seekers would be as forgiving of the attacker if someone actually did that,:: Wing agreed. ::I think they're getting off too easily, but they didn't hurt him so I guess it makes sense to leave it primarily with the humiliation of having completely lost 3-to-1 odds even if it was three civilians against a warframe. They didn't even make him really disobey the rules. It's not like anybody'd thought about him causing an earthquake with his Sigma ability.::

::And he had no reason to know what it would do underground.:: she agreed as they fell silent and Wing returned to his musings about Seekers, grief, funerals and his unit in general.

There really was entirely too much to think about, like how much the overcharged taking had helped Deadlock and Jazz. He couldn't rightly comprehend how many friends and kin they'd each lost, never mind the function, culture, cities and everything else. Despite the changes of location and to the Order itself, Wing willingly admitted he had lost very little compared to most here. He hadn't had to leave kin or culture behind. The closest he'd come was when he'd left his creation stunt clan but that had happened so long ago he rarely thought of it, and there had been little love lost between them. No, he had truly had a sheltered life despite his long centuries, and the others had recognized it almost immediately. There was a reason Thundercracker had latched onto him as a fledgling. Not that it was a bad thing, honestly. It had surely helped him convince them to follow him here.

He watched the Seekers circle the city at an unhurried pace, though it was definitely fast enough to damage a finish. Wing could feel the grit scraping against his plating despite being above the main cloud. When he focused he could see the finish coming off Thundercracker in tiny dots and strips.

He didn't know if it was the act of feeling the paint being scraped away or being so focused on the flight that would trigger the release and help his flock mate grieve, but if it worked as well as getting overcharged had for Deadlock and Jazz the minor repaint he himself would need would be well worth it.

Idly Wing wondered how Prowl would choose to mourn. Would it be like Deadlock and Jazz? Or would he do it in a more private manner? Wing had very few friends who had been brought online the way Prowl had, and there were no Peacekeepers present who had been created the same way. There was no one to ask until the Praxian was brought back online. All he did know was that Prowl had originally come from a very insular culture and what Jazz had said about not having much social contact among the Autobots, presumably by choice.

As the first lap ended the Seekers shifted apart and it became clear that Thundercracker was alone. Everyone else flew with at least one other, most flew as a trine or double trine. When the other
civilians had settled into their paths Thundercracker engaged his afterburners and shot ahead of them.

::This might not be enough for him:: Marwir said quietly.

::What makes you say that?: Wing didn't take his attention off his flock mate.

::He's flying hard but he can't let it all go down here. There's no storm to challenge him and a ceiling holding his gift in check:: she explained.

::If it isn't then I will take him to the surface during a sandstorm and let him fly with or without permission. I'll pay the penance if it means he can finally have some peace:: Wing said determinedly, knowing he was admitting that he would break the rules if necessary.

::I know, but give him a chance to say this isn't enough, and give Aurora and I time to argue it with Dai Atlas:: she didn't sound like she was pleading, though Wing knew she was.

::I will give him a chance if that happens, but I will do what is necessary if he neglects my flock's needs:: Wing agreed. ::Any of them::

::I would expect no less:: her tone was honestly fond of her troubled and troublesome student. ::You have always been loyal to your spark::

::And you have always helped guide me and keep me on the correct path:: Wing answered sincerely even as he focused on Thundercracker intently. The Seeker was flying fast and hard, taking turns at speeds no Seeker native to the city would dare to. He pulled off maneuvers that strained his frame, trying to make up for the calm air and lack of falling hazard.

Wing debated whether there was any way to add those components back into the flight, but he couldn't think of anything that the city leaders would tolerate since any falling hazards would damage the civilians below. There was also no way to make the howling winds Thundercracker obviously wanted. All he could do was hope what Thundercracker could do was enough and be ready in case it wasn't.

Thundercracker knew he would never find the twisting updrafts and currents he'd always known until now, but he couldn't help subconsciously searching for as he flew through the relatively still cavern air. Still, he could make it work. Flying as fast as he could, taking sharp turns and loops that strained his frame and engines. This flight was more than he'd expected and he would not be ungrateful for it. It would have to be enough.

He'd passed every other Seeker in the air at least once by now, and none of the civilians showed signs of wanting to keep up with him. It was frustrating being the only one able and willing to push to that level. Climbing a bit higher and darting around a stalactite, he searched for that biting, colder layer of air to help fracture the already cracking paint. It wasn't to be found and his entire frame whined in distress.

That cascaded into having to acknowledge that he was all alone here.

No trine. No flock. No allies.

He felt his processor briefly glitch at the truth and caught himself by pulling up before he'd dropped more than half a mechamile.

He wasn't alone. They weren't mourning with him but he was not alone. His gestalt was there and would always be there. There were those who wanted to trine. He'd rebuild again just as he had
before.

Rebuilding a trine for the third time, and this time he didn't even have the luxury of already knowing and caring for one of them. Instead all he had to offer whoever might be interested in him was a flock of misfits mostly made up of a bunch of grounders who were also outsiders.

On top of trying to earn a new trine, he also had to try to adapt to a new flock. At least they had a little experience with warriors and those with non-traditional needs. He'd just have to manage. Be polite, be submissive, be everything he'd been trained his entire existence not to be.

His thrusters roared in frustration.

He was a leader damnit all and he'd never lead again.

Everything he'd been created and trained to be would never happen again. Maybe, just maybe if he scraped and bowed enough he could have a bit of authority over a bunch of mechlings and fledglings as a flight instructor. If he did what they wanted and more he might just get search and rescue certification and be obeyed then. His trine was likely to follow him except when he needed to be reined in.

He'd have to make due with what he could get. At least he'd never actually wanted to be among the ruling elite. He'd never aimed to be a Lord of Law. Even as a Flock Order he was middle management. He'd long assumed there would always would be those above him and there always had been. Even if for a while now it had mostly been Starscream. The bitter, twisted Vision that refused to be satisfied with his place and coveted more and more power. He couldn't even be certain anymore that Starscream would have kept to his promise and created with his trine after the war, if there was anything left after the war. Healthy eggs and hatchlings required resources. That wasn't going to happen for a long time after the fighting ended.

There were resources here though. An abundance he couldn't rightly remember the likes of. The mechlings he'd seen were all well fueled, with good frames and none of the markers of being denied during their growth.

How long would be it before it was his turn?

Wing had said they would be eventually expected to create, but from what he was seeing in his flight class and hearing from his new flock those opportunities were few and far between. Wing was not a true substitute for his own fledglings no matter what his coding currently seemed to have decided. At least it wasn't completely broken. In this place it was undoubtedly better to have overactive creation code than underactive.

He needed a trine first and on that he wondered whether grief or code would determine when he repainted. He couldn't imagine being ready to move on for vorns. In truth he never wanted to move on from his first trine. He loved Skywarp as an endura, but he loved his first trine as a perfect trine. How did one move on from something that good?

It would be unrealistic to expect to replicate such perfection, and impossible to expect to replace a conjunx such as Skywarp. Hopefully he would have a better relationship with this new trine then he did with Starscream. It would have to be. He couldn't take that level of stress again. He'd almost rather do without a trine than cope with another Starscream. He'd even take a trine of Seeki or Sierki over that no matter how humiliating it would be. They'd at least appreciate the honor of being trined even if it was with a low ranked Order. He was a full Seeker after all. He had something to offer such fliers.
No. No. No. He was not going to have to go there. Saamanjasy had said several mechlings were interested in him. That was why Gloaming had attacked him. Everyone in that class was a full Seeker. None of the Visions were like Starscream. He'd have a real trine. He'd have a sane trine. He'd love them in time. Create with them when it was time.

Proximity alarms went off and he responded to them without thinking, veering away from a stalactite with barely a wing's width to spare.

He'd be hearing about that from Wing if not Aurora. They'd surely see it as a suicide attempt he backed out of instead of the need for risk and G's that it really was.

Jazz would know the difference if he was watching since the saboteur knew how well he could fly in stressful conditions. This cavern was nothing compared to some of the combats they'd been in back on Cybertron. Even a full mourning flight over Vos was nothing compared to the longer and harder battles they'd faced. Only the Rite of the Storm Flight came close. Now that would be cleansing. That was what he so desperately wanted and not just for the challenge it presented. The violent thunderstorms called to his spark and were the cause of his designation more than his sigma ability.

There would be no more storms here in this static, underground cavern. Maybe Wing would someday help him reach the surface occasionally so he could feel that power again. It would destroy his finish, but he'd either take the punishment or perhaps someone in his new flock would be sympathetic and skilled enough to help him repaint. He was sure Jazz would offer to help him out if he needed it. Either way it would be worth it every so often.

He'd really have to look into the civilian punishment for going flying in the wind. It couldn't be worse than what he'd endured during the war. After all, Wing didn't seem to think the Knight's punishment was a concern and civilians seldom inflicted worse punishments than military mecha. It wasn't as if he'd feel the need that often, he was sure of that much. He'd make sure he could take any punishment without hardship to his trine before he went. He wasn't a half-bad tactician or planner in his own right even if it wasn't what he was used for.
Chapter Summary

Highdive contemplates the future as Thundercracker ends his underground mourning flight and asks for a storm. Wing, Jazz, Deadlock check on him, among others.
Deadlock is quietly freaked out by the bare metal.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Highdive watched from the roof of her flock's eyrie as the last of the grieving Seekers flew in circles around the huge cavern. He'd long since been stripped to bare metal and still flew like a crazed stunt frame. She knew some basics. He'd lost his city, flock and trine in coming here. Everyone knew that. He'd probably lost a lot more in surviving this long in a war. What she didn't know yet but knew she'd find out once he was repainted. She'd make sure he noticed her.

Despite the frame he was tolerant, calm, self-assured and articulate; all the things she liked in others. She'd been mildly concerned that he might be as prejudiced in his own way as Gloaming was, if not worse. The news that the gestalt was actually made up of non-Seekers was what made her originally think he might be different and oh, she'd been right. It didn't hurt that he was handsome and the most incredible flier she'd ever seen. She'd even tried flirting with him but he hadn't seemed to notice. Probably flirting was something different back when he was still doing it. She'd figure it out, even if she had to talk to Master Aurora to find out about him.

She need to talk to her flock leader about arranging a conversation with someone as powerful as Master Aurora. Originally she'd been concerned about taking the chance of exposing her interest to the entirety of her flock even if it meant she could get the courting process started faster. Now it wasn't a concern. The entire city knew she was interested, including Thundercracker. Which might make it easier. He'd be looking for her efforts with any kind of luck. Though she'd have to keep her wings very still for the next bit. Her age was no protection against the shame of flirting with someone who was mourning.

How long would be mourn? It'd be a while with all he'd surely lost. Some would expect her interest to fade if she had to wait too long, but she'd wait for him as long as was necessary. Thundercracker was something she'd never seen here; the Knights were close but they didn't have his edge.

"I thought you might be up here," the deep voice of her flock Order drew Highdive from her musings. "Has he showed any sign of coming down?"

"No, he hasn't shown any signs of stopping anytime soon," Highdive admitted, keeping the quiet respect muted in her field. "I can't imagine what he's gone through, Nightflight."

"I'm not sure any of us can," he sat down next to her. "Why have you fixated on him?"

"He's lost so much and he's not just giving up. You haven't seen him in our classes; he's obviously far above us in skill but still attentively following instructions. He's actually trying to fit in here." Highdive admitted flickering her wings briefly.
"That is good to hear," he smiled slightly. "What else do you know about him?"

"He uses adoptive creator markers when referring to Master Aurora, she doesn't object, and he's currently living with the Knights," Highdive started ticking off what little she actually knew. "He's an extremely skilled flier which you can see. He has called members of his gestalt his flock; they are mostly grounders along with an Aerial Knight. He's always accompanied by one of the Seeker Knights, though I don't know why. He doesn't need protection or help getting around."

"They're protecting us from him. He's not a citizen, not even a probationary one. Someone needs to keep an optic on him," Nightflight explained. "Will he be a Knight?"

Highdive dipped her wings, "I don't think so. He hasn't expressed any interest in that field from what I've heard. When someone asked he mentioned possibly becoming a flight instructor. He's certainly got the steady temper and authoritative nature necessary for it."

"A rare combination in my experience, especially for one grieving so much," he glanced towards the bare metal Seeker flying hard on his third orn in the air. "What happens if he rejects you? Someone that old is likely to have a solid idea of what he wants in his trine."

"It will depend upon why he rejects me. If he rejects me because he think I'm too immature I'll wait and try to convince him otherwise when I'm a little older. If we decide that we are not compatible, I'll try to find someone else but it will be difficult when comparing others to him," Highdive answered after some thought.

"I would hope it is not for immaturity given he all but has to trine with mechlings. You are extremely stable and mature for an Action your age," Nightflight said honestly. "Don't forget that if you are incompatible as trine you may still enjoy being lovers."

"I'll take him as a lover if that's all I can have, but I'd rather have more," Highdive admitted. "He's the only Order that's attracted my interest so far. I know I won't replace what he's lost, but I think I could help make his life here better."

Nightflight hummed thoughtfully and made a choice. "I met a few of his type before we left. They tend to be blunt, to the point and have little use for what we think of as flirting. They probably have their own version, but I didn't get close enough to find out. Do you know who's flock he'll be in?"

"I think he'll be in Master Aurora's creation flock," Highdive said with a small bit of uncertainty. "If not her flock then certainly her Order's flock." She didn't mention that he seemed to count his gestalt as a flock. They weren't local so they wouldn't be who he answered to.

"A good choice. Beyond connections they no doubt know how to handle odd members," he hummed. "They're well placed. A step up for you if you trine with him."

"It's a good thing I'm not interested in politics because I imagine he's not going to be allowed to a flock Order no matter how suited he actually is for the position. Too many distrust him because of his past and others because of his connections to non-Seekers," Highdive grumbled, mostly for Thundercracker's benefit.

"Not for a very, very long time at least," Nightflight agreed. "In time most will stop seeing a warframe and just see a heavy frame. Much will depend on how much he has been a leader of coincidence and how much he honestly desires the authority. This is an opportunity for him to change anything and everything about himself and his future."

"We'll see what he wants to become," Highdive agreed. "I'd like the chance to help him and the
others fit in here. From what little I've heard they have a lot of potential."

"No doubt. They will also have a lot of trauma and issues," Nightflight told her seriously. "No one survives that long in war without having problems. To be honest I'd have far more reservations about him if Gloaming hadn't pulled that stunt. It showed just what kind of temperament Thundercracker really has when pressed. I'm still somewhat surprised he didn't tear them to shreds."

"I guess he didn't see Gloaming as the threat the fool thought he was," Highdive said with a small wing flip. "He must have looked like an amateur to someone with Thundercracker's experience."

Nightflight chuckled. "No doubt." He paused, then tensed for take-off as Thundercracker's flight suddenly dropped a quarter mechamile and became wobbly.

"Not good," Highdive was on her pedes, thrusters warming when Nightflight put a hand on her wing.

"His guard's big enough and ready," he told her softly. "It isn't out right yet to come that close."

"Oh. Right," she mumbled and worked to stand down, watching sharply as Thundercracker's form steadied enough to be in control again and angled towards the Citadel with a big flight frame keeping close enough to catch him if he didn't make it.

Distantly he knew he should be far more concerned by almost blacking out and how unsteady his flight was. Knew it and couldn't place why. His HUD was full of red warnings of every priority except an impending crash. All he dared focus on was the target locked path to his eyrie. He needed to get there before he ran out of fuel completely. Hopefully everyone else would realize to keep clear because there was no way he could avoid running into anyone. It was difficult to keep track of his surroundings, and the eyrie jumped closer every time he managed to refocus his attention on it.

Even though the landing pad was blessedly clear it was going to be difficult to even attempt a smooth landing. Hopefully he wouldn't crash.

Scratch that.

Hopefully he'd manage to transform. Pedes and hands made a rough landing like this go better.

Come on. Transform.

Transform.

That's it. Pedes down. Braking far more controlled. Hands and optics. And waiting for him was Aurora, Tornado and his full flock.

Even as he stumbled to a stop Wing was moving forward to try and catch him. Such a small fledgling trying to hold up so much weight; he'd stagger under the load. Deadlock would be better able to support him, but the grounder was staring like he'd never seen a Seeker before. Tornado moved next, the large Order taking the weight that Wing couldn't and breaking the rest of Thundercracker's stumbling landing.

"You look like you're seeing a ghost," Jazz nudged at Deadlock and easily dodged the reflexive retaliatory swipe.

"Just looks creepy," the warrior grunted.
"On your berth," Tornado said as he guided the nearly unconscious Seeker to it.

"Try to drink," Aurora was there when they had Thundercracker half upright. He took the cube and drank, automatic systems guiding him more than thought.

"One pit of a way to mourn," Jazz said quietly as Tornado backed off and let Aurora and Wing fuss over Thundercracker.

"It is, and he's taken it to an extreme. I wouldn't be surprised to see him need another round given what he's lost," Tornado nodded.

"We've all lost a lot during this war but Prowl's the one who's lost closest to what Thundercracker has," Jazz agreed.

"Creepy way to mourn, making yourself look like a walking corpse," Deadlock said with a small shudder.

"Trying to purge some of the grief so he can make a fresh start," Jazz said with a bit of speculation.

"That is what mourning is for. Being bare metal is a public showing of your state. The social rules change for those visibly grieving," Tornado explained a bit more. "It's cultural."

"Something I probably won't ever get," Deadlock said with a small shrug even as he kept glancing at Thundercracker. He couldn't imagine doing that to himself, even for Gasket.

"Everyone grieves differently. At least this means Thundercracker moved on to a state where he was willing to mourn; he's willing to acknowledge the grief and try to move on. Wing and I were getting worried about him during the trip," Jazz agreed.

"Yes, everyone, every culture, grieves differently," Tornado agreed. "You have drinking and reminiscing. Seekers show it on our frame. Knights retreat into solitude for bindings and meditation. Praxians paint themselves."

"Polyhexians used to have parties and sing songs for the departed. Axiom Nexus sold special jewelry to wear as a sign of mourning. Some of the older parts of Nyon refused to say the designation of the deceased for five vorns after deactivation; they claimed to do otherwise would attract ghosts," Jazz added, recalling some of the odder traits some of his agents had mentioned in the past.

"Some ghosts hang around a lot longer," Deadlock muttered. "In the gutters you stripped and drained those you cared about fully. Made sure what they left went to those close to them."

"How's it different from what happened to a random frame?" Jazz looked at him as they all relaxed at the gradually improving position of Thundercracker's wings.

"The reason," Deadlock shrugged.

"It could be argued in that case that the departed are continuing to take care of the living in the only way possible," Tornado offered speculatively as he watched Wing continue to fuss over Thundercracker. Despite the mourning Seeker's bare metal, he was definitely doing better.

"That's the idea," Deadlock grunted, then stalked towards Thundercracker. "So, you survived. What now?"

"Now I recover enough to fly and go up again," he answered with weariness in every line of his being.
"Again?" Deadlock said staring at him even as he saw the other Seekers seem resigned to Thundercracker's statement. "You going to strip all your plating off as well?"

"Not even the height of summer storms can do that," Thundercracker snorted. "I'll keep going until I can contemplate trining again. Not just say it."

Wing shot Aurora a look and she nodded.

"I will speak to Dai Atlas about turning you loose in a proper storm," she told him, earning a flicker of surprise, then deep gratitude.

"Storm season for the southern hemisphere isn't too far away, and the sand they always churn up will make it more challenging to fly," Wing offered, understanding a little bit more of what Thundercracker seemed to need from their earlier discussions about the mourning flights. "There's access down there through some of the caverns but anyone in space who managed to spot you flying would have difficulty finding the city since it's not anywhere near the main city entrances."

"That sounds tactically sound and a good flight," Thundercracker nuzzled Wing and drew him a bit closer.

"It does," Aurora smiled at the suggestion. "This will take a few orns to arrange, more than something in the cavern."

"Thank you. I can wait. Doing this right is more important than doing it quickly," Thundercracker assured her. "The formalities are done. No one will question whether I am in mourning or not."

"Even completely clueless grounders will know something is up with you," Deadlock agreed, still staring at Thundercracker's stripped finish. He hadn't seen the Seeker this worn out ever; no Decepticon would have appeared in public this drained and worn out. They weren't in public though. This was Thundercracker's quarters. Surely he wouldn't leave until he'd recharged and fueled fully.

"So what rules change for you, like this?" Jazz finally asked.

"No one will try to get closer to me. No flirting, no effort to trine, no propositions, not that I've had any yet anyway. If you could afford it and worked for a good employer, you didn't have duties. It's a time when you're given more leeway about lashing out and minor misbehavior than even a mechling," Thundercracker tried to remember all the details over the demands of his frame to recharge.

"All right, you both know he's landed and is safe," Aurora began to shoo Jazz and Deadlock towards the door to the lower Citadel. "He needs to recharge."

"Wing will let us know if you need anything," Jazz said pointedly as the pair started out to meet Kimark and Dart. They would all be keeping an optic on him during this vulnerable time.

Chapter End Notes

Question for readers: In the ch 1 outline thing, do you want all the not-going-to-be-written scenes in the outline shown? Things like TC's flight classes count, Jazz going on a job, Wing going back to punishment shifts after a short break and testing cycles that take many orns. Writer's notes, basically.
Thundercracker manages to intentionally send Wing a signal via their bond. Wing meets with his close allies (Marwir, Thorn, Atl, Demeter) and Redline to discuss his plan for watching his priorities and code influence.

As the sound of the other Knights voices trailed off, Wing suppressed a sigh and refocused on the window he was carefully scrubbing. Climbing and flying around this high up in the rafters was a duty normally reserved for the fliers, and it was a duty Wing was well used to given his penchant for pranks. Still, it was a lonely task far removed from others, and he had another three rooms to clean before he started on his next set of chores. He knew that was part of the point as well. He'd abandoned his duties. Being alone was part of the punishment because he was so social. It wasn't just grunt work, as many younger Knights believed. Even in punishment chores there was a rhyme, reason and lesson being imparted if one was willing to learn it.

Wing knew the lesson. He just wasn't willing to take it to spark yet. Given his age and function within the Order, he likely never would. It was just how things were.

Once he was finished removing the dust and clinging bits of debris that'd been kicked up since the last cleaning detail, Wing swapped the scrubber for a drying cloth and set out to polish it to a shine. Most grounder Knights wouldn't even notice the small panel high above them, and the majority of fliers would pay little attention to it. Still, it was a part of the Citadel and served a purpose just like all the Knights did. When one part was neglected everyone ultimately suffered.

That was a lesson he'd taken to spark and put into everything he did, from his duty as the voice of opposition to his pranks to cleaning detail to the real punishment that was working the sewers to the one duty he really, honestly despised: monitor duty. He could work through drudgery without complaint. He could manage confined spaces and stench with limited complaint. But being forced to sit still and focus on a couple screens and controls for a shift was absolute torture. One that only the question of his security clearance was saving him from a lot of right now.

He'd take cleaning, even cleaning the sewers, over monitory duty any day.

Once his situation was resolved he knew he'd be spending many long shifts in front of those hated monitors. It was one of the few things Dai Atlas knew for certain was an actual punishment for the Aerial.

Sometimes Wing was sure the Sovereign took a kind of perversely enjoyment in torturing his Daoshi so effectively. Sometimes he saw how much it hurt his Initiate to have to punish him. Either way, Wing didn't enjoy it, though he accepted it as his due for his actions. He'd never been unjustly punished by any Sovereign.

Privately, he sometimes wondered if his role as the Voice of Dissent gave others the impression that he escaped some of the harsher punishments others might receive for speaking out or sneaking around. If he did, which he doubted, he more than made up for any perceived bit of favoritism in
sheer volume of punishments for his actions. He knew Dai Atlas and the other Masters prided themselves on being fair, but they also understood his role in the Order and allowed him to fulfill that function. It was all to maintain the balance and keep the Knights functioning at their best.

With a careful look around, he deemed the rafters clean and smoothly dropped to the floor to head for the next room. As he walked he felt a nudge, uncertain and careful, somewhere in his spark and code. He slowed and pondered that hesitant connection as he entered the next room. He'd never experienced a bond the way Thundercracker had, and he wasn't certain it was something he should follow right now in the middle of his duties. Curiosity won out, and he paused before climbing back up into the rafters and focused his attention on this tentative touch.

His reply earned a more steady pulse, now thick with excitement and triumph, and his comm pinged. Answering the comm wasn't really appropriate during punishment, but if there were changes going on in their gestalt link he would need to report them to Redline and Marwir. Those two would want as much accurate information as possible, and he could take the extra shift of cleaning duty. Even if it was in the sewer. ::Yes?::

::You felt that, and replied?:: Thundercracker's excitement was palpable even over the comm.

::Yes, I did. Have the others felt it too or is our connection stronger?:: He wasn't certain if Thundercracker had bothered checking on the grounders in their flock yet, but he was curious about the gestalt link's development. Wing just wasn't curious enough to try it himself while on punishment detail. Not yet anyway.

::I was trying to reach just you. I know it can be done in trine bonds and true spark bonds; I wanted to see if it could be done here or at least worked towards. You felt it and the others didn't,:: Thundercracker explained excitedly. ::I'll let you go before you get in trouble, though Aurora knows I tried,:: the said before the line closed.

At least Thundercracker had cleared the experiment with Aurora before trying; that meant he shouldn't get into too much trouble for answering. It also meant he needed to seriously contemplate all the ramifications before finalizing his claim to Deadlock as an Initiate. He wanted to train the warrior into the Knight he knew Deadlock could be come, but could he be an effective Daoshi when he would be that closely connected to his Initiate? So much would depend on how much of this increased connection was from time and how much was because they had tried to make contact.

If effort was required, he could do that. He was more than disciplined enough to keep from broadcasting under normal conditions, and he knew Deadlock was too. At least once he understood why he wanted the discipline. If this connection continued to grow stronger over time, then it could be a problem, especially if thoughts and emotions began to spill over to gestalt mates during bindings. Wing reminded himself that there were trines and mates who managed to keep their connections closed during such important times. He'd helped train half of such a pair and there were several Seekers among the Knights who truly needed to keep their bonds blocked.

He put it all away for later consideration and stepped into his next room and flew up to the rafters to continue his chores.

Wing relaxed in Marwir's quarters with her, Atl and Thorn, enjoying a single cube of high grade for the evening. They chatted of random things, tidbits of the last twenty vorns that he'd missed and reminders of good times and good humor as they waited for Demeter and Redline to arrive. As much as Wing enjoyed spending time with his gestalt, these were the mecha that knew him best. He'd missed all of them for different reasons while he was enslaved, and it felt good to relax and spend time with them without the others present.
Once Redline and Demeter arrived, Wing politely offered them a cube of high grade and let them settle. After they were all seated, he shifted gears and put on a more serious expression. "I asked all of you here tonight because I need your help."

"Always," Marwir said with a soft firmness that would surprise those that didn't know her well.

"You know we'll help," Thorn agreed seriously while the others nodded.

"What do you need?" Atl asked.

Wing vented briefly before continuing, "I've been using the bindings to explore the ramifications of my journey, for me, my gestalt and the Knights. My latest binding made me realize that, due to the new coding, my loyalties and perceptions may be altering. Sometimes I can recognize the changes happening to the others in the gestalt, but other times I have to think to notice the differences. For example, in the beginning Thundercracker could barely tolerate touching the grounders; now he considers them his flock although his connection is still strongest to me."

"You wish us to watch for changes you don't notice," Demeter made the connection first.

"Of course. I will always be your Daoshi," Marwir reached out to grip his arm in confirmation.

"And we are your friends," Atl agreed. "What do you wish us to do, if we see a change?"

"If it is something that appears trivial, let me know but make certain that all of you are aware of the change. If it is something that is going to impact my service to the Order, you need to discuss it among yourselves. If you all believe it is a serious enough change, force me to go to Redline for an examination," Wing paused and then continued to voice his concerns. "Especially if I am showing signs of placing my gestalt above my oath to the Knights. I don't know how much influence this gestalt coding has over me. I'm trusting Challenger of Ways to guide me through this situation as it develops since the coding cannot affect it. It approved of my bringing them here to the city."

Glancing over at Redline, he continued, "Thundercracker can already send pulses of feelings to me through the gestalt bond and he can feel it when I tried to reply the same way; he tested it earlier today with Aurora's permission. I haven't tried with Jazz and Deadlock yet."

"I can't say I'm surprised it's possible. I am a bit surprised you already can," Redline hummed. "What little I have and your gestalt mates have told me indicates the oldest of gestalt bonds are functionally spark bonds, or perhaps that older gestalts have spark bonded by virtue of various mergings."

"We'll watch out for you," Marwir promised for them all. "Your nature will make it tricky on occasion, but I believe between us we can tell when you are being contrary and when you are off the path."

Wing nodded in thanks for their quick understanding and agreement. "I'm assuming once we resume merging into Flightplan the connections between us will grow even stronger. I've only spark merged once with Prowl during interface, and Thundercracker doesn't interface with any of us. The only time we're all connected that deeply is through him."

"What is it like, being joined like that?" Redline asked with open fascination that was only partly from his medical need to know.

"It's not quite like a spark merge or a hardline connection, although a combination of the two is probably the closest examples I can give you. When we're merged we're still interacting as individuals and keep our own identities. We can detect each other's emotions fairly clearly; that's how I found out Deadlock's terror of heights was much more than a normal grounder's reactions."
Wing thought for a klik and then continued, "Then you have to bring Flightplan into the equation because we're also interacting with him at the same time. He's a very young mech who is destined to have extremely limited experiences given his nature and the reality of his situation as a gestalt. He trusts us to help him understand the world, but he is mostly in charge of the frame when we're merged."

"So if we spoke to the merged gestalt, we're talking to Flightplan, not any of you?" Marwir wanted to be very sure. "How much control do you still have. Say to force it to break up?"

Wing thought hard for a moment before answering, "I'm not certain, but I think you're primarily talking to Flightplan. The scientists usually talked at him not with him, and he listened to us for guidance on how to interact with them. He's never interacted with anyone else so I don't know quite how it would work if you tried to talk to me while we were merged. Thundercracker and Jazz would have more information since they've dealt with other gestalts based on this coding. As for breaking apart I believe we can. Deadlock almost forced us to break apart the first time we went skyward, so at least for right now it should be possible even without all five of us cooperating."

"A good thing to know if it needs to happen," Marwir nodded. "I expect at some point merging like that will be permitted. There is no reason not to trust the merged gestalt once we trust all the components."

"I'd like him to be able to experience more," Wing smiled softly. "I think you'd like him. Flightplan is so anxious to please and learn. We're hoping he can find something useful to do; none of us want him to experience war or be forced to fight."

"Sounds like the average newly sparked mecha," Marwir smiled slightly. "He'll mature into an actual personality in time."

"I expect it will be heavily influenced by the five of you, since you are in his processors so much," Redline hummed thoughtfully. "So he's likely to mature quickly, if you count his actual time aware, but slowly if you count in our time aware. Do you have any thoughts for what he might be useful for?"

"Search and Rescue seems like a good fit given the skills the five of us possess," Wing said immediately. "We could explore other caverns when we decide to expand, and construction is always an option although it's not really to any of our individual tastes. We're also a good line of defense if someone does ever attack the city."

"If nothing else the mass and reach would be effective in emergencies of many kinds," Redline agreed. "Maybe not a function, but certainly an asset to the city. Did you have any other concerns?"

"Not at the moment, although I'm certain something will come up later. This is a new experience for us all," Wing said then grinned at everyone. "So, let's just relax and enjoy a pleasant evening together."
Wing tried to suppress a grimace as he mentally prepared for yet another binding. It was a good thing that Thundercracker had once again gone into stasis for the coming event. Although many of the previous ones had helped him internally address issues which would help him stabilize and reaffirm his relationship with the Order, he knew this latest binding was probably going to be hard one. Nothing that forced him to focus on his guilt was going to be easy. They were good for him, but they were never pleasant or easy.

Even so, as he knelt and hooked his forearms behind Challenger of Ways, he was looking forward to having resolution to some of his feelings from the last few vorns.

He still sometimes felt at fault for the predicament they were all in being a gestalt. If he hadn't identified them as Cybertronian for his former master, the four of them probably wouldn't have been picked up for the program. They might still have been slaves, but he had no doubt that Jazz at least would have eventually found his way to freedom and Deadlock seemed to rather enjoy being a gladiator. Yet if he hadn't, Prowl might never had been repaired and Thundercracker would likely have eventually been extinguished as a living target. If he hadn't, none of them would have ever escaped the war.

What he was less sure of was how much any of them had really wanted to escape the war. Sure, they were all determined to make the best of it here, but Deadlock, Jazz and Prowl all had strong reservations of belonging here whether they'd admit to them or not. Thundercracker might not be sure he could, but he wanted it. But did Thundercracker want to be here simply because he'd lost his trine to the gestalt link? If he still had Starscream and Skywarp back on Cybertron waiting for him Wing didn't have any doubt what the Order would have done once he escaped. Wing was at least partly responsible for the destruction of that trine and with it the end of Starscream's reign as Winglord, likely forcing the proud Seeker into an existence that was as much slavery to him as what they'd suffered on Kessai.

With a trine bond linking them Starscream wasn't likely to escape his Order either unless Skywarp broke further with tradition and helped him, but where would the two of them go as a fragmented trine? Even if another Order like Thundercracker existed on Cybertron, every Seeker had to now know Starscream's true status. The creator coding must be the main reason Thundercracker could be so affectionate towards him after all the trouble he'd helped cause the Seekers back on Cybertron.
Of all the remaining Seekers, why did it have to be one that had a real trine and the only trine that was hiding something so important? He liked Thundercracker well enough, he was glad the Seeker honestly wanted out of the war, but the damage left in the wake of this was huge.

Yet so were the losses of Jazz and Prowl. They just weren't intimate losses. The loss of Jazz and Prowl cost the Autobots, but it wasn't the destruction of a mate's life. It wasn't the same.

Or was that because they were grounders that Wing didn't think of their pain as the same? He knew Prowl could recite every mecha who extinguished do to his orders. Did he really think that little of grounders that the deaths and devastation caused to the Autobots by the loss of their two senior officers didn't matter as much to him as a pair of Seekers he'd never met? He'd spent most of his life among the many frame-types in the Knights. It was true most of the Knights were fliers, but he'd always assumed that had to do with the remoteness of the Citadel. Nothing in the code or culture he could think of valued flight over any other trait. None of the code or laws gave preference to fliers, or to grounders for that matter. He knew with few exceptions the Great Swords didn't care what frame a spark wore; Challenger of Ways definitely didn't. It had been happy with fliers, grounders, beast-formers, even a deep-space shuttle once and an aquatic in the distant past. Now it was content as part of a gestalt as well.

He couldn't really blame where he'd matured, as that had been among the Knights. Surely any prejudice he'd had from those handful of vorns he'd been in the stunt troop that had commissioned him couldn't have stuck through all of his training and experience as a Knight of Light.

It couldn't be the gestalt coding could it? After all he was linked to three grounders and a Seeker. Or was it that his connection with Thundercracker was stronger than it was with the others? The two of them were already able to send emotions to one another, and he hadn't managed to do that with Jazz or Deadlock yet. Of course, Thundercracker had more experience with bonds than any of them. He also had always blatantly preferred Wing's company. Was his link with Thundercracker influencing his opinions of grounders? That didn't seem like a good explanation since Thundercracker had been growing closer to Jazz by the end of the journey. Still, what other reason could there be? Or had he always been this biased and not realized it?

It wasn't as if it altered his actions, but he had rarely taken a grounder on as an Initiate before Deadlock, and that wasn't a sure thing now that he wasn't the only Knight available. Yet he was close with many grounders among the Knights. Lovers with them.

Maybe it wasn't about grounder vs. flier at all, but some residual issue with the Autobots for allowing the war to begin in the first place. He didn't actually think of Deadlock in the same way as he thought of Jazz and Prowl, despite Prowl all but asking to be trained. That might be it, but why wouldn't he blame the Decepticons as much? They were the ones who attacked the Citadel. Was it because of how Dai Atlas, Axe and other Knights had been treated by the previous Primes and Senate? Jazz admitted to being ISO under several Primes so he had to know of the crimes and cruelties perpetuated by those in power. But the former Decepticons admitted to destroying Praxus, a neutral city, and slaughtering every living thing inside no matter age, function or eve race. Was he excusing them because of past abuses? Wing didn't think so but wasn't certain anymore.

The favoritism he'd shown between his two potential students might not even have anything to do with factions. He knew the berserker wouldn't fit in any other place in the city, so getting him to commit to the Knights was important. Wing had also know fairly early on in their trip that Prowl would most likely have to be reformatted, so there wasn't much incentive to make plans with the former Enforcer beyond what was required to keep him ignorant of their real destination.

He nudged at something that rested between spark and processors. Not quite a thought. Not exactly
an emotion. Certainly not a memory. Possibly something of all three.

Survivor.

Thrown away.

Rejected.

Unsuitable.

Passionate.

Tenacious.

The bubble whispered all that and more while Wing made the connections that every glyph was used to describe both himself and Deadlock in equal measure. It had hit uncomfortably close to spark every time Deadlock snarled that he wouldn't have been allowed on the shuttles even if he'd wanted to go with them. Was Deadlock what he might have been if he hadn't found the Knights? Was that why he had latched on so firmly to the idea of the warrior following in his wake?

It wasn't as if he had any need to a legacy, not with his own place in history already and having trained a Sovereign. Short of becoming political himself it was one of the highest achievements a Knight could hope for. No, his response to Deadlock wasn't about a successor in any sense, but in seeing what could be and wanting to lift what he might have become to what he was. It was personal on a level no other Initiate drew from him, even those who shared a similar story of being abandoned. Deadlock was so much like him. It was painful to see him think so little of himself when Wing knew better.

They'd both been deprived of so much when they were just starting out. Deadlock wouldn't say how he came to be on the streets, but from listening to him, it was clear he'd lost someone extremely important when he'd lost Gasket. Wing had the shelter of the Citadel from an early age, but had he ever really had someone who viewed him as that important? The stunt team he'd been created for hadn't valued him at all; they'd proven that early on. Knights will defend each other, but this was a civilian protecting another civilian. There was no obligation there, not a legal one at least.

Gasket must have been special then, to take in ... whatever his designation had been before he'd been designated Deadlock by Megatron ... and then die protecting him. He really should try to get Deadlock to speak about that a bit more. Get the full story. There was no question there would be some intense bindings on it in Deadlock's near future.

There sure had been for Wing, dealing with his abandonment by the stunt clan.

That abandonment had a harsh blow when he was young, but it paled in comparison to what Deadlock had endured. Almost all of Deadlock's history was of loss, pain and betrayal. The bindings were going to be intense and possibly dangerous as the former Decepticon faced his past and everything that had happened in it.

The fact that it had taken nine bindings for him to realize something that should have been obvious early on was troubling. Actually if he was seeing too much of himself in his flock mate it might be better if he stepped aside and let someone else be Deadlock's Daoshi. Kimark would be a good choice. The seasoned warrior was fully capable of controlling the aggressive grounder, and Deadlock seemed to tolerate and even enjoy the company of his fellow berserker. Axe would be excellent too, given who he was bonded to and how many warriors he'd shepparded to maturity in the army and in the Knights. Marwir got the toughest cases in the Citadel. There were many who
would do right by Deadlock and bring out the best in him.

He didn't want to though. He really, really didn't want to give Deadlock up. It wasn't even his choice, Deadlock and the Sovereign had that call, yet he was invested as much as any who'd taken the oaths with him.

Why could he be so set on this one?

Was it because of the gestalt coding binding them closer together or was that too simple an explanation? He couldn't just blame everything on it without good cause. Maybe this attachment started because he had subconsciously seen himself in Deadlock. It might have been because he could see the warrior as another outside voice shaking up the complacency in the Knights.

He'd never even asked Deadlock if he wanted another teacher, or asked him at all when he had a real choice. He really should have done that. He should have been much more clear what options Deadlock had for training.

Should have.

There'd been a lot of those lately. He should have been more careful. He should have come home sooner. He should have escaped slavery long ago. He should have....

Should have.

He shouldn't think of such things after it was settled, so it wasn't settled.

He hadn't accepted it yet.

He couldn't accept that his actions had helped lead to this strange chain of events. He was trying to take responsibility for his actions, especially since the others were all depending on him to help them integrate into this society. Thundercracker and Jazz would manage; they were both capable of at least faking social behavior. Prowl wouldn't have to at the rate things were going; his integration would begin as soon as he was reformatted. That brought his attention back to the current problem on hand; Deadlock.

Wing had heard other Knights say that thinking about what might have been only led to indecision and depression, but he'd never realized just how strong those chains of thoughts really could be. He couldn't help pondering what Deadlock would have been like if he'd had the kind of chances Wing had been given. It was a pointless diversion from what needed to be done. No amount of thought could change the past. The past was done. One could only learn from it.

What was to learn from Deadlock's potential futures if things had been different for him?

Nothing. It was time to focus on helping him now that Deadlock had options and opportunities. Even if that help meant explaining that he had the option of accepting another as his Daoshi.

But Deadlock was his student....

Wing's thoughts came to a screeching halt as that glyph froze in his meta.

His.

Possessive in a way he was with nothing naturally. It had to be the gestalt coding. That was what had changed.
So how to fix this, or did it need to be fixed? Deadlock didn't seem to object. Deadlock did deserve a choice though. Wing had to tell him that it was Deadlock's choice of who to train him of those who offered.

He didn't have to like it, but he did have to say it.

If the coding was having this much influence on him, there was no telling how much influence it was having on the others. Would Deadlock have even wanted to join the Knights without its influence?

Was Flightplan's subconscious presence the source of this urge for his components to become closer? It was a bit of a crazy thought given how eager to please them the young the gestalt was, but Wing had no real understanding of just how all this coding worked. He could easily see the advantages, almost the need, to have components agreeable to each other even if they didn't form a tight bond. Yet what was done was done and he had to admit that things would be a lot worse if the coding didn't make them want to get along. Pragmatic base coding helped too.

He really should feel worse about what the coding was doing to his gestalt mates, yet the changes didn't seem to cause more harm than good. Or was he just seeing them as good changes because he was affected as well? Would Starscream and Skywarp approve of what was happening to Thundercracker if they could somehow contact him again? He'd like to think that at least Skywarp would eventually understand and approve of Thundercracker's current attitude; everything he'd heard implied Starscream was the most volatile of the trio.

The trip, all the time after the trine bond broke, certainly hadn't been easy for Thundercracker. The pragmatic Seeker was making the best of it, but could this really be better than being home with his trine?

Why was he still thinking of this? It was done and gone. It didn't matter if it was what they might have wanted with no limits, but what reality had that?

None. At least this reality would be less painful for the four of them now. Yes, Deadlock and Jazz would have to learn to live a less lethal existence, but they wouldn't want for energon anymore. These limits wouldn't hurt them as much as the war back on Cybertron did.

The same war that had stripped these four of any chance at a normal existence and caused the Knights to chose to go into exile. Had they abandoned their duty by fleeing Cybertron?

Legally, he knew they had, and they did as well. Legally if any of the three officers returned to Cybertron they were deserters at best, traitors at worst. None were kidding when they said that returning home wasn't an option. But legal didn't touch on morally, which he didn't think was true. None of them had betrayed any secrets, nor did they plan to.

Wing would argue with anyone that morally their flock had done nothing against their oaths, but legally none of them could return to Cybertron and expect anything other than prison or even possibly execution. It was pointless for him to keep dwelling on what could have been for the others.

So why was he?

Guilt.

Well, he knew that before the binding started. This was orange, so of course he was facing his guilt. Yet ... what was he really feeling guilty for? He felt guilty about so many things, most of which he had no cause to feel that way. Somewhere in there was something he was ashamed of and deserved to be. Feeling guilty about what the others had lost back on Cybertron was pointless, and he needed
to put that aside so he could help them focus on fitting into the city. He'd promised them a good future here, and he would keep that promise.

Not telling Deadlock that he had the option for another Daoshi was an error he would correct. Even though giving him the option to chose another felt wrong to this new coding, it was the right thing to do. There was no saying that he would, even though he could, and there was the small matter of Dai Atlas not yet being convinced that it was a good idea for Wing to train Deadlock.

All that was fairly old though, things he'd been struggling with for a time already. What wasn't he thinking of? What was he avoiding?

A whisper brought an image of Prowl to mind, a small smile of his face, a warmth in his field and one of Wing's short swords in his hand.

Despite the others claiming him to be cold and practical by nature, Prowl had been openly friendly with Wing. He'd even trusted the Aerial enough to bare his protoform and his spark while interfacing. The same peaceful, powerful spark that had welcomed his presence during that one merge they'd shared. In many ways Prowl reminded him of many of the other Knights, especially the dedication to duty that the former Enforcer possessed and the desire to do right by those he served and who served him.

So why did he think so little of the Praxian? The long time in stasis was surely part of it.

A bubble of intensity closed his throat and wrenched a cry from him as much of his awareness tried to shove that thought away. He was no match for the binding and it would not go. He had to face Prowl, locked in stasis, choices taken from him on a level that none of the others had suffered. Given the restrictive Enforcer coding he'd possessed since he came online, Prowl had never had the luxury of making choices like Wing and the others. Despite that restrictive coding demanding he return to Cybertron despite knowing the futility, Prowl had managed to give his own version of approval by allowing them to plot around him and even place him in stasis. Prowl was trusting them to make the right choices for him.

It wasn't right not to think of him more. Everyone else had a voice. Prowl was relying on them, on Wing to be his voice.

It was a duty Wing had all but completely ignored in favor of worrying about Deadlock and Thundercracker. Here he was worried about the Seeker who was already integrating into his own frame type and the warrior who was finding companionship and sparring partners. Prowl was trapped in medical and hadn't even had the chance to adapt and bond with the others. Wing had been something of an outsider before the long journey, but Prowl would be even more out of step with the others in the gestalt once he was reformatted.

He had to focus on Prowl once he was out of stasis. No matter what he thought of spending time with Thundercracker or training Deadlock, or even hanging out and making sure Jazz was doing okay, Prowl had to be his priority until he was sure the Praxian was settled and at least content with his existence. He was certain Marwir would agree. It was what a Knight and a flock mate should do.
Chapter by gatekat

Chapter Summary

Wing proves his form is still good enough for his rank before the Masters, quite a few Knights and his gestalt.

Careful to keep his optics on his Daoshi as he entered the ring, Wing took a brief moment to check out the spectators surrounding the sparring ring. A number of Knights and Initiates were here to observe, and he spotted Atl and Talon standing close to Kimark, Dart and his gestalt. Deadlock had a bored look to him, but Wing was certain he was actually interested in the proceedings. The Masters stood with the Sovereign, all ready to critique his performance.

Marwir was relaxed, confident both in her skills and her place in this test. Truth be told, so was Wing in many ways, only he was definitely not looking forward to having his aft handed to him in front of his gestalt. The other Knights all knew the score and his standing. His gestalt, especially Deadlock, had never seen him challenged, much less watched as someone wiped the floor with him while his every fault in form and action critiqued by multiple mecha.

As Marwir moved into the first of the combat katas, things even a first-vorn Initiate should be able to do flawlessly, he wondered what Prowl would think of this display. Prowl would probably be closely watching every action as the two sparred, deciding what he should incorporate into his own fighting repertoire. Wing could imagine the tactician cataloging their skill levels with the intent to incorporate the data into his probabilities and scenarios. As he followed Marwir through the combat katas, he couldn't help thinking that Prowl would approve of and welcome the critiques if he were here on the sparring floor.

The silence from the Masters was welcome as he moved into the first aggressive katas. He knew he hadn't lost much skill; it didn't make the confirmation any less welcome. Now he just had to keep that silence coming until he'd completed the Initiate's katas. He should be able to keep them silent well into the advanced katas, but if he failed an Initiate kata he'd be back in training until he corrected his lost forms. He flowed through the first few katas easily, keeping part of his attention on his gestalt even as his frame followed the familiar patterns. Jazz seemed to be spending most of the time observing the other Knights. Deadlock still looked bored but he was paying closer attention now that Wing was in the more aggressive maneuvers. Thundercracker's unpainted wings were tense and high, but it was clear from Bladewing's stance that he wasn't stressed enough to be of concern.

A dozen more forms were moved through and Wing let out a small vent of tension as he passed the Initiate katas without critique. It was still early in the forms he knew flawlessly, but at least he wouldn't see remedial training. It really would have been humiliating to face that at his level. Deadlock would have never let him forget it.

Shifting up to the higher level katas took a bit more of Wing's focus as he worked to keep them flawless, but he was still familiar enough to be able to keep an optic on the others. Prowl would have found most of these katas contained familiar maneuvers, but he would mostly likely mirror the Knights and be paying close attention to Wing's actions. He would be the first in the gestalt to recognize when Wing did eventually begin to falter before a Master corrected him. Wing didn't even
bother trying to recognize the voice. He accepted it, filed it for later and didn’t let himself be
distracted. He was still getting through more katas than not without critique. He also knew it would
hold as they became ever more advanced and began to reach the handful that he hadn’t mastered yet.

For the first time Marwir barked at him to freeze and was given instant compliance. She broke the
practice form and became his instructor once more. He settled into the first stand of the form and
moved through it one step at a time, accepting corrections and repeating each action until he had it
perfect. He had mastered this one, though only by the barest of margins. Clearly the vorns without
practice had cost him, even if not as much as many likely expected.

Deadlock was watching the corrections to Wing’s form intently, seeming to note every interaction
between Daoshi and former Initiate. It was probably very different from what little training he’d had
before meeting Wing, and Wing hoped the lack of violence and belittlement would help Deadlock
accept corrections with some grace when he was finally on the sparring floor. He knew it wouldn’t
come at first, but the more he watched Knights train, the better the odds were he’d figure it out soon.

After Wing finally performed the kata perfectly, Marwir stepped back out of the instructor roll and
fell into a fighting stance. Wing prepared to put his best effort against his Daoshi. This was a fight
he wished Prowl could see even if he did ultimately lose against her. The Praxian would appreciate
the skills displayed more than any of the others probably would. It was enough of a thought that he’d
written himself a note to ping him when Prowl was up and about to arrange for it.

Just as any other real sparring match, the first moves were testing. Low level and at partial speed and
strength. They knew each other, knew strengths and weaknesses better than most, but it was simply
how it was done. That might well be one of the harder things for Deadlock to learn. There was an
order to things, even fighting. Sword rang against sword and Wing began to give himself over to his
instincts more than his active thought. It was a contest that would push him to his limits and beyond
before she disarmed and pinned him.

Marwir danced gracefully around him, her lighter form moving as quickly as Wing once could
before his latest walkabout. Neatly parrying her next blow, he pressed more than normal, trying to
use his now superior weight to his advantage as many of his own opponents like to do. That was
another reason he didn’t expect to come close to winning this match; he was still adjusting his
fighting style to his new mass. He was determined to perform as best he could for their audience.

From the silence of the Masters and the speed this was advancing to their normal fighting level, he
was doing acceptably well. Even if he wasn’t demoted for remedial training, he was going to get it
from half a dozen Knights and he was going to welcome the assistance in learning his new frame as
well as his old one. From Demeter’s tiny frame to Dai Atlas’ giant one, he knew he’d know himself
again within a couple vorns.

He twisted a strike into a parry as Marwir almost slipped past his guard. He’d had to completely
focus on her, so he had no real idea how the others were reacting to the increasing speed and skill
level of the match. Thundercracker had promised to keep the growing bond between them closed to
prevent distractions right now, although Wing knew it was something that they’d eventually have to
practice using during a fight. That could be done in less public settings, however. When working the
bond was the focus, not his making a good showing.

The next flash of awareness was later, brought by losing one of his short swords. He still had the
other and he wasn’t pinned, though his retaliatory slash missed completely as she shot away. That
brought a sharp criticism from several of the Masters. He could also hear a murmur from some of the
Knights on the sidelines as he shifted his stance for the one sword. They knew as well as he did he
should have left a long line of bright blue on her. It was the beginning of the end and Wing knew it,
Marwir knew it, every Knight knew it. It didn't change the expectation that he continue to do his best to fend her off as long as he could and mark her up better than he already had.

He managed to leave a glancing blow on her arm, but it cost him a streak across his own shoulder which was a much more crippling blow in real combat. All too soon, she managed to dart under his sword and struck at his hip. When he twisted to try to avoid her strike she lunged in towards him and knocked him off balance. His remaining sword went flying when his hand struck the ground hard and he kicked up hard to dislodge her lighter frame. It wasn't over yet, but what was left was more formality than a real match. No one ever won unarmed against two swords.

Marwir smiled, her predatory coding coming to the fore. "Come get me, Wing."

This match wasn't the appropriate coding time to try some of Deadlock's more unusual maneuvers, so Wing focused on doing his best to disarm at least one of Marwir's swords before he was brought down. He did manage to grab her arm and twist, but she moved with it and used the leverage to flip him over to the ground. He lay there as she pinned him, his vents working hard but his field smooth in surrender. He'd shown well and he knew it. From the rumble of Deadlock's engine, he hoped Kimark could explain that quickly. Thundercracker didn't sound very pleased with the results either, although his rumble was a bit calmer most likely because Wing wasn't actually injured.

Glancing over at the trio and their keepers, he noticed Jazz was paying a lot of attention to the surrounding Knights and was mostly likely seeing how everyone was reacting to his performance. He had to wonder what Jazz thought of this being the expected results, and possibly the lack of betting going on.

Marwir offered him a hand after she stood, the civilized victor as always, and Wing accepted it, the civilized loser.

"Thank you, Daoshi, for showing me where I must improve," Wing said as he bowed to her. For all it was an expected statement, it was also a completely true one.

"You are welcome, my student, to all I can teach you," she replied in kind before they turned to collect their paint edged sparring swords and put the space to rights once more. Once they were done the pair turned and bowed respectfully towards the Masters before leaving the sparring ground. Wing mentally braced himself for his gestalt mates' response to his loss.

"Go on," Marwir nudged him towards the group as they came out. Thundercracker was visibly agitated, the other two weren't, though Deadlock was scowling. "I'll meet you in the washrack."

Wing ignored the snickers from some of the other Knights as Thundercracker stepped forward as he approached and immediately began examining his fledgling for any real damage. "You are unhurt?" He asked.

"Yes, there was very little risk of real injury," Wing said patiently as he endured the fussing. It was good that the mourning Seeker was still civilized enough to do this. "We are both far too skilled to harm another with sparring weapons."

"Why didn't you use real weapons, if you're both so good?" Jazz asked with a cock of his helm.

"Because it wasn't that kind of match. That was to prove I still knew enough to use real weapons; that my form hadn't slipped enough to go back to Initiate training," Wing hoped it was explanation enough.

"You were proving you were still good enough to keep your rank?" Deadlock said slowly, trying to
match this lack of damage with the power displays he was used to in the Decepticons.

"More my standing in the Order, though it could cost me rank if I'd really failed badly," Wing told him. "Except for the Circle of Masters, rank is based on how many you've trained and how far they've advanced. I attained the highest rank possible for me a long time ago. I could only lose it if it was deemed I couldn't perform the initiate level forms well enough. Past that it was to determine my standing, where I place according to my skill in the arts. I've lost some ground there, but not enough to actually change my standing."

"Huh," Deadlock said finally, still trying to reconcile with the much less violent method of determining rank. It didn't make a lot of sense yet, but Wing seemed accepting of it. It did help explain some of his reactions entering the sparring grounds.

"Well, you're physically fine, except for your finish," Thundercracker said gruffly once he was done checking him over.

"And if he wasn't he'd be on his way to Redline," Jazz agreed with a jerked nod towards the other Knights still clustered around. "It was impressive to watch but most of them seemed surprised you managed as well as you did."

"I did admit that I couldn't practice at all for most of the time I was gone," Wing pointed out. "I don't think anyone expected me to lose rank, but I could have easily lost my standing by a few ranks over that long. Do you want to visit the washrack with me? I really want to get the paint off me."

"I will," Thundercracker said firmly.

"Sure," Jazz said cheerfully. "I wouldn't mind a wash and more hands make faster work."

"Never going to turn down a wash," Deadlock chuckled as the entire group of seven headed for the primary public washracks in the area.
Chapter by gatekat

Chapter Summary

Thundercracker begins his above ground mourning flight.

Ignoring the sand whipped up around him and the nearby rock columns, Dai Atlas kept his optics and sensors trained on the Seeker flying high through the worst of the winds and clouds above. Normally sane fliers would have headed to the ground during these sorts of impressive lightning strikes, but this particular Seeker seemed to have embraced the wild violence surrounding him. Dai Atlas had already heard and felt the rumble of the aftershocks from Thundercracker's Sigma ability twice now.

He had to admit that it was impressive. He had no doubt that rank had little to do with the mech's survival. Thundercracker flew well, had powerful engines and knew how to handle storms that even Dai Atlas himself didn't fancy flying into. It marked him as well-designated. He belonged in the storm.

~You're getting philosophical,~ Axe chuckled over their bond.

~He's impressive and this is *dull.*~

~You're the one that insisted on standing primary guard during this mourning flight. You've seen them in the past, and you knew it'd be long periods of boredom,~ Axe reminded him.

~I know. It had to be one of us and I'm faster. No one else could shoot him down if he does bolt. It doesn't make it any less dull once you get over how blasted *good* he is in the air. I'm glad he's not making a run for it.~

~He won't, and you already knew that from everything we know about gestals. He's got the rest of his makeshift flock back here in the city. Everyone active is being monitored discretely by more than one Knight, and Redline still won't let Prowl out of stasis,~ Axe reminded him.

~I know, I know. I wouldn't have let him out if I thought there was a credible chance of having to shoot him down. Grief can make mecha do stupid things and he's grieving a lot. You remember what it's like to lose a bonded mate,~ Dai Atlas replied, grateful for the distraction from the sand against his plating and getting into every seam.

~Yes, and he's lost a lot in a very short period of time which would make any mecha need something like this,~ Axe agreed. ~He's also as practical as you and I. He made that deal with Starscream shortly after he lost two trine mates and a sparkling not to mention almost his entire flock. If he was going to offline himself he'd of done it then; he'll do what needs to be done to survive.~

~He'd also just recovered his first love. It's a powerful reason to remain functioning,~ Dai Atlas countered in the easy banter. ~I expect losing Skywarp is the hardest blow he's suffering right now.~

~Especially since for all he knows Skywarp is still online back on Cybertron,~ Axe agreed with a sigh. ~Aurora says that the civilian Seekers seem both impressed and concerned by his endurance
during the public mourning flight. Most of the flock leaders are keeping their opinions private for now, but the word from her flock is that many seem to be reluctantly willing to tolerate him for now. Gloaming's attack didn't do the dissenters any favors with his actions. If Jazz had been here much longer I would have been tempted to assume he arranged it to improve public opinion.

~Agreed, and I think it's to Thundercracker's benefit that it wasn't meant to make him look better. He simply is that even tempered. Rare for a Seeker, even more so for a warframed and combat-hardened one. I'm still somewhat amazed he didn't retaliate in kind. It does make me feel better about him though. You must admit that if he doesn't lash out over being assaulted he's unlikely to do so without being struck first,~ Dai Atlas mused. ~I wish he was more inclined to become a Knight even if I understand why he doesn't.~

~Yes, but he's also one of the better suited ones in that gestalt for being a civilian which will help ease some of the worries I've heard. Splitting them up during their normal lives makes mecha less worried about them banding together and causing trouble. Can you imagine Deadlock as a civilian here? I know he deliberately pushes you at times, but he is much better suited to the Knights than any legal civilian occupation available,~ Axe chuckled.

~I have no doubt. Now what's he doing?~ Dai Atlas was distracted by Thundercracker's abrupt ascent. He quickly moved to get above the Seeker, only to watch him dive into the harshest winds, a maelstrom strong enough to toss even the powerful Seeker about. ~I hope this storm is strong enough to settle him. Anything stronger will tear him apart.~

~I think that's partially what he wants,~ Axe admitted. ~Tornado said he'd want the most violent storm we could find. I wish I could see a recording of some of this flight. I know it's personal for him, but it has to be impressive given your reactions.~

~You can watch my memories of it. It is impressive. If I didn't know better I'd say he's suicidal.~

~Only we know he's not,~ Axe hummed.

~No more than anyone who has survived that long in a warzone,~ Dai Atlas agreed as Thundercracker broke out and headed into a slightly calmer part of the storm. ~You can help me get this grit out of my frame when we get back.~

~Happily,~ Axe purred, adding in everything else he intended to get his fingers into while he was at it. ~You haven't flown this hard since Cybertron.~

~Maybe we should take a look at the option of bringing small groups of Knights out to practice once a century or so,~ Dai Atlas reluctantly admitted as he stared out at the Seeker still flying through the storm. ~If we ever do get attacked this is the kind of conditions we'll have to be prepared to work in, and you're right, we are getting out of practice.~

~Wing's been bugging you again, hasn't he?~ Axe said amused.

~He's being surprisingly quiet, but truly ... I miss the sky and the challenge as well,~ Dai Atlas admitted.

~Well, let's wait until Thundercracker's mourning flight is over for good before suggesting it to the Masters. I bet the Seekers will love the idea of actually seeing the sky again even for a short time,~ Axe thought a moment before continuing. ~We'll have to discuss involving some of the civilians if we do start this program. There's no way even Aurora could keep the effects from her trine mates.~

~It will be complicated and I still don't like it. The risk is still significant and it will encourage many
more to sneak out,~ Dai Atlas reminded him. ~Accepting 'never' is usually easier than 'on occasion' with something like this. Most fliers are content enough now. Would they remain that way knowing that sometimes they'll be allowed out?~

~And what happens when we do finally have to go to the surface to fight? Will the fliers want to come back down here knowing they will never see the sky again?~ Axe countered the familiar points of the old argument they'd never truly resolved. ~What about the mechlings who've never seen the sky? Seekers, Aerials, rotors...what will they think when they see what they have been missing?~

~That it was for their protection. If we'd been on the surface we'd have been discovered a dozen times over,~ Dai Atlas replied. ~That is a known fact. So is that most who come here are slavers or pirates, not friendly aliens.~

~Who we need to be able to defend ourselves against if they do discover us,~ Axe agreed. ~We've been fortunate to be undetected for this long.~

~We work hard at it and they don't fight in bad conditions. Nothing like this at least. Most Knights wouldn't survive this storm.~

~No, they wouldn't,~ Axe agreed. ~It's still something to consider, especially given what we've heard from this group.~

~Consider, yes. After I get this grieving maniac safely to Redline,~ Dai Atlas grumbled and pulled himself above the worst of the storm.

~Which he's not close to yet, is he?~ Axe guessed.

~I'm sure he'll fly until he drops from the sky,~ Dai Atlas sighed. ~Another reason I only wanted the largest of us to be out here to watch him. I'm sure he won't manage to return under his own power this time.~

~No, especially since he knows this is probably his last view of the sky,~ Axe agreed quietly.
Chapter by gatekat

Chapter Summary

Firefall (and Klinge) visits Kimark and meets Deadlock.

Deadlock sprawled in the chair as he and Kimark drank their breakfast energon in the common room of their quarters. He was acting indifferent and relaxed and much to his frustration he knew he wasn't fooling many of them. Thundercracker's state had him all out of alignment.

"So what's for today?" he finally grumbled at Kimark.

"Unless you object, I'd like to introduce you to Firefall and her partner," Kimark smiled a bit. "I think you'll get along with them."

"So the Masters finally think it's safe for me to be around a civilian," Deadlock grumbled even as he shifted eagerly. Meeting a grounder who wasn't a Knight was at least a good distraction from the crazy Seeker tearing his frame apart over losses none of them could control. Finally getting to meet Kimark's mate was even better.

"It was my call and hers, but yes, they did approve it by virtue of not objecting," Kimark chuckled. "She's looking forward to a bit of sparring and getting to know the mech who's claimed so much of my attention lately."

"Sounds like I get to have a workout today after all. When do I get to meet them?" Deadlock finished draining his cube.

"Oh, definitely a workout, and likely a threesome afterwards," Kimark grinned and kicked back the last of his cube before dispersing it and standing. "In a couple joors. She's on the evening shift right now so she's not a fan of getting up as early as I do. Figured we can do some studying until she gets here."

"Studying? They're still trying to make you make me do it?" Deadlock grumbled, still not seeing much point to learning anything beyond blades and unarmed fighting.

"Unfortunately. There are things they insist you learn before being allowed out," Kimark shrugged. "At least law and market values have some practical applications."

"Anybody tries to cheat me they'd better realize they're going to get trouble from me," Deadlock grumbled but reluctantly pulled out a datapad and looking at the next lesson. Settling back in the chair he slowly began reading up on prices of paint supplies; something he was actually interested in after his new paint job and the one Thundercracker was going to have to do. It was boring sitting here in their quarters, but at least no one else could see him struggling with glyphs or having to ask for help.

His relief when Kimark said that Firefall was here couldn't be hidden, but again, only Kimark would have seen it if the Knight hadn't already stood to greet her at the door. Subspacing the datapad, he watched the red, orange and deep charcoal gray femme enter the room. She didn't move with the
same attitude as the Decepticons back home, but she was definitely more cautious than Dart or Wing. It wasn't hard to believe she'd been a gladiator like Kimark. Her tall, large build reminded him more than a bit of Chromia, one of the only Autobots he honestly respected the fighting powers of too. She was probably just as strong and twice as agile as her mech teammates.

"Deadlock, this is Firefall," Kimark half turned to introduce them.

"Nice to finally meet you," she grinned at him and the reminder of Chromia's fierceness only increased. There was a chirp and movement on her shoulder as a black microbot with orange trim, six jointed spike-limbs ending in glowing orange spikes and relatively large orange blades on its arms made itself apparent by standing up. Even fully upright it wasn't as tall as her helm. "And this is my partner Klinge."

"Good to meet someone who managed to escape this little club," Deadlock replied as he glanced at Kimark to gauge his reaction. The Knight didn't seem at all worried about them meeting. In fact he seemed positively pleased. Klinge accepted his look as acknowledgment as climbed to her spot on the back of Firefall's neck.

"Oh you'll meet plenty of civilians once they believe you won't maul anyone," she chuckled and flopped down on the couch with the careless grace of a confident warrior. "It shouldn't be all that long. You've got good self control from what Kimark says."

"I haven't ripped anyone open yet if that's what you mean," Deadlock chuckled and leaned back. "Wing would give me his pathetic look if I did, and no one has fragged me off enough to warrant it yet. Although if anyone tries to hassle me like that halfwit did Thundercracker it'll be a different story."

"I heard about that. I was prepping to get called in before it got called off. Did they find out what that was about?" she glanced between the two relaxed mechs.

"It's standard stupid Seeker stuff. Idiot thinks his sibling has a crush on Thundercracker and doesn't like it so he decided to divebomb a warframe that's still mostly in combat mode," Deadlock said dismissively. "He's lucky 'Cracker didn't knock the whole ceiling down on him because no one knew what his boom would do underground."

Firefall tried not to laugh too hard as she shook her helm. "Seriously says a lot about Thundercracker that he didn't. So what are you looking forward to checking out here?"

"Wing never stops going on about different places to eat and snack out there," Deadlock said with a small jerk of his helm towards the general direction of the city. "I want to see if there's anything exciting to do."

"Sports, drive parks -- Praxians make the best ones, dance clubs, 'facing and kink clubs," she listed off to see if any got a reaction.

"We've been to a drive park although we had to go after hours. They didn't want to scare the civilians by exposing them to us at that point," Deadlock snickered. "Dancing is more Jazz's thing than mine. The other clubs sound like they could be interesting. I've never been before but Kimark promised to show me what's so exciting about sports by taking me to a game."

"Dancing's Wing's thing too," Kimark chuckled. "I'm sure Jazz will know them all before long. And I was thinking pedeball."

"Nice and violent, fast paced and fun to watch. The crowd's energy is a high all its own," Firefall
nodded. "So what are your kinks, the ones you know at least?"

"I don't get spiked, but I like driving my partner into offlineing," Deadlock grunted. "Claws, fangs, anything rough can be fun."

"You like a partner with fight in them, or one who mews and begs for more?" she asked with a clear focus on finding the right club and type of playmate for him. "If we can work out the designations of your kinks it'll go easier when you visit one."

"A fight with an almost equal is better than someone who just wants to get hurt. There's no challenge there," Deadlock said with a shrug.

"That's my take too, but you might be surprised how many don't agree," she shrugged as well. "A lot of folks on both sides seem to be into more passive subs."

"If it's something someone is doing to survive that's one thing, but I've never had the need to learn how to handle someone passive long term. I don't do that kind of thing myself," Deadlock admitted before shifting focus to something she'd said earlier. "So you almost got called out for Thundercracker's stunt. What other kinds of things get your attention? I doubt there's many storms down here."

"Storms, no," she laughed easily. "Accidents of all kinds, from younglings getting stuck somewhere to adults who get badly damaged. We even rescue pets on slow orns. It's not as exciting as it sounds, but it's work I enjoy."

"Big change of pace from the gladiator pits," Deadlock said as he tried to imagine spending his time rescuing pets. Being a Knight was sounding a lot more entertaining. "Thundercracker is thinking about becoming a flight instructor if they'll let him. You probably won't have to rescue his students from many mishaps. He won't tolerate carelessness since it gets mecha offlineed."

"Good to know and I don't doubt it. If he goes into emergency response as well we'll probably see a lot of each other," she hummed. "It'd be nice to have some wings around that don't have such an attitude problem."

"He was talking about looking at emergency response or disaster recovery as a part-time career, and he's fairly stable for a Seeker. He's got a Seeker superiority complex, don't get me wrong. He just doesn't think that all grounders are worthless," Deadlock agreed. "He is stuck with the three of us for the rest of his existence."

"Still an improvement over most things with wings," she chuckled. "Some are friendly enough, but Seekers ... you know what they're like."

"Yep, most of them think they're the greatest of Primus' creations and the rest of us should bow down to them. Unless they've scrambled their processor and follow a logic only they understand. Thundercracker's the sanest one I've ever met, and there are a lot of Seekers in the Decepticons," Deadlock agreed readily, knowing he was talking up the Seeker but willing to do so since he was part of his unit. After all, the Seeker needed something to look forward to when this crazy flight of his was done. "Cracker can keep calm in a tense situation and knows how to get most others to follow orders. Not bad for a flier."

"Pity he won't be a leader again. We could really use his type in charge of the Seekers. They're civil enough here, but Primus I wish they could grasp how irritating they are to the rest of us," she rolled her optics.
"Makes me want to pound some sense into them, but that never works no matter how many times I try. Yes, Kimark, I know Dai Atlas won't like it if I try that here," Deadlock grunted. "I don't know if even he gets how irritating it is being talked down to like that. All I know is 'Cracker got a lot easier to deal with on the trip here. He's just decided that Wing and the three of us are tolerable, and Jazz thinks that's mostly the gestalt coding making him label us as flock."

"I can't say much on that. I never got close enough to a Seeker to know how they do social connections," she hummed. "It's an interesting thought though, that coding added so late in existence can have that big an affect. Have you noticed differences in any of the others?"

"I didn't know Wing before, so I'm the wrong one to ask about that optimist. I've heard some Knights talking and they think he's crazy bringing two Decepticons and two Autobots here and expecting us to integrate," Deadlock shrugged accepting that most would always think the worst of him before continuing with his examples. "Sure, us not offlining each other so we could escape slavery makes sense in theory, but us sticking together without this gestalt coding binding us together? Not a chance. Jazz checks on 'Cracker and I almost every night to see if we're okay; he'd have been sneaking in to slash our lines back on Cybertron. Prowl hasn't tried to offline Thundercracker, and that Praxian hates Seekers like nobody else I know. The three of us got overcharged together mourning our losses, and we didn't even try to fight."

"I'd say that's something. Kinda creepy, when I think about it too much, but fascinating too," she hummed thoughtfully. "Make me even more curious about how things got so bad that the war happened."

"I'm the last one to ask about the politics involved," Deadlock shrugged. "I was abandoned by everyone in power until a mob boss took a shine to me but Engineer didn't have me doing much with politics. After she was gone Megatron took a chance on me. You want to know why it happened talk to Jazz and Thundercracker. Or Dai Atlas. I bet he knows more about the early stuff."

"Jazz was?" she glanced at Kimark.

"Imperial Special Operations. Pretty old too," he answered.

"Ah, yes. He would know. I'm not that concerned; it's just something the subject made me wonder about," she nodded. "So I've heard a lot about how good you are as a workout partner. Care to show me?"

"Definitely," Deadlock grinned and stood with the pair.
Chapter Summary

Thundercracker ends his above ground mourning flight and says it was enough.

Dai Atlas perked up when his sensors picked up Thundercracker wobbling and not straightening out. A klik later he darted into the storm as the Seeker fell in a twisting spiral almost completely controlled by the winds. His thrusters had flamed out and he was reading barely conscious. Despite Dai Atlas's powerful frame and engines he didn't make it to the falling Seeker before Thundercracker plowed into the sandy ground, leaving a furrow that was filled in almost as fast as it was dug.

He had to almost dig the Seeker out of the sand since he was too exhausted to actually lift himself off the ground. This was one of the reasons why he and Axe had traded off being the primary ones spending so much time watching the war-framed Seeker. Once he had the Seeker in his arms he headed for the shelter of the rocks to see how much damage had been done to his frame. He felt the reflexive tensing and relaxing of the conflicting desires to fight whoever had him and relax into the care being offered.

By the time he reached the rocks Thundercracker had once more shown his base code in accepting the attention he couldn't resist.

Old knowing fingers slid over bare plating and once more Dai Atlas was reminded that the Seeker had been built to survive. There was military in his frameline and it was still serving him well. The crash had scratched him up more but his armor was stronger than the sand and all it had done was melt onto the leading edges.

That would be annoying to clean up later but was hardly a concern at the moment. There were scratches and gouges along the Seeker's wings from the flight and crash, but the damage wasn't severe enough to prevent him from taking back to the skies provided he let himself rest and recover. Hopefully this flight had finally purged the Seeker's grief; Dai Atlas was sick of the sand and didn't want to think about dealing with another flight like this.

Since there was no need to call Redline out, Dai Atlas picked up Thundercracker once more and headed for the entrance to the cavern entrance where they could both escape the driving sand and he could get some energon into the Seeker.

He let out a small groan of relief once they were properly sheltered from the wind and sand even as the sounds of the storm continued around them. "It's going to be a pain getting the sand out of our frames," Dai Atlas said as he settled the Seeker on the ground and removed one of the cubes from his subspace. With a critical optic he sighed and pulled out a feeding tube to pour it directly into Thundercracker's fuel tank. Once processed it should be enough for them to have a basic conversation. He'd had to do this many times in the past for injured comrades, and it wasn't the hardest task he'd had since Wing had returned with his new gestalt. Once the jet fuel was in the Seeker's systems Dai Atlas waited for him to recover.

~How's it going? You feel relieved,~ Axe prodded him over the bond.
I'm out of that storm, hopefully for good if things went right. He finally came down and isn't significantly damaged despite plowing into a dune. Redline won't have to do much to repair him unless he decides he needs to go up there again,~ Dai Atlas answered even as he monitored Thundercracker's slow reboot.

That's welcome news. I'll schedule time for both of us with Deco then. How's he look, besides sandblasted?~ Axe asked.

Worn out and slowly recovering now that I shoved some fuel into his system. We'll see how he does once he's finished coming back online. Hopefully he doesn't do a quick combat boot, but I can manage him if he does,~ he admitted.

No doubt. I'm fairly sure you could just lay on him to keep him calm,~ Axe teased.

True, although Aurora would have had an easier time since he seems to be adjusting well to her presence as a substitute creator. He's starting to stir and it's definitely not a combat boot,~ Dai watched the Seeker finally show signs of activity. It didn't quite feel right to wish him a good orn after a mourning flight, so he simply said, "Thundercracker."

Red optics took a moment to focus, then did so more readily. "Dai Atlas." He paused for a long quarter klik. "I believe my mourning flight is done."

"Good. I'll tend to a few of your injuries and get you some more fuel before we start back to the city. Your flock will be waiting for you," the Sovereign said, relieved that they would be heading back down to the safety of the city cavern. ~He's done. We'll both be joining you shortly.~

How fast does he need to get to Redline?~ Axe asked seriously.

After his flock has reassured themselves that he's survived and will recover. I'm sure they're as glad as I am that he's not going out again.~

The two grounders are better at hiding their concern than Wing will ever be, but they both have reasons to conceal their emotions,~ Axe agreed. ~Only one left to mourn once Prowl is brought online. Fortunately Praxians don't do things like this.~

Agreed,~ Dai Atlas replied as he examined Thundercracker's frame, paying particular attention to the Seeker's legs. "You're going to feel all of this grit until we can get you cleaned properly, but you look good to walk through the necessary tunnels."

"Agreed," Thundercracker replied and stood, though he did require the wall to help him balance at first. "I've walked with worse than grit everywhere. Any idea what's covering me besides sand?"

"You appear to have found an unusual way to create glass," Dai Atlas said with a small chuckle. "I've watched a few artisans work with sand to make it in the past, but you seem to have found an unusual creation method. Redline is going to grumble a bit when he sees this."

"No doubt. The grit will be more work to clear. Glass shatters easily," Thundercracker grumbled. "You've got some impressive storms on this world."

"Those storms and the lack of surface water are the main reasons organic races don't tend to stay the few times they have tried to settle the surface," Dai Atlas agreed.

"Have you ever had to chase anyone off?" Thundercracker asked as they began the slow walk towards the city.
"No. The few times we have acted against someone here it was to obliterate them," Dai Atlas said seriously. "Once an alien sees one of us they must be destroyed before they can tell anyone. I only tell you this because you will learn from your gestalt mates. Deadlock and likely Prowl will be among the few of us that can kill and not be psychologically harmed by it. As are you and Jazz, which means I am willing to call on your gestalt if the battle is expected to be a difficult one."

"Deliberate execution to protect the city is something the four of us will be able to do," Thundercracker agreed before thinking for a moment, "I don't know how Prowl will react if he has to be reformatted. Wing and Prowl killed the insectoids that attacked the ship on the way here. I also don't know how Flightplan will react to such an event. He is very young and has no combat experience."

"Such will be kept in mind," Dai Atlas promised. "We have only had to do this twice since settling here. Both times were against pirate slavers that came too close to the city. Normally settlements are allowed to decide they do not wish to be here on their own. Most don't remain more than a few metacycles."

"There's a group all of us wouldn't mind taking down, especially if it's the Nijihito or any of their allies," Thundercracker grunted as a joint decided to briefly act up. "They are a menace to all Cybertronians with that stolen technology."

"Agreed. Also remember that as a civilian, you and Jazz, and Prowl if he does not join the Order, have the right to refuse such a request," Dai Atlas told him. "You are not part of the defense force of the city. I cannot order you to fight."

"I doubt that would be much of a problem even if we hadn't been at war. Prowl and I were both law enforcement for a very long time, and my creation flock was half military. We would both be expected to help defend our respective cities. Jazz has his own long history and would be involved even if it wasn't for direct combat," Thundercracker said with a small wing dip, ignoring the grit and glass nuisances grinding together.

"Or to the knowledge of those in charge," Dai Atlas offered his understanding of the SpecOp's mindset.

"Or that," Thundercracker chuckled before swaying dangerously. "Using faster than processing."

"Then sit. There is nothing a joor or two will make a difference on," Dai Atlas did as he suggested.

"Thank you," Thundercracker slowly sank to the ground and leaned against the cavern wall, willingly taking the break his systems were demanding. Taking the offered cube he drank thirstily, refilling his tanks and letting his self-repairs begin to work.

When they reached the lip of the tunnel that opened into the city's cavern Thundercracker was feeling much more like his former, steady self. The Air Martial, not the Decepticon. He knew it was an illusion, yet there was a bit of truth in it as well. Part of him had healed.

"Are you steady to fly to Aurora's eyrie?" Dai Atlas asked.

"Yes, sir," he dipped a wing. "I won't be fast, but I'll be steady."

"Good. Your flock is waiting for you there," he said and launched into the air.

Transforming and taking off was initially a little shakier than he would have liked, but Thundercracker quickly compensated and headed for his current home. Having been out in the storm
had helped at least temporarily with the longing to feel real weather again. Those Seekers in the air dipped their wings in passing to express their condolences. Though it wasn't required of him while he was mourning Thundercracker acknowledged them.

It was still a relief when he came into Citadel airspace and Aurora flew over to greet them and relieve Dai Atlas of his chaperone duties.

::Thundercracker,:: she said expressing both her concern for him and relief that he was back safely. ::Thank you Sovereign, I will escort him from here.::

Dai Atlas gave a brief wing dip and headed off to meet with Axe and get the grit out of his systems before seeing Redline for the fiddly work of making sure it was all gone.

::Aurora,:: Thundercracker greeted her with the relief to be home that he felt. Without another glyph they circled down to the eyrie. Thundercracker hadn't even really set down before Wing was glommed onto him.

"I'm glad you're back safe, but you're an absolute mess," the Aerial lightly scolded as he clung to the larger Seeker.

"Don't knock him off balance just yet, Wing. He looks like he might collapse on you," Deadlock grunted, staring at the Seeker from behind Jazz.

"I rested and refueled before coming back," Thundercracker reassured his unhappy fledgling as he found a steady stance on the floor. "Now I need the sand out, glass off and a very long recharge."

"We'll help," Wing spoke up immediately.

"Indeed. That is what flock does," Aurora agreed.

"Glass?" Jazz asked curiously as he approached and examined Thundercracker's frame, noting the sheen covering the bare metal. "You really did make a mess."

"We brought some extra wax and stuff to make certain there was enough to deal with everything after the sand was dealt with," Deadlock said gruffly, trying to downplay the concern that statement truly implied. He hid how warm he felt at the wing flick of thanks the statement as well.

"I know. It turns out the sand here makes glass when enough heat is applied," Thundercracker explained. "It does make for a soft crash landing."

"Crash?" Wing squawked.

"Nothing serious. My engines flamed out when I ran out of fuel," Thundercracker rumbled gently.

"You need to take better care of yourself," Wing grumbled as we went back to checking Thundercracker over for damage.

"You should listen to your creator," Jazz snickered.

"It's part of mourning," Thundercracker explained to them both patiently. "The physical pain and discomfort, the exhaustion, all help to process the grief."

"Sounds a bit crazy to me, but you probably think other ways of mourning are strange," Deadlock said with a shrug before staring intently at Thundercracker's optics. "You're done with this now, right?"
"Yes. I'm done with the dangerous stage," he promised them all. "Now I remain unpainted, a ghost of sorts, until I feel ready to trine again."

"Weird," Deadlock said before moving a bit closer. "You need a shoulder to lean against getting down to the washracks? You'll knock him over if you try to lean on Wing. Aerial is too slight to carry much weight."

"I'm stronger than I look," Wing stuck his glossa out at the warrior.

"I believe I can walk myself," Thundercracker refused as his wings gave a cant of thanks for the offer. "I'd like to clean up now," he nudged Wing towards the door that grounders used.

While Wing hovered close to Thundercracker as he started across the large, open room, Deadlock moved ahead of the group as if he planned to block Thundercracker's fall if he stumbled on the way down. Aurora and Jazz were barely resisting a chuckle at the strange form of restrained coddling from the berserker as they followed the odd trio.

::Would I be correct that Deadlock is being quite caring by his norm?:: she sent an ultra short range comm to Jazz.

::I've never seen or heard of Deadlock doing anything like this for anyone. He's a street mech; they don't acknowledge another's vulnerability in public.:: Jazz replied. ::The closest to caring we'd seen before this was him supporting Flightplan who's almost like a sparkling if you talk to him. This has to be close to his equivalent of Wing at his worst.::

::A fascinating tidbit, but also I would say a very hopeful marker of his ability to be civilized with time and a safe environment,:: she hummed as they rode the lift down to a mid level that had one of the smaller, less frequented washracks. The five of them would fill it. There would be no risk of being seen by others even if Aurora hadn't planned to lock it with her code.

::That's the most civilized thing I've ever seen him do.:: Jazz admitted before he went in the washracks first checking habitually to see if anyone was going to surprise them. Wing and the Seekers followed with Deadlock bringing up the rear, also keeping an optic out for trouble neither truly expected anymore. It was just that neither were anywhere ready to give up habits that had saved their lives too many times to count.

Solvent was turned on and rained down on the unpainted Seeker for a long klik as they allowed the liquid to wash away the loose debris.

"I locked the door," Aurora spoke up from where she was waiting for an invitation to join the cleaning. "Only another Master or Redline can open it without my permission."

"Thank you," Thundercracker said, his voice growing low and languid in the pleasure of grit being pulled from his inner workings.

"You get his helm and shoulders since you can reach them without him having to sit down. We'll handle the rest," Deadlock said with a jerked nod towards Aurora before focusing again on Thundercracker. "You just move when we tell you so we can get this mess out of you."

No words were given in answer, but Thundercracker's field hummed with the pleasure of being surrounded by and doted on by his flock when he was hurting. At least Jazz was sure that this was an important part of the process too, the rebuilding of the remaining social bonds. It was a process he knew well in many forms, even if this variant was new.

Deadlock focused on Thundercracker's legs and hips working to get the grime out while grumbling
about the state of Thundercracker's plating. There wasn't as much glass to deal with, but the grit was
embedded into his frame and running down from above with the solvent.

Wing kept his attention on Thundercracker's wings, hissing about their damaged state as he cracked
away glass and scrubbed out sand. He'd flown in some of the storms on the surface but never one of
this obvious severity. He'd never crashed either. He really didn't like to think about that part. So he
mused on how easily Thundercracker was letting the grounders do this. When Wing had first joined
them Thundercracker barely tolerated him and the others were unquestionably unacceptable.

Now the Seeker was calm and even happy with two grounders working on his lower frame while he
and Aurora worked on his upper half. Wing was very sure if they had the patience they could get
Thundercracker to recharge standing here as they cared for his frame.

Such a huge difference from two and some vorns ago.

Jazz was thinking along the same lines, humming softly while scrubbing Thundercracker's front and
easily swapping places with the others as they moved around the blissful Seeker. Sure, he'd
recharged with the Seeker during the long lonely flight, but he'd always known it was desperation
that had allowed him so close. Here there were plenty of Seekers for Thundercracker to socialize
with, but he still sought out the three of them and showed concern for their missing member.

It was a pattern he saw in himself and Deadlock just as strongly. He was sure if he knew Wing and
Prowl better, and if Prowl had more time aware, he'd be seeing it in them too. On a level he railed
against it, while his pragmatic side just listed it as yet more control code to be understood and broken
without breaking any bonuses that came with it.

In the verbal silence Aurora was also thinking, though her thoughts were largely happier ones. The
prospects of these three were so much higher than when they first arrived just over a decaorn ago.
Thundercracker was almost certain to make a successful transition and even she was beginning to see
what Wing likely already had in Deadlock. She knew Jazz could adapt to anything; it was simply the
nature of his coding. Still, he seemed to be settling as well.

None of the Masters were naive enough to think these three would ever be completely civilians, but
they had brought with them skills and talents that were in short supply or missing from the city's
population, particularly the gestalt coding they now carried, however corrupted it might be. They
were all very strong sparks and strong frames, something the city would always welcome. They'd
add good traits to the sparklings they created. Flightplan could well be an incredible asset when
disaster struck, whether natural or accidental. They'd be a welcome addition to Dai Atlas' killer crew
when the next pirate base was built.

A firm tap on the back of Thundercracker's leg was a momentary warning before Deadlock lifted the
limb and balanced it on his own while Jazz took the opportunity to scrub at the rest of the now
exposed joint while Deadlock worked on the thruster and pede.

"Go ahead and recharge," Wing cooed. "We won't let you fall."

"Maybe not recharge," Thundercracker murmured as Aurora's field wrapped around him. He settled
into a light standby. Not good for defragging, but enough he wasn't consciously processing and his
armor relaxed. Given even more access to the areas underneath Thundercracker's armor, Wing and
Aurora carefully directed the solvent deeper to get rid of more irritants. Everyone was careful to
avoid distressing or rousing the exhausted Seeker.

"You know, glass might look interesting decoratively if properly overlaid like we do gemstone or
metallic paint," Wing muttered as he worked to chip away some small pieces on the inside of the
"Applying it as plating might be challenging," Deadlock grunted. "Don't know if it would be worth it, but Deco would probably know."

"I'm sure he'd try," Jazz hummed. "Ground up it can be rather sparkly and easy to produce on this world."

"Give him something to try out," Deadlock agreed. "Ready to switch to the other leg?"

"Yap," Jazz responded and they moved smoothly to continue working.
As he stood waiting for class to begin, Thundercracker couldn't help wondering what Deadlock would think of this situation if he was here to watch. He'd been excused from the last class since no one had wanted him flying after the first mourning flight hadn't been sufficient. The majority of the mechlings couldn't seem to decide whether to stare or avoid looking at him in his obvious state. It was strange being at such a social event during his mourning period, but a large portion of this class was to show the civilians that he could act civilized. It also meant the mechlings who were interested were visually reminded that they wouldn't be his first trine.

It was a lesson to them as well about interacting with someone in mourning who chose to be in a social situation. None of them were old enough to have seen the last Seeker in mourning here. Not even many of the adults were. So Thundercracker was here for every reason but for himself. He knew he was still mentally shaky when it didn't bother him. He was very much still numb to it all. On a level he was grateful this wasn't the first mourning period he'd had, simply the most personal. Both Air Martial and military mecha deactivated at far higher rates than the general population and he'd been flock to a dozen before Vos was destroyed.

A sleek femme, well-built for her type, came up with careful wings, ready to go away with a small flick. It took him a bit to place the dark blue Seeker and white with tan highlights as Highdive, and longer to recall that she was Gloaming's younger sibling; she was the one most notably interested in him. An Action, she was fairly safe to talk to.

"Highdive," he said politely but still skipping the normal, more cheerful greeting just as anyone in mourning would typically do. He was fairly certain this was more about Gloaming's attack than it was about her own developing feelings.

"Thundercracker," she used all the correct grief-markers and vented briefly before plunging in. "I'm sorry my stuck-up sibling and his trine decided to try to buzz you, and I'm glad no one was seriously hurt and that you didn't get in trouble. They got yelled at by the Flock Order so I don't think they'll try anything like that again."

"That is welcome news," Thundercracker really did relax a bit. "Thank you for telling me."

She shifted slightly. "Why did Aurora make you come? Shouldn't mourning be all you are concerned with?"

"Ah. She did not force me. A large part of why I am in class at all is to be seen, to show that I'm safe around even youths. We agreed that it was worth the discomfort to show that is true even under such circumstances. I may not come to every class, though I intend to come to most."

Highdive frowned but eventually nodded, "I guess I can see where that would be necessary given
"what happened."

"Sometimes such are the choices one has to make," Thundercracker tipped a wing to her in thanks of the understanding, then focused on Saamanjasy. "Class is starting."

"Thank you for your time," Highdive dipped her wings and turned to focus her attention on their instructor. She didn't move too far away from Thundercracker, choosing instead to remain an acceptable distance from the Order. Thundercracker listened distantly to Saamanjasy as he described a particular form of tight barrel roll.

"Does anyone have any idea why you would need to do such a thing besides showing off?" The Vision asked the class, scanning as usual for any volunteers or inattentive students to prod. He avoided catching Thundercracker's optics, unlike the last few classes where he had deliberately asked the Order for his opinion.

"To shake an attacker off?" Highdive suggested.

"That is one option," Saamanjasy agreed with a pleased tilt of his wings.

"If someone else is careless and flies too close?" Acharaj offered.

Saamanjasy nodded a wing to that and continued to look around, but no other ideas came forward.

Normally this is when Saamanjasy would call on him, but the Vision was acting like Thundercracker wasn't even present in the class. Mourning or not, Thundercracker offered, "If a fire or explosion in a building throws debris at you. You're less likely to fly haphazardly into someone else's airspace."

Saamanjasy dipped a wing in agreement to that. "All three of those are sound reasons to pull such a maneuver. Most of the other instances I know of where mecha pull off a barrel roll are for showing off or during flight displays."

"What's the difference between showing off and a display?" An Order in front asked.

"A display flight is a coordinated effort, often by a group. There is one common flight frame example even the grounders recognized. Many of you have seen a stunt frame show," Saamanjasy waited a klik to see if anyone in the class voiced any confusion. "The stunt frames precisely time and coordinate everything down to the smallest movement to avoid crashes and injuries. In addition to coordinated efforts Seekers sometimes do individual display flights for a potential lover or trine mate. Recklessly doing so in flight space where someone else might get hit is showing off."

Wings all around canted in understanding and the questioner was undoubtedly satisfied with the definitions.

"Now, we're going to demonstrate a barrel roll," Saamanjasy announced. At this point most of the class turned and looked at Thundercracker since he was normally one of the demonstrators.

"Optics on me," Saamanjasy corrected him. "A Seeker in mourning is not to be asked to work. They may volunteer, but one does not ask."

Everyone shifted to watch him and process what had just been said. It was so rare for a Seeker to be in mourning here. There were glances around as the class shifted to the group flight practice, and when Thundercracker joined them the movement around him was different. No one sought the positions on his wings, but he was surrounded, shielded in a way. What they didn't know they went on instinct and related gestures.
Saamanjasy watched the groups carefully, offering corrections and suggestions like always. Occasionally the Vision called out a correction or redirected students away from each other as some of the mechlings got a bit careless and strayed too close together. As usual Thundercracker was obviously one of the best in the group and would normally be assisting others. This time no one interfered with Thundercracker's space or asked his advice. They flew with him, but not with him.

When they landed and Thundercracker set down neatly next to Aurora, he was slightly bemused by the warmth he felt at the way the others had tried to fly as a flock would around a mourning member. No one directly spoke to Thundercracker as they departed but each of the mechlings made certain to say goodbye to Aurora. It was awkwardly endearing as they tried to accommodation his unfamiliar condition.

The pair took off on the familiar flight to the Citadel.

::You teek better than I expected,:: she admitted after a bit.

::It went better than I expected. It was nice to fly like that, protected by a flock, even a flock of strangers,:: he replied thoughtfully.

::They seem to be handling exposure to something as potentially disturbing as this very well for youngsters who have most likely never seen anyone in mourning let along a fellow Seeker,:: Aurora agreed as the other adults coming in to meet their mechlings respectfully kept out of the pair's way.

::Agreed. There will be more. I doubt those who flew when I first did are the only ones who will wish to go over the losses I reminded them of. Highdive did very well, coming up to apologize for her brother without making another overture. Someone instilled a solid sense of how to behave in her without relying on rote rules,:: Thundercracker said.

::Her flock Order is known to be tolerant of different opinions but tries to makes certain that his flock's fledglings do not misbehave. I know he wasn't impressed by Gloaming's behavior especially since it brought such shameful attention to them,:: Aurora agreed.

::It's good to know, and to know Gloaming isn't representative of his flock,:: Thundercracker relaxed as they circled to come in for a landing at her eyrie.

::We tried to leave as much of that attitude as possible behind, although mecha will always find something to be prejudice about,:: Aurora agreed as they landed while Haji and Cheoseo waited for the pair.

"Good to know it went well," Cheoseo grinned and came up to nuzzle Aurora before brushing his field against Thundercracker's in greeting.

"We have energon waiting for you," Haji announced as he joined his trine mates. "If you don't mind, I'm curious how class went."

"Most of the students adjusted well to having someone in mourning present. Saamanjasy only had to issue a few corrections to some minor missteps. Highdive apologized for her sibling's behavior," Thundercracker reported to the higher ranked Order.

"Good, then it's doing what we hoped and is good practice for the Seekerlings on top of that," Cheoseo smiled and they all settled in the pillow pile that was the dining area. He passed out the small cubes to everyone and closely watched Thundercracker until he took an actual drink. "My Flock Order sends his regrets for your loss. If you need anything they can help with let me know and I'll pass the request along."
"Thank you," Thundercracker replied honestly. "At the moment, simply knowing I have flock-kin is worth nearly as much as the flight to my recovery."

"We have a half a joor to rest before Northwind expects us at the eyrie," Aurora said quietly, glancing at Thundercracker to see if he still wanted to go over visit her flock.

"This is a good orn," Thundercracker managed a small smile for her. "I believe he already understands I am not the most emotive Seeker."

"They already know and accept you as you are," Haji agreed quietly.

"Everyone will be on their best behavior. Aurora will make certain of it," Cheoseo promised before glancing over at his Vision.

"Saamanjasy will help me handle any problems," she agreed with a small wing flip.

"He is quite the Vision. Smoke did very well with him," Thundercracker gave the finest complement he knew.

"Yes, he is," Haji agreed before relaxing against Aurora for a moment, enjoying this time with his trine and their adopted mechling. It was still an unusual situation, but he had to admit that Thundercracker was handling himself well and would be an asset to any flock. Eventually a warning from his chronometer had him reluctantly rising.

"Time to go already?" Cheoseo flexed his wings and headed for the flight balcony outside the main entrance to their eyrie. The rest moved with him, with Thundercracker a little slower than the others. A quick glance at Aurora and he let it go. She seemed to understand Thundercracker better than most, especially when it came to his mourning. He was glad not to have the experience to know what it was like to lose a trine.

The flight was quiet until halfway there when Thundercracker clicked on the open line. ::Cheoseo, how if your latest project going?::

Having already gotten encouragement from Aurora to follow any line of conversation Thundercracker offered, he answered promptly. ::It's going fairly well although I'm thinking of changing some of the ratios of trace metals I'm adding to the copper in a few of the panels for variety. The arsenical bronze has such an interesting silvery sheen to it now that its pattern finally finished I think it will make the hepatizon wedges stand out once I finally get the right patina applied. It's interesting how gold, silver and copper make indigo if you mix the right ratios and treat them correctly.::

::Purple? That is fascinating:: Thundercracker's tone marked real interest, not merely being polite. ::It is a well-known process among metal workers::

Cheoseo willingly elaborated on a process few outside his field cared to learn about. ::Artisans are about the only ones interested in the process since there are cheaper, more suitable materials for buildings, armor and weapons. I'm not the only one here that uses it, but it is fairly uncommon.::

::Is it something that is viable for armor inlays?:: Thundercracker asked just to be sure.

::I don't see why you couldn't use it like that since I've seen similar alloys used by different frame types without any issues. Would you like to see it some time to get a better idea of the patina? I have samples in my studio I could show you::

::I would:: Thundercracker trilled his thanks, then fell silent again for the remainder of the flight to
Northwind's eyrie. It wasn't a completely comfortable silence among the four Seekers, but it was better than the tension they'd all felt during the orns surrounding Thundercracker's two grueling mourning flights. Haji and Cheoseo landed first followed by Aurora. All three waited until Thundercracker joined them, protectively surrounding him before the group moved towards the waiting flock.

"Welcome, Order of my creation and your trine," Northwind greeted them warmly and welcomed them into the eyrie.

"Good orn, Haji. You actually managed to get Cheoseo out of his studio to join us?" Smoke teased lightly as the four approached. Turning her attention to Thundercracker, she dipped her wings respectfully.

He flicked his in reply; thanks for the respect towards his state. He knew he should be able to fade into the background more than before, to be among his flock without socializing, though he was less sure than he liked that this very civilian flock did things as he remembered from his creation flock.

"Even he can be convinced to be social on occasion," the lawyer chuckled with his Vision's brother's Order. "Anything interesting going on at the plant?"

"The really interesting stuff falls under non-disclosure," she grumbled playfully in what Thundercracker had learned was a familiar refrain. "We did have a new intern almost destroy part of a lab. She wasn't paying attention and almost ignited an entire hood of diethyl ether Oasis was using."

"Oh my, at least no one was damaged," he chuckled. "That could have been bad."

Thundercracker listened, dug through his memories and winced when he pulled up enough information on diethyl ether. Still, the story was told in humor and no one damaged meant it could be amusing. It just wasn't yet. He was fairly sure that in a couple metacycles he'd smile when he recalled it again.

"Oasis spotted her before anything actually ignited. After a lecture she promised to pay more attention. One more error like that and the manager will switch her over to another lab while we get stuck trying to train a new intern," Smoke sighed as they entered the main eyrie.

"Sometimes it's worth it. Usually it's not," Haji agreed and happily joined the extended flock lounging in the central pillows around the aurora fire to soak in the warmth. Needed or not, it was nice.

Thundercracker settled as well, a bit closer to the center than he'd normally be, but the flickering light and extra warmth was very appealing and he didn't question the desire. It was nice to notice that he wasn't just permitted closer than usual, but those he teeked welcomed him to the warmth and pillows he tentatively claimed, then relaxed on.

Green and blue flickers danced across his frame as the voices of the flock murmured around him. Two of the voices caught his attention and roused him from his comfortable daze. Looking over at the other side of the fire pit he spotted Airwave and Redtail begging Nighteye and Nebula to play for them. The two quieted a bit after the older Seekers promised to break out their instruments later.

The described fledglings really were sparklings, far too young to have flight upgrades yet. How long had it been since he'd seen a Seeker frame so small? And music. A live performance. Oh, he'd enjoy that as much as the fledglings who'd begged for it.
Now that they'd been appeased with the prospect of music, the twins were attracted to the pretty colors around them. Chasing the lights they darted around their elders drawing fond chuckles and tolerant glances. It was obvious when they spotted his unusual bare metal armor because both stopped and blatantly stared at him. Skywatch quickly called to the twins, drawing their attention away even as he made an apologetic flutter towards Thundercracker.

Thundercracker gave a reassuring, tolerant flutter back. Yes, it was rude, but they were sparklings. How could he take offense at their curiosity? He was sure he was the first mourning Seeker they'd seen, and he was new to them at that. Around them the conversations picked up again, those closest to Thundercracker giving a few stories of fledgling misadventures that even managed to draw a smile and small chuckle from him now and then.

He didn't feel up to adding his own stories of growing up with his siblings and cousins just yet but thinking about his creators and flock brought out both pain at the loss and the fondness of remembering those good times. It was good to know, for him. Confirmation that he wasn't so broken that he couldn't mourn as he should. He'd recover. It would take time. A long time. He'd trine long before he processed all he'd lost. His creations would likely be grown and trined before he took a serious mate again.

He could see it though, in brief glimpses when the laughter around him chased the pain away for a klik. The potential was there and he held onto it with all he had while life moved on around him, reminding him without bothering him of what was on the other side.

Sitting back and relaxing while the musicians broke out their instruments for the promised song, Northwind couldn't help being pleased with how the majority of the evening had gone. There'd been a few small missteps dealing with Thundercracker's current state, which was unfortunate but not entirely unexpected given how few Seekers ever offlined here; mourning grief was not something most were experienced in handling. He'd been personally relieved when Aurora mentioned how well the grounders and Aerial seemed to be adjusting to taking care of the sole Seeker in their strange gestalt. It bode well that Thundercracker seemed to be accepting the companionship being offered by those around him.

"I agree," Aurora answered his unspoken comment quietly from her spot against his side. Something caused her to pause and search for an unfamiliar sound. She wasn't the only one either.

"Mmm, I'm not sure he's aware he's singing," Aurora said very quietly. Her field was blazing with excitement for the moment of peace it meant. All around them the flock settled back into ignoring Thundercracker, though the sparklings had the most difficulty.

"He doesn't seem to mind their attention. You did say that he treats that Aerial Wing like a fledgling?" Northwind observed quietly. He'd closely watched Thundercracker's reaction to Airwave and Redtail the entire night, and he'd come to the conclusion there was no reason to believe that the fledglings shouldn't be safe around the war frame. Not that he'd expect their creators to leave them with the official mechling for sparksitting duties any vorn soon, but he'd spotted a fondness in the reserved Seeker as he watched the pair all night.

"He does. He seems to have quite a fondness for youngsters. It's hardly the worst trait in the flock,"
she smiled. Thundercracker had stopped singing along and drifted to silence, yet the cant to his wings was a little less mournful than when they arrived. "I wish he was ready to spend the night. I think it would do him a lot of good to be in a pile."

"I will welcome him when he is ready. There are still a few are still getting comfortable with the idea although Saamanjasy's stories about flight classes and your reports have settled most concerns," Northwind said with resolve in his voice and field. "He will not lose the war edge immediately if ever, but the more we treat him like flock and less like pariah the faster and smoother he will integrate."

"Agreed. I expect within the metacycle he'll be ready. He's been recharging with Wing regularly and his nest is inching closer to ours every few orns. I know watching me spar and learning what being a Master in the Circle of Light means has helped his worries about hurting us greatly. I believe he trusts that I can stop him if I need to."

"You'll need to be here when he finally joins a pile," Northwind agreed, not saying that he expected to offer rather than wait for Thundercracker to ask. "Ask Tornado to join as well. Having two Masters present will help ease any concerns for all involved."

"It won't be difficult to get him to come," Aurora chuckled softly. "I'll keep you up to date on how ready he is."

"Please do," he agreed, settling back to relax and listen to the music.
Chapter Summary

Praxian fueling lessons/dinner with Dagger, Talon, Jazz, Deadlock and Kimark

Going to meet Jazz and a few of the Knights for fuel shouldn't have felt so much like preparing for one of those stupid tests, but Deadlock could barely keep the edge out of his field as he followed Kimark towards Dagger's quarters. The medic had immediately volunteered to help him learn more Praxian, although Deadlock couldn't quite figure out how a dinner party was going to help him know when Prowl was insulting him.

"Remember, no one here will intentionally insult you without making it clear they are giving an example," Kimark was continuing the rambling prep. Deadlock was sure he wasn't really that familiar with it, but he knew enough to survive an event. It actually made Deadlock feel a little better knowing he wasn't the only beginner in this.

At least it wasn't just him and the Praxians like someone had originally suggested. Jazz had volunteered to come along, so the party now included Dart as well as Talon and Dagger. He knew Dart well enough, but Dagger and Talon were still somewhat unfamiliar so he was a bit edgy around them. He supposed the Praxian medic was fairly harmless. He was taking good care of Prowl. Talon though, he didn't think he'd exchanged more than a few words with yet. Jazz liked him though and called him harmless for a Knight, so he couldn't be that bad.

He'd still prefer a smaller group.

"It's almost all finger food, things the size of the granite bars Wing brought or smaller. Meant to be eaten with the hands rather than utensils for the most part. You'll see a lot of similarities when you start seeing Thundercracker eating Vosian again, rather than the simple fuel served here," Kimark continued.

"Why isn't Wing going to be there?" Deadlock grumbled, wanting another familiar face present.

"He's doing another cleaning shift and can't take time off for something fun like this very often," Kimark said with an understanding shrug. "We should be able to arrange one of the next events to include him, but this training shift didn't coincide with his free time. In fifty vorns or so it'll be much easier for him. Until then he has duties for thirty four joors an orn."

Deadlock grunted and fell silent when Kimark opened the door to Dagger's quarters. Dagger was there, setting the table with the elegant mostly white near-Seeker form that was Talon.

"Hi. Dart and Jazz should be along shortly," Dagger greeted them with a warm grin. "I got as many normal table foods as I could think of for this. A group of six is a good size for an intimate family meal. Casual."

"So every meal is normally eaten in groups like this? Not just special occasions." Deadlock asked, not wanting to sound completely stupid but unwilling to remain ignorant since he had Prowl in his
"Yes, Praxians and Vosians both normally eat in a gathering such as this," Dagger answered, guessing that tying this to more than one of Deadlock's unit would help his frame of reference. "We're typically some of the most social frames. While I doubt Prowl will with the gestalt, it is common to see us take things from each other's plates or drink from cubes with little concern of who picked it. At least that's how it works when everyone gets along. Family or units. It can be a very complex thing to figure it out who has the right to with who if you aren't raised with it. Basic social rules say that you never do so with a non-Praxian, so no one should pick anything from your plate without asking. On the same count you shouldn't take from another's plate unless you know you are part of their inner circle. Talon and I have given each other the right to, so you can see it in action."

"Taking fuel from us isn't a good idea," Deadlock agreed quickly, knowing that would most likely trigger an attack. "That could cost you a limb back on Cybertron."

"It's not something I would have tolerated either when I first joined the Knights," Kimark agreed. "You'll find it is almost solely a Praxian and Vosian trait, and almost all of them only do it to each other."

"It's rude to take from someone who hasn't agreed to share," Talon reiterated. "No well socialized Praxian would."

The door opened again to admit Jazz and Dart.

"Smells good," Dart grinned and glanced around.

"I hope so," Deadlock grunted, nodding a greeting towards Jazz. It was a relief to see the other mech and know someone else had his back.

"I haven't had real Praxian dishes in a long time. This'll be a treat," Jazz chuckled. "Any particular order to the seating?"

"Not that I had in mind," Dagger smiled at him and motioned towards the rectangular table. "We aren't even trying to sort out rank here, so three on a side."

Kimark sat down on the far left with his back to a wall and motioned for Deadlock to sit down next to him. Dagger and Talon sat down across from the pair so Deadlock would have a clear view of their manners and visual instructions. Jazz settled on Deadlock's other side while Dart faced him. It might have felt to some like being hemmed it, but it gave Deadlock two mechs he trusted on each side and a solid wall at his back.

"Is there an official start to the meal or does the highest ranked just dig in and everyone else follow?" Deadlock asked curiously. He was used to the latter, but it didn't really fit with what Dagger had been describing so far.

"That varies wildly. If you are unsure, wait for someone to get something before picking your first item, and wait for someone to eat before starting to eat. I can't think of any situation where that is wrong."

"The only situation where it would be incorrect is if you are the guest of honor at a very formal event," Talon volunteered. "It's not something you would face without significant preparation."

"Right, that. Not something to worry about. In most casual situations you don't pick anything until everyone is seated and you can start eating once you have your first round of everything you want."

He paused to motion to the spread of a dozen simple bowls along the center of the table, each with a
different type of item. "I tried to avoid extremes with these. Some Praxians like things very acidic or sour."

"Prowl's one, though he might be ready to go back to sparkleberry pies again," Jazz spoke up. "He'll drink nearly anything just like the rest of us, but give him the choice and he seems to gravitate towards battery acid, but he also said he does that because it's easier to get."

"I'll keep that in mind for when he's aware," Dagger smiled thanks for the tidbit. "Everything on the table is what my experience says is safely in the cross-cultural range. I also grabbed some rust and gold dust for anyone who wants to offset a bit more of the bite," he motioned to the two small shakers dead center. "Have at it."

Deadlock pondered the choices in front of him. The gray bars flecked with black topped with peach-pink dust looked like they might be safe to start with. Picking one up and putting it on the plate he looked at the other offerings, spotting a small yellow bar topped with what he thought he recognized as arsenic and pyrite.

"The one you picked up first is called a Morganite Dusting," Dagger offered, giving the Praxian word and then the Imperial Standard glyphs Deadlock should recognize. "The other is a Star Crunch. It's made out of citrine, and I find it quite refreshing."

Deadlock nodded and spotted a small spiral twisted around on itself, a bite sized thing, that he was sure was almost pure energon.


"Interesting design," Deadlock commented neutrally, setting one on his own plate as he watched Talon select his own fuel. The flight-frame Praxian who looked both like a Seeker and not had been rather quiet so far but that appeared to be more his nature than any rudeness.

"I like them," Jazz said as he placed a couple neatly on his own plate.

Dagger pointed at a blue-coated, three pointed star of energon resting on one of the other plates on the table. "Now these are gelled solar energon encased in a thin lazurite shell. We call them midnight stars. There's usually sulfur in them, so you might want to try it with and without the rust shaken on top."

Jazz immediately snagged two, coated one liberally with rust powder and scanned for one of the two bowls he hadn't claimed something from yet.

Dart handed it to him with a grin. "I love these. They're thin layers of crystals and minerals stuck together by energon high grade jelly."

"Pretty too," Jazz hummed as he looked at the precisely cut X shapes, each with a dozen hard layers.

"The type is vicrasi, the layering pattern is sixrix, and the shape is zez. So those are called vicrasi sixrix zez. Each shape tastes a little different, even when the layers are the same," Dagger explained the most complicated item on the table.

Deadlock picked up three of them and put them on his plate. Might as well try everything available and see what was tolerable. The last plate had bite-sized, three layer pyramids on it.

"Those are pretty good although some of them are a little sour for my tastes," Kimark said as he grabbed one off the plate before passing it on to Deadlock. "These seem lighter colored than some of them I've tried."
Dagger nodded towards the plate. "Tri-pyramids have different flavors of energon gel in each level with a high grade silicon infused jelly in between to hold them in place. The top layer is almost always pyrite although the concentration varies with this being a lighter batch; the middle layer is always a copper oxide mix. These have aluminum as the base layer. It's a complex mix of flavors that some like to eat separately while others like me pop in all at once."

"Just how many ways did Praxus have to get energon into a frame?" Deadlock asked as he looked at his plate, then picked up the most normal of them. The light spiral was a lot like the candies Wing brought. It was fancy and all, but it was simple components and it went down smoothly.

"Not counting candies, confections and things that aren't really fuel, like that morganite dusting ... maybe a couple million," Dagger really didn't sound sure and glanced at Talon. "More are created every decaorn."

"The last count of any credibility I saw was sixty eight trillion, however that did include many variations on the same item, such as the thousands of variations of vicrasi that are common and also included known recipes that are archaic and no longer used," Talon offered.

Dagger stared at him, then ruffled his armor and settled. "Okay, so trillions."

"Wow," Deadlock said trying to contemplate that many recipes or having enough spare energon to be able to be that creative. Even Jazz looked a bit impressed.

"Cooking is very much an art form for Praxians, so there has been a lot of experimentation in the past," Dagger said with a small shrug.

"The Golden Age and before also had enough wealth for enough mecha that eating at restaurants was common," Talon added. "Providing prepared eatables was a large industry for generations. You only drank a cube when you were in a hurry."

Jazz stilled, thinking back hard, and eventually nodded. "Some cities more than others, and some classes more than others, but I remember that. I never really thought about it though."

As they spoke they all noted Talon snag a tri-pyramid off Dagger's plate instead of asking for the basket to be passed.

Deadlock tensed watching to see if Dagger was going to retaliate for what felt to him like theft even though Dagger had said they would be sharing like that. Instead, Dagger just chuckled, grabbed two more of them and shifted that part of his plate closer to Talon. "You did always like those."

"I likely always will. Just as I will always take fewer than I want to ensure everyone gets a few," the sleek jet agreed.

"So why not just get the basket in front of you?" Jazz asked.

"I could, but this assists the effort at self control and we did want to give you an example of filching things as normal. I would easily consume the entire basket and a second if I gave up self control for a joor," Talon said.

It earned a flare of surprise from Kimark that made it to his face.

"Just because you've never heard of me indulging like that does not mean I don't have it in me, or that I haven't done so in the past," Talon gave a small smile.

"So you're being polite by leaving most of them in the bowl, and Dagger is being polite by picking
up a few extra for you?" Deadlock said as much as asked as he contemplated the two tri-pyramids on his own plate. So if it turned out he didn't like them, maybe he could swap treats with Talon. That wouldn't be unreasonable or wasteful. It was like when Wing snagged that batch of mixed treats in that port and they'd split them up later.

"In a sense," Dagger agreed.

"Reason can vary, and often it is simply habit among civilians," Talon added.

"It there a term for it?" Jazz asked.

"No, actually. It's that common," Dagger smiled.

"How do you ask if it's okay then?" Jazz asked.

"Oh, just if it's okay to share," Dagger grinned.

"Weird," Deadlock said with a final shrug before picking up and eating the tri-pyramid. It was definitely more sour than he was used to, and he was glad this was a lighter version of the treat. The mixture of the other flavors helped make it more palatable, but he was probably going to trade it to Talon for something else since that was an option. It was weird having that much texture and minerals in his energon too. Usually that was a bad thing.

"I like these," Jazz hummed after popping a star crunch. "Bit bitter, but really interesting."

"I expect everything here is a bit bitter, except for the light spiral," Dagger agreed smoothly. "It's Praxian."

Deadlock looked over the pair of midnight stars on his plate before shrugging and swallowing one of them. It was as bitter as he expected, but the small bits of pyrite inside the lazurite added a little tang to it he hadn't expected. Grabbing the shaker he applied a liberal amount of rust to the top of the other piece before trying it. Turning to Kimark, he said, "It's a lot more interesting this way. Still bitter but the sweetness helps a lot."

Kimark nodded and tried it to a hum of approval. "It does make it better."

Jazz did preemptive move and coated a morganite dusting with gold before biting half of it. "The extra sweetness does take the edge off."

"Prowl will probably wind up keeping shakers of gold and rust around for your use," Dagger said with a small smile. "If Thundercracker likes traditional Vosian fare he'll be less liberal with them."

"Or I'll bring one when we eat Praxian," Jazz grinned. "There's still a lot to sort out about how we're going to live once we're out of the Citadel."

Deadlock looked over at Talon and asked, "Is it acceptable for me to trade you my tri-pyramids for your light spirals or does that mean we're going to be sharing all of our food? Because I don't think I can tolerate mechs just randomly taking fuel from me, but I could trade you something I'm not as fond of that you really like for something I'll eat?"

"Yes, it is acceptable, and I won't take anything not offered," Talon promised and picked up two light spirals and offered them to Deadlock. "You also don't have to consume everything on your plate, especially when trying something new."

"That's going to take a crazy long time to get used to," Jazz shook his helm.
"Trading is going to be the only way we will leave something behind," Deadlock agreed with a wince as he swapped out the light spirals with the tri-pyramids. "Fuel is too precious to waste by just leaving it behind."

"We understand," Dagger promised. "It's simply information to have, and is important to understanding how others might act."

"I can get that," Jazz nodded and nibbled on a morganite dusting.

"Is it okay to ask for something if someone leaves it on the plate and doesn't intend to eat it?" Deadlock asked as he snacked on one of the light spirals. He knew he wouldn't grab it off someone else's plate, but it would be difficult to watch someone just discard energon like it was nothing.

"Yes, in a casual setting," Talon answered. "I wouldn't do it at a formal event."

"Agreed," Dagger nodded.

"You won't encounter that much around the Citadel. We don't take more than we need so we rarely leave anything," Kimark added.

"Good. Fuel should never be wasted," Deadlock growled. He'd seen too many mecha die from starvation to tolerate such waste.

"Agreed," Kimark said as he snacked on one of the vicrasi sixrix zez sprinkled with gold.

"It's never wasted," Talon said firmly. "Depending on location and type, it is either filtered and put back in the supply, the method the Citadel and most locations that serve the poor use, or it is used to power something."

"No one starves in this city," Kimark reminded him quietly. "Every citizen is entitled to draw a free ration. It doesn't taste great and it's not enough to race or fight hard on, but it'll keep a mecha fueled."

"No one?" Deadlock said, hope and suspicion in his voice and field. It was hard to believe that such care was being taken for the bottom of society even here where everyone was selected to join them.

"We do not abandon anyone. It is not our way," Dagger said.

"It is in the city charter and the law," Talon added. "We did all we could in organizing this city to avoid what destroyed our homeworld. All citizens are entitled to a berth in government housing, an energon ration and needed maintenance. It would not be a pleasant existence to anyone who came, though I expect it would be a reasonably good one to a street mecha. It has been well proven that beings who have fuel, shelter and maintenance rarely revolt. Those capable of work are found something they can do for an income, which they can use to improve their situation."

"I saw that, but how do you manage it?" Jazz asked, just as suspicious as Deadlock.

"Taxes. Those in need have to ask for the help," Dagger said.

"So they have to ask for charity," Deadlock said with a bit of disgust. "At least they have to earn some of it. Making it a loan is a little less disgraceful."

Deadlock turned towards Kimark trying to sort this out with what Wing had said before. "So you pay for the loan before you need it?"

"It's insurance," Jazz offered.
"Insurance is accurate, I think," Dagger looked well out of his depth. "It's just part of what government does; it takes care of those who can't take care of themselves. Those who don't believe in taking care of the least fortunate do it to protect themselves from the unrest an uncared for population brings."

"Protecting themselves from unrest," Deadlock tried that thought out before nodding slowly. "That makes sense. Politicians always try to protect their own afts and power structure."

"They do tend to try," Talon agreed while they continued to snack. "Is there anything you'd order for the next meal?"

"Definitely light spirals," Deadlock said immediately. "Most of the rest wasn't too bad with a lot of rust or gold."

"Maybe some of these gatherings can explore other foods," Kimark suggested. "Praxian manners, but the variety more like what they'd have in their own home."

"I'm always up for trying something new, and I second the light spirals. I rather liked the midnight stars too," Jazz spoke up. "We do have a Praxian, a Seeker and a Knight with a sweet denta you wouldn't believe. Plus me and Deadlock who don't really have a cuisine," he paused. "If I go back, probably Iacon for me, though I don't honestly remember."

"Iacon was very metropolitan last time I was there. You could find anything easily, though the flavor that dominated anywhere that didn't say it was of a city was distinct enough," Talon said.

"That would give us a better grasp of what to expect later on. We could also see how Praxian manners are influenced by what you're eating. We'll be going out to eat with Prowl and Thundercracker at some point. We need to know how not to embarrass them," Deadlock grunted, in a small way admitting his concerns about not humiliating them or himself with unintentional poor manners.

"We should definitely doing this again," Jazz agreed.

"We will," Dagger promised with a smile. "Both with other types of Praxian fuel and things from all around the city. Hopefully Wing will be able to join in later. He knows the city's fuel scenes better than anyone I know."

"Wing would definitely enjoy something like this," Kimark agreed as he finished the last piece on his plate.
Chapter Summary

Prowl is booted up, the first conversation with Barasi Lelku and Lord Red Csillag. Meets Dai Atlas, Redline and Dagger. Redline and Dagger grasp the full power of Prowl's AIs. Dagger learns how much Prowl loves clean and hot liquid.

Redline walked through his Medical Bay observing each of the patients as he passed. They were all minor injuries his staff could easily take care of without his attention, so he simply made note of their presence and continued to his destination. The still Praxian form rested in stasis on the medical berth, condition unchanged since his last examination. The difference was that he was now confident enough in his understanding of the coding in that scrambled processor to call on those who might have a chance to get an actual, honest opinion out of the mech on his own fate.

It wouldn't be for another couple joors, but it was soon enough to be exciting in anticipation. Prowl might honestly be free soon. He'd already made certain that Prowl's frame was properly repaired and that all the new mass was integrated correctly. He hoped it wouldn't be necessary to reformat the former Enforcer, but he was prepared for that eventuality if it proved necessary. The pessimism over Prowl's condition from the rest of the refugees in the gestalt had greatly concerned him, but it made more sense once he'd learned how badly the medical facilities were doing back on Cybertron. When Jazz, a SpecOps all-purpose mech, was counted among the best programmers around on either side, he had to agree that reformatting would be the only option if it was like that here.

Fortunately, it wasn't. The three outsiders just didn't trust enough to believe without seeing. He could even understand that. They'd been without anything civilized for longer than he'd been here on Aelios. So he focused on spending the time until Barasi Lelku and Red Csillag arrived to see if the changes he'd made would allow Prowl to accept one of them as an authority to appoint Dai Atlas as his new Lord of Law. If that was possible then Prowl could be given the option of living as is, a partial reformat or a full one. It was the best case. He was just as ready for the worst case, which was either pretending to accept it or assaulting someone.

Having gone through Prowl's coding, the most worrisome thing was actually the tac-net and the AIs attached to it. Whatever had happened to Prowl before he was enslaved, it had cause a great deal of damage to those systems. Redline had done what he could to complete the repairs, but Prowl's advanced processor wasn't like anything he normally worked on here on Aelios. Pits, if he didn't have fairly solid proof, he'd have assumed the mech wasn't Cybertronian at all, and likely wasn't even a related sub-type.

He shook his helm and leaned on the approval of Singer of the Spark that he was doing the right thing. If the Great Sword had no doubts about this course of action, it couldn't be a truly bad one.

Looking over at the opening door, he watched Lelku and Dai Atlas enter the room, followed respectfully by Red Csillag. She gave no indication she was at all intimidated by her two companions even though they outranked her, and Dai Atlas was significantly larger than her. Although she wouldn't have carried much authority in House of Fairwings if they were still back on Cybertron, the femme was the highest ranked Praxian noble available. Hopefully she would be enough to help
Barasi Lelku get through Prowl's wrecked programming.

"Is everything ready?" Dai Atlas asked his CMO.

"As ready as knowledge can make it," Redline nodded, then looked at their guests. "Are you both ready?"

"As ready as possible," Lelku inclined his helm regally. "This is not something that has been attempted in the records."

"I've never commanded a Praxian Enforcer quite like this before, but I will do my best to help him," Red Csillag answered, dipping her doorwings briefly towards Redline before settling into a more authoritative pose. She may not have ever known of him back in Praxus, but he was a Praxian and therefore it was her duty to try and aid him now.

"Jazz did drop a hint that if he boots correctly, meaning my medical boot holds, this could take a joor or more. After digging around his code and frame, I have to agree," Redline warned them as he gave the medical berth the order to begin activation. "That bar indicates how many of his systems are on line."

As they watched the bar slowly move, Red Csillag asked quietly, "Does it normally take this long for an Enforcer to boot from stasis?"

"No, but he has systems I've never seen in anyone else," Redline answered as he watched the monitors closely. "Tactical systems, multiple AIs....the amount of hardware in his processor alone is astounding. Never mind the fact that his 'processor' is spread across half his frame. I'm not surprised he's a tactician without peer. He's built for it."

"I would say we can relax for a while," Lelku hummed softly even as he stepped closer and reached out with his field to seek the spark of the mech on the table. Strength came back to him. The type of calm fire so often associated with those drawn to the priesthood. "What color is his spark?" he asked mildly.

"Ice blue," Redline gave the exact color code.

"I'm surprised he remained an Enforcer. That is typically a color that would be claimed by the priesthood," Lelku's curiosity increased.

"Probably because the tactical systems were too valuable for the Enforcers to give up," Dai Atlas pointed out. "It's not surprising he has coding that's forcing him to return to Cybertron and the Prime. He was critical to the Autobot's war efforts even before we left."

"Possible, though they would have been paid for his value," Lelku said even as his focus shifted more and more to the calm, powerful spark who's field was entwined with his own. "The hardware must be an incredible drain. I believe his spark is strong enough to power a large shuttle."

"It is," Redline grunted. "It's one of the major difficulties with removing the tactical systems beyond how integrated they are. He was custom built and called to power that mess. I could do it if I really had to during a full reformat, but to be honest it'd be easier to perform a spark transplant than work out how to use all that energy the system's currently taking."

Dai Atlas winced at the possibility. "Let's avoid that if possible. I don't want you to have to figure out how to incorporate a shuttle into the current functioning gestalt."

"I wouldn't want to try and remove him from it, although he is the least connected of the five,"
Redline agreed. "All four of them would view it as an attack on one of their own. I am sure of that much. The coding wouldn't allow them to view it as anything else. Though I agree. There are several options before going to a transplant, and to be honest, I'd rather let him return to Primus than torment him that much. Even the medical oaths recognize that there is a point when the right answer is to let a patient go no matter how much you don't want to."

"How would that be possible without angering the others?" Dai Atlas frowned.

Redline looked at him briefly. "I've found the line of code that keeps him functional against himself. He can't break it, but I can. Given the freedom to do so, he'll take his own spark as soon as he's sure no one is close enough to stop him."

"Less depressing subject, please," Red Csillag said softly. "Like what is going to happen when he accepts our order?"

"One of the Praxian Knights will be assigned to him and he will be sent to their quarters to decide what he wants to have happen," Dai Atlas told her. "I don't intend to list the options unless he asks for it."

"To allow us to see how he wants to integrate or to make certain he joins the Knights?" she asked carefully. "I realize how much of a problem he could be if he genuinely wants to return to Cybertron. The Knights or the Peacekeepers would be good places for him."

"The priesthood is also a valid option for him," Lelku reminded them firmly.

"I'd prefer he was a priest to a Peacekeeper, to be honest," Dai Atlas told them. "He's been in command far too long to be outside a social structure that he can't use force of will against. Though if he's reformatted on his own request it's a different matter."

"Reformatted ... at his request?" Red Csillag paled visibly.

"It's not a bad thing to most pre-progs," Dai Atlas told her. "They don't have the same sense of self and functioning as most."

"With as broken as Prowl's coding is it's an option he might take, and if he asks I'm willing to do it for him," Redline said grimly. "The damage from the destruction of Praxus is extensive. None of the others have approached me about that option, and I'm not going to suggest it unless they can't learn to cope with those memories intact. Based on what I already know, none of them will have that much of a problem."

"If he chooses to reformat we Praxians will want to help teach this new spark," Red Csillag said quickly. "That way he will have a many choices as to what he wants to become."

"The gestalt will be involved in his upbringing no matter who ultimately teaches him," Lelku pointed out. "They are united in their bond forever."

"Unfortunately he's unlikely to have that many choices. He'll still be at least a partial pre-prog with two AIs and a massively unique piece of hardware he was built around. I don't think I can edit enough to allow him into any function that doesn't have a strong rank structure. His base code won't cope with it," Redline warned her. "That said, I do think it would be good for him to socialize with Praxian civilians often no matter what his choices are."

She dipped her doorwing in unhappy acceptance of the medic's statement and the room fell silent beyond the gradually rising noise of Prowl's systems powering up and the medical readouts keeping watch on him. Breezes past before ice blue optics powered up to take in the room and its occupants.
They locked on Dai Atlas and didn't stray.

Prowl's vocalizer cycled a couple times before getting out what he wanted. "Dai Atlas." he said warily, all rank markers carefully set in past tense, giving an open question as to what the ancient warrior was now in their absence.

"Yes. I am the Sovereign of Light now."

"Sovereign Dai Atlas. Have you reentered the war?" Prowl asked carefully.

"No, although no one knows for certain what the future will bring," Dai Atlas answered, choosing his words carefully. "I am the leader of those who protect the surviving civilians of Cybertron, including Praxus."

"Good." Tension that hadn't been visible until he let it go eased from Prowl's frame. "Then my gestalt did betray me."

Despite the phrasing, he gave none of the indicators that he was truly angry with them.

"You know I cannot stay," Prowl kept his focus on Dai Atlas.

"There may be a way you can," Dai Atlas answered as Red Csillag stepped forward ready to do her part.

Her field filled with the authority and confidence of a noble, she used the original Enforcer glyphs from his designation as she said, "I am Red Csillag from House of Fairwings. Your original oath is to Praxus, and I am the ranking noble New Praxus. This is Dai Atlas, the Lord of Law of New Crystal City."

Prowl twitched, frowned, then half sat up and twitched again. He looked from her to Dai Atlas, then back again. His doorwings betrayed a distress as he tried to process that, what it meant. Tried, failed and went back to trying to make any sense of it again.

Redline began to tense, slowly, as Prowl's internal temperature gradually rose.

The last member of their group decided it was time to speak before the internal conflict actually caused harm. Stepping forward, he gently pressed his field toward the agitated Enforcer, projecting a calming presence and reaching for that powerful spark. Keeping Prowl focused on his white optics, he said, "Prowl, I am Barasi Lelku of New Crystal City."

"You are the last still functioning," Prowl murmured, willingly taking the distraction to give his secondary processors a longer crack at following the convoluted legal process that he was in no way prepared to navigate.

"How many priests were left on Cybertron?" Lelku asked softly, keeping the optic lock and Prowl's awareness focused on him.

"Perhaps eighty who would claim the title if they dared. Only seven still wear the red that I know of," Prowl answered and shared in the priest's grief at what was lost. "They were targeted almost as heavily as medics after Sentinel Prime's assassination. Megatron knew that he could never rule with a strong priesthood."

"It is sorrowful things have reached that point. We have a strong, thriving priesthood here," Lelku lowered his head briefly in grief at the reminder of another loss back on Cybertron. "You are welcome to visit and speak to any of us if you wish."
Prowl was still and silent for a moment, then his doorwings gave a twitch. "Which Barasi sent representatives?"

Lelku smiled at the question, genuinely happy to Prowl's attention, "We have a good contingent of priests originally from Tiger Pax, Tesarus, Helios and Protihex. I am one of the few who chose to come from Kalis, and we have a couple from Altihex and Praxus as well."

Prowl nodded slowly. "I would speak to the Praxians, Barasi."

"Of course," Lelku nodded and glanced over at Dai Atlas. Prowl may not be the most cooperative mech he'd ever met, but at least he hadn't attacked anyone yet.

"We have another Praxian we wish to introduce you to now." Silently agreeing with Lelku Dai Atlas spoke as he turned towards the medics working behind them. "Knight Dagger, please enter and meet your new charge."

A primarily white Praxian, one much younger than Prowl but still of an old enough design to have seen Cybertron, stepped into Prowl's view. Seeing the pair standing face to face, it was difficult to miss how similar their coloration was, though Dagger's chevron was thick and short, much more like Ratchet's, and his optics were a bright red. Even so, the smooth calm of his field, so different from the hard control of Redline's, drew Prowl a bit closer.

"Hello, Prowl," Dagger spoke in the Praxian dialect from shortly before the city fell. "I am Redline's SIC in addition to being a Praxian citizen and Knight of Light. You should not leave my presence without my permission until this is sorted out. Once Redline and I are satisfied that you are able to leave medical, I have plenty of space available in my quarters for you to use."

"Accepted," Prowl dipped his doorwings, quickly shedding the frame language used in mixed company.

"Is everything functioning internally at adequate standards?" Dagger asked lightly as he moved closer to his new charge and glanced at the readings on the monitors while he felt out Prowl's field more deeply. "We spent quite a while checking your systems, but you need to let me know if anything needs improved."

"It is adequate. The damage that remains is unlikely to be repairable without extreme measures," he answered truthfully. "How long before I can drive?" He asked, the normally simple glyph having more in common with how professional racers spoke it than most mecha.

"I'm sure it can be arranged for the next orn or two, though it is likely to be during the off joors," Dagger told him with a look at Dai Atlas that it needed to happen.

"Thank you," Prowl's doorwings dipped slightly in appreciation.

"What damage, specifically?" Redline insisted on knowing.

"Processor, coding and the gestalt additions. Most is very old damage," Prowl told him smoothly.

"We've begun partial repairs to the processor and coding damage. We need to do some thorough mapping now that you're online to see how the damaged portions are interacting with the rest of your systems," Redline grunted. "It's a bit of a cobbled mess from my perspective, but you're functional and should stay that way. Once we're done examining you we should be able to get at least some of it fixed."

"We've also been studying the gestalt coding and frame modifications." Dagger said with a small
"Smile. "Ethically it's a disgrace that the changes were made without any of your consent, but it seems to be integrating well with your systems."

"Considering their knowledge and the complexity of several of us, that is something of a miracle," Prowl admitted. "Do you wish to do the scans now?"

"As much as I want to, it will wait until we have your answer," Redline huffed with a glare at his leader.

"Then may I meet my unit for a while?" Prowl asked, actually oblivious to how he categorized them, though it wasn't lost on either medic or Dai Atlas.

"Yes, we can bring them in here for a visit. Would you prefer to see them together or one at a time? We can make arrangements either way." Dagger asked.

"Together for now, please," Prowl flicked his doorwings in thanks and acknowledgment of his status relative to theirs.

"Now that all that is settled, shoo," Redline motioned the non-medics to get out, then turned to Prowl when the door closed behind them. "Medic to patient, I need access to that black box called a tac-net."

Prowl paused as he began to sit on the medical berth, then completed the motion. "That is beyond my preview. My only access is through the system AI."

Dagger tried to imagine having something in his systems and frame that he wasn't authorized to access directly before glancing over at Redline. "Is there medical access to the tac-net? Did Ratchet have the ability to repair it if it became damaged?"

Prowl twitched his doorwings in negative. "He has done so, however it involves more effort than is typically worth. Hacking it is a dangerous thing at best without extreme need. It has both reformatted and deactivated intruders before. It is authorized to destroy itself and me to avoid being compromised."

"If it can do that, how can it be hacked?" Redline asked carefully as he realized just how lucky he'd been when he'd been poking around.

"As I understand it, by a great deal of skill and very, very quickly. Having the Prime order it to stand down is also useful, though not applicable here. It's never been attempted when I hadn't already been critically damaged," Prowl explained. "Physical repairs are much more standard."

"Well, let's check over the integration of your repairs while we figure out what to do with that system. Considering the previous injuries we found in your processor it should be checked for damage," Dagger gave Redline a pointed look silently advising they not to push right now. He figured it'd take at least the two of them and probably a hacking specialist to try to safely check the tac-net over.

"It is not giving any error messages; I recommend leaving it be. It will be difficult enough keeping it in check while only checking the coding that is Prowl," Prowl said firmly as he laid down and tried to relax into having his coding and awareness prodded by medics he did not trust. "I do feel much better than I did the last time I was aware."

"I'm glad to hear that. It means we're doing our job correctly," Dagger said cheerfully as he and Redline carefully connected to Prowl's systems and waited to be granted access. Trying to put Prowl a bit at ease and remind him of his connections through his unit to the city, he continued, "We've
both worked on Wing whenever he managed to injure himself, and he doesn't complain much about our methods. He doesn't seem to mind my berthside manners much either."

"Wing is incorrigibly friendly," Prowl said flatly, though his field flickered with amusement and almost-affection. It flatlined for a fraction of a klik as the electronic handshakes happened and both medics were openly aware of the effort involved for Prowl in keeping something big and very nasty away from them as they were allowed into Prowl's top level processor. It left Prowl with only a fraction of his full mental abilities to see to them and still he read as smarter than both of them combined. Further in the background was a second awareness, wary and unhappy at their presence, but not yet aggressive.

Mindful of the blatant potential trouble being barely kept in check, Dagger kept his focus on examining Prowl's coding and making certain everything was in working order. Keeping to a professional level, he worked carefully to try and make no hostile moves while treading lightly as he examined the Enforcer's systems. There was a lot of old damage that still needed repair or possibly replacement coding, but, as Prowl was currently functional, it seemed to Dagger that most of it could wait until he and the other presence had a bit more trust in the medics. This kind of editing really needed trust to work well even without the AIs and those nasty defenses Prowl only had marginal control over.

They both backed out and traded the hardline with Prowl with a hardline to each other. Physically Prowl seemed calm. They were close enough to teek that he was still calming down that defensive system and his own ruffled nerves at having them inside his processors.

~Did you catch what that third presence was?~ Dagger asked his mentor.

~I believe it was the Enforcer AI, though I didn't go close enough to check for sure. It is very well entrenched and hardcoded, whatever it is,~ Redline explained.

~I'll kept well away from it for now. I can see why even a medic of Ratchet's caliber would have to be careful working on him in wartime. It's hard to believe he functions as well as he does with those two integrated in his system,~ Dagger muttered. ~It's amazing they didn't completely slag him when they integrated the gestalt coding into that balancing act.~

~Agreed. No matter what he or his coding says, I have no doubt that it is because he was unwilling to allow it to happen,~ Redline mused as they focused back on Prowl now that he teeked normally. ~I wouldn't be surprised if it was making the tac-net AI even more aggressive.~

"Has it calmed down well enough?" Dagger asked softly, his attention on keeping his field soft and non-threatening.

"Enough," Prowl flicked his doorwings against the medical berth. "Did you learn what you needed to for now?"

"Yes, you have more systems that will eventually need repairs but for now everything appears to be functioning at sufficient parameters that Redline and I agree you can to be released into my charge," Dagger said with a small flick of his doorwings towards the door. "With Redline's permission I'll escort you to our quarters now."

"Go ahead. I do want to see you if anything gives an error message," Redline said firmly. "I'm sure you are even more aware than I am how mangled your code is right now."

"I expect so," Prowl agreed and stood, inclined his helm to Redline politely and followed Dagger out.
Dagger waited until they were outside medical and headed for his quarters before speaking to Prowl. "There are things in the Citadel I'd like to show you once you're settled into our quarters. We're already making arrangements for you to drive and to see your unit, but if there is anything else that will make things more comfortable for you just let me know."

"Time in a washrack and to detail. It has been a long time since I was properly clean," Prowl requested easily. "Then time to meditate and recharge. I have a great deal to process."

Dagger smiled at the simple requests he could easily grant. "Different areas for meditation are always available here in the Citadel. For now I have a small space you can use in our quarters. If you don't mind company I can help you with your doorwings in the washrack. Once you're ready for recharge there is a berth prepared for you."

"That sounds very good. I will appreciate the assistance, and would return it," he offered smoothly in the traditional response civilized mecha gave. A favor for a favor and everyone walked away looking good.

"Help with doorwings is always welcome, especially from someone who knows what they're doing," Dagger agreed cheerfully to cover how utterly delighted he was that Prowl could give such a response, even by rote. The closest washracks weren't too far from his quarters, and it didn't take them long to enter. He was pleased to see they were the only ones present. "Set the cleanser for whatever temperature you prefer. I've gotten used to everything from near freezing to boiling depending on what I'm having to clean off my frame," he said as he went to snag a bottle of the higher-end cleanser he preferred for working on black, white and red.

"Not quite boiling," Prowl said before turning on one of the heads near the center, but not in line with the door. It wasn't something Prowl thought about, though he was dimly aware that there was a tactical reason why he didn't like corners under most circumstances. All thought fled him as the hot rain of solvent touched his plating. He didn't even know how deeply he moaned as the tension of existence fled him as the heat and wet built around him.

Dagger paused to watch Prowl's stoicism disappear into the steam rising around his frame. The washracks were definitely going to be very regular stop if it made his charge this happy to be warm and clean. Making sure Prowl knew which washracks had a hot oil pool was also up on that list. He'd always known some mecha had a thing about liquid heat, but he'd never seen it to quite this level.

Keeping his field relaxed and friendly, he extended it out towards Prowl to remind him of his presence before he actually entered the solvent himself. The last thing he wanted to do was startle the mech and trigger a potentially hostile reaction. It was something he needed to be especially careful of. No matter how calm and cooperative Prowl seemed, Dagger could never forget that he was fresh out of a war-zone, vorns in slavery and being mechnapped by his own teammates. The mech needed to be treated as carefully as Deadlock and for many of the same reasons. Every micron he could move towards a neutral or eventually friendly categorization would help with later medical treatments.

He stepped close enough to touch easily and felt Prowl's field mingle with his smoothly. It was a light touch, just enough to make speaking less necessary as they cleaned each other's frames. Even so it was enough for Dagger to gain an appreciation for how good this felt for Prowl. As complex as the processors were, the frame seemed to have simple tastes. That actually made sense as he reflected further while scrubbing some bits of debris out of Prowl's hinges. Simple pleasures like being clean were also practical and would be less likely to trigger negative responses from the two dangerous AIs in his systems. It was something that could allow enjoyment without thinking too, something that
Dagger expected Prowl did entirely too much us just as a default. His field definitely teeked different, smoother, when he wasn't focused on thinking.

As Dagger worked, his touch smooth, professional and non-sensual, he gradually found armor plates loosening slightly for him. Not enough to really open any vulnerabilities, but Prowl was starting to relax to the level most did on the sparring field. As the last of the cleanser rinsed off Prowl's doorwings, Dagger did a last quick pass over the first areas he'd scrubbed since there was a bit more plating exposed now. Dagger was pleased to have gained even this small amount of trust so quickly, especially given what he had recently learned about the tactician.

Once he was certain Prowl as clean as he was going to get this round, Dagger took a small step back and relaxed his own plating, letting the cleanser soak through his frame. He could teek at least a hint of how much Prowl didn't want to move, yet the mech did and stepped to the side so Dagger could get under the primary spray. Now it was the Knight's turn to decide how much to trust a mech that by rights he shouldn't even allow behind him while Prowl selected a brush and sponge to work with. Prowl may be a warrior, but he was also an Enforcer. It was a calculated risk, but he decided to act as he would if he was in the wash rack with Kimark during some of the mech's rougher vorns. He kept his plating relaxed but nowhere near as open as he would with his friends, all the while continuing to keep his field as neutral as possible. The hot cleanser helped since it felt like cleaning up after a messy shift in medical. That the mech behind him teeked of much the same, the pleasure of the liquid heat still rich in Prowl's awareness.

There was something to this, to being clean and cleaning up, that Dagger was sure he would be able to make a good connection with Prowl over. For all their differences, they already had commonalities. It was about the last thought Dagger had for a solid breem as he was cleaned with the same professional care that he'd given. It took a moment to trace it, but he eventually picked out the shift in Prowl's teek that had roused him to pay attention. It was a difficult echo to pin down, but it felt good. As much as Prowl seemed to enjoy being groomed, he clearly enjoyed doing it as well.

It was enough to cause Dagger to try and dredge up as much as he could think of on Enforcer culture in Praxus and who was likely to know more within the Citadel. He didn't know a lot about Praxian Enforcers even though he'd started researching as soon as he knew Prowl would be his charge. The two Combat Aerials Talon and Zephyr might have some more information for him if he picked at their processors some more, but he'd probably have to ask Red Csillag if anyone was left with firsthand knowledge of that rather insular culture. Dai Atlas and Axe might know something too, now that he thought about it. They'd been around enough in the military to know a bit about everything.

The moment he felt Prowl's hands leave his lower back and step away Dagger felt a moment of disappointment of the pleasant attention even as he felt very good at the accomplishments so far. Even though he knew without a doubt that Prowl was as far from an ally, or even a permanent resident, as it could be, he was still behaving like he understood how to be civilized. It was honestly a fair bit better than some of his gestalt mates at times, and definitely better than many Knights that Dagger was now glad to call friends.

"We can stay and enjoy the spray as long as you like, but there's a hot oil pool in a different washrack I think you might enjoy more," Dagger smiled. He knew the instant 'hot oil' registered that Prowl wanted to be there badly. "So dry off, wax, polish and enjoy a couple joors before recharge?"

"I ... would like that," Prowl did his best not to show his eagerness and knew he was failing miserably. Even with all the repairs his thought-to-vocalizer filter was still fairly well shredded.

After turning off the spray, Dagger grabbed a bottle of wax and motioned Prowl over to the side to
dry off, saying, "I'll start on you first if you don't mind. It's a good quality and should compliment your finish well."

"Thank you. You do have the colors to know," Prowl gave an awkward complement that Dagger had the good sense to recognize for what it was. The effort earned Prowl a smile and doorwing waggle to encourage him to remember he could wing-talk with Dagger. Even so, the silence between them was fairly comfortable. Most of a joor to wax and polish, and in Dagger's case be touched up by a steady hand, and as long as both teeked like it was good, both relaxed into that comforting silence.
Dagger woke with a start at the sounds of distress in the room next to his. It wasn't nearly loud enough to have been heard through the walls, but like all those who had a charge in a different room he had a comm line linked to a microphone in the spare room so they could give their charges an illusion of privacy. He listened for a moment longer, trying to gather a sense of what he'd be walking into, and slid from his berth to walk to the door of the second berthroom. After another pause he stood carefully to the side as it opened.

Nothing charged. No snarl. No hint that the mech inside had a clue it was open. Only the low whine and whimpers came from the dark room as Dagger looked in.

Prowl was on the berth, a blanket tangled around him and twitching in unconscious distress.

"Prowl?" he called from the doorway, pitching his voice a bit louder as he waited impatiently to see if he got a response. "Prowl? Are you alright?" His initial reaction was to immediately wake his charge but startling any traumatized warrior was never a good idea. It wouldn't help him earn Prowl's trust if he wound up making a trip to medical for something that basic. Instead he reached towards the recharging mech, trying to use his voice and field to help soothe him from a distance. The first touch of their fields made it clear enough this was a memory loop, an unpleasant one, but nothing too serious. He could teek and almost hear Prowl beginning to boot up and reminded himself of how long it had taken in medical the previous orn.

On the up side, while still heavily stressed and disoriented, Prowl's field was quickly settling into a calmer state as he booted.

"That's good. It's just Dagger. You're safe," he spoke as much to fill the uneasy silence as to reassure Prowl.

His comm pinged at high importance from Aurora.

::Yes, Master Aurora?::

::Your charge seems to be in some distress. Please allow Thundercracker in if you can. He's extremely agitated by Prowl's state:::

::I didn't know they were that closely connected given how much time Prowl spent in stasis, but I guess it makes sense given he was the first to link to Wing. I'll let Thundercracker in as soon as he gets here, but it will probably take some time for Prowl to finish booting from the memory loop. Let me know if the others also react to his distress::: Dagger answered, mulling over having the Seeker present when Prowl finished booting. It would probably help his charge stabilize to have a member of his unit present, even if the two were originally opponents back on Cybertron.
He pinged the door open when the Seeker knocked and knew immediately that Thundercracker had been woken by the distress along their gestalt bond. It was hard not to stare and try to help the distressed and unpainted mech, but he knew it wasn't his place yet.

"He's booting up now. It was just a bad memory replay," Dagger tried to assure him.

"He has enough of them," Thundercracker murmured and approached the room even more cautiously than Dagger had.

"He's safe," Dagger was sure of it, but Aurora's caution really had his attention.

"For a Praxian, certainly. Even for most frametypes. For a Seeker, not until he is fully aware," she explained the careful positioning where they could see Prowl but he didn't have a good angle for lunging. "Seekers were almost exclusively Decepticon during the war and there is some personal history there with Prowl more than Jazz."

"Prowl was a ranking officer in Praxus during the assault that leveled the city, which I was in the command trine during. It was his duty to predict that we were coming and how to stop us. He couldn't and still takes it personally," Thundercracker spelled out the basics Aurora was unwilling to out him on. "Even with his explanation of my tactical value and the gestalt code I find it amazing he hasn't even tried to rip my wings off. I know it wouldn't have saved Starscream."

"Starscream earns it every time he opens his mouth," Aurora said dryly and Thundercracker didn't contradict the truth.

"Oh," Dagger murmured, trying to process that and couldn't, not really.

"It is not a secret," Prowl said while booting his optics. "My apologies for disturbing so many. I am not usually so loud." His optics brightened and cycled twice. "You are finally mourning it all."

"You didn't disturb me, it is my duty as a medic to check on patients," Dagger said calmly, still grappling with the realization that Seekers, just like the Vosians he worked and served with, had destroyed his home city.

"The gestalt bond allowed me to feel your distress, and yes, I can finally begin to process and mourn properly," Thundercracker admitted.

"How new is the bond upgrade?" Prowl pushed himself up, then to his pedes. He wasn't as steady as he had been walking from the medbay, but not so unsteady that it couldn't just be from moving before he had completely booted. It was always the finger motor controls that were loaded last, so Dagger did nothing more than kept an optic on him.

"In the last decaorn. Wing was the first I could connect with reliably, Deadlock is still the most difficult. This bond works in a very similar way to a trine bond," Thundercracker explain and gradually relaxed when it became clear that Prowl was indeed still going to tolerate him.

"I'm not surprised. You were already emotionally close to Wing, and triad coding is similar enough to cross over on occasion," Prowl flicked his doorwings in acceptance, though he did look at Thundercracker for an explanation when the Seeker's bare wings flared wide in shock.

"That I was not aware of," the Seeker admitted.

"No reason for you to be. It was almost unheard of even in Praxus before the war. Afterwards it was difficult to find the mecha who could make it work. It still saved a several Autobot Seekers, so it's remembered," Prowl shrugged a doorwing, and Thundercracker lowered his in acceptance as he
thought about it.

"There aren't many triads here either," Dagger admitted, pleased to see that Wing's observations about the pair were still holding true. They were being more than just civil to one another. It did bode well for Prowl being able to interact with the Seekers here in the Citadel.

"Wing finds the bond interesting and has been experimenting with it; Deadlock has mostly been trying to ignore it or close it off," Thundercracker shrugged.

Prowl nodded slightly, a reflexive mimicking of his doorwings from spending so much time around wingless frames. "Energon?" he asked Dagger politely.

"This way," he respectfully guided the two Seekers and Prowl away from the smaller room before anyone started to feel too cramped. Grabbing a few cubes from the stash he'd acquired in the hope it would put Prowl a bit more at ease he offered one first to Aurora and then to the others. Sitting down, he asked curiously, "So some of the Autobot Seekers managed to triad bond with Praxians? Or was it with Combat Aerials from other cities?"

"Both. It's easier to trine with Combat Aerials, particularly those with more Seeker than average in their coding, but a few did form a triad bond with one or two Praxians, or those who agreed to have the coding uploaded and it was enough. Unlike trine coding, which doesn't seem to work without the entire coding package, triad coding is compatible with most. So any Seeker that was willing did find something close enough to a trine to function. The rest did whatever they did to keep going," Prowl explained between appreciative sips of the quality regular grade energon. "Is this the local standard?"

"Yes, I can see about acquiring some other flavors if you're interested. Do you have any preferences or would you prefer to experiment and see what we have?" Dagger offered, fascinated by what Prowl was saying even as he could teek the discomfort in both Seekers. It was a bit spark-wrenching to realize the kind of sacrifices those who had remained behind had been forced to make.

"Flavors?" Prowl focused on him with a mixture of blank, surprise and belated comprehension.

"It's been ages since there was anything worth calling a flavorant," Thundercracker sighed. "Though I remember before the war enjoying a few."

"I had them longer, largely because I like acidicly bitter. I have no idea if it's still true," Prowl admitted before savoring another mouthful. "What is this mix?"

"Half solar, half magma. They're the two main production methods here, so most energon is half of each," Dagger explained with a smile to cover how disturbing it was to hear of the equivalent of Axe not having any options for energon.

"Even before the war magma was something I could rarely afford once a vorn. Even Praxian Quartz was easier to get," Prowl sank into good memories again, and no one commented on the small smile that crept across Thundercracker's face at it and the teek.

"It was quite the expensive import, though not nearly as difficult to get as hydro. That was what we usually drank on special occasions," Thundercracker hummed thoughtfully.

"What kind?" Dagger was genuinely curious.

"Graduations, promotions, mechling and adult upgrades, and to the survivors of the Rite of the Storm Flight when we could. Everyone wanted it that decaorn though, so we usually couldn't complete with the wealthy flocks."
"Well, we don't have a lot of Praxian Quartz or hydro given this world is mostly desert, but we can get a few other kinds of regular energon like wind at fairly reasonable prices. There are also a lot of experiments with different flavorings we could try. For example, you might find you like magma and aluminum."

Dagger discretely acknowledged a ping from Dart's comm, figuring it had something to do with the Knight's charge. :Yes, Dart?:

::Dagger, is it okay for Jazz and I to come by and check on Prowl? He's hiding it fairly well, but I can tell he wants to see that he's functional.:: Dart asked.

::Prowl's doing good. Thundercracker and Aurora have joined us for breakfast, you're welcome too,: Dagger told him.

"I would like to experiment. Who's coming?" Prowl asked. "I'm a walking tactical center. I caught the comm from Dart even if I didn't listen in," he explained at Dagger's startled look. Thundercracker chuckled softly and Aurora smiled in amusement behind her cube.

"Dart and Jazz are coming to join us for breakfast," Dagger recovered with a grin even as he made a note not to try and hide any comm activity from Prowl. At least to him, Prowl had made it politely clear that he was quite capable of hacking into just about any comm and he wasn't in an effort to be polite. Getting up, he grabbed another cube for Prowl and two for Jazz and Dart. After a thought, he also grabbed the small containers of aluminum, nickel and arsenic and set them down on the table. "Wing and Marwir will probably drop in a bit later since he's still cleaning windows."

"Still?" Prowl glanced between Dagger and Thundercracker.

"He broke some serious regs bringing us here. He's on punishment detail for half a century," Thundercracker explained, one command officer to another.

Prowl nodded and relaxed, only to tense with a knock on the door before Dagger pinged it to open. "Morning, Jazz, Dart," he greeted the pair as Jazz made his typically bouncy entrance with a smiling but more sedate Dart behind him.

"Glad to see you mobile again. So it worked, that crazy idea actually worked?" Jazz grinned at the Praxians.

"Legal protocols are still debating that, though it is promising that it wasn't immediately rejected," Prowl told him calmly. "Have you tried the flavorants they have yet?" he motioned to the small containers Dagger had brought out. "The arsenic is very bitter," he added with almost a purr for it.

"I've been sticking mostly to iron oxide and copper myself, but a bit of nickel does sound good this morning." Jazz dashed a small bit into his cube before settling in his seat next to Dart. "Everything good with you, Thundercracker?"

"Yes. I am settled from the abrupt boot. In general I am adapting well. It has been surprisingly easy to slip back into civilian life," the Seeker responded.

"Dart's been showing me some new dances," Jazz said as he took a quick drink. "We're working on a few dance routines although Wing hasn't had time to work with us on the sky routine yet."

"I'm sure he will learn quickly," Thundercracker defended his adopted creation smoothly.

"Sky routine?" Prowl cocked his helm along with his doorwings, giving more frame language than Jazz was used to. "Is there some kind of competition?"
"There are some of those we can enter, but we're in the planning stages for a display for the Showcase," Jazz said with a bit of pride. "We're looking to incorporate similar stunts like the ones we used on the poles and ledges when we were sparring with Wing."

"The Showcase is still held, here?" Prowl couldn't hide his surprise, or how pleased he was. He focused on Aurora. "Does it still contain Cybertronian history?"

"Yes, though unlike the one you knew the history of the Knights of Light is now written alongside the Prime's in the Hall of History, and much of what was censored about those in power is now written, least anyone forget why we no longer live on our homeworld," she smiled and lifted her wings in pleasure at his smile and its honesty. "In this city, the Order is as important as the Primes, Royals and Senate were on Cybertron, though we do not hold nearly as much power. There is a civilian government that most interact with instead of us."

"I hope that balance continues to work here," Thundercracker stared momentarily at his cube before taking another drink. "and I would also be interested in learning more about how this city developed and operates."

"History has its place, but I'm interested in all the new music, food and art styles that's developed here," Jazz said.

"You would be," Prowl almost chuckled, his frame language taking the sting out of what had once been a sharp retort of disapproval. "Fortunately there seem to be enough who keep history relevant that there is space for your interests as well."

Jazz lifted an optic ridge at that, but it was Thundercracker who explained it.

"Music, cuisine and art are all important to society, but not so important as remembering how not to destroy yourself and your people. If no one in power remembers what happened, it will happen again."

"I guess, but even when we do know, we still make a lot of the same mistakes," Jazz shrugged. "Guess part of my job's always been keeping something of civilization alive so we can rebuild it."

"It's not a bad purpose, just not the one Thundercracker and I have," Prowl gave possibly the most ringing endorsement of Jazz the mech had ever heard, short of "trust him to get the job done".

"We all have our roles to play in society," Dagger said quietly, enjoying the quiet moment watching these three interact. It was another positive sign that they could learn to live in a peaceful community again. After a quick check of the time, he politely excused himself and pinged Marwir.

::Master Marwir? Would you and Wing like to join the six of us for your dinner?:

::Yes. Prowl is doing well then? Wing became very agitated a few breems ago, then calmed down. I'm sure he still wishes to check on his gestalt mate,:: she replied. ::We will be done in a couple breems. Your quarters or a common room?:

::We're in my quarters. I'll make certain the balcony is clear for you.:: Dagger turned his attention back to the others. Adding them would be a tight fit, so they might want to shift to another room eventually, especially if Deadlock showed up. "Sorry, I was just inviting Marwir and Wing. They'll be here in a bit."

"He's been worried about you; we all have," Thundercracker admitted. "The medical technology here has remained at a much higher level than what we possessed."
"Ratchet would be jealous," Jazz said trying to keep things a bit lighter.

"I expect it has advanced considerably. They have been at peace nearly as long as we've been at war," Prowl reminded them. "I do agree Ratchet would be jealous, and most of the others shocked at what was once possible."

"Indeed. Imagine what Ratchet could accomplish with facilities such as these," Thundercracker hummed. "He might even manage to fix Megatron."

"Megatron might be too far gone by now for that to happen, but if anyone could do it it'd be Ratchet. He can work miracles with a lot less than this." Jazz glanced over at the balcony. "That them?"

"It's a moot point, but he was an amazing visionary and leader early on. I saw the instability, but it wasn't as if we had many options at the time," Thundercracker said thoughtfully.

"Yes, that is Wing and Marwir," Aurora answered Jazz as the pair landed and walked in. The white Knight smiling warmly at them all and bounded over to give Prowl a hug that made doorwings shoot up with a startled sound.

"It's good to see you functional again, Prowl." Wing said cheerfully as he pulled back still gripping the Praxian's shoulders. "How do you like the Citadel so far?"

"The energon is good, the berth is soft, the washrack pool is wonderful and no one has tried to shoot me yet," Prowl summarized what he'd experienced so far. "Someone with knowledge of Enforcer coding has successfully given my legal protocols enough to keep them in debate whether it is a legal order to accept Dai Atlas as my Lord of Law."

"That's really good news," Jazz piped up. "This long would have found a good enough reason not to if it's there."

"That is true, though I cannot accept any orders until the report is finalized," Prowl acknowledged.

"I'll be showing you more of the Citadel later today if you're interested," Dagger promised.

"Would you be interested in watching a training demonstration or two?" Wing asked, remembering how he'd vowed to encourage Prowl's interest in the Knights.

"Yes and yes," Prowl flicked his doorwings to them both, and nodded as well. "I would also be interesting in sparring properly, though I understand if arming me is unacceptable."

"What kind of weapons?" Aurora asked seriously.

"Two short swords like yours, or a short sword and buckler, would be my primary preferences. My formal sparring style is Teris-Spi, though I have significant training in other forms for practical reasons," Prowl told her.

She shifted her wings thoughtfully and pinged several others. After a short conversation she nodded. "If Wing or a Master is your opponent, we agree you may be armed. If you spar with Dagger, it must be unarmed."

"Thank you," Prowl inclined both helm, frame and doorwings to her.

"It'll be good to practice with you again," Wing grinned and finally moved away from Prowl to grab a cube and sit down casually on Thundercracker's lap to the amusement of everyone. "I'm looking forward to watching you spar. We might even be able to talk Axe into to go a round or two with
you. He's always interested in a new challenge."

"There are a number of Knights who would be willing to spar with you, unarmed or otherwise," Dart agreed, ignoring Wing's antics, though he was warmed by the way the hardened Seeker all but cooed about it.

"I believe I would enjoy that, as time allows," Prowl didn't really smile, but to those that knew him, there was a pleasure there.

"So what's this about a washrack pool?" Jazz asked as the energon was mostly gone.

"There's a hot oil pool in the largest of the Citadel washracks. When I saw how much he liked heat in the shower, I thought he might like that too," Dagger explained.

"Which I do," Prowl added. "I believe it is open to all."

"It is," Dagger assured them all.

"That was a luxury even before the war," Jazz purred at the thought.

"Oh yeah, and I have to introduce everyone to some of the confections here!" Wing grinned at his gestalt mates.

"I don't think anyone is up for major trips through the city just yet, but we can certainly bring some treats in for everyone to sample," Aurora said firmly, earning a great deal of interest from the gestalt.

"The oil pool should be available if we want to head there," Dagger offered. "I can comm Kimark and see if they'll meet us there."

"That is one luxury that even Deadlock will be eager to enjoy," Wing snickered and hopped to his pedes, the last of his energon downed and the cube dissipated.

"I can't think of anyone who wouldn't," Jazz teased him playfully as the group shuffled into the hall and towards the large washrack.

"It is truly large enough for everyone?" Thundercracker asked.

"Definitely. It was designed with socializing in mind," Wing chirped.

"There are smaller ones about as well. The one in the medical bay is large enough for Dai Atlas, so most of us think of it as sized for three or four. And a couple other washracks have a smaller one, suitable for half a dozen or so," Dagger added.

::Kimark,:: Dagger commed. ::Would you and Deadlock care to join us in the large oil pool? The rest of the gestalt is together and socializing well. I imagine Prowl would like to check on the last member of his unit.::

After a klik, Kimark responded, ::Deadlock's being his usual self, but we'll meet you there.::

"They're coming," Dagger added for everyone, but largely out of an awareness that Prowl would be suspicious of any comm he didn't hear the results of.

"How has Deadlock been handling this?" Prowl asked politely.

"He's enjoying sparring with Kimark and some of the other Knights," Dart said. "The two of them have a similar background and have found things in common, besides just interfacing and fighting."
Although he's a bit courser than most who've joined us, we've dealt with integrating aggressive warriors in the past."

"He's not as connected through the bond as the rest of us, but that'll probably change as time goes," Wing admitted.

"It has to do with emotional connections," Thundercracker supplied. "The more willing one is to allow or embrace a connection, the stronger it will be. Prowl and I are open by coding and upbringing. Wing by nature and a bit of coding. Jazz and Deadlock have difficulty by their experiences if I've read them right."

"Jazz?" Dart cycled his optics and looked between them.

Jazz just shrugged. "ISO lifer. Not exactly a function that encourages trust."

"That is quite true," a light, fairly high voice yipped as a fluffy brown turbofox trotted up to join them near the central washrack of the Citadel.

"Hay Demeter," Wing greeted her cheerfully.

"You going to join us and meet Prowl, Demeter?" Dart asked.

"For a time. I'm curious about the mech I have heard so much about," she admitted easily.

"Who did you hear of me from?" Prowl asked with a curious look.

"Wing lately, a bit from Jazz, no small amount from Dai Atlas and Axe and a lot from Talon," she answered.

"Why do your leaders know of me? They were long gone from the military by the time I joined. Who is Talon that he knows of me?" Prowl's doorwings gave an inquiring shift.

"As they put it, anyone of your skill and talent would be enough to shift the balance of the war and was worth keeping an optic on. Talon is a Praxian and tactician, and you interest him as such," she explained.

"You were also one of the main tacticians in charge of the Autobots during the Exodus, and we had to take that into account as we were leaving," Dart admitted. "Talon would be interested in talking over some past cases and learning why you chose certain courses of action."

"As long as they are not still classified, I am willing," Prowl agreed readily. His doorwings began to twitch as he saw the door to the largest washrack in the Citadel and the hot oil it promised.

"That is so cute," Jazz giggled as quietly as he could.

"We'll see how you act when Dart and I take you out clubbing," Wing snickered back as Prowl ignored the commentary behind him while following Dagger through the door. A pair of Knights just drying off greeted Wing and the others but made no move to try and join them as Dagger headed straight for the oil bath. It was a pool, truly, deep enough in the middle for Dai Atlas to stand waist deep and large enough for the entire group of eleven to lounge comfortably.

No one was surprised that Prowl was the first in, but everyone except Deadlock paused to watch just how the liquid heat transformed his frame language and all but shut his processors down in bliss. Dagger had seen Prowl's reaction before and focused part of his attention on the others as he slipped into the oil and found a spot that suited them. Most of them seemed surprised that something so
simple could have such an impact on the tactician, although Thundercracker paused and looked a bit pensive as he watched before he joined the others in the pool. Deadlock had simply climbed in and let the oil cover most of his frame, ignoring everyone else. Dagger couldn't tell whether he was truly uninterested in Prowl's reaction or just trying to be his own odd version of polite by treating him normally.

Wing was next in and soon they were all settling. Mostly it went Knight-charge-Knight-charge, but Jazz made a point of getting the spot next to Prowl and smoothly meshed their fields to a polite level.

"You really do enjoy this," Jazz said softly.

"You believed the reports were exaggerating," Prowl chuckled, his optics off as he almost floated in the shimmering oil.

"Well, yeah. If ya liked it that much, ya should have had one in your quarters," Jazz pointed out.

"The resources involved outweigh the benefits," Prowl barely shrugged his doorwings.

"I think the officer core and most of the enlisted would disagree," Jazz chuckled. "A relaxed Prowl is ever so much easier to deal with."

"It would have ruined the workaholic image everyone heard so much about even on our side," Deadlock pointed out.

"Ratchet would have had it arranged as a stress reliever for you," Jazz agreed. "He was always complaining you strained your systems too much."

"He likely would, which is why I made sure he never learned. A hot oil pool, even a small one, is very expensive to run. I did well enough with the spas that survived until recently," Prowl insisted without any real force to it. He was far too mellow to really insist.

"Well, you'll have lots of access to them here. The city has a number of spas available, and you could always earn enough shanix to have one installed once you're in your own quarters," Dagger said with a small grin, throwing the offer out as a further incentive for the tactician to stay.

"Something for the future, to consider," Prowl murmured, almost oblivious to what was outside his field.

Jazz smiled a bit sadly at the mech he was coming to grips with the truth about, and how little he knew about a mech that should have been something of a priority. How much was he leaning now because of Prowl's damage, and how much because Prowl was no longer trying to hide it from him? Either way, it was time to leave the mech in peace. A subtle glance around and he picked out his next target to chat up.

"So, got any exciting plans for the next few orns, Thundercracker?"

"Master Aurora and her trine have been helping me improve my grammar and remember the proper social dynamics for my introduction to the civilian Seeker flocks," Thundercracker replied after hesitating for a moment. "My creation flock was of a more military bent than most of the Seekers who joined the Exodus."

"It is not surprising. The loyalties of those in the Air Martials and military to Vos are well known even here," Aurora soothed him. "We would have like to have more of your kind come. Some arts were lost with you."
Thundercracker lifted an optic ridge at her.

"The variant of Skykato that the Air Martials practiced, the skills of long-range targeting, how to deal with the overcharged or damaged safely, among other things. So few came that none of them were masters," she explained.

"Thundercracker's mastered both, and I'm one of the best snipers on either side of the war," Prowl told her.

"How did you find time for that too?" Deadlock groused, though he didn't actually contradict him.

"I didn't. The same hardware and software that allows for basic movement is used for targeting. When I turn my full tactical suite to calculating how to hit something, I hit it," Prowl told him simply. "It is much the same way I master martial arts so quickly. Anything involved in physics or based on computations is something I pick up very rapidly."

"Fascinating, but why does sniping matter?" Dagger looked between the ranking Knights.

"Because it is a skill. There are such weapons in the vault, even if no Knight would use them," Aurora told him.

"And no civilian is allowed to," Thundercracker didn't really guess. "This really is an unarmed city outside the Citadel walls."

"Yes," Aurora nodded and canted her wings to him.

"The Knights will handle close combat, but those weapons may be needed by the Peacekeepers if slavers discover us and decide to attack," Wing said quietly, remembering the group he'd encountered who'd helped cause this whole mess.

"Sniping is also useful for Enforcers and Air Martials if a criminal has a hostage," Thundercracker pointed out.

"Something we have yet to deal with," Aurora told them. "We are still largely within the first and second generation, mecha who worked hard to build the city, and their creations. We hope it will be some time before any criminals of that seriousness happen."

"It is still best to be prepared. Most hostage situations I am aware of are not criminals like that. They are panicking, desperate mecha, often with processor damage. Negotiation often works with them, though they are also the least predictable," Prowl said quietly, his frame settling into a light recharge while his processors drifted and his senses only picked up enough to keep track.

"The desperation that cause many of the crimes we experienced does not appear to be a part of this city, but I have to agree with Prowl. It's best if there are already procedures in place before the situation occurs. Whether it is crime, an accident or a natural disaster, the best way to minimize the danger is to plan before it occurs," Thundercracker said, watching Prowl relax with a soft smile.

"We have, within the skill sets available. Natural disasters and accidents are well covered with plans in place and specialized teams that can be called on as needed. Both your input would be welcome, however. I expect Prowl in particular has more experience with such management than everyone who came with us combined," Aurora told them, getting a doorwing wiggle from Prowl to indicate he was willing. "Some skills simply were not a priority to recruit and we had to leave with little notice. Ranged weapons were one of the skills that didn't make it to landing."

"We did amazingly well, when you look at expectations compared to how many made it, but we still
lost over half the fleet before we reached Aelios," Wing added.

"What were the expected losses?" Jazz asked cautiously.

"Dai Atlas planned assuming a 70% loss rate. That we only suffered 42% losses was somewhat shocking when we accepted that we'd settle here," Wing told them.

"Dai Atlas expected that high a casualty rate and still elected to go through with the plan?" Thundercracker said as he and Prowl both twitched at the idea of such losses being acceptable for any plan involving civilians. Even Deadlock looked mildly disturbed by the idea.

"The losses would have been lower if the Autobot commanders had obeyed Prowl's orders and not fired on you," Jazz grumbled.

"Yes, the three ships we lost in orbit. At least one, maybe even two might have made it here," Wing nodded.

"It was the best idea, the only idea, with any chance of survival for Cybertronian society, or for the Order," Wing said quietly. "He spent two millennia becoming a Master just to have a voice in what would happen."

"We would have listened, though he was correct that we listened much more willingly to such an extreme idea after he joined the Circle of Masters," Aurora corrected him lightly. "Dai Atlas had a great deal of experience with such expeditions as well. No one else would have dared given the situation."

"He did it a lot under Nova," Wing added. "Find a world, set up a base of operations, hold it until it was a viable outpost and move on to the next world. If anyone could pull it off, it was Dai."

"That much is true, though the fleet he was used to traveling with was a military one," Prowl murmured, still processing what the giant had managed to talk these people into and the desperation required to think a three in ten chance was better than either faction.

"Long before he became a Senior many of us could already see that conflict was coming given the imbalances and corruption in the world outside the Citadel," Dart said quietly. "Dai Atlas was one of the few here who realized how devastating that war would become to Cybertron as a whole."

"He saw what I did," Prowl sighed, his doorwings twitching in agitation. "You were lucky he was not as bound by coding as most military mecha."

"Him or his mate," Kimark agreed with a hint of admiration. "We're lucky that they picked the Citadel as the place to hide when they resigned. Nova didn't take it too well."

"Understatement of the ages, mech," Jazz laughed. "Primus, he doubled the curses I knew just on those two. Of course, I didn't know all that many back then, but it was still something to watch from a safe distance. Never seen a mech so angry, and that includes old bucket helm at his worst."

"You think Nova Prime was worse than Megatron?" Thundercracker couldn't help his surprise.

"Towards the end, yeah," Jazz nodded seriously. "Megatron's not half as violent as Nova was in those final vorns."

"Nova was also the Prime so no one was willing to stand against him until it was almost too late," Wing agreed. "Dai Atlas mentioned that he got crazier the longer he served. He also said that seemed to happen to a lot of the Primes he served."
"Confirmed," Jazz shivered slightly. "A true Prime won't, but they're crazy-rare."

"What makes a true Prime?" Prowl was suddenly fully focused on Jazz, and so was everyone else.

"Well, basically ... the way I was taught, there are two kinds of Primes. Those that just bear the Matrix, and those that bond with it. The first kind go insane if they last long enough. The second pass peacefully, if they last long enough. Standing theory was that a bearer is driven insane by the Matrix energy, while those that bond with it might suffer other ways, but it doesn't damage their processors," Jazz struggled to explain something he only really knew by rote. "Nobody I know of really knows though. That's just what records and the really old ones say about it."

"So why do we keep using this thing if it drives almost everyone who carries it crazy?" Deadlock asked with a huff. "Doesn't sound very useful to me."

"That insanity is one of the forces behind Starscream's issue with the idea of a Prime as planetary leader," Thundercracker admitted, watching Prowl's reaction as he mentioned his former trine mate. The tension and low growl of Prowl's engine was, to be honest, pretty mild as far as the expected range went. Distance and hot oil really did seem to do wonders there.

"The times when the Senate or Priests selected the candidates were usually the ones went crazy if they lasted long enough," Jazz shrugged. "Which, since it was power, they did their level best to make sure they did. Optimus is the first one since Guardian to actually bond to the Matrix."

"If I recall that correctly, it was quite the event. I'm sure your master was behind the real Matrix being out there that orn," Prowl actually chuckled.

"I will not confirm or deny that," Jazz gave him a smile, pleased that Prowl seemed to agree with it.

"If what you have said about the Primes is true, then we will need to update the historical records so everyone knows," Aurora said quietly. "It does explain much of what happened before the Exodus."

"Even if Optimus is a true Prime as you say, his ascension was too late to stop the war," Thundercracker sighed. "With so many insane Primes in living memory, very few on our side truly trusted him or anyone else in power."

"That much, regrettably, we agree on," Prowl sighed as he settled into the oil once more, only his face above the shimmering surface. "My own calculations and Jazz's reports are a large part of why I never pursued a peace treaty more aggressively. It would have been much simpler if I'd been allowed to run the war for a few more vorns. It is what it is, however."

"I think I am glad you didn't," Thundercracker concealed his shiver at the idea of the cold calculations and darkness he felt from Prowl in their merges having had a few more vorns in charge, unfettered by Optimus's morals.

"We could debate what if's forever, and I know a few historians who would welcome the discussion. It's a possibility that didn't happen then and isn't really worth contemplating now except in theory," Wing said firmly, privately agreeing with Thundercracker.

"A debate better left alone," Prowl agreed, though every one of his gestalt mates knew he'd managed to edit what he said this time, even if they didn't know what.

"I gotta question," Deadlock looked over at Aurora with an odd smirk. "Now that Prowl's up and moving when can Flightplan come out and play?"

"Not until he decides what his future is," she said firmly.
"I am up and mobile, however I have not yet determined the legality of the order I was given," Prowl explained.

"What order?" Deadlock scowled at him.

"To accept Dai Atlas as my Lord of Law," Prowl said easily. "Makes sense," Jazz said. "He's an incredible general and as Sovereign of the Knights he already holds that job under a different title. From what I've heard the Praxians here certainly hold him in that regard."

"Yes, though as a legal title it is not one he has," Prowl summed up the core of what his coding was tangling with. "This city also does not hold official recognition in the line of alliance with Praxus. It makes it complicated."

"Would the Praxian enclave here count as a colony of the original city?" Thundercracker asked, curious how Prowl's coding was deciphering everything.

"Not legally, as it was not authorized to my knowledge. However Lord Red Csillag of House Fairwinds may have the authority as the highest ranked Praxian noble still functioning. If she is then she becomes the Lord of Praxus by law, even if not in practice. It is a massively complex thing to determine, one which I was not coded to determine."

"Who still survives that has the authority to make that determination? After all, you are one of the highest ranked surviving Praxian Enforcers." Wing asked.

"It is a legal specialty, similar to inheritance law, not a rank. I can work through it, it just takes a very long time to get to her," Prowl attempted to explain. "To my knowledge, no one here would have that information. A true Barasi might, the Prime would, of which neither are here."

"True Barasi?" Wing questioned.

Prowl paused to organize himself before answering. "One that has been trained to the old standards, elected and acknowledged by the others and the Prime. While Lelku has the title, it did not come officially. The difference between practical law and the glyph of the law. These are not matters that have much wiggle room."

"If there's anything we can do to help you figure things out just let us know," Wing offered. "Haji knows business law very well, and he has a lot of contacts with other lawyers in different fields as well."

"I will, if I can think of anything," Prowl promised. "Unfortunately the bulk of what would make this easier was destroyed with Praxus. The lines of kinship and what order the nobles deactivated in. At this point it is predominantly an act of officializing it in my own records for when I am asked. Even if I select incorrectly, so long as the legal protocols are followed, there is very little damage to my credibility done."

Jazz couldn't quite stop the concerned look on his features at the way Prowl was talking and not making a lot of sense.

"A slap on the wrist instead of potential charges of treason," Aurora spoke up with a round of looks that warned everyone to shut up about this.

"Exactly," Prowl answered.
Thundercracker shifted to reach over and touch Jazz's arm. "It's a legal dance, a coding thing. It's standard."

"Makes sense," Dagger said, even though it was far removed from what he was used to handling. Following Aurora's silent order, he turned to the warrior on the other side of the pool, "So, Deadlock, what are your plans for today?"

"Sparring and interfacing," Deadlock said with a leer. "You interested?"

"Sparring, as long as Prowl is interested in watching," he chuckled. "The 'facing would leave me too distracted to do my duty."

"I will," Prowl agreed lazily.

"You free after we're done here or do you need some time to warm up first?" Deadlock asked.

Dagger chuckled, "Prowl and I don't have any real plans for today, so we'll be able to spar after this."

"Maybe a couple other matches can be set up before you're done," Wing grinned cheekily.

"I know at least one," Marwir agreed tolerantly. "You always need a reminder why I'm the Master and you aren't."

"Well, I'm always up for a spar with the you, Marwir," Wing said lazily as he moved a bit closer to Thundercracker.

"I'd like to test myself against you as well, Deadlock, if you're interested," Dart offered.

It was debatable whether Prowl made a point of sitting as close to as many Knights as he could or whether they surrounded him as the group and half a dozen others settled into places on the stadium bench seating around the display field. Either way, Prowl was clearly where he wanted to be. With his gestalt but within easy hearing of as many Knights as possible. It wasn't as if there was a bad view in the place even if it had been full. The fact that all the seating was designed to accommodate wings made a pleasant change from most Autobot seating. Wing had settled next to Prowl with Thundercracker sitting on the other side of the Aerial. Deadlock and Kimark were facing off on the sparring ground, and Wing seemed excited to watch the fight.

"Does Deadlock understand he doesn't have a chance?" Prowl asked anyone who cared to answer.

"I don't think he really cares about the odds of winning," Jazz answered with a shrug. "Kimark is a good opponent for him; he knows how to keep Deadlock from flipping out during a fight even when he loses."

"They have a similar background," Marwir agreed. "While Kimark's berserker trait was always more controlled than Deadlock's currently is, he has learned to control it admirably. It gives him insight into Deadlock few have."

"I believe his is a good match for civilizing Deadlock. The common background is more important with Deadlock than for most," Aurora added. "It will be a long path, but I believe Deadlock can make it."

"He also has us to help him make it," Wing said with a reluctant nod at the idea of Deadlock with Kimark. "Even though he is the least connected in the gestalt right now, he has already changed for
the better in the time I've known him."

"It would be difficult for him to change for the worse," Prowl commented dryly, though neither his field nor his frame spoke of it being meant to hurt. As he spoke Kimark did something fast and Deadlock was suddenly flying in an arc that didn't follow his momentum. It was a shift from the expected that had Prowl's full attention on working out what had just happened.

"He really doesn't like the unexpected, does he?" Dagger spoke softly to Wing.

"With a passion," Wing nodded while Deadlock got to his pedes and the pair began to circle again. "Something to do with being a tactician, I think."

"Surprises kill," Jazz shrugged. "At his level, surprises kill armies and cities, and can lose a war."

"Talon doesn't care much for surprises either," Wing gestured towards Aerial on the far edge of the group watching the fight. "I guess that is a tactician trait."

"That's different," Dart commented as Deadlock circled again and made another lunge at Kimark, diving for his legs.

"Deadlock likes being unpredictable," Thundercracker pointed out dryly.

"More proof there's a solid processor in there no matter what he says about it," Dart grinned.

"Are matches usually this quiet?" Jazz asked with a look around. Despite being nearly a score of mecha, no one was cheering, jeering, or yelling commentary.

"Yes, especially since Deadlock is still unfamiliar to most of the Knights and not even an Initiate," Dagger thought for a moment before continuing. "If Wing and I were doing a friendly spar there would might be a few comments from the observers, but overall we try to keep things respectful in the Citadel. Training is something we take seriously. If they wish to hear observations, those watching will gladly give critiques afterwards."

"Deadlock won't," Thundercracker said with the certainty of long experience with the processor set. "He'll never hear it as anything other than 'you aren't good enough.' It's not exactly useful."

"It takes an unusual Daoshi to teach someone like him," Marwir agreed, her optics sharp on the action below. "He can learn, however." She paused and looked down at her oldest surviving student. "It truly bothers you to see him with another."

"I know I need to do what is right for him, which may well be stepping aside and letting another train him. He has the option for other Daoshi even if I feel that he should be my Initiate," Wing reluctantly admitted. "The two of us have a connection which I believe is beyond the gestalt. He's asked me to teach him things, and he's listened when I offered advice. He even let me perform a binding."

"Then he may well still choose you. Remember, it is the Initiate's choice in the end. You are doing the right thing in allowing him to build another connection. It will strengthen the one with you when it is by choice rather than a default," she reminded him gently.

"The gestalt bond is drawing us closer in ways we never would have expected before it happened," Jazz reminded them as Deadlock crashed to the ground again. "It's influence parts of our coding."

"Has it begun to settle any, or is the rate of change still high, in your opinion?" Dagger asked politely.
"Everyone has noted that I'm still having increased sensitivity to emotional outbursts through the bond," Thundercracker shrugged and tipped his wings lightly.

"Just bad ones, or everything?" Dagger asked with the keen interest of a responsible medic.

"Good feelings transfer over the bond as well, although I'd already learned to recognize building overloads and block them out," Thundercracker grimaced. He really didn't want to feel his fledgling or the grounders in his flock overload.

Jazz snickered. "I'm sure you get a lot of practice at that one. Though it does explain some rather abrupt shifts in my mood," he said with a thoughtful hum.

"I'm sure," Marwir smirked at Wing. "Though it can be difficult to tell with some."

"It's not like I've ever denied I was a hedonist," he grinned back at her.

"No, you never have," Dart snickered.

Thundercracker sighed, "I'm going to get a lot more practice blocking the bond, aren't I? Well that will help me learn to block these bindings."

"It will, and you'll have attention if you want it soon. You are quite exotic to those who favor heavier frames," Aurora smiled at him. "There are some here."

"I'm looking forward to meeting them," Thundercracker's field rippled with pleasure at the idea of having potential long term company again. He'd missed having a lover's touch, and the single brief encounter during the trip had only increased that longing. Responses were put on hold as instead of going flying, Deadlock threw his mass to the side just as he made contact with Kimark, pulling the Knight to the ground with him in a tumbling wrestling match that had Prowl's sharp interest.

"This is your first form, isn't it?" Marwir asked softly.

"Yes, close quarters control of a suspect is the first type of combat every Enforcer must be ready for. It is rare for weapons to be involved once within arm's reach," Prowl twitched his doorwings.

"Other than claws," Thundercracker agreed, watching the combatants with a bit of renewed interest even though he didn't intend to fight grounders like this. He'd seldom had to engage in this sort of intense level of close combat back in Vos or in the war, and it was almost exclusively with Seekers in defending his rank and status.

"True," Prowl said, his optics and full sensor suite locked on the action, learning everything he could from it. "This is not the kind of fight that Dagger is likely to win."

"Even with my training Deadlock has a significant reach and weight advantage on me," Dagger agreed as Kimark twisted around and managed to straddle Deadlock's back, holding him in place even as he thrashed. "I would do better against him with swords."

"What do you believe your odds are, unarmed?" Prowl asked with genuine interest.

"Around 43% given what I've seen so far," Dagger said as Deadlock tried to twisted out from under Kimark. "Kimark's a difficult opponent for me, and Deadlock has many of the same techniques."

"Much less refined and far more instinctive," Prowl agreed. "When you blank out what side he's on
in battle, he is very impressive to watch."

"All right, all right, I yield," Deadlock growled and stopped struggling.

"Good fight, you're already picking up some of my moves," Kimark grinned and twisted to his pedes before offering a hand to his opponent. As Deadlock got to his pedes, Kimark looked up at Dagger. "Still want to take your chances at getting trounced by an outsider?"

"Yes, new challenges help keep me from getting rusty. It'll be good to face a new opponent," Dagger said with a small smile, even as he settled himself mentally for the coming sparring match while he walked down to the floor and Kimark walked up to take a seat.

"How close to a real fight did you think that was?" Kimark asked anyone in the gestalt who cared to answer.

"Well, Deadlock didn't berserk so he wasn't treating it like combat back on Cybertron," Jazz said after a pause.

"It was closer to how he fought after the first few merges but before we escaped," Thundercracker agreed. "He was trying, but it wasn't a battle."

"Good to know my assessment agrees with yours," Kimark relaxed and grinned at the Praxian on the sparring floor, only to pause when he caught how tense Prowl suddenly became.

"Something wrong?" Wing asked, splitting his attention between the seated Praxian and the start of the match. Dagger was almost dancing around Deadlock trying to stay out of his grasp and doing a fine job of it.

"No," Prowl insisted even though every scrap of him all but screamed that he was lying. "It doesn't apply here."

"Dagger is a Knight as well as a medic," Kimark said as he watched the pair below for any trouble. "He's smaller than Deadlock, but he's used to sparring with that disadvantage. I've learned the hard way to be a bit cautious fighting medics; they tend to know weaknesses specific to frame types."

"So very true," Prowl chuckled weakly despite how much of him was demanding he get down there and between the pair fighting.

"It's because he's Praxian, isn't it?" Jazz suddenly looked at Prowl, who nodded.

"Because you are?" Kimark struggled to follow the logic he suspected was war related.

"Because there are more Autobot Seekers left than Praxians on all three sides and he's a Decepticon," Prowl ground out as he aborted another attempt his frame made to leap down.

"Would it help if you remind the AIs that this is a trained warrior sparring with a member of your unit?" Thundercracker asked, trying to find a solution to the problem that would let Prowl observe the match in relative peace. "Dagger is getting practice with someone who won't harm him but does use techniques he has less experience countering. He is also surrounded by friends and colleagues including other Praxian Knights." He made a small nod towards Talon and a couple of other Knights sitting and watching the pair on the floor.

"Some," Prowl grabbed the idea for all it was worth. While his frame remained tense enough that every Knight near him was keeping a sensor on him, ready to run interference if he got to his pedes, it settled significantly as far as Jazz was concerned. Personally, Jazz thought it was a good thing that
Prowl was feeling protective of a Knight even before he could accept staying here. It also spoke to how little he trusted Deadlock if the fight got hard, but no one in their right mind would trust a berserker not to lose it when pushed.

"Neither of them is armed, and this spar isn't intended to do much more than scratch paint," Aurora continued quietly, wanting to reinforce Thundercracker's words but not draw attention to the fact another, unfamiliar Seeker was speaking.

"Deadlock sparred with me a lot on the ship, and he never lost his temper even when I kept beating him," Wing agreed. "Watch their faces and posture, Prowl. They're both enjoying themselves."

"It's the only thing keeping me here," Prowl said evenly, though another bit of tension eased. "You aren't Praxian, Wing. This is about protecting one of only nine Praxian ground frames I know still function. It's not entirely logical, but it is strong."

"Did you ever protect Barricade?" Jazz suddenly asked. Prowl's flinch was as much an admission of guilt as anything he could say.

"Only in not targeting him for deactivation," Prowl said quietly. "I wanted him in the brig for the war to be reprogrammed once it was over."

"That would have been a good place for him or in stasis so he couldn't cause trouble," Thundercracker admitted. "Even before our flock formed I would have trusted Deadlock closer than I would Barricade." He didn't admit how close that actually was for either of them given they were trying to soothe Prowl's coding right now.

Dagger slipped under Deadlock's arm and danced aside as the warrior tried to tackle him. Deadlock spun around and lunged for the lighter mech's legs, but Dagger jumped over the attack. "Now that's closer to foreplay than real fighting," Kimark remarked.

"Somehow, I think Dagger knows it too," Wing giggled.

"Oh, he does, believe me," Kimark grinned. "He's not the impossible slut you are, but your Initiate got around once he earned his sword."

"I know it," Wing grinned back, proud of how far Dagger had come since arriving in the Citadel on Cybertron.

"Are there any Knights who don't regularly 'face anything willing?" Prowl asked dryly, though mostly in an effort to keep his thoughts on this as foreplay.

"Quite a few," Aurora chuckled. "Mostly the youngest and oldest. Supplicants and Initiates don't typically have the energy, and despite Wing, most older mecha grow bored with interfacing as more than an occasional thing."

"It's a way to strengthen the connections between us, especially since most civilians don't enter into long term relationships with Knights. Our ways are very different from what most of them are used to," Dart said.

"Much like Air Martials didn't tend to trine outside their own ranks. The primary exception was with those in the military who understood our ways and attitudes," Thundercracker observed.

"It is true of most subcultures that are noticeably different from those around them," Prowl proved he was paying attention to the conversation around him. "Praxian Enforcers almost never had an outsider mate. It simply wasn't a suitable existence for an outsider to join."
"Wait, you're telling me Enforcers just don't do relationships?" Jazz managed not to squawk at how alien that was.

"The unit provided everyone one needed. There was no cause to go outside it," Prowl had relaxed enough to shrug his doorwings.

"And without your unit?" Jazz asked more carefully.

"There was neither time nor opportunity to build that kind of trust again for the time I had any desire to," Prowl said simply.

"Well, you have time and opportunity to do that here," Aurora said. "The city's Peacekeepers choose the career rather than being created for it, but some of the culture will be similar to what you knew. They have expressed interest in working with you to gain the benefit of your experience as an Enforcer."

"It is from a very different world, though I will assist with what I can," he promised everything and nothing.

"You also have us," Wing reminded Prowl. "We are here for you."

"I have referred to the gestalt as my unit for some time now. The coding is clear about it. Real trust takes longer," Prowl told him. "I have the entirety of the war to overcome to trust anyone again. It takes time."

"We have the time to adjust," Wing agreed even as he grieved privately that Prowl could have spent so long among the Autobots and not have anyone he thought to trust personally. "The five of us will be together for a long time, and we all need to learn how to best fit together. We will inevitably make mistakes, but we will support each other and grow closer through the experiences."

"That is all true," Prowl agreed to the relief of those around them.

A low murmur brought Wing's attention back to the sparring floor as Deadlock snagged Dagger around the waist and tumbled him forward onto the ground and sprawled across the Praxian's back. "See, he's being careful of Dagger's doorwings. I bet they're both running pretty hot right now."

"So will Kimark be my guard tonight?" Prowl asked politely. His frame was still tense, but there was no longer a danger of him interrupting the wrestling match below.

"Would you be more comfortable if I stayed with you in Dagger's quarters until he comes back or would you rather hang out in my quarters until they're done?" Kimark agreed. He was curious to see if the Enforcer would tolerate the idea of leaving a fellow Praxian alone with Deadlock.

There was real hesitation and a mild grimace as Prowl worked through an entirely too complicated set of reactions. Eventually he sighed. "Dagger's quarters. I doubt I could rest in yours."

"Either is fine with me so if you're more comfortable there it works," Kimark watched Dagger thrash briefly under Deadlock before submitting. The pair stayed that way a bit before Deadlock stood up and pulled Dagger to his pedes, then off the floor to the snickers and chuckles of several Knights. "What would you like to do for the rest of the evening?"

Prowl gave a look at Aurora, then at Kimark. "I don't suppose we can spar until it is time to fuel?"

"There are several Knights here who would be interested in sparring with you. Do you have a particular opponent in mind?" Kimark asked as several Knights around them perked up at the
"No. I expect to have time to spar with any who wish to," Prowl relaxed slightly. "Though I would prefer if they remained unarmed as long as I am required to be."

"Sounds reasonable although sometimes it's a good challenge fighting an armed opponent. Ready to start?" Kimark said cheerfully as he headed back down to the sparring floor.

"Absolutely," Prowl's doorwings perked up and he followed. "I also agree on mixed weapons. It is just not for the best today. I have too much energy to burn off right now."

"It's not going to be a problem with your coding having you fight me after that is it?" Kimark asked they turned to face each other.

"Since I'm the one fighting, no problems," Prowl gave him a slight, knowing smile and settled into a relaxed defensive posture that was pure Praxian Enforcer. "It's watching another Praxian fight and not helping that is so difficult. Freestyle or formal?"

"Freestyle works for me," Kimark settled into his own stance, a mix of his old gladiator ways and his current form. He waited for a moment until Prowl was ready and then lunged. He caught Prowl's teek as they came close and made note of how calm the mech was despite the claim of being too jacked up to settle. The next thing he was aware of was looking up at the ceiling as Prowl sent him skidding towards the wall.

"You're good," Kimark said as he got back up and turned to face Prowl again. He approached again a bit more cautiously and kept a solid optic on the Praxian as Kimark feinted a grab towards his leg.

"I had a lot of time to occupy and a great deal of front line command to survive," Prowl responded with a twitch of his doorwings in pleasure at the praise. Instead of moving away from the feint, he stepped into it and drove the opposite knee into Kimark's side. Kimark twisted to grab at the leg even as he buckled a bit from the impact and was privately surprised when Prowl didn't seem to stop him and instead went down with him. A grunt escaped him when Prowl's surprisingly heavy mass dropped across his chest and ended with the arm that had grabbed Prowl's leg pinned under that leg and Prowl was after his free arm.

It was Prowl's field, the excitement, hint of arousal and definite enjoyment that made even a quick loss worth it, and Kimark wasn't about to let this be a quick pin. He was far better than that and stronger than he looked in his own right. Kimark arched up and rolled, trying to use leverage and brute strength to flip Prowl over. He didn't want to damage the mech's doorwings, but at this point he was certain Prowl was skilled enough to know how to avoid that sort of damage.

Just the teek when Prowl hit the ground under him confirmed that. It didn't matter whether it affected performance or not, every Praxian felt it when they landed badly.

A grin crossed Kimark's face in response to Prowl's building enjoyment as they wrestled. Prowl had much more diverse training to pull from, but Kimark had survived on his ability to pin a heavier opponent. It made for a very different kind of show than much of the audience was used to.

"Is it just me, or is Prowl smiling?" Jazz asked no one in particular.

"It's a bit creepy," Thundercracker agreed, a bit unnerved by the stoic tactician openly showing so much emotion.

"Why? He often displayed enjoyment when we were sparring," Wing asked. Aurora also looked at the pair next to them as the Knights watched the tumbling opponents on the sparring floor.
"Prowl doesn't smile. He doesn't show anything. Hasn't for as long as I've known him," Jazz tried to explain something he didn't really think of anymore. "The only times I've seen him even kinda smile before he was enslaved it was ... well, Megatron bolted and Prime ordered him to stand down. He's scary when he decided to smile. But it was never a smile like that. It was this 'I know something and you're about to wish for deactivation' type look. And he never sparred like this," he waved towards the pair rolling around for dominance on the floor with little effort to return the match to anything resembling a formal style.

"He did keep our matches to a more formal style," Wing agreed after some reflection. "Although he seemed to enjoy them and was very affectionate with me. He even suggested removing armor when we interfaced."

"That was after he was captured and his processor fried to barely being a drone," Jazz pointed out. "He hasn't been right since then."

"The idea that Prowl could smile would have locked up several processors back on Cybertron. Most of the Decepticon rumors made out Prowl to be emotionless and rule-bound, much how they perceived Soundwave," Thundercracker reflected a moment before continuing, "Shockwave was also calculating, but no Decepticon officer or soldier with any sense would compare Prowl or Soundwave to that sparkless monster."

"The rumors existed in both ranks," Jazz assured him. "Though I admit mostly I heard was the comparison to Soundwave, minus all the social protocols."

"Sounds like whatever did the damage was a good thing," Wing suggested. "Prowl's had moments of honest pleasure and enjoyment. He doesn't teek like the being you described."

"I'm not trying to say it's a bad thing. I just wonder what caused the change. The war's enough to make anybody close themselves off. But why is he acting like he probably did young?" Jazz shook his helm. "Just bothers me that he's so different."

"Perhaps we should discuss your concerns with Redline and possibly Dagger tomorrow. Redline will want to know the differences you perceive since it appears to be damage related, and he may already have answers since so much of Prowl's coding has already been mapped," Aurora said as Kimark once again tried to roll Prowl onto his back. Prowl turned with the Knight's weight rather than against it and kept the momentum going, flipping the pair across the sparring floor.

Somewhere in the twisting, rolling struggle, Prowl got a pede under himself and managed to kick himself upright and far enough away to land cleanly. The grin was even wider, his doorwings high and wide and he lunged forward as Kimark set his pedes to meet him.

"Might be a good thing," Jazz murmured, twitching as he registered that Prowl wasn't the only one acting seriously wrong. "How far is he on understanding the gestalt code?"

"The Masters were informed that he is still comparing the gestalt code in your systems to the original baseline gestalt coding as well as the information the two of you had about other versions of Shockwave's experiment," Aurora answered, watching the unfamiliar display with interest. It wasn't a form of combat most Seekers would enjoy, but these two opponents seemed to be reveling in the challenge.

"He cursed a lot about it last time I asked," Dart admitted. "Dagger probably knows and understands more than any of us but he's a little busy right now."

Jazz snickered at that. "Probably for the rest of the orn too. Though it looks like Prowl might not
miss him much."

"It's good for them both," Thundercracker stated firmly. "Interfacing is important for social health."

"That we can definitely agree on," Wing snickered, earning a groan from Marwir.

"I swear you're a perpetual mechling," she groused affectionately.

"That we can also agree on," Thundercracker said with an affectionate glance at Wing.

"Wing's coding is speeding up the deciphering process. Redline already knows his original code and has been comparing the changes," Aurora continued with a small chuckle at their antics. It was good that these war-battered mecha could joke and tease, even if it turned awkward at random moments. Even better that they could do it with those outside their gestalt.

She focused on the match below and was as sure as she could be that this was as much foreplay as the match between Dagger and Deadlock had been. The real question in her mind was whether Prowl recognized it. She could see that Kimark had.

"What hasn't changed with Prowl?" Aurora asked.

"He's still logic driven, and he still hates the Decepticon Seekers back on Cybertron," Thundercracker said as he shifted most of his attention back to the sparring match. "How much of that hatred will transfer to the Seekers here remains to be seen, although almost everyone else here classifies as Neutral. The gestalt coding has helped alter his opinion of me since I am now part of his unit."

"At a minimum, he does seem to be able to tolerate us," Aurora canted her wings in agreement.

"Agreed," Jazz nodded to her. "He's always been fine with Autobot Seekers. Even the low-ranked defectors that were at Praxus have been accepted. I don't expect he's any real danger to anyone, except maybe if he's startled or in a flashback or such. He hasn't lashed out yet, has he?"

"No, he's been very polite so far," Aurora nodded.

"Then I don't expect he's going to be. Still wouldn't sneak up on him myself, but that's reflexes, not him," Jazz said.

"The Enforcer coding and tac-net are still trying to force him to return to Cybertron. We'll see if the logic puzzle Dai Atlas and the others presented will let him remain here," Wing added.

"Yes, do you have any sense from him whether he is really considering remaining here or playing the game required to escape?" She asked rather gently.

"I think he wants to stay," Wing said firmly. "Even when he was insisting we had to go back to Cybertron he went out of his way to give us opportunities to plan without him in the room. He even voluntarily went into stasis after that first shift we shared. He had to know that would be the ideal time to lock him down and keep him that way."

"Whether his coding will let him remains to be seen, but I agree with Wing," Jazz reminded them grimly.

"I am more concerned with him saying he wishes to stay so he will gain the freedom of movement to escape," Marwir huffed, her gaze on the match that seemed to be winding down with Kimark on top. "He's a good fighter. He'd make an amazing Knight if he chose to be."
"He expressed a lot of interest in it, more than just what he'd need to get along," Wing spoke with more hope than certainty. "I think he's a good fit too. He comes by so many traits we try to exemplify naturally. He has the calmest spark I've ever touched."

"I think we'll know a lot more on what he's planning by what he says when he makes up his mind on accepting Dai Atlas," Thundercracker said with more certainty than most expected. "I may not be a tactician, but I know how Enforcers think and I'm not half bad at planning a mission."

"Then we will just have to hope for the best and prepare for the worst," Dart said quietly.

"You fight well and not in a style most Knights are used to facing," Kimark observed as he offered Prowl a hand up. "You would offer a challenging fight to almost everyone here."

"Thank you," Prowl accepted the hand with a strong grip to convey his trust in the other as he stood. "It has been entirely too long since I could spar without concern for my rank. Far longer since I could enjoy a good brawl."

"I'm always up for a good brawl," Kimark agreed with a cursory glance over Prowl's frame, both looking for damage and taking the opportunity to admire what he'd been grappling. "There's no real rank in the sparring ring unless you're being evaluated for advancement. Dai Atlas takes his turn here just like everyone else. Not that most of us can beat him."

"It is very different from the military. Very few would risk beating a ranking officer. It's considered suicidal to make the mech who plans your missions and makes transfers happen look bad," Prowl said as they let go. He shivered his armor and frame, settling everything back in place. "I wish it were easier to remain. It seem nice here," he admitted quietly before turning to the exit and motioning Kimark to follow.

"It's a lot better than the gladiator pits or anywhere else I ever visited," Kimark agreed as he followed after Prowl, making a note to pass on Prowl's choice of phrasing to the others later. "It took me a long time to adjust once I made it to the Citadel, but I managed and now I like it here. Deadlock will too. He's contrary enough to make it as a Knight just to prove any naysayers wrong."

Prowl chuckled low in his chest. "Indeed. He has the processors, spark and will to become anything he sets himself to. How did you leave gladiator pits?"

"A lot of luck and some skill," Kimark admitted as he stepped a bit closer to Prowl, letting their fields brush as they walked. The Praxian was in a good mood, energized by their sparring and arousal licked at the Knight's field. "My mate and I fought for a long time in the arenas before we made our escape."

"How did you know to come to the Citadel?" Prowl asked, leaning slightly into the field contact as they headed for Dagger's quarters.

"We didn't, not really. I knew it existed and had a sense of where it was. Wing and I crossed paths while he was on a walkabout, so I knew it was a good place for warriors to retire. We just kinda kept looking, hunting and scavenging as we moved. Every so often we'd see a flier headed nowhere or from nowhere and we'd go that way. Eventually started to see Wing in the sky. Being unarmed was the hardest part for me to adapt to, but I earned the right to weapons again."

"And your mate?" Prowl prodded lightly.

"She's in emergency response now," Kimark smiled fondly. "We've drifted apart a bit but I try to see her more orns than not. Rules and all, she's not allowed to live here unless she's a dependent or we
bond."

"Or she becomes a Knight herself," Prowl nodded slightly. "You have done well to still be close after so long separated."

"She likes her function too much to give it up," Kimark shrugged. "Same with me. We make it work. Helps that neither of us are much on being exclusive. It's not really in gladiator culture."

"It is not part of Enforcer or Praxian coding either," Prowl agreed. "Even those who bond tend to do so in triads, and they are often open."

"I don't think we'll ever bond; it's not for us. Firefall is interested in meeting all of you once civilian interaction is allowed," Kimark grinned. "She's already heard a bit about Deadlock."

"I can't be surprised with her background," Prowl said as he palmed the door to Dagger's quarters open and looked around, instincts ingrained in the war making paranoia a norm, something he wasn't even fully conscious of doing anymore.

Kimark already had experience with Deadlock's version of this paranoia and was content to wait patiently for Prowl to decide it was safe before entering behind him. Blatantly looking Prowl over, he asked, "So, what do you want to do until Dagger gets back?"

"Interfacing, meditation, assuming you are as inclined as you teek," Prowl looked at him inquiringly. "I'm interested if you are," Kimark stepped forward and reached out to run his hand across Prowl's shoulder, tracing his way back towards the doorwing. It pressed into the touch willingly, the pleasure flowing freely into Prowl's field to share with his lover of the night.

"Any preferences tonight or things we should avoid?" Kimark asked as he stepped closer, enjoying Prowl's desire. "I'd love to hear you cry out in ecstasy as you overload."

"That is a mutual desire," Prowl's rumble was soft despite the heat in it. "I do not appreciate pain or violence," he caught Kimark in a kiss as they walked towards Prowl's room. "I'm partial to riding you, at least for starters."

"That would be a sight to see," Kimark rumbled as he pictured Prowl settled firmly on his spike. It didn't escape his notice that the position kept Prowl from being pinned beneath him, but there'd be other rounds of interfacing later to enjoy that sight.

"I have been told I put on a good show," Prowl purred and nudged the Knight to lay down before climbing on top of him. Another kiss was claimed while one hand slid down Kimark's dark burgundy and green frame.

Enjoying Prowl's wandering hand as it explored Kimark let his own hands discover the Praxian's hot spots. One hand traced the obvious doorwing while the other explored his right side, noting the tightly held armor but expecting nothing less at this point. It wasn't as if he held his own much looser and he'd been a Knight and safe for much of his existence at this point. This was already going to be much better than any night with Deadlock and Prowl was happy and skilled at sharing his pleasure.

Slowly Prowl's frame began to slide down, the Praxian kissing his way along the center of Kimark's frame. Kimark sucked briefly on the tip of Prowl's chevron as his head moved past, letting go as he moved further away. Looking down to watch the normally reserved mech enjoying himself as he gave pleasure, Kimark let out a small moan of delight as he slipped both hands onto Prowl's shoulders. He stroked cabling, then the top edge of the doorwings as Prowl reached his spike cover and playfully traced the edge with little licks, his field a mixture of pleasure, enjoyment and teasing
good mood.

Enjoying the attention from Prowl's glossa, he deliberately kept his spike cover closed for a little bit before letting it snap open to allow his lover access. It felt good when a lover did this willingly. It felt _amazing _when they did so because they enjoyed it. The teasing of Prowl's lip plates along the housing sent delicious tinges through the entire array and the fast little licks dragged a deep moan from Kimark as he arched into the contact. He couldn't reach Prowl's own array right now, but he did what he could to return the favor, letting his field fill with pleasure and lust as he delved further into those beautiful doorwings. Even if he hadn't played with plenty of winged frametypes before, Prowl's field gave a great indication of how much he enjoyed the attention and what felt the best.

Mutual pleasure was always the most satisfying and enjoyable for him, and Kimark's spike extended fully under Prowl's loving attention. Feeling that mouth wrap around his spike he let out another low moan and gasped. His fingers working on autopilot, Kimark was startled when Prowl's frame moved, the doorwings lifting out of range as his spike slid from Prowl's mouth. By the time his optics refocused he was looking up at Prowl straddling his hips. The Praxian smiled down when he was sure Kimark could focus and lowered himself to slowly envelope the Knight's spike in his eager valve with a moan.

Kimark joined him in that moan, gripping the edges of the berth and arching slowly up to meet Prowl on his way down. He didn't want to push Prowl faster than he could handle, but he wanted to feel the valve envelope his spike. Slick, hot, eager and _skilled _... Kimark's optics fritzed slightly as their frames met and Prowl's calipers and lining began to work him in a far more complex pattern than he knew was possible.

"Nice spike," Prowl purred, rubbing against Kimark's housing briefly before lifting up.

"Wonderful valve," he rasped back, groaning as Prowl worked him into a near incoherent frenzy. Watching those doorwings move as Prowl's frame rode his spike was an inspiring vision, and Kimark made certain to lock that memory to enjoy later. The pleasure and enjoyment pouring off the Praxian in thick waves was nearly as good as the physical pleasure centered on his spike as he gave Prowl most of the control. He definitely wasn't losing out for it.

Moving his hand from the berth to Prowl's leg, he worked his fingers carefully along the war frame above him, mindful of moving cables and shifting plates even as he sought out hot spots to help drive the Praxian's charge even higher. He earned several moaning gasps for it and Prowl's helm tipped back, his face awash with the bliss that was rapidly claiming him.

"Close," Prowl gasped with a shudder, his charge crackling against Kimark's fingers and hips.

Kimark moved the other hand to Prowl's leg and kept up the hunt, seeking to both drive Prowl over the edge and be ready to catch him if he fell forward during the overload. "Got you. Want to see and hear you," he moaned as his own charge crackled against Prowl's frame. It was enough to bring a flicker of surprise across Prowl's field, then a slight shift in his frame that cause his charge to surge. With a gasp Prowl's hands tightened and his valve contracted tightly before his frame locked up and he roared. Watching the changes as Prowl overload was something Kimark vowed to do often even as his own overload hit and he arched with Prowl. Two strong hands moved from Prowl's legs to his chestplate, ready to support him and guide him down as a comfortable weight on Kimark's frame.

As they recovered together, frames panting and armor pinging as it cooled, Prowl was the first to really relax into his place, sprawled on top of Kimark's strong frame. "That was good."

"Yep," Kimark agreed with a purr. Prowl weighed more than most Knights his size, but it was no way uncomfortable having him there, not with how good the Praxian's field was. "Want to go
another round right now or just lay here and enjoy?"

"Rather inclined to relax for a bit," Prowl murmured, his field settling.

"Fine with me," Kimark grinned and shifted a bit to give Prowl a bit more comfortable angle. He'd bring up meditation or another round later, after Prowl was done snuggling. It was pretty nice. So was petting those lovely doorwings and feeling their owner relax more and more with a deepening purr. It was a lot like Wing, only this mech had that edge of savagery and danger that made it feel like managing this was an accomplishment. So was the fact that it lasted nearly half a joor and Prowl nuzzled him before speaking.

"What do you have in mind for next?"

"Would you like to face some more or would you rather spend some time meditating?" Kimark asked as he gently stroked the edge of the doorwing, enjoying the gentle vibrations moving through his frame.

"Meditation is something you do together?" Prowl asked with definite curiosity.

"Sometimes when it feels appropriate and especially during an Initiate's first few times. We can keep an optic on each other if someone winds up distressed," Kimark said.

"It's always distressing," Prowl said with the kind of calmness of a well-known truth. "It helps, but it's always difficult."

"Because of what you meditate on, or because something about the state is unsettling?" Kimark tried to nudge out enough to grasp how it could be so different.

"The subjects," Prowl sighed. "What do you meditate on that is not disturbing?"

"I often meditate on future possibilities or choices I am looking at making. For instance, when I have an Initiate I meditate on how to best instruct and guide them. Sometimes I think about past actions and what I could have done differently, but I'm not one to dwell on the past," Kimark admitted.

"For all I'm tied into thinking of it, I try not to. Once the lesson is learned it does little good. Though I do see how our meditations are so different given we look at similar things. There have been no possible good outcomes since Praxus was leveled. Many choices, but none are any good."

"You have good options to ponder now," Kimark pointed out. "You have the option to become a Knight or a Peacekeeper again if you desire. Your future is open here."

Prowl's optics dimmed slightly as his field roiled with distress, want and pain of the like Kimark had never met before. It calmed less than a klik later with a shuddering x-vent.

"Perhaps," the Praxian murmured. "It also opens up even more horrific futures for those left behind. Mecha I am responsible for."

"You are no longer responsible for them," Kimark said softly but firmly, not really understanding Prowl's view of his responsibility. Talon might have a better grasp of it, but Kimark was the one here now.

"I will always be responsible for my actions and inactions. There is no one capable of replacing me among the Autobots. Megatron will win if I am here." Prowl sighed, hurting deep inside in ways he couldn't name and didn't want to contemplate. "Have you ever had anyone rely on you?"
"My mate and the other Knights, but no one in the way you have described," Kimark said simply. "I am a warrior, not a tactician or leader."

"Many warriors are all three, such as your Sovereign," Prowl's tone held real respect for the mech. "Though I suspected you are not yet among them, and may never be if you are lucky. Imagine walking away from Firefall as she's pleading for help only you can give. In staying here, I am doing that on a planetary scale. It's immensely selfish."

"I can't imagine doing something like that, but I also can't imagine having that much weight on just my shoulders," Kimark said after a pause. "I think I'd break under that kind of responsibility; one mech should never truly bare that kind of burden alone. Even Dai Atlas has support from the Masters in his choices and decision making process. From what I have heard you didn't even decide you wanted to do it; that decision was made for you."

"I didn't, but no pre-prog ever does. That I can even contemplate not returning says a lot about how badly broken my coding is," Prowl admitted with a touch of uncertainty. "I never did understand why he kept me around. It wasn't as if he listened to me outside of battle orders." He huffed, then growled softly. "Existence was also much easier before my coding broke to the point where I cared."

"If Sovereign Dai Atlas is accepted as your Lord of Law then shouldn't there be less conflict in your remaining where there are Praxians to protect? We are working to preserve Cybertonian culture and prevent the critical mistakes that happened from reoccurring," Kimark said, watching Prowl closely as he spoke.

"Not when my former commander was the Prime," Prowl grumbled in frustration as much as anything. "It takes a lot of work to make that thought acceptable. I still don't know how willing I'll be in the end."

"Would meditating on the issue help or hurt your decision making process?" Kimark asked, curious how Prowl would take the suggestion now.

"It depends on the type of meditation, though it is likely to leave me with some new clarity and a great deal of distress to package up again. That is the typical result for most of them," Prowl answered.

"Well, I often meditate by practicing a kata over and over, using the familiar motions to set their frame and processor. Others settle in front of their Great Sword and let their processor wander while they sort out their problems. What would you like to try?" Kimark asked.

"Kata meditation settles me," Prowl relaxed a bit. "Based on what I've been told of what comes through the gestalt bond, a binding meditation is not likely to be a good idea without more time to prepare the others. I'd rather not distress them so much again."

Kimark made a quick check of the schedule before answering. "There's an open training room we can use. I'll mark it as in use for meditation so we won't be disturbed. There's also a wash rack close to it for clean-up afterwards if you want it."

Prowl nodded slightly, his field giving a much more firm agreement as he shifted to get off Kimark and to his pedes. He was already wiping up the evidence of their interfacing, though to Kimark it had the feel of doing it out of habit rather than actually caring all that much.

Kimark rose and gave his own frame a quick wipe-down in turn. Once he was roughly presentable he lead Prowl out of Dagger's quarters, down the sparsely populated corridors to the training room he'd reserved. Watching Prowl as he entered reminded Kimark again that this was a combat-ready
warrior. Stationing himself by the door, he said, "No weapons obviously. Too bad, watching a sword kata meditation is a bit hypnotic for the observer."

"It is a pity," Prowl agreed as he settled into a relaxed neutral stance, his frame perfectly balanced to move in any direction without warning. His optics flicked off as he relaxed into the slow movements of the first unarmed kata he'd ever practiced. Though he'd come on line with it and many more as part of his Enforcer coding, it had still taken vorns to fully integrate those built-in lessons he now moved through with a soothing ease. Just the motions took him back to that time, back to when the universe was simple, he knew his purpose and place and he believed he'd enjoyed his existence as much as any mecha.

Kimark watched Prowl as he started a familiar kata he'd seen many Initiates practice. This was no Initiate effort though. Prowl's movements were as smooth and effortless as any senior Knight. It was easy to believe that he was as well trained as most of them, something he already knew after their earlier spar. He could see the soothing effect as Prowl stopped needing to think about his frame and allowed it to move as thousands of vorns of repetition trained it. It was a peace Kimark understood well from his own existence. The freedom from a battered processor was a relief like few things and he knew Prowl needed it more than he ever had.

It really was nice to see Prowl settle more and more as the breems and katas passed.

::Kimark, what is Prowl doing?:: Thundercracker's comm was incredibly polite given it was from a Seeker to a grounder.

::He's meditating. Is something wrong?:: Kimark answered truthfully, still keeping his optics on Prowl. He seemed to be relaxing, but he had to admit the gestalt had a form of access to the Praxian's moods he'd never have.

::No. He is calm in a way he wasn't even in stasis. The bond link with him is almost ... pleasant.:: Thundercracker explained.

::Meditation can do that for a mecha, especially one with as complicated a processor as Prowl has. It doesn't have to be as conflicted as what you've experienced from Wing.:: Kimark answered truthfully, relaxing now that he knew things were going well from that end. It was good to know that Prowl's look and teek matched what the bond said of him.

::That is good,:: Thundercracker agreed and politely ended the comm. It left Kimark to watch and study moves that were entering the realm of things he wasn't sure were possible outside of a dedicated practitioner of a single art. Fast, fluid and beautifully intricate in their command of the frame, this was becoming a dance worth watching.

::Hay, Kimark. Safe to join you?:: Dagger pinged him sometime later.

::Safe, yes, but I didn't bring up the idea of an audience with him before he started,:: Kimark hesitated, torn between wanting to stay and watch Prowl continued to dance and knowing that his own charge needed his attention. He didn't want to abandon Prowl, but Dagger was Prowl's keeper and needed to know his condition. ::Yes you can join us. Hopefully it won't disturb him. This is amazing to watch.::

::He's as good as he looked to be then,:: Dagger guessed cheerfully before the door opened and he slipped inside with a somewhat presentable Deadlock in tow.

::This is almost like watching Marwir. He's not to that level, but he could be if he decides to join us,:: Kimark said, taking a moment to take in Deadlock's condition and field. He seemed content and a bit
bewildered as he watched Prowl's movements.

::He could be that and far more from what he's shown. He knows more than just Teris-Spi and Diffusion and whatever the battlefield taught him.:: Dagger said with absolute certainty. ::It's beautiful to watch at this level. I hope we can watch him do this with his proper armor and weapons before he is lost.::

::Yes, it would be a shame to never see his skills in action. Hopefully he can regain what he'll lose after the reformat.:: Kimark agreed. ::He would be frightening to face on a battlefield.::

::Agreed.:: Dagger shifted his doorwings, watching in absolute fascination as the most difficult moves of his home city's martial art were performed as easily as he performed the early katas of the Knight's martial art. ::I've never seen it performed at this level.::

::So there are folks here who know it?:: Kimark asked.

::Many Praxians do, but to know it this well? I've never seen the like. But how often do we get to watch the Masters do the hardest katas just for fun either?::

::Not very often.:: Kimark agreed. ::You know, you could suggest to Dai Atlas that he give a demonstration especially for the Praxians here, civilians and Knights. I'd ask Prowl about it first obviously, but I think he might enjoy showing the level of skill he has obtained.::

::First I want to check out just how many high-ranked practitioners there are in the city. Ours isn't the only art with rules on giving displays and I wouldn't want to put Prowl in the position of telling Dai Atlas no or doing something he shouldn't.:: Dagger said carefully. ::This isn't the same as giving a formal display presentation and neither is the sparring he did.::

::Agreed. The last thing I want to do is throw more conflicts into that processor of his. He's got enough to work through right now.:: Kimark agreed immediately. Glancing over at Deadlock he asked, ::This is using katas in meditation. Have you ever seen anything like this?::

::Nah, nobody gave away how good they are except to survive. Doubt anyone meditated.:: Deadlock dragged his attention away from the arousing display enough to answer.

::Wing said he helped you through a binding. That is one form of meditation; this is another. I can see why Prowl and Wing wouldn't have done this during the trip. Your ship didn't have enough room to properly let go without worry of hitting something or someone.:: Kimark nodded, understanding Deadlock's point. He was still uncomfortable with the small breach of Prowl's privacy, but letting Deadlock see what Prowl could actually do might help the two get along a little better.

"Doesn't seem any different from practice," Deadlock shrugged, his optics and attention locked on Prowl as the movements became blindingly fast and the Praxian seemed to fly despite being a ground frame.

::You could view it as a form or practice.:: Kimark agreed, still impressed by what he was seeing. This wasn't an art he personally would use, but he could see the advantages it could give in a fight. ::The key to using it as meditation is to be so familiar that your frame can flow through the moves without thinking about them.::

Deadlock grunted in understanding as Prowl began to reverse the complexity of his movements to come back to reality.

::So he's really that good, that flying is mindless?:: Deadlock sounded incredulous, but it wasn't quite accurate. ::Why the Pit wasn't he on the front lines?::
Because his tac-net was considered more valuable as a tactician directing others, Dagger said quietly.

He wouldn't have displayed his skills to keep them a surprise to any assassin coming after him or those near him, Kimark added.

Another grunt escaped Deadlock, but this one was of understanding agreement.

Dagger, see if the Masters will let him have weapons, even just soft steel practice blades, for his katas. We all know he can do far more harm with his hands than those, Kimark prompted his far less warrior-oriented companion. It would do him good to really be able to use his art.

I will, Dagger promised quietly, still utterly fascinated with the smooth control of the slower movements.

Kimark continued watching Prowl as he regressed through the katas, admiring the movements and hoping this had helped Prowl reach a decision. It seemed to have helped calm his field. Hopefully the distress he mentioned feeling after meditation wouldn't ruin all of that stability. He kept some attention on his charge though, enough to recognize when the katas had slowed and simplified to the point the warrior was getting restless watching the smooth perfection of form.

Want to go spar? he offered Deadlock after a few more kliks.

Definitely, Deadlock agreed immediately and headed towards the door. He did pause to look back at Prowl while waiting for Kimark to join him.

Let him know it was impressive, and I'd love to spar with him again, Kimark said to Dagger as he headed for his charge, pleased Deadlock was willing to wait for him even if it was because he didn't know which training room they were going to use. It wouldn't have always stopped either of them.

I will, Dagger promised before the door closed behind Kimark, then turned his full attention to the joy that was watching a master doing katas that relaxed them. Whether it was fast, flashy and acrobatic designed to be more for display than a fight or the slow, precisely controlled power that were the foundation of the art in combat, it exemplified everything he'd dedicated his functioning to mastering. The movement held him willingly spellbound until Prowl stilled, then finished with a bow that was recognizable as Metallikato's.

Dagger returned a small bow in recognition of Prowl skill before speaking. "Kimark had to take Deadlock out to spar, but he stayed until you were almost finished and left me to keep an optic on things for you."

"I am surprised Deadlock held willingly still for as long as he did," Prowl smiled slightly. "Thank you for allowing me to finish. It does feel good to lose my processors for a time."

Dagger relaxed a bit, pleased that Prowl didn't seem unhappy to have had company for a while during his meditation and delighted that something active would make him teek this pleased. "We'll work on getting you more time to practice and practice swords of a type the Masters might agree to. The kind we give first-vorn Initiates are soft enough they wouldn't damage a mechanimal, much less one of us."

"That would be most welcome. The weapon forms have always been my preferred ones," Prowl's doorwings gave enough of a wiggle to indicate how much of an understatement that really was. He truly loved his swords.

Dagger nodded with his doorwings. "You really was incredible to watch. I'd love to take you up on
the opportunity to spar with you even though I'm nowhere near your level. I'll talk to some of the other Praxian Knights and see if they'd be interested in arranging time for in a series of training sessions. We don't get many chances to learn from someone of your caliber."

"I would welcome the opportunity to spar with anyone who wishes to," Prowl agreed readily. "True training will need to wait until I have had contact with the local grandmasters. While I am of the status to train at will I am not in a safe situation here to go against the local leadership yet. It would not be prudent."

Dagger tipped his doorwings lightly in agreement and understanding. "Kimark and I were already hoping to talk to Dai Atlas and Red Csillag about getting a meeting like that together. We wanted to see about arranging a display demonstration of your skills if you're interested. I know a lot of the Knights and civilian Praxians would want to see what you can do."

"I am willing," Prowl agreed.
Chapter Summary

Prowl accepts Dai Atlas as his Lord of Law. Dai and Axe discuss who will train Deadlock and reformatted Prowl. Prowl and gestalt go driving.

Prowl relaxed at the table, alone with Dagger this morning. It was pleasant to not be pestered by questions for a while after he booted up. He knew the medic was watching and scanning him, but there was no demand to talk until their energon was finished.

"What would you like to do?" Dagger asked.

"I am ready to speak with Sovereign Dai Atlas," Prowl said far more calmly than he felt.

"I'll comm him and arrange a meeting," Dagger agreed without hesitation, curious to know what Prowl had finally decided. ::Sovereign?::

::Yes Dagger?:: the reply came quickly.

::Prowl would like to speak with you. I think his coding has finally reached a decision,:: Dagger said respectfully.

::When does he wish to see me?::

Dagger paused. "When would you like to meet?"

"In two joors, if he is agreeable," Prowl answered and Dagger passed it on.

::Then in two joors in my office.::

::I'll bring him there.:: Dagger looked over at Prowl. "We'll head to his office in a bit. Is there anything you want to do before then?"

"Wash, touch-up, wax and polish," Prowl said firmly. "Two joors should be sufficient to bring my finish up to spec."

"Let's head to the wash racks then," Dagger as he stood. "They should be mostly empty right now."

Prowl followed, his focus on what he needed to do to make himself look good enough that the Enforcer AI was calm about the meeting. He was silently grateful that he'd had the time to bring his finish up to the command officer standard he'd held himself to much of his existence or the process would take a full orn of work or more. As it stood most of what was needed was to rinse off the dust, ensure that all evidence of interfacing was gone and polish his finish to the mirror shine. Unlike on Cybertron, he would not be using reflective paints for his colors. While the gold, ruby, sapphire and silver would normally be included in such a presentation finish he wasn't ready to ask for such a lavish expense without needing it.
Dagger took note of how focused Prowl's field seemed to be as he finished polishing the other Praxian's doorwings. This decision was going to impact the entire gestalt and their attempts to integrate into the city. He wanted to comm the others and let them know Prowl had come to a decision, but it would be inappropriate to do so even if Prowl wouldn't be instantly aware he had done so. He wanted to ask what Prowl's choice was, but that wasn't completely his place either, though he was sure he could get away with it. He'd done all he could so far and he knew Prowl wished to stay. It was better than their first expectations.

He watched as Prowl examined himself in the full frame mirror room and noted how carefully he was examining himself. Even if he hadn't teeked it and even if this wasn't the third time before the mirror, the intensity was enough to tell him how nervous Prowl was. It reminded Dagger entirely too much of the first time he'd faced the Sovereign after getting into trouble. He hadn't polished obsessively, but the same energy was there.

This time when Prowl walked out, he didn't point to any spots that needed more attention.

"Ready to go?" Dagger asked since Prowl finally seemed satisfied with his finish. Good thing, because they still had time to reach the Sovereign's office and wouldn't have to hurry. He was sure Prowl had timed it just that way.

"As I am likely to be," Prowl admitted his nerves, yet when he followed his frame gave no hint of it and neither did his field. To the outside he was every inch the high-ranked command officer he had been for so long. Anyone passing them would be unaware of the turmoil in his processor.

The level of control both impressed Dagger and reminded him of how long Prowl must have been a commander both in war and peace to have it come so smoothly and naturally. When they reached the door, Dagger politely commed Dai Atlas. ::Sovereign, Prowl is here.::

::Show him in.:: he replied and pinned the door to slide open.

Dagger stepped forward into the office with Prowl following closely behind him. Dai Atlas sat behind a massive desk watching their approach with Axe behind him on his right. Though the young Knight wasn't sure what to make of it, both of their finishes were as fine as Prowl's, including Axe's gold now glittered with gold leaf. Dagger gave a polite bow and said, "Sovereign, I'll leave you and Prowl alone."

"Wait outside," Dai Atlas instructed him, then fell silent until the door closed behind the Praxian Knight. He took in Prowl's high-gloss finish, his stance and tried to work out what it didn't show clearly. "What have you decided?" He asked after a moment for both sides to gauge each other.

"I can accept you as the Lord of Law of New Crystal City. What are your orders?" Prowl said carefully.

Dai Atlas regarded him again for a lingering moment, taking in posture, manner, exactly glyphs and inflections before he spoke. "What do you wish to do?"

There was a shiver across Prowl's tightly controlled frame. Not enough to click his armor, but enough it was visible in the tips of his frame and the mech was unable to deny it.

"I would be reformatted as a Knight of Light." Prowl manage to speak smoothly despite his frame.

"You have a great deal of knowledge and experience that could be used to help this city. Why do you wish to be reformatted?" Dai Atlas asked, suspecting that he already knew the answer but wanting to hear it from Prowl.
"The knowledge will remain. I will not," Prowl told him calmly, part of him relaxing at the lack of the immediate refusal that had always come before. "I have not desired to remain since Praxus fell and my true function ceased to be. I continue because I have been ordered to."

"A cruelty given your coding even if it was deemed necessary by those in command," Dai Atlas said quietly, understanding a bit more of Prowl's turmoil with that admittance and the intense weariness he carried around so naturally it was unlikely he remembered what it was like to be at peace with existence. "The tac-net cannot be removed from your frame; it will still be there after the reformat. Your gestalt will be allowed to merge under Redline's supervision so this decision can be properly explained to Flightplan. I will not have a blind-sided, angry gestalt in my city."

Prowl didn't even twitch for several nanokliks, then his optics cycled. Only after a soft reboot to clear the disbelief did he display the shocked hope in his doorwings. It showed nowhere else however. The rest of his frame was held to the same military at ease stance that most of the former military mecha still defaulted to. It made Dai Atlas angry at both Prime and Megatron all over again. Keeping his face impassive despite the growing anger, he continued, "We will need a complete list of your martial skills and rankings so that you can be properly retrained to match your frame memory."

"Of course, Lord Dai Atlas," Prowl responded, falling back on some of his oldest coding to cope with the emotional chaos. "My primary form is Teris-Spi, the Praxian derivative of Skykato, which is the Seeker derivative of Metallikato. I am rated a grandmaster. I am a master of formal Diffusion and Crystalocution. I have attained level three mastery in Circuit-Su, though it is unofficial, and begun training in Cy-Kisn, though it has been centuries since my last instructor was extinguished."

"No wonder you gave Wing such a challenge while sparring," Dai Atlas said as he pondered that list for a moment, trying to recall who in the Knights would have even close to that level of skill in Teris-Spi, although Metallikato or the Knight's own sword style would probably work for retraining purposes it would be almost a crime to lose a grandmaster of such an exotic art. Cy-Kisn wasn't as much of a concern since Prowl admitted he did not know it well, and the other three were common enough among the Knights not to be an issue. "Who is likely to know Teris-Spi?"

"Praxians; Enforcers, military and nobility all train in it, however it was created by Praxian priests. If a grandmaster exists here, I would look among the priesthood first," Prowl suggested. "Even if they do not have a grandmaster, they are likely to know the ranking of every practitioner in the city of dasi or above."

"We will check with Red Csillag and Barasi Lelku before your reformatting," Dai Atlas said, hoping there was someone available. "Is there anything else that will be a concern?"

"While I came on line with a fundamental grasp of how to adjust control of the three components in my processor, it took several centuries to master it and I made many unauthorized edits during the war. Depending on how much can be understood from the reports, there could be several vorns of unanticipated fluctuations of control. Depending on the situation and which comes to the fore, such a fluctuation could range from confusing to dangerous to those around me," Prowl hoped he had explained well enough. "The Enforcer AI is very rarely dangerous given the restrictions on causing damage, however the tac-net AI has no limitations on it if it deems itself or its host to be under threat."

"Then we will need to take the appropriate precautions," Dai Atlas agreed, understanding the potential danger Prowl was revealing. "Given what Redline has said about your coding, most of your gestalt should be unlikely to trigger a threat response. If you are intending to become a Knight, I am going to impose a restriction on your choice of Daoshi; they must be able to handle the potential threat the tac-net presents as well as your exceptional and varied martial arts training."
"I understand," Prowl paused. "I have never had a choice on who trained me. That will be a strange conversation for a newly formatted self."

"It is not appropriate to make the choice now since under the Knight's rules your new self should be involved in the decision, although I understand better than most here why that will be outside normal parameters for you. However, we can take your current preferences into consideration," Dai Atlas pondered who would be appropriate to take on this unusual Initiate and all his quirks. Most of the Knights he ruled out immediately due to Prowl's tac-net.

"A former military or law enforcement mecha would be best suited in my opinion. Depending on Redline's level of concern, he may be the best choice. There is next to nothing that can cause me to assault a medic," Prowl suggested. "While I do not know how his skill level would stand against my reflexes, Talon is likely to be well suited. He is described as a highly logical, highly structured Praxian tactician. If he was raised in Praxus then he would also know many of the cultural quirks that I came on line with."

"Those are all considerations to take under advisement. Do you have a personal preferences?" Dai Atlas asked, adding Prowl's concerns to his own list of suitable candidates. It was making it that much shorter, though everything Prowl had said so far had left his first choice firmly at the top of the list.

Prowl went still for a long time, struggling to answer a question he was very ill-suited understand. Eventually he went with what his tac-net suggested. "Talon or Dagger."

"Not Wing?" Axe spoke up for the first time.

"He may be my gestalt mate, thus the coding has made me extremely tolerant of him, but he is not a mecha I would follow willingly," Prowl attempted to explain without being too critical of the skilled, experienced Knight who'd trained the leader before him.

"No, Wing is not one for following orders or giving them," Dai Atlas agreed with Prowl's assessment of his own Daoshi. "He would not have had a successful career in the military or Peacekeepers. There is another option for your Daoshi. Me."

Doorwings angled curiously. "Why offer a choice if I will be yours to train?"

"It is our way to give the Initiate the final choice in who their Daoshi is. You said that a former military mecha would be a good choice, and I am offering myself for consideration along with those you have listed. Each potential Daoshi should be considered, although Redline has admitted to being too busy currently to take on an Initiate. I am currently leaning towards either Talon, Dagger or myself as the primary options," Dai Atlas watched Prowl closely to see how he would react to the offer. The confusion held for a few more nanokliks before Prowl flushed it from his processors and frame.

"I can give no reason to disqualify any of the three," Prowl said honestly.

"Then we should consider all three options. Talon and Dagger are both Praxians; I am not. I should be capable of handling a physical confrontation with you; Dagger and Talon do not have the level of skill needed to fight a grandmaster. Dagger is a medic and is unlikely to trigger your aggressive coding. Your coding has acknowledged me as your superior. I have experience dealing with a spark bond and Knight training," Dai Atlas waited to see if Prowl had anything to add.

"Talon likely has the best understanding of how both my processor and AIs operate. While his is not as complicated as mine, he does co-exist with a tactical AI and a natural temperament very close to
mine. Dagger, as a medic, should be immune to retaliation without a declaration of war so long as he remains out of the tac-net,” Prowl added, then stilled as he processed additional factors. "That you are able to defeat me would open you up to a greater likelihood of assault, though that would be true whether you are my Daoshi or not."

"It is just that if I am, I will be a steady target for any frustration needing an outlet," Dai Atlas said with a tip of his wide wings in understanding. "That may not be a bad thing, Prowl. It is important to be able to vent one's frustrations."

"Even if you did not earn them?" Prowl asked cautiously. "For all the memories will be gone, the data will remain. No reformat that leaves the hardware intact can be. It is likely my experiences will have an effect on the new personality."

"All the more reason to give you me as a target," Dai Atlas said firmly. "Even now you would not be the most difficult, abrasive or unstable individual I have dealt with. Turning the impossible to control into good soldiers was a specialty of ours in the military. At your worst you will have nothing on those we have guided into productive existences before now."

Doorwings canted in acceptance as that was written into the file for the new personality to read early.

"From everything we have discussed it sounds like it will be safest for the new you to have me as Daoshi. In the unlikely event we prove completely incompatible as student and teacher, I will approach Dagger and Talon and see if one of them is interested in taking on an Initiate," Dai Atlas watched Prowl closely to see if he had any further objections. No a word was given either way, but as Prowl inclined his helm and doorwings in acceptance there wasn't any tension of disagreement there.

"Perhaps while arrangements are made we can spar with proper weapons? I would like to be sure we are correct that I am not a serious danger to you while still fully aware of what I am doing," Prowl suggested.

Dai Atlas nodded, understanding Prowl's concerns. "I will make the arrangements with Redline, Dagger, Shogun, Skjöldur, Talon and the Circle of Masters. Normally I would have Wing present as one of our better combatants, but the gestalt coding makes me reluctant to include him. What is your assessment of your gestalt's reactions to this combat?"

"Poor, overall, once I begin to lose. Wing and Thundercracker are likely to stay where they should. Deadlock is the most likely to jump in. Jazz could do either. He is unpredictable at his most agreeable," Prowl gave his best assessment, though he couldn't conceal how much Jazz irritated him.

"Given my past experience with gestalts and the reports I have about your unit I concur with your assessment," Dai Atlas said, pleased to have the confirmation. "Kimark may be able to block Deadlock from joining the fight, but he cannot prevent him from berserking. I am inclined to treat this like Wing's penance and offer them all the option of stasis."

"A good idea," Prowl tipped his doorwings. "At a minimum it will give them and their guards the opportunity to be ready for any backlash the final moments may generate in me if I lose control."

"We will have extra Knights near them regardless of whether they are in stasis or not. Better to take unnecessary precautions than have any incidents," Dai Atlas said.

"Agreed," Prowl said smoothly.

"I will make arrangements for the sparring and for the five of you to be able to merge into
Flightplan," Dai Atlas said firmly and was please when Prowl bowed his doorwings and helm in acceptance.

"Thank you, Lord Dai Atlas," Prowl felt his frame relax some.

"Do you have anything else you need to address with me now?" Dai Atlas asked.

Prowl mulled it over before he was forced to ask. "Do you stand against the Prime, or against the war?"

"Against the war," Dai Atlas said firmly. "We would have gladly remained on Cybertron and out of everyone's way if it had been possible."

A bit of relief eased Prowl frame. "Then nothing else for now, Lord Dai Atlas."

"I will contact Dagger and let him know you have been dismissed," Dai Atlas said, having heard from Dagger about Prowl's sensitivity to comm. ::Dagger::

::Yes, Sovereign?: Dagger answered promptly.

::Our conversation is finished for now, and Prowl will be joining you momentarily.: Dai Atlas watched the Praxian dip respectfully and then head out the door. Once it closed, he glanced at his mate. "How much do you think he can actually obey us?"

"Enough that I now feel more secure about the plans for Flightplan than I did before this meeting," Axe said after a pause. "He has been badly used and abused for a very long time; the idea that it is coming to an end is already helping him. He will do what is necessary to achieve that end."

"So long as we don't directly contradict an order of the Prime," Dai Atlas agreed. "I also feel much better about his ability to go through with this. He definitely wants to. I am less pleased that he couldn't agree fully, though he managed more than I expected."

Axe nodded. "I don't think the AIs would let him commit further without the Prime's permission. I do share his concerns about the tac-net and Enforcer AI once he's reformatted. If he is truly as calm at spark as Wing said, it will help him stabilize while the three rebalance. It will definitely be safer having him with you rather than Talon or Dagger."

"Certainly in the short run. Socially, I can't deny either one is better suited to mentor him. For his health and ours, it needs to be me. He needs a very strong will and rank to give him orders, a replacement for a charismatic Prime."

"And that you can do," Axe smiled and ran his hand along his mate's wing.

"I can, and naturally enough now he'll obey on reflex. Plus someone needs to be able to control that gestalt. Aurora may have the best grip right now through Thundercracker but it will fade as he adjusts to his new flock. I doubt Deadlock will ever be any more obedient than Wing. Jazz will never be controlled in more than passing. Prowl though, he's a natural leader at the mid level. Control him and we'll control the others enough," Dai Atlas sighed. "Honestly, Prowl may be the most dangerous of them, but Jazz is the one I worry about. ISO mecha simply don't function as any other kind and I'm sure that one thinks out of the box even for his kind."

"He seems willing to become an entertainer and has been cooperating so far, but both of us know he could just disappear if he wanted and none of us could truly stop him. Keeping the rest of the gestalt linked to us is the safest way to manage him." Axe thought a moment before continuing. "I'd prefer Deadlock trained under Kimark since it would create one more tie outside their group, but unlike
Prowl he's too rebellious to accept a forced choice."

"Or even a pointedly guided one," Dai Atlas nodded and leaned against his mate lightly. "I agree that Kimark's a better choice than Wing, but I think almost anyone would be for that kind of rebel nature. We might get lucky if Kimark asks first; they do get along well and we have gotten it mostly into Wing's processors that Deadlock isn't going to be his Initiate. I think it might be time to be more clear with Kimark what we'd like of Deadlock."

"Agreed but be a little less blunt than that when you approach him," Axe chided with an amused grin as he continued stroking the edge of the wing. "Kimark is a bit of rebel too in his own way. But he will see reason that a berserker Knight could help Deadlock learn to control his nature. I don't see anyone else working well as Daoshi; Deadlock doesn't trust easily. Makes sense with where he came from."

Dai Atlas rolled his optics and reached over to tickle his lover's side in retaliation for the teasing fingers on his wing. "Come now, you know I can manipulate with the best of them."

"I know you can handle politicians and rebellious mecha," Axe laughed, enjoying his mate's more agreeable mood. "If it weren't for Prowl's unusual situation I'd suggest you take Deadlock. Wing said he admires Megatron for his charisma and combat expertise. You could help fill that new void in his world view."

"And I've been around long enough it's a reasonable expectation I won't go insane," Dai Atlas hummed. "You know that you could take him on. From his perspective you aren't going to be that much different than me, just calmer."

Axe thought for a moment about everything involved with taking on someone like Deadlock before replying. "We do have experience dealing with bonds during training, and it would be another way to keep the group close to the Order. I'll start spending some more time around him outside the sparring floor to see if we're compatible, and we'll see what Kimark thinks about taking on an Initiate. Maybe you'll connect with Deadlock and I'll handle Prowl too. One way or another, they'll be trained well and loyal to the Order when it's done."

Dai Atlas nodded and sank back in his chair, then against his mate. "One way or another. Though as it stands I'd rather handle Prowl. Deadlock pushes my buttons entirely too easily."

"He is the type to drive you up a wall, especially if he works at it," Axe chuckled and wrapped his arms loosely around his mate's shoulders. "It'll work out."

Thundercracker had decided to once again watch the race from high up on the announcer's box, and Wing had decided to join the Seeker in his self-appointed guard duty instead of spending the time with the other Knights. As the racers made their third circuit of the track, he couldn't help commenting, "Prowl looks like he's enjoying the race."

"He's enjoying the race and the chase," Thundercracker agreed as he shifted his attention briefly to their surroundings to scan for trouble. The likelihood anyone would attack with this many Knights here was extremely low, but this was Prowl's first real outing and nothing was going to spoil it. Plus being on guard helped take his mind off the cavern roof high above.

"Is that an Enforcer thing? I've never heard the other Praxians I know care about chasing," Wing commented. Even at this distance he was sure that the three grounders in his strange flock were enjoying it immensely. He knew the Knights with them were.
"I asked Talon to confirm my recollections of past experience since it has been so long, but I believe many Praxian Enforcers were almost hard coded to enjoy pursuit," Thundercracker admitted. "You've probably noticed that Prowl likes to spend a large portion of the race following someone else. That's not just the differences in their speed you're seeing."

"It's that he likes having someone in the lead," Wing nodded. "It's different, but I know fliers like that. They're good enough, fast enough, to lead, but just don't enjoy it as much as being second."

"Some Orders and Actions prefer a support role. They often volunteered to take the open Vision spots in duty trines. Not everyone is created to be a leader. Speaking as someone who has dealt with having too many dominants in a group, those support roles are critical to a group or flocks functionality," Thundercracker agreed.

"I know. There are always more followers than leaders. There has to be for any society to function," Wing agreed and smiled softly as Prowl suddenly turned all his effort to speed and pulled ahead.

"He's very skilled at racing, and this seems to be doing him more good than the short stop we managed before he went in stasis."

"More opponents to keep his interest," Wing agreed. "And a much better track. He does like order and rules more than a free-for-all. Plus he doesn't have the stress of fighting his code so much now. He may not have said it in public yet, but I know Dai. He wouldn't let Prowl out to race without an agreement that he was staying."

"Agreed," Thundercracker said as he watched the racers below them.

Prowl shifted through the curve blocking Jazz's anticipated path as they headed towards the finish line. Dart had easily won the first two races, but the cycle-former was tiring and no longer a significant opponent on the track. Dagger was right behind Jazz, and the other Praxian's lighter frame was giving him an edge during part of the circuit. Right behind them were Blueflash, Kimark and Deadlock.

This wasn't the most satisfying part of the race for Prowl, but the laps where Dart was out front had satisfied his need to chase enough to honestly try to win in the last couple laps. The smooth track under him felt as good as a lover's caress; how long had it been since he'd been on such good pavement? Likely not since Praxus. Clearly the Praxian contingent that came considered the skills to build this track as the critical thing they were to long term health.

"It felt so good to drive like this again.

Racing with three members of his unit around a Praxian track while the two fliers monitored from above. Their gestalt was actually well suited as a pursuit team. They could handle an aerial or ground-based chase. Wing was the faster, more agile member, able to keep up with and track their quarry while relaying coordinates. Jazz was cunning and able to pursue their foes through twists and passages where a flier couldn't go. Thundercracker, Deadlock and himself were the heavier hitters; the ones who would ultimately take down the target. For all their differences they were a deadly and efficient team.

They were starting to look, think and act like a real unit too. The metacycles that Prowl had spent in stasis and the time on this world had fostered connections that were showing up in Prowl's unit coding as good markers. Deadlock was still the difficult one, yet he was less difficult to manage than the twins had been. The mech was smart, stubborn and fierce, but he wasn't a trickster and he was far less antisocial than he thought he was. He just needed to be handled in a very specific way.
The finish line passed with Prowl in the lead by less than his length, with Jazz right on him and the others not far behind.

Slowing to a stop, Dart transformed and vented heavily. He waited for the others to slow and transform to tell them, "I'm done for now. I'm looking forward to watching the show. I might join you for the last race of the night before we head back to the Citadel."

Prowl nodded to him and did a quick scan to assure himself that the small frame hadn't taxed himself too much.

"Please tell me that's not creator code trying to latch on to something," Jazz snickered.

"Keep Thundercracker away then; we don't need to be adopting more Knights," Deadlock grunted.

"No, just basic public servant coding," Prowl replied.

"Dart's fine," Blueflash said as he moved to the starting line. "He usually sits out the middle races."

"I do. I'm built for speed more than endurance," Dart assured them, then walked to the watching Knights while the starting line was settled at again, this time all with mid-sized cars.

As Kimark waited for Axe to start the next race he pondered the most recently awakened member of the gestalt. The descriptions he'd heard from Deadlock and the others did fit the stoic Enforcer who was even now working to find his place in the gestalt. These past few races he'd noticed changes in the three's behavior. They seemed to be beginning to anticipate each other's moves. Deadlock never caught up with the others, but he also didn't seem surprised by the stunts they pulled.

It would be interesting to talk to Wing about how easily he and Thundercracker saw the moves coming relative to how well they could predict the Knights. About the only thing he wasn't keen on was being around when the combined form was. He really, really did not want to look up at another gestalt again, especially one made out of these warrior mecha. Kimark didn't have many illusions about their capabilities, and the idea of fighting them in any form let alone that one was disturbing.

A movement from Axe brought his attention back on to the race. Unless they were going to do a much longer course he had no illusions about catching the Praxians and Jazz. No, his focus was on beating Deadlock and seeing how close he could get to the others. Even on a long course Prowl was completely out of his league based on his original function, though he had a solid chance against the Praxian Knights.

The signal lit and they were off. For the first few lengths the Praxian Knights had an advantage with their higher power to mass ratio, though that was only helpful in a true sprint. By the time they reached the second straightaway Jazz was on them and passing them, with Prowl right on his unit mate's bumper. Right now he and Deadlock weren't too far behind. That would come as the half dozen laps stacked up.

At his side Deadlock was his challenge. He was heavier and had a more powerful engine to compensate, but he was also heavier than he was used to and it still gave him trouble on turns and acceleration at times.

That mass difference was something all three gestalt grounders were fighting with various levels of success. It was one reason Kimark was pleased that the three enjoyed racing so much; this was a good way to learn their new limits while showing the Knights what they were capable of doing. As the rounded the fourth curve Jazz was in the lead with Prowl almost on his bumper. Kimark had traded places with Deadlock five times as they tried to pass Blueflash. The more lightly built Knight
was having nothing of it and displayed his mastery of the track in blocking them smoothly at every effort before spotting an opening to dart ahead of Dagger by half a length.

It was the kind of move they couldn't pull off against these opponents, although Deadlock was slowly creeping his way along trying to pull alongside Dagger. He could probably knock his lighter opponent aside if he pressed from that position. It was a critical decision that Deadlock may or may not realize the importance of. The rules were clear: no frame contact. The threat of it was deeply frowned upon. Would Deadlock keep to the rules and implied rules?

Deadlock revved his engine and continued to slowly push forward as they entered another straightaway. It could be considered an audible threat, but he wasn't actually moving towards Dagger just yet. Whether Dagger was done playing with them or responding to the rev was hard to tell, but he darted forward with a reminder that he was faster than the heavier warriors by a good margin. Blueflash, Prowl and Jazz were now well head of them, with Dagger solidly between the two groups.

Kimark was almost even with Deadlock by the time they were in the last stretch, but both were far behind the others. Blueflash, Prowl and Jazz were lined up and Kimark could no longer tell who was winning. He was sure all three only marginally cared. Blueflash because of training and the other two because each had won and lost several times already and weren't excessive in reacting either way.

When he and Deadlock crossed the finish line with Kimark just barely in the lead, the other four were already standing around chatting as they cooled a bit. Coming to a stop, Kimark waited until Deadlock had transformed before doing the same. He waited to see how Dagger was going to react to Deadlock's little stunt.

"You're fast," Deadlock admitted, looking at the other four.

"Thank you," Dagger smiled. Prowl and Jazz nodded acceptance of the complement and Blueflash wiggled his doorwings.

"You are good for your class," Prowl told him. "These races are nothing like what a real track would run. There is no way at least three and upwards of five classes would race together normally."

"Classes?" Deadlock gave him an odd look.

"Normally races are restricted to similar frametypes with similar mass to power ratios," Prowl explained. "Dart is in one. You and Kimark are another. Depending on the size of the track and who's driving, Jazz and I and Dagger and Blueflash may or may not be in separate classes. Only on the smallest of tracks would the six of us race together, and never with a cycle."

"That's why we were almost always divided on the track by the end of the race," Kimark said with an understanding nod. "It might be more challenging next time we have a race like this if someone calculates out a handicap for each of us."

"Like letting the two of us start ahead of all of you so Prowl has someone besides a cycle to chase immediately," Deadlock said with a chuckle.

"It is easily done with the performance data from today," Prowl perked up at the idea. "It would make for a much more fair race."

"You want to work on that for next time? I think we've got time for at least one more race tonight."
Jazz said with a grin.
"Dart, you want to join us?" Dagger called out to the cycle.

"Oh yeah, I'm in," the cycleformer grinned.

Once the lift opened, Dart said cheerfully still a bit tired but excited by the race, "Let me know when you're ready to head back to our quarters. I'll be getting a drink with some friends."

Jazz answered cheerfully as the three grounders stepped out to join Wing and Thundercracker in the eyrie, "Don't worry about us, Dart. Aurora volunteered to let us crash here. It's our first chance to recharge together as a unit."

"Then ping me when you're ready to leave in the morning," Dart agreed willingly. "Have a good night."

Prowl was looking around the eyrie curiously as he walked out of the elevator. Even if they hadn't already know it, it was obvious it had been a very long time since he had been in a domicile like this.

Aurora was over on one of the pillows next to a tray holding six energon cubes. "You all seem to have enjoyed yourselves. Does anyone want a drink?"

"Yes, thank you," Thundercracker answered, both because this was his residence and as a show that it was safe for the member of his gestalt that wasn't yet used to her and this place.

"Prowl, did you ever visit Vos?" she asked pleasantly while the gestalt gathered in the lounge of pillows and took their energon. She watched as Jazz took two cubes, drank from each, poured enough into one from the other to fill it and offer the full cube to Prowl, who accepted it with doorwings canted in thanks and trust.

"I did the last time the Imperial Showcase was there and a few times for duty," he answered and sipped from the cube.

"I remember the Imperial Showcase, it was very impressive. Although the circumstances of the other visits probably weren't pleasant, I hope you did find things to enjoy during your stays," she said taking a drink from her own cube. Interacting with Prowl was a lot like watching the others when they first arrived. He was still edgy, looking for betrayal at every turn even when she could see he didn't want to.

"I did. I particularly enjoyed the fuel and confections. The view was also very enjoyable," Prowl readily gave what he remembered as good things. "Even the duty trips were not that unpleasant. I was either a guard or sent to observe. There wasn't any trouble."

"We've been trying out different confections and dishes. Some of them I haven't had for a long time," Jazz added. "They have a lot of different oil broths available if you're interested in trying any of them. I had a solar oil broth the other orn that was pretty good. They put some arsenic and copper in it."

"They have real Praxian cuisine here as well, along with Vosian and most other cities," Thundercracker added.

"Really?" Prowl perked up, his doorwings going sharply interested. "I'm interested," he added to Jazz.

"Yeah, we've been having meals with various Knights, doing different cuisines and casual manners," Jazz said with a grin. "It sticks better than reading about it."
"Usually tastes better too," Deadlock grunted. "Carrying rust power is a survival tactic though."

"I may carry some arsenic powder when we have Polyhexian, although you may be able to leave the rust powder home then," Prowl said with a small nod and a moment of hesitation before saying hopefully. "It has been a long time since we have had this many options. I assume vicrasi are available."

"Widely, at least where Praxian is served," Jazz grinned at him. "Dagger showed me around the shops he usually goes to and it seemed like there were a hundred variations."

"Thousands, if you know how to ask," Prowl gave a small, teasing smile. "Usually only the most popular are made for walk in customers."

"You'll be able to find a favorite as soon as you're allowed out," Deadlock said taking a long drink from his own cube. His lack of concern about the contents a clear giveaway that he'd come to trust Aurora not to poison him. They all saw Prowl take note of it and how much it made him relax. That Jazz felt the same made him relax further.

"Has there been an indication yet of when that will be?" Prowl asked.

"Well, we're being allowed small supervised excursions. It kinda depends on where you want to go. Thundercracker gets to go to flight class with just one tag-a-long. Dart's been taking me out to a few shops for some treats and socializing. We're both planning to join civilian society so they wanted us to start getting exposure as soon as it was safe," Jazz answered with a small grin.

"While Deadlock plans to become a Knight?" Prowl prompted quietly.

"So far," Deadlock said, sounding mostly resigned to it, but there was only a little bit of reluctance in his field. "Dai Atlas doesn't seem to like me much, but there's not much else around here I can do that won't get me locked up on a regular basis. That'd get Wing in trouble, and he'd spend all his spare time trying to change me."

The white jet winced, and even more tellingly didn't actually correct him.

Deadlock looked directly at Wing, "I'll learn what I can and tow the company line a little better than I did in the Decepticons since it looks like the Knights will fuel me better and won't jump me in my recharge, but I'll never be Dai Atlas' favorite little minion and everyone knows it. Kimark and the rougher ones like him get me and where I'm coming from. Demeter doesn't make me want to knock her sideways with her attitude; I like her spirit." Turning towards Aurora, he continued, "You and Axe don't seem to mind me, but I know most of the Knights are willing to tolerate me because of you."

"Also because Wing is in the line of Daoshis for much of the Order at this point and he's vouched for you. Those that don't trust him because of that know him and trust him for other reasons," she pointed out. "Though it's good you don't want to knock Demeter sideways; she'd send you aft over skidplate," she added with a chuckle.

"I met a few beastformers and symbiots during the war. I recognize the attitude and willingness to back it up, especially in the small package," Deadlock actually smiled at the memories before turning back to Prowl. "What are you planning on doing?"

"Reformatted and to become a Knight, since Dai Atlas seems to believe it is possible," Prowl answered with the ease of being sure of the choice.

"Reformat?" Deadlock sputtered. "Why?"
"Because I am tired, it hurts to exist, and I have no reason to become someone new the hard way," Prowl shrugged. "Reformatting is not a bad thing."

"I've seen and heard about what happens to mecha who've been reformatted. How can you not call that a bad thing?" Deadlock demanded, recalling some of the rumors about Mindwipe and Shockwave and their more disturbing experiments. Turmoil had threatened once or twice to send him to them, but Deadlock knew Megatron wouldn't have allowed it since he was too useful as he was.

"That is not a legal reformat," Prowl's sickened expression said more than words could how far he viewed that from what he was talking about. "Those were experiments done by very sick processors. A reformat, what I'm speaking of, would put me back to factory defaults and a blank personal memory, but with all my coding intact and files on what I know to review. My tac-net and both AIs would be fundamentally unchanged."

"It would let you finally rest after everything you've endured. Reformatting would ease the burden of all the losses without causing our flock to permanently lose a member," Thundercracker said quietly as he glanced at his own bare plating.

"Yes. While I would be a new mecha in a sense, I would grow up into someone very similar to who I was before the war. I could endure as I am, but I perceive no reason to. It is not a benefit to the future I have here," Prowl explained further. "I am not yet sure if the new mecha to have this frame would wish a different designation. A great deal is connected to this one in the files he is expected to read and little of it is pleasant."

"Some of us have been considering changing designations," Jazz admitted. "Especially with all the changes we've gone through recently."

"Are we going to have problems with that tac-net and the AIs?" Deadlock asked suspiciously although he seemed a little less outraged by the whole idea. "You've warned us they don't like us, and we know you've had to work to keep them under control."

"Only plugged in. Hardline will be fundamentally impossible for several centuries at least until he learns to fully control them," Prowl told him. "The rest will fall away along with my past."

"It is strange hearing you talk about yourself as another individual," Wing admitted as he traced the edge of the cube idly.

"This isn't because of you, and it's only indirectly because we came here," Thundercracker said staring at the Aerial suddenly. "Prowl never had this option truly available back on Cybertron."

"Optimus would not authorize a reformat any more than he would my resignation," Prowl grumbled, then twitched and had to force several threads to shut down. "I'm looking forward to not hating my leader."

"Circumstance may not have allowed him to do so," Wing said neutrally trying to keep things calmer and avoid rehashing old grievances that might cause Prowl coding problems. "Since there is no war here you can do what is appropriate for you."

"Yes. It has been a long time since my desires have played a role in my choices," Prowl hummed as he explored that truth and the novelty it represented. It hasn't registered before, yet it was true. He had actual choices here. Just none of the choices he had long expected to desire.

"So does this mean Thundercracker is going to have someone else to call a fledgling? You're a grounder but you're also flock," Wing asked curiously as he tried to lighten the mood a bit again.
Even after the speculation on the way here, he didn't understand why Prowl would make this
decision any more than Deadlock did, but if it was what Prowl thought was the right course of action
he would support him. And he would be there for him once the reformatting was over.

"If he wishes. The term he will think of is rookie, though fledgling would be correct in context,"
Prowl said after a bit of thought. "The first century or two will involve a great deal of learning who
he is, what he likes and doesn't like. It may be longer given the intensity I understand Knight training
to be. If common wisdom among the Enforcers is correct, then he will quickly develop similar kinks
and fetishes as well as a similar personality, as the reformat is not because of behavior problems.
Hate and rage will be things he is likely to find difficult to comprehend for a very long time. I didn't
until Praxus fell." He paused and glanced between them. "He is likely to have much of the same
frametype issues that Thundercracker had to deal with, though far less ingrained."

"Great, another stuck-up elitist," Deadlock grumbled without much heat behind the words.

"Is that something the gestalt coding will adjust since he is making a fresh start with it fully
integrated?" Wing asked.

"No one probably knows for certain since this is a rather weird situation," Jazz admitted. "I've never
heard of successfully reformatting only one member of a gestalt."

"It's never been attempted by an actual medic to my knowledge," Prowl said. "Given how effective it
is on me with all my well-ingrained prejudices and bigotry it may act rapidly enough you don't even
realize it's there until he interacts with outsiders."

"Because we're unit and that trumps almost everything," Jazz said with a small nod. "You know, the
Knights are going to want you and so are some of the Praxian civilians especially after a reformat.
It'll be interesting to see how things turn out."

"Too bad for them that they'll have to deal with us too," Deadlock grunted.

"Another benefit to the Knights. They will not fill his processors with any cultural issues the locals
may still have. He may hear it or see it out there, but it will not be the culture where he resides,"
Prowl said.

"Based on what I've seen among Seekers, it exists, simply muted. Those that came were not those
that held those beliefs deeply," Thundercracker agreed.

"It's hard to bring those prejudices along when you need to work with other frame-types to survive,"
Jazz agreed. "Especially since the Knights are the ones responsible for organizing the Exodus. A few
hardliners probably made it through or developed here, but there isn't a good way for most of them to
isolate themselves yet. The community is still too small and interdependent."

"And will be for many generations at the current growth rate," Prowl agreed. "So Deadlock and I are
becoming Knights, Wing is remaining one, have either of you decided what you will do here?" He
looked between Thundercracker and Jazz.

"I am exploring several options. Being in Saamanjasy's flight classes have made the possibility of
settling into a teaching role a stronger possibility. I'm also looking at disaster recovery or search and
rescue when needed. I'm far more used to keeping my wits in a stressful situation than most civilians
here," Thundercracker answered.

"You'd do well in both, and we all have more experience keeping our wits than any ten civilians,"
Prowl agreed before looking at Jazz.
"I've spent a lot of time acting as an entertainer before and during the war, so I'm thinking of going into that field at least for a while. It'll keep me busy," Jazz said with an affectionate shrug. "I'll usually be able to set at least part of my own schedule and visit here when I want."

"Always a plus," Prowl agreed and sipped his energon. "Singing, dancing, erotic?"

"Still figuring that out. Right now I've got a mixed group of fliers and grounders interested in an aerial performance display. We've starting working on it. Choreography is getting a little tricky like you'd expect with that varied group, but Dart said Talon is enjoying the challenge of trying to coordinate everything," Jazz grinned, waiting to hear Prowl's response.

"I can perceive that complication," Prowl murmured, his gaze going a bit distant.

"I foresee a long chat with Talon soon," Thundercracker actually chuckled.

"From what I've heard around here he'd welcome the opportunity to discuss anything involving tactics with you," Deadlock chuckled a bit. "He's a Praxian Aerial in case you hadn't heard."

"I read it in his public file," Prowl nodded. "He does sound like a mecha I will enjoy getting to know. We are likely to be good friends or vicious enemies."

"Let's hope for the good friends then. Talon has a number of allies in the Knights, and I really don't want to see any trouble between anyone in our flock and him," Wing said fervently while looking directly at Jazz and Deadlock. "Not to mention that none of the Masters will look favorably on any actual fighting. We're all still on probation."

"Based on my history, we will only become enemies if we strongly disagree on how to run something we are both in charge of. The odds decrease significantly once I am reformatted and no longer think in terms of thousands of sparks lost on any choice," Prowl tried to reassure him without actually taking it back. "Ultra Magnus and I were good friends until he began to countermand my battlefield orders within his unit. Eventually Optimus understood we could not function in the same command and kept us as far apart as he could."

"Well, neither of you should wind up in that kind of situation so things should be okay between you then," Wing said relaxing a bit with that information. "He'll be pleased to have another tactician to compete against on the simulators."

"That will be enjoyable, especially after the reformat when I am in the learning phase once more," Prowl agreed eagerly.

"Do you know when you'll be reformatted?" Wing asked, trying to hide his unease.

"No, though I would expect within the decaorn if nothing comes up to delay it," Prowl answered.

"Then we will enjoy our time with you while we can, and we will look forward to meeting him once it happens," Thundercracker said quietly as pulled Wing a bit closer to help soothe the Aerial.
Chapter Summary

Flightplan is formed and the situation explained to him. Both Prowl's reformat and the editing about to happen. A Praxian priest approaches Dai Atlas about the rumor of a grandmaster of Teris-Spi in the Citadel.

It was fairly early in the morning, though not so early that Deadlock was truly grouchy. No one wanted any more ill-temper involved in this than there had to be. As it stood there were over a dozen Knights of Light on the wing towards an unused side cavern large enough for Flightplan not to feel crowded. Inside the largest of them were an additional half dozen grounders. Everyone was tense, some more than others.

The tension was something Deadlock understood completely. Honestly, he'd of thought they were idiots if they hadn't been this concerned. Gestalts were not something most of these mecha would have experienced in person, and they had long had a reputation for being extremely difficult to take down in combat. Given that this particular gestalt was made up primarily of soldiers from a very destructive war, he wouldn't have been surprised if there were more security precautions waiting out of view.

He still remembered the sensation of the first time he looked up, and up, and even further up when he saw Devastator the first time, and that gestalt was on his side. He'd long thought triple changers to be huge, but a gestalt brought an entirely new perspective to it. That perspective was now warped by memories of looking down that far and trying to comprehend those were his optics and he was still touching the ground.

When Dai Atlas set down those on board were quick to get off so he could transform and soon the flying Knights were either in the air or on ledges nearby.

"Ready for this?" Kimark asked quietly, everything about him screaming that he was hoping not to have the battle he'd come here to be in.

"Yeah," Deadlock grunted even though he wasn't entirely certain how the younger mech was going to react to all the changes they had endured. After all, Flightplan hadn't been active since shortly after their journey away from the Nijihito began. "It'll be interesting to see how much Flightplan already knows," he commented right before the group began their transformation. He became aware of his gestalt mates one by one. Prowl dominated by his nature and training as a tactician, yet he waited for orders. He was so much calmer than the last time and Deadlock knew a hint of relief. The darkness in Prowl when he was riled triggered fear in the warrior.

Deadlock hadn't spent a lot of time with the Seeker during the trip, but even he had worried a bit about the depression Thundercracker had been mired in the few times they spoke. Thundercracker's grief was present as always, but it was less sharp and focused than it had been. He was accepting his losses and starting to look forward to the future. The Seeker was a more solid force in the gestalt and as far as Deadlock was concerned that was a very good thing.
In contrast Jazz seemed a bit brighter than he had been. Deadlock would never expect Jazz to be truly safe from a civilian standpoint, and anyone who thought otherwise was a naive fool in his view. Jazz was working to contain that darkness he would always carry, and the effort seemed to be slowly working.

Against the backdrop of memory, Wing seemed dimmer. Exhaustion no doubt played a part. He was working double shifts every orn and would be for vorns. Yet he was calmer too, happy to be home and safe.

Also with them was Flightplan, the much younger presence that now bound them forever as a unit. Flightplan looked around at the stone walls surrounding them. ~Why are we inside?~

~This is our home now. We are in a cavern not far from New Crystal City,~ Wing explained. ~That is the Sovereign of Light, Dai Atlas. We need you to understand what is going to happen to Prowl.~

~Are they going to try to hurt Prowl like the others hurt you and Deadlock?~ Flightplan rumbled protectively, watching some of the much smaller forms back away nervously from his massive frame. ~I won't let that happen again.~

~No, this is being done at my request,~ Prowl said firmly, then reluctantly opened up a bit more to show the youth what 'reformat' meant to him. ~It will take much of what has hurt me away.~

~Part of you will go away but another part will still be here with us. Is this what Thundercracker is doing? He still hurts but it is different,~ Flightplan seemed to be struggling but willing to try to understand yet another concept foreign to his limited world. Refocusing briefly on the movements around him, he asked. ~Wing says this is our home, but they are afraid of me. Do I need to play simple for them too?~

~In a way, yes. He is going about lessening the hurt in a more traditional way,~ Prowl hoped it was close enough. ~No, we do not need to be simple for them.~

~They're afraid because most have never seen a gestalt before, and those that have know how dangerous you/we are if we chose to attack,~ Wing said. ~Like so many things, their fear will lessen with exposure and understanding.~

~They also weren't sure how angry you'd be about what Prowl's going to do,~ Deadlock added. ~Some of us find reformatting really disturbing.~

~This is what Prowl wants?~ Flightplan asked waiting for an affirmation from these more experienced mechs that he trusted to explain things to him.

~Yes, this is what Prowl has wanted for a very long time,~ Thundercracker agreed.

~I'm not angry he is doing what he wants as long as it does not injure any of us. Including Prowl,~ Flightplan said quietly but firmly.

~It won't. It will leave me young and possibly wishing to be called a new designation. It will in no way injure or damage me,~ Prowl said firmly.

~Okay,~ Flightplan said and looked down at his arm. ~Some of us look different; I like the new colors on Deadlock. Will Prowl and Thundercracker have new colors?~

~Thanks,~ Deadlock preened a bit, enjoying the positive attention.

~I will, in time. Similar, but new,~ Thundercracker answered.
-I do not know, though I expect some differences,- Prowl told him.

- I will be too,- Jazz piped up and shared images of some of his ideas.

- I will probably remain mostly the same except for my version of our new flock symbol,- Wing said as he shared images of the gestalt symbols the others were working on.

- We will be pretty when you are done,- Flightplan said cheerfully. -I like these new symbols. They show everyone we belong together.-

- That's the idea. We're still us, just more,- Jazz agreed cheerfully that was only a tiny bit forced.

- This is a better place than where we were before,- Flightplan said decisively and looked down at Dai Atlas and Axe who hadn't moved during this whole discussion. Looking down, he tried to keep his voice low and friendly as he said, "Greetings, I am Flightplan."

"Greetings Flightplan. I am Dai Atlas, leader of the Knights of Light, of which Wing is a member. From your calm, I take it you are not upset by Prowl's choice?" he said as Knights relaxed slightly.

"It is his choice," Flightplan said as he followed a small nudge from Wing and slowly knelt down to be closer to the other's level. He didn't want to scare anyone with sudden movements. "What will you do with us?"

"Your component parts will have existences of their choosing in the city. Two have indicated an interest in becoming Knights of Light. You are likely to be called on if there is a natural disaster or other need for such a large frame. Once they are citizens you will be as well, and thus able to form as you please," the giant explained to the far larger giant.

"We would like to help; if we are useful we are safe and fueled. We were made to fight; we won't have to fight here?" Flightplan asked, relying on the others to listen for any falsehood.

"I would call on you if the city is under attack," Dai Atlas answered honestly. "Otherwise, no. There is no expectation for you or your components to fight."

-It's the truth. There hasn't been an attack on the city since we arrived,- Wing backed it up with his long experience here.

- He's been honest with us so far and has the experience and authority to back up his words,- Thundercracker agreed. -We have all received more than sufficient fuel so far.-

- Good repair and quarters too,- Deadlock added.

- Very reasonable access to their datanets,- Prowl agreed.

- They even let me sneak around as long as I don't ditch my shadow,- Jazz added his support.

Each one who spoke made Wing more joyful.

"We will protect the city when we are citizens," Flightplan agreed when every single component backed the idea.

"Thank you," Dai Atlas tipped his wings and the Knights relaxed further. "Do you have any further questions?"

"Who is in charge of me besides you?" Flightplan asked, most of his components interested in hearing the answer.
"I am ultimately in charge of you, however you should obey any lawful order you are given by a Knight or peacekeeper. Your component's keepers would be the most likely to do so. If you receive a keeper of your own will depend on how often you expect to be combined. That is a discussion I have not had with your components," Dai Atlas answered.

~Ask who your keeper is likely to be,~ Jazz nudged.

"Who will my keeper be if I have one?" Flightplan asked obediently.

"If you need one, it will likely be myself and never alone. There are very few Knights with any hope of controlling you by force without destroying you if it is required," Dai Atlas answered.

~That's the truth from what I've seen so far,~ Deadlock agreed. ~Most of these mecha wouldn't have a hope against us like this.~

~Yeah, he's probably actually faced one,~ Jazz hummed.

~At a minimum he has commanded them,~ Prowl agreed. ~He would know the basic specs.~

"Acceptable," Flightplan said looking around all the mecha surrounding him. So far his components seemed content so he would be satisfied with what he had learned.

Once it neared the end of the orn, Dai Atlas put aside the report and waited patiently for the appointment he knew would be on time. He wasn't exactly certain why Barasi Lelku was coming to visit with a guest, but he more than suspected that it had to do with the newest active member of the gestalt.

"Thank you for seeing us on such short notice, Sovereign," the Barasi inclined his helm slightly. "Presul Blacktip is a master of Teris-Spi. He and three civilians believe they are ready to be promoted to grandmaster, however until now there has not been a grandmaster to test them."

"And you have found out that a grandmaster is now in available here in the city," Dai Atlas said, realizing that this was an additional issue Prowl's presence would help resolved.

"Yes. Presul Blacktip would speak with him to determine that he is indeed the mecha in the records and to determine if he is willing to test those here for their status," Lelku continued. "This is a rare art that views the testing by one of the rank desired or better to be of great importance."

"He hasn't been cleared to interact with civilians yet, but he has accepted me as the Lord of Law," Dai Atlas answered still thinking over the situation. If Prowl was willing to test these masters for promotion to grand master it would be a solution to the problem of retraining him in Teris-Spi once his reformat was completed.

"How long before he is permitted to interact with Presul Blacktip?" Lelku asked politely.

"I will check with Knight Dagger to see how Prowl is progressing," Dai Atlas said, deciding to bring up his own situation and see if the solution would be acceptable. "I do have a request for you as well also involving this discipline. Prowl has requested to be reformat ted so as to better integrate. He will retain his frame memory of his past training, and it would be advisable for him to be retrained in this art."

"Then he will be trained," Blacktip spoke for the first time. "It is the right of every Praxian to learn our martial art. If Barasi Lelku permits, it is a task I would welcome."
"So long as none of your duties falter I have no issue with this," the Barasi spoke with subtle formality.

"Retraining a grand master will certainly be an unusual experience for you," Dai Atlas said relaxing a little bit now that one of the smaller problems with the gestalt was settled.

"Indeed," Blacktip's doorwings nearly quivered with anticipation.

"One moment please," he said politely before comming Dagger. ::Dagger, do you and your charge have a moment for a question?::

::Yes Sovereign,:: Dagger replied promptly. ::We will be there in a few kliks.::

"Knight Dagger and his charge Prowl will be joining us shortly so you can make your request directly. Would either of you like a seat while we wait?" Dai Atlas motioned politely towards the chairs near his desk.

"Yes, thank you," Lelku inclined his helm and the main walked to the two chairs, one designed for a mech much bigger than they were, to wait for the new Praxian.

"How are things at the temple?" Dai Atlas asked to pass the time.

Lelku vented briefly and said candidly, "Every time new mecha are accepted into New Crystal City we have individuals come questioning how they should respond. These new arrivals have brought even more questions since rumors say they were instrumental in the very war we fled."

"Which, unfortunately, is true. Prowl had been a ranking Autobot tactician since well before the Exodus. Jazz was ranking Autobot SpecOps. Thundercracker was part of the elite trine on the Decepticon side," Dai Atlas admitted.

"And Deadlock?" Lelku asked.


"There are those who are angry about their presence as it reopens old wounds. Keeping them here in the Citadel for now is a wise idea, but they will encounter some more grudges as they venture out into the city. Hopefully we won't have more warning sirens, although after talking to the Peacekeepers I don't blame Thundercracker for that incident," Lelku continued after a pause. "I have encountered a few, especially in the Archives, who want to know how things are going back on Cybertron."

"Prowl and Thundercracker have both spoken of their willingness to answer any questions they can, though Prowl knows many things he considers too classified to speak of as well. Jazz is free with some kinds of information that may be of interest. If they contact me I will arrange for a meeting," Dai Atlas said.

"I will let them and the rest of the priests know so word can be spread through the appropriate channels," Lelku said with a small nod of thanks at the offer. "Wing returned to you with some very strange companions; hopefully they will prove more of blessing than a curse."

"So far, I believe the odds are in their, and our, favor. Prowl and Deadlock intend to become Knights, Thundercracker seems to be settling well with his new flock and Jazz has realistic plans to become an entertainer. They will be able to support themselves well before they are full citizens," Dai Atlas said with the certainty he felt.
"At least they are all being realistic about ways to support themselves and use the skills they already possess. Entertainers and Knights would be some of the more accepting occupations," Leklu agreed.

"And despite the scuffle you heard of, Seekers do take care of their own. Thundcracker has the backing and humility needed to survive until he is no longer an outsider first," Dai Atlas agreed.

::Sovereign, we are here. May we enter?: Dagger commed.

::Enter,: Dai Atlas commed as he said out loud, "They are here."

The two Praxians stepped in, both black and white with red chevrons, but otherwise bearing little resemblance.

Prowl bowed to the priests. "Barasi, Presul." Then shifted to bow to Dai Atlas. "Lord of Law."

"Dagger, thank you for arriving so promptly. Prowl, Barasi Leklu and Presul Blacktip have requested to speak with you," Dai Atlas said, making it clear that he was allowing the request before he turned the discussion over to the pair. He did not want to create any issues with Prowl's balancing act since he'd only recently accepted Dai Atlas' authority over him here in the city and he was under no illusions just how precarious that choice had been. He was sure that Prowl had spent those orns bullying his coding into giving the answer he wanted, even if he wasn't fully aware of it.

"Grandmaster Prowl," Blacktip opened with a single glyph that set the tone and subject of the requested meeting. "I am a master of Teris-Spi ready to be tested as are three others in the city. I am requesting that you test one of us before you rest."

Prowl's doorwings flicked in surprise and he gave a glance at Dai Atlas before focusing on the priest after a subtle wing-nod. "There is not a grandmaster in the city?"

"Grandmaster Spinner did not survive long enough," Blacktip explained and both gave a moment of loss for the being they both knew and respected.

"I will do what I can, then. Did a copy of the records survive?" Prowl focused on the next issue; that he had no proof of what he was without them.

"Yes. We can confirm your status," Blacktip said and watched a bit of tension drain from Prowl.

"Lord Dai Atlas, testing of a new grandmaster takes a minimum of a metacycle with tests every orn. It will consume almost all of my time," Prowl looked to his current boss.

"My understanding is that this testing is the only way to gain new grandmasters of Teris-Spi here in the city," Dai Atlas waited for a wing dip of confirmation from the pair before continuing. "As the Master of the Knights of Light I understand the importance of such positions and traditions. If you are willing to accept this duty to Master Blacktip, I will authorize your normal duty shifts and training time in the Citadel to be set aside so you may focus upon this task."

"Thank you," Prowl inclined his doorwings in thanks-respect before turning to Blacktip. "I will test you as soon as it can be arranged."

"Thank you, Grandmaster Prowl. I will let the others know of your decision and arrangements will be made through Sovereign Dai Atlas," Presul Blacktip said with a deferential doorwing dip.
Orn 56

Chapter by gatekat

Chapter Summary

Prowl and Dai Atlas spar to prove Dai can control Prowl if he snaps.

As requested Dai Atlas stepped into the sparring ring, leaving Axe on the side lines to monitor their match. Neither truly expected any trouble to occur, but it paid to be cautious when sparring with someone of Prowl's skills and abilities. Dai Atlas was long used to looking down to keep track of a smaller opponent, since few besides his mate now equaled him in size. He didn't expect that to change any time soon as he had no real desire to spar with Flightplan any time in the next few decavorns. At a minimum he wanted the gestalt's combined form to have a few vorns of existing before any combat occurred.

In the audience was the rest of the unit in various levels of unease and interest, Redline looking decidedly peeved, the remaining three Masters, several of the better fighters and most of the other Knights who could manage it. Watching their Sovereign spar with anyone besides his bonded was worth the effort. Sparring with real weapons too. Prowl wanted to be sure that in a worst case scenario the being he was trusting to protect society from him was up to the task.

Prowl stepped into the circle and bowed deeply to his Lord of Law. It was a move that displayed not just the twin Teris-Spi swords on his back, but as he stood it showed off the glint of armor on his left arm.

"Thank you for indulging me in this, Lord Dai Atlas."

"I look forward to additional matches later," Dai Atlas said as he returned a formal bow, drew his own swords and waited for the Praxian's first move. Since this was a test of his ability to stop Prowl, he was going to go on the defensive initially. It would allow him to gauge his opponent's abilities while keeping a few of his own tricks a surprise later. Prowl had trained skill, but he had ages of experience on the real battlefield.

With a dart in to slash at Dai Atlas' leg, Prowl began the testing process, judging and gauging an unknown opponent.

Easily stepping aside to avoid the attack and using a blade to block the expected next strike, Dai Atlas kept his responses to a minimum, using this first part of their session to study Prowl as well. He was as methodical as Dai Atlas had expected, and it was apparent it wasn't going to take many feints and strikes for Prowl to finish his initial assessment no matter how repetitive Dai Atlas tried to make his responses. Even that repetition was valuable since it confirmed his strength and response times.

It also confirmed that Prowl was as unaccustomed to fighting a significantly larger opponent as the average warrior was. It didn't seem to put a damper on how much he was looking forward to each move that crossed their blades as he darted within range again with a lighting fast spin to target Dai Atlas's wrist.

Quickly blocking with his other sword what could be a crippling wound in a real fight, Dai Atlas
decided to press forward and assess Prowl's defensive capabilities, starting the offensive against his smaller opponent by striking out at his left arm. Prowl turned and twisted the arm as the shield flared to life, taking the impact. It didn't dampen the kinetic energy much, but it did fully reduce the cutting damage to nothing. At full strength Prowl would have been sent flying instead of skidding, but that shield would have kept him alive.

Excitement, enjoyment, intensity. This was much like sparring with Kimark, only far more controlled. No matter what Wing said of the spark in this frame, it also knew the joy of battle and challenge.

Prowl got his balance back and grinned, open and hungry, before moving in again.

This time Dai Atlas was having to twist and shift slightly off-balance as Prowl dove under his right arm and struck out at his legs as he passed. It was a move many smaller opponents used, but Prowl pulled it off well and even managed to score a glancing strike to Dai Atlas' armor. A simple strike wasn't sufficient to drive him further off-balance, but it would have been much worse if it had struck deep in a joint. It was warning enough that in a real fight Prowl was capable of sending Dai Atlas to medical before he was subdued.

The Sovereign accepted it, even relished the fact that he had a new worthy sparring partner. It wouldn't take long for this frame memory to be retrained.

The instant Prowl was behind him, the Praxian twisted on one pede and lunged up to grab hold of back armor, then kicked against it to get higher.

Normally on a battlefield instinct was to expect Axe to take care of the problem, but Dai Atlas had a few tricks to use that he quickly debated. Flailing around after Prowl wasn't going to be much use since he didn't really want to kill him. He could just fall backwards and crush the smaller mech since there were no convenient walls available; he'd have to leap off or risk injury. A sharp burst of distress-must help as Axe made an aborted step forward mixed with what sensors were telling him and he twisted a hand around to scrape the Praxian off with his sword. The bite of Prowl's sword along his shoulder armor did little damage, but Axe's relief said clearly that the original placement would have hurt.

In a real battle between the Sovereign and the gestalt Dai Atlas knew Jazz or Deadlock would immediately take advantage of this kind of distraction and use the opportunity to take him down even as Prowl rolled away from him. It was not a fight he wanted to be in alone, especially with them having access to Wing who knew him so well. Even just fighting Prowl alone wasn't a pleasant prospect. The mech had just proven he was as much a scraper as a martial artist. Fitting for a being who survived Cybertron's greatest civil war.

Prowl's pedes hit the wall as he twisted to control his movement after being flung by the short sword taller than he was. Instead of using that momentum to lunch at Dai Atlas he used it to kick himself upwards and towards another wall, then up again into the rafters.

Most grounders didn't think in three dimensions enough to immediately go up in a fight instead of straight back at their foe, but this was a tactic Dart in particular liked to use during sparring, especially against much larger opponents. It wasn't worth the effort to go up after him since the confined space would work against the triple changer. Tracking Prowl as he leaped across the rafters above Dai Atlas readied himself to dodge either thrown blades or a leaping strike.

He realized just as Prowl came down blades first that he was being maneuvered to reduce Axe's view of his back. It was a cunning and deliberate ploy designed to remove one of his established supports in battle and it had worked. Turning to fight Prowl as he would normally allowed the
Praxian another chance to repeat his climb with no one directly watching. Instead he stepped directly forward raising both blades for a doubled slash designed to throw Prowl's frame aside. It would cause severe damage when the swords struck his arms, but normally a blow like this would rip someone of Prowl's size in half.

A sparkpulse later he saw Prowl adjust for his chosen reply and angled his frame to land pede first on the flat of the blade. It was a risky move Dai Atlas had seldom seen anyone willing to try to perform, but it would have saved Prowl's life in real combat. Instead of crumpling parts of Prowl's armor and throwing him aside, Prowl's momentum slowed Dai Atlas's swing so that even as the Praxian was pushed away it wasn't far enough to get him out of striking range.

Both Teris-Spi swords slashed down with an accuracy not even Dart managed on this kind of move and Prowl curled and twisted to come to a sliding landing on his pedes. Forearm and wrist sparking Dai Atlas turn quickly to face him and saw the grin and bright optics looking up at him.

"You're good," he admitted with a growl even as he shifted his weight and swung an attack with his good arm, trying to draw Prowl into range for a side attack with the other sword. He'd fought with much worse wounds in the past and could ignore the injury until the sparring match was over. Over the bond Axe huffed but agreed.

"Thank you," Prowl accepted it and darted in again to go after the good sword arm only to twist at the last moment to slash at that side's knee joint instead.

Dai Atlas lifted his leg to let the heavier armor take the blow and kicked Prowl. "Dart will want to learn that stunt."

"Easy to teach," Prowl agreed as he turned on one pede in a skidding circle to hack higher and catch the back of the knee joint. "You're holding back."

"Yes, I almost always hold back in a spar unless it is with Axe. It's too easy for me to offline someone with an ill-timed blow," Dai Atlas admitted as they twisted around each other.

"That I understand. I expect I would have to do the same with Demeter if we are of similar skill," Prowl accepted the truth of the disadvantages of sparring so far outside one's size class.

"Yes, when fighting an equally skilled opponent physical limitations must be taken into account. It doesn't help that Axe and I are two of the only mecha of our size with our millennia of combat experience. Restraint keeps my processor focused on techniques and not on efficiency," Dai Atlas agreed, recognizing that these four warriors were among those would understand that concern about processor flashes and instinctive offlining blows. He wasn't convinced that Deadlock particularly cared unless it involved Wing, but a berserker would have to understand the concept of restraint. This spar was all about those reflexes and proving to Prowl that Dai Atlas could handle them and control Prowl when Prowl couldn't.

Whether that meant keeping the Praxian occupied until help arrived or stopping him by whatever means necessary. Dai Atlas shifted forward and struck out harder than before with both swords at once. Prowl managed to block one with his shield but the second caught him low on the left leg. The combined force sent Prowl tumbling to the ground where he had to roll to his pedes from an awkward sprawl.

That brief hesitation was all the advantage he needed at this moment. Dai Atlas lunged forward and crashed into the smaller mech, pinning him to the floor with sheer mass and enough skill to keep the blades under control. Prowl struggled, snarled and sent a hard shock through his shield. While it was enough to stun someone Prowl's size it was only an unpleasant buzz to Dai Atlas. Despite the hissing
and struggle, Prowl didn't teek upset. He was giving this every effort, all his tricks, but in the end he wanted to be pinned and completely stopped.

In the audience Deadlock was on his pedes with Wing trying to hold him back and several Knights ready to intervene as well.

"He's fine," Thundercracker said firmly, placing a hand upon Deadlock's other shoulder even as he watched the continuing struggle closely. "Dai Atlas is not crushing him."

"Sounds like he is," the warrior growled, then blinked as all the tension on the floor ended and Dai Atlas stood, followed by an unharmed Prowl.

Dai Atlas waited until Prowl had turned towards him and said, "You fought well."

"Thank you," Prowl bowed politely to him, one martial artist to another. "I look forward to sparring with you again." He turned to look up at Deadlock and the warrior sat down with a huff.

"He doesn't trust me not to hurt you," Dai Atlas said a bit cynically.

"Deadlock has had a hard existence and does not trust easily," Prowl answered. "He will wait for proof that your words and intentions match. Megatron won him over. You can in time."

Dai Atlas accepted the statement. It was not the first time he'd heard that or understood how true it was. He motioned Prowl to join him in leaving. "After you are reformatted Blacktip offered to retrain you in Teris-Spi."

"Excellent," Prowl perked up. "The other disciplines are better represented in the Order?"

"Yes, we have masters in Diffusion, Crystalocation and Circuit-Su to help you relearn your forms," Dai Atlas promised.

"Things will go smoother for everyone when his frame memory and martial training are similar," Prowl said.
Chapter 64

Chapter Summary

Prowl testing Blacktip to be a grandmaster. This takes a metacycle of tests every orn.

As the only ranking grandmaster in the city, Prowl stood alone, wearing the full formal regalia of a Grandmaster of Teris-Spi and the Master of the Temple of Crystal Praxus. The mixture of armor, ornamentation and fabric felt strange to him and allowing the four masters to tend to him all morning had been even stranger. He had endured it for the good of the formalities to come. Behind him was the center of the Dojo of Crystal Praxus; a crystal sword stand with finest two Teris-Spi swords and shield that the dojo could afford. As this was the first and central dojo of the city, the one where nobility trained, it was the finest set in the city. This one was one of the finest sets ever crafted. Above were the four traditional dark red cords -- one for the frame, one for the processor, one for the spark, and one for the traditions the former upheld -- were stretched across the ceiling in a traditional rhombus. The space chosen, the largest of the indoor arenas with space for the entire Order of Light to be comfortable would be packed with standing room only with many a smaller Knight or Praxian either on the shoulders of the largest or in the rafters.

Looking around one last time before the audience, every actual martial artist of Teris-Spi in the city and much of the Order of Light was allowed in, Prowl commed Dai Atlas that all was ready for him to allow them in.

The great doors opened and slowly the Knights filed into the room starting with the Praxian Initiates who filed against the back walls. Once they had entered the Knights followed in ranking order starting with the Praxians who practiced Teris-Spi and ending when Dai Atlas and the Masters walked around the circle until Dai Atlas stopped at the space below where processor and frame met. Dai Atlas and Prowl had decided this was the most appropriate location for them during these events. Mixed in with the Knights were the members of his gestalt all very interested in seeing Prowl in action.

Once the Knights had filed into the back, the civilian Teris-Spi practitioners entered to take their appointed spaces around the center. Each made a bow to Prowl as the grandmaster of this dojo. It was almost a shock to Prowl who hadn't seen this many Praxians in one place since before the destruction of Praxus. Last to enter were the three Masters of Teris-Spi who all bowed respectfully to Prowl.

When all were settled and the three Masters of Teris-Spi not to be tested this orn took their seats on cushions on the sparring floor just outside the circle that Prowl dominated. At an unseen cue Master Blacktip stepped into view. He was dressed as every practitioner of Teris-Spi was in their formal robes, sashes and adornments denoting rank and accomplishments within the art. At five paces from Prowl he stopped and bowed low, his doorwings angled to give him the least warning of an attack out of respect for the being before him, then knelt in supplication.

"Gransmaster Prowl, I would be tested to join your rank before all," Blacktip spoke his request as if this was not the entire purpose of this meeting and the gathering around them.
"By what right do you claim to be a Master of Teris-Spi?" Prowl demanded just as formally.

"I was tested and found worthy of the rank of Master by Factcheck," Blacktip said, naming the now off-lined Archipresul of Praxus. "I have trained seven current dasi who all assist with training new students and four who have advanced to the rank of Panki in Teris-Spi. Two of those are also currently instructing other students and have helped train new senior students and dasi. I have tested two panki who successfully passed and earned the rank of master. I have also trained Masters Aurin and Mayquick to mastery of the art."

Prowl accepted the statement with a flick of his doorwings that sent both lines of rich red tassels swinging. "What was your first mastery?"

"The Art, Grandmaster," Blacktip answered, relaxing in increments as things went smoothly for both of them.

"Now you claim mastery of The Art, the Processor and the Spark?" Prowl demanded smoothly.

"Yes, Grandmaster," Blacktip answered.

"As is tradition we will first prove your mastery of the Art," Prowl said. "Step forward into the circle and we will begin."

Blacktip took his position and settled into the neutral stance as Prowl picked up the rich red crystal correction staff of a teacher and began to call out positions, then katas. All but the youngest of students recognized the early stages of this test and even they could follow why it was done easily.

Prowl's attention was focused on Blacktip's movements, watching closely for any deviation from correct form as the katas increased in complexity. There was no hesitation in the master's movements as he demonstrated how well he had integrated the martial foundations of this order into his frame and processor. It was suited to one who had chosen this as their first course of study.

The orn was already late when the katas were finished and Prowl circled around to stand in front of Blacktip once more, the master frozen in the at ease pose after his final kata.

"I have found no fault with your solo form. We will continue in the morning," Prowl's voice rang out for the audience more than for the mech standing before him.

Blacktip bowed to the grandmaster and silently backed out of the circle before turning and heading out the door; he would not speak to anyone outside of this circle until the testing was over unless a true emergency occurred. The silence was meant to test his patience as well as force him to contemplate each orn's events. In later orns it was also to prevent him from cheating, at least in theory. A grandmaster needed to know everything without flaw or reference.

Once the masters and practitioners of Teris-Spi had risen and left in the order they entered, the Knights also filed out. Once everyone else was gone Prowl's unit remained standing just outside the door with Dagger waiting close by.

Deadlock waited until Prowl was in normal speaking range before asking, "Is it all going to be this boring?"

"Not always, although the formalities will remain for the duration." Prowl wasn't offended since he knew the berserker's nature. It was like expecting the twins to tolerate these events without comment. "There will be sparring between us at times. That comes next. Then decaorns of testing his knowledge of both facts and theory of our art. If he succeeds this will take a metacycle and occupy much of every orn."
"Longer orns than this?" Jazz asked.

"A few, but not many," Prowl assured him. "It is a long process but not a difficult one for the tester."

"Let me know when it's going to be boring and I'll skip those sessions," Deadlock said bluntly. "It'll look better for you if I don't get stuck here and start fidgeting."

"Tomorrow is the sparring. The rest will make today look active," Prowl warned him.

"I'm very interested in seeing this testing, but I don't know how many orns I'll be able to get away from my shifts," Wing admitted.

"I'm sure there are cameras that could record or at least stream it to you," Prowl suggested.

"Um, not really. We don't have much security around here beyond the Knights. We've never needed it," Wing pointed out.

"Perhaps one would be placed if you asked," Prowl said.

Thundercracker and Jazz were both trying to remember the last time they resided somewhere that didn't have security cameras everywhere. "Red Alert would be throwing a fit at the lack of security here," Jazz muttered.

"I'll make a recording for you if you can find a camera," Thundercracker offered. "I'm interested in seeing this testing."

"Thank you," Wing smiled brightly at him. "I'll let you know by tomorrow night."

"There are several Knights that watched from the rafters. One of them may like you enough to trade for their view," Deadlock tried to be helpful.

"Better see if you can find two cameras. If I tell them I'm recording it for Wing I'll probably get offers to help," Thundercracker chuckled dipping a wing slightly to Deadlock in thanks.

"I'm probably going to skip most of it after tomorrow. You can show me any exciting parts once it's over," Deadlock said before nodding to the Praxian. "No offense intended, Prowl."

"None taken. This path, this art, is not for everyone. It was created by the priesthood to protect not just the physical city of Praxus but all that is important to us, from law to philosophy. It can be very dull watching if it is not your culture and your fascination. I am sure as few as two dozen will watch the entire process. Only five of us are required," Prowl said agreeably.

"The tester, the tested and those of the ranks they came from?" Thundercracker took a guess.

"At our level, yes. It is not so strict at the lower levels, though most will try to attend," Prowl nodded his doorwings.

"Especially since they never expected to have a grandmaster here after the one in transit offline," Thundercracker tipped his own wings with understanding. "A part of their culture they thought lost returned with us."

"Yes," Prowl actually smiled with a sense of wonder that he was building something rather than destroying it. "There will be four grandmasters in the city within the vorn and five once I train back up."

"How long will that take?" Wing asked.
Prowl hummed and thought a bit. "Less than a century, I expect, if my situation allows for the time requirements to be waved. My memory makes the knowledge portion a matter of orns. That's typically the longest, hardest part of training. I learn physical things very rapidly and I should retain much of my frame memory. If the time in rank requirements are not waved then it will take roughly eighteen hundred and fifty vorns."

"Sounds complicated," Deadlock said doubtfully. "Are the Knights going to be that bad?"

"Only if you want to become a master," Wing answered.

"So I'm fine then," Deadlock said relieved.

"Is there a precedent either way for you?" Jazz asked.

"They exist. I used them for the early, pre-teaching ranks. After that they are much more difficult to acquire. They have not been used for master or grandmaster in recorded history, and the one case of a reformatted practitioner was only of panki rank," Prowl explained. "I have no doubt I will be waved up to panki very quickly. To master and grandmaster may or may not be waved."

"So from what you're saying waiving the speed of advancement at the earlier ranks should most likely happen, especially since there is past precedent and you'll have the frame memories to make that advancement a non-issue. I'd hate to see you bored stuck in that tedium so I hope you make it through quickly. It'd be nice if they waived everything so you can be in your proper position as soon as possible but that might cause trouble politically since we're high-ranked Autobots. Even if you're reformatted it's going to take the civilians a while to be comfortable with having any of us in positions of power," Jazz said.

"Even one as tenuous as one of five grandmasters of a relatively minor martial art," Prowl agreed. "Fortunately beyond the testing he will be able to spend any time politics requires that training does not in studying other things he will need to catch up on. I have top level mastery in Formal Diffusion and Crystalocution, level three mastery in Circuit-Su, as well as learning all the cultural and legal aspects of being a citizen, and then Knight of Light. Just those five martial arts and the related material will keep me very busy for a couple millennia."

"A lot busier than me," Deadlock admitted as he pondered all that training. "I'm just looking at making it to being a Knight. You'll probably outrank me fairly quickly."

"It's not so minor a position to the Praxians here," Thundercracker reminded them. "And your integration with them is no less important to our flock than my integration into the civilian Seekers."

"True," Prowl acquiesced to them both. "Though as I understand Knight rank, until you try to become a master it is largely about how many you have trained and how far they have advanced." Everyone gave Wing a look.

"Fairly accurate for titles. Now standing is another matter. That's just about how good at the martial art you are. My standing is higher than three of the five Master Knights, but they outrank me," Wing gave a brief explanation.

"Right now that's just making my processor hurt. I'll figure it all out later once it matters," Deadlock grunted before glancing over at their patiently waiting chaperon. "Who else is hungry?"

"Yes," Prowl perked up at the prospect of fuel.

"Definitely," Jazz grinned along with Wing and Thundercracker flicked his wings for the two groups
to merge and head for a common room.
Chapter Summary

Thundercracker watches/records Prowl testing Blacktip to be a grandmaster.

It was the seventh orn of testing Blacktip and the purely physical aspects were done with. Two orns ago Prowl had moved on to verbally quizzing Blacktip on the history and laws of Teris-Spi and its practitioners.

All in all, Thundercracker found it fascinating how it was both similar and different from what he knew from Wing's test here and promotion tests of the Air Martials. He was recording all of this from his perspective for Wing but he was here for himself as well. For Prowl to have mastered so many martial arts indicated it was something he was drawn to. It would be important to understand why these, of all the existing arts, had been chosen and if the order was a factor of interest, availability or both.

It had to be more than just the fact that Teris-Spi was an almost exclusively Praxian variant of the Metallikato martial art, although that was obviously part of the appeal of it as Prowl's primary form. He'd heard enough grounders grumble about Seeker arrogance, but Praxians had always had their own form of superiority complex and before the war they rarely denied it. He expected it was their rarity in the war that was a core cause. Most mecha had been stationed with a Seeker. Not nearly so many were that close to a Praxian.

The highly processor focused nature of Circuit-Su would make it a natural choice for someone with Prowl's intelligence where as Diffusion with its focus on using an opponent's skills against them may have appealed to the Enforcer in him. The most unusual addition to this group of fairly ritualized fighting arts was Crystalocution; a much more practical art than the others and eschewing the traditions of the other forms. On the whole it made an interesting and conflicted image of his flockmate.

Keeping the recorder steady on the action Thundercracker looked around. The upper ranks of Teris-Spi practitioners he expected. This was the testing of their first native grandmaster. It was a huge event for their order, even as loosely affiliated as they were. What was far more interesting were which of the lower ranked but high status mecha and Knights that stuck around this far in.

To most Dagger was a fairly obvious observer given it was his charge currently on display, and Thundercracker had noted early on how intently the medic was watching the proceedings. None of the flock had seen anything that might be perceived as hostility or ill-will in Dagger's actions, and he had quickly been accepted the way most of their chaperons were. More so on some level since he was also one of their two medics. He'd earned trust there that the others didn't have. Even Aurora didn't have quite that level, at least not among the others.

Red Csillag, the Praxian noble who had helped settle Prowl's coding, was also a frequent visitor during the events. Thundercracker had yet to determine whether her interest was more due to Prowl's status as a grandmaster or his soon to occur reformatting or possibly something that might only make sense to her. He'd seen his share of odd reasons and desires over his long existence and would no
longer discount the possibility that another's motivation may be something he wouldn't think of.

Others such as Talon were unknown for other reasons. It was difficult to know whether the Praxian Aerial Knight was here as a Praxian or a martial artist or to check out the soon to be available new student. Much the same could be said of the non-Praxian Knights. It could be an interest in the art on display, interest in the newest resident or interest in their newest soon-to-be-student Knight.

He'd heard several Knights murmur mostly positive things about Prowl's skills and discipline after the last few sessions, and they seemed to think that he would make a good Knight. He was making a better impression that Deadlock was currently doing among the majority Knights, but Kimark had mentioned that Deadlock was someone who would attract the more practical part of the Knights rather than those focused on the spiritual or cultural aspects of the Order.

Personally Thundercracker had no doubt that Prowl would be drawn to both sides. The mech was deeply practical yet his choices of martial arts and hints from their joint time also suggested Prowl was far more spiritual than many would give him credit for. The big question was how much of these attitudes were innate to Prowl and how much had been learned in this lifetime. Once he was reformatted it was going to be interesting to see how the new Prowl behaved and interacted with the others in the flock. It was one aspect that Thundercracker couldn't help with. In many things his Air Martial experience could translate Praxian Enforcer quite well, but the Air Martials had no equivalent of freshly sparked members. Seekers simply didn't create that way.

Prowl could well be even more rule abiding than now if he'd learned how to relaxed. Or he could be far more relaxed if experience had taught him not to trust or express himself. Until they knew Thundercracker was betting on the second. There was too much pain and hate towards reality as a whole in Prowl for his expected nature to be completely natural. Hate like that took time and repeated exposure to nurture.

"Dagger, is there a correct way to block a given attack here?" Thundercracker asked as Prowl struck at Blacktip for the 4th time that groon.

"In a way. He's expected to avoid being hit and get back into position in the fewest movements possible. How he does it is up to him and Prowl decides if it's few enough," the Knight explained.

"Almost surprisingly arbitrary yet very practical on a fundamental level," Thundercracker said after a bit of thought. "It allows for individual initiative and favored moves but still mandates a level of competency against an opponent before progression."

"That's the idea. A core tenant is that there is not a single correct path, only a correct destination. Some paths are more efficient but all that work are valid," Dagger nodded his doorwings.

"Which keeps the practitioners from become too set in their ways and keeps things unpredictable for opponents," Thundercracker agreed as he watched Prowl throw a 5th attack at Blacktip. This time Blacktip parried the strike with his left arm instead of dodging. "How aggressive is the order in keeping it to Praxians?"

"Calling Teris-Spi's practitioners an order is rather like calling Skykato's an order. It's a loose organization with rules on what you have to do to be recognized as a rank by it. It's not an order like the Knights are though. I've never heard of a restriction, though between needing the sensor capabilities that doorwings give and finding a teacher I doubt there will ever be many outsiders that gain much rank.

"So a non-Praxian flier or a grounder with additional sensory systems could possibly pick up some of the maneuvers," Thundercracker mused, pondering whether Wing was interested in learning some of
it. He knew the Aerial would never be comfortable with range attacks, but this seemed to be in his comfort zone.

"I know of no reason, though keep in mind I'm only a Dasi. I picked it up as a matter of pride and practical access before I became a Knight. I've never been a serious student the way they are," he flicked a doorwing towards the masters and grandmaster on the floor.

"They would most likely require a non-Praxian student to be very serious about learning since it is such an unusual request," Thundercracker said. Deciding to shelve the idea until he could mention it to Wing and Prowl, he turning his attention back to Dagger. "If you don't mind my curiosity, did medical draw your attention away or do you prefer the Knight's art instead of Teris-Spi?"

Dagger blinked and his doorwings twitched in surprise for a nanoklik. "Ah, neither. I knew I wanted to be a Knight the first time I got close to a Great Sword when I was still a sparkling. I knew I was a martial artist before I was coordinated enough to walk. I was lucky to have supportive creators that indulged me and encouraged me to come to the Citadel on Cybertron when I got my adult frame. I didn't find out I had a talent for medical until I was training to become a Knight. My Daoshi couldn't focus on anything when his previous student was critically damaged not long after Sentinel became Prime. I wanted to be helpful in the downtime so I drifted to the place where extra hands and a runner always seemed welcome. By the time Wing was ready to train me again I understood I didn't just like medical I had a talent for it."

"While it is unfortunate that someone was injured so severely at least a little good came out of it since you found your calling," Thundercracker said with a small wing dip. The concept that his fledgling was old enough to have trained Dai Atlas, Dagger and at least one other Knight had reconciled in processor and coding a while back, but it was still important to him when he found out things like this about Wing.

"It was a frightening, stressful time for the entire Citadel. Dai Atlas was only a Knight then but everyone respected them. It was a terrible thing to see, to watch them fly for the first time in over six hundred vorns, to merge in a mimic of their bonding flight, only to see them shot down by a coward on the ground. Their chests were fused together when they fell. The largest fliers managed to catch them and bring them down. Hardwing managed to save their lives. It was a long recovery." Dagger told the basic story.

Thundercracker paused for a long klik, not having realized that the injured student in question was in fact Dai Atlas. "I'm surprised someone would have risked their wrath with a failed attempt, but a distance attack is the only way most would think to have a chance of taking him down. Even up until I accidentally left Cybertron Dai Atlas and Axe both held a reputation that few would have dared directly challenge. They're not only individually dangerous but are said to have inspired their soldiers to great feats as well."

"They certainly inspire many of us," Dagger agreed. "Wing caught the one who did it. Apparently he was an old personal enemy. Though for a while we thought he was a bounty hunter that hadn't kept up on the pardons the new Prime gave out."

Thundercracker nodded, "Grudges are difficult to let go of or get away from no matter how hard you try. I had a few mecha I arrested that tried to make problems for me, although nothing at that level."

"I'm glad you didn't. Some things I'll never understand and I'm glad for it," Dagger admitted. "I like healing but that's a level of broken I can't help."

"Sometimes grudges have valid reasons for existing, but Prowl is a good example of someone torn apart by one however justified it might be," Thundercracker agreed quietly, watching his flock mate
strike out at Blacktip's knee joint. "It will be good for him to finally be able to rest."

"Yes. I hope his spark can heal whatever damage it's sustained when the processors are no longer making it worse," Dagger sighed. "I still regret losing so much experience. No matter how effective the knowledge passdown it won't be as good as living memory. Still I can't regret something that he wants so badly too much."

"Better he reformat than we lose him entirely," Thundercracker agreed. "I'm not just saying that since he is part of our gestalt. Even if we were still on Cybertron I don't know if he would want to continue no matter who won the war."

"I doubt even he knows," Dagger agreed. "Though I can't imagine the fate of the losing side's officers would be one many would be willing to endure. Civil wars are rarely kind to them."

"No, it wouldn't be," Thundercracker said with a small shudder, thinking about what would have happened to Jazz and Prowl if the Decepticons had won. He knew it wouldn't have bothered him nearly as much if they'd never left Cybertron, but these two were now a part of his flock and under his protection.
Jazz sat in the observation area watching the second joor of the sparring match. Blacktip's verbal testing wasn't challenging Prowl's frame in any way, and the Praxian was obviously enjoying his time out there with Wing. Jazz knew Deadlock was closely watching trying to learn everything he could about Prowl's fighting style. That kind of attentiveness had kept the mech online in the Decepticons. Here it should help him fit in with the Knights. That nature of intense overt observation and incorporation would be their strongest connection to each other soon and Jazz was willing to admit it wasn't a bad thing to have in common.

Soon. Within the metacycle Prowl would cease to be and someone else, someone painfully young and innocent and likely crazy-annoying would be in his place. For now, he would watch Prowl and try to pick up a few tricks for himself.

Like the blocking move Prowl performed as he darted under one of Wing's blades and used the shield to push the other one up at an awkward angle.

"Good move," Wing said as he stepped aside to dodge a kick from Prowl.

"Thank you," Prowl purred, his doorwings wide and moving with a smooth wave that marked this competition as a friendly one better than the practice weapons they were obligated to use because of Prowl's status. Without hesitation he moved forward shield first in a reminder that his fundamental training was Enforcer.

Wing managed to use the translucent energy shield as a form of cover, hiding the movement of his blades as he darted towards Prowl. He was so focused on his new trick and the decreased visibility compared to what Prowl was used to that he missed Prowl's own hidden move that jammed the practice blade into Wing's throat when Wing lowered himself for a strike. It wasn't a perfect hit; even with a real blade it wouldn't have severed the primary neural cable to paralyze. It was still enough to end the match.

"Good strike," Wing said with a bow after they'd stepped back. His own strike against Prowl's hip wasn't good enough to be considered a draw. "I won't make the same mistake next time."

"I look forward to our next match and evening our count a bit more," Prowl said with a serious voice but a happily wiggle of his doorwings that would have completely ruined his image among the Autobots.

"Do you want to get cleaned up and head back to Marwir's quarters? For a change I don't have anything scheduled tonight," Wing offered. "We'll make certain that you are ready for the testing tomorrow."
"I like that," Prowl purred and moved to put his practice gear into storage before doing his part of cleaning up the mess they'd made. It was simple, soothing, physical labor that Prowl enjoyed.

Wing watched Jazz and Deadlock head out with Dart and Kimark. He knew they wanted to spend time with Prowl. Normally a large cuddle pile would have been the next step, but they'd respected his request to have it be just the two of them tonight. No one asked why. He was sure they each had a theory. Eventually he might ask what they thought up just to see how close they were to the truth.

"Good enough?" Prowl drew Wing from his thoughts a few kliks later.

"Yes, the Knights won't have much to do extra in here next cleaning shift," Wing said after looking around at the their work. "Now, how about that shower?"

Prowl smiled with a happy doorwing wiggle and joined Wing in walking out. They didn't touch but they did walk in sync with fields lightly tangled. Of course Wing knew Dagger was following them, but he stayed outside the washrack so they pair could enjoy their time as close to alone together as they could have now. It was enjoyable cleaning Prowl's doorwings and allowing the Praxian to return the favor by scrubbing his own wings and turbines. He was really getting used to how much they reveled in the act of getting clean. It didn't resonate on the level of core kink that it did for the four but it was hard not to deeply enjoy something that brought another so much pleasure.

Waxing came next, then buffing and polishing. It didn't matter to any of them how long it lasted. The simple act of it brought them all peace and drew the best of their social protocols to the surface. It was a full joor and some before they left, both lax and gleaming, to be followed by Marwir back to her quarters and Wing's room there. The berth was barely big enough for two and no one cared. No matter what combination or where, snuggling meant close contact.

Prowl settled himself on the berth making certain his doorwings positioned so Wing wouldn't hit them when he sprawled half on top of Prowl.

"I missed not being able to cuddle with you on the way here," Wing admitted.

"I'm glad you had others to snuggle," Prowl purred and held him, stroking half open slender wings. "I'm glad you managed to keep me under. I like it here."

"Good, I want you to enjoy your time living in the Citadel," Wing snuggled closer. "It helps make up for the not so good times when we first met."

"Mmm, I can't say I ever thought of it that way. Or if I did it was so long ago I've forgotten," Prowl said thoughtfully. "Good orns are cherished. Bad orns survived. We didn't count them."

"Similar thoughts viewed differently," Wing agreed. "Some tend to think of the good orns as rewards for dealing with the bad ones. Either way, we enjoy it while times are good like they are right now."

"That I can very much agree with. This is as fine a final metacycle as anything I could devise. Returning something of importance to Praxians and a unit to be with," Prowl's purr deepened with his field's happiness. "I never dared contemplate such a good ending."

"Is there anything I can do to make it better?" Wing asked keeping his regrets at losing Prowl out of his field as much as possible by focusing on how happy Prowl was at this moment.

Prowl was silent for a long half klik as he contemplated the question and every permutation of it he could. Eventually he answered. "Continue to be yourself. What I'm enjoying most is simply spending time with my unit. The sparring, snuggling, treats and relaxing with nothing specific to do. It's good."
"I'm good at snuggles; everyone says so," Wing agreed immediately. "I also know all the best places to get treats, and I know I can get Atl to go get us some. When I'm not on my duty shifts I would love to spend more time with you sparring. I'm picking up some new tricks to surprise everyone else with next time we fight."

Prowl's smile was genuine. "I'm glad I can teach you something when we're having fun. I have long tried to learn something every orn even if it was only trivia."

"We'll have a lot to teach the new mech once he's functional beyond the basics of city and Citadel life," Wing offered. "Hopefully he'll love learning like you do."

"I'm sure he will," Prowl said with absolute belief. "The nature of the tac-net will ensure it does all it can to encourage my innate curiosity as far as it's allowed. It thrives on data." He paused then hummed thoughtfully. "I've made a note to tell Dai Atlas but it is good for you and the others to know as well. We're creative in the definition of useful data and work but the tac-net becomes increasingly agitated the longer it is denied work. Like driving it must be indulged or I become unstable."

"Would things like the structural composition of the cavern be of use to it? Things like that could help us prepare for potential disasters where Flightplan might be needed. Or is it more likely to interested in district layouts?" Wing pondered some of the more esoteric bits of data they could use beyond the obvious.

"District layouts first, though the composition of the cavern would be good. It's going to begin with the mental status of a rookie ... an Initiate. Someone who expects to be given orders. Giving orders comes much later," Prowl trilled at both suggestions.

"So start with the foundations of how the city functions so a baseline can be established. Then start adding in the variables that could be useful in certain situations. I think we can work with that," Wing said. "Jazz and I can certainly come up with a lot of odd information that will keep it busy over the vorns, and Thundercracker and I have different view of potentially relevant information than most grounders."

"Agreed. Dai Atlas, Axe and others here have different points of view as well," Prowl agreed as he wiggled his doorwings in an indulgent pleasure at the softness.

"You look good like this. I like having happy berthmates; it makes me not want to get up and leave for my duty shifts," Wing purred as he snuggled in a bit closer. Mindful of Prowl's work ethic he added, "Not that I don't go, but it's more fun to stay. Of course, it's also fun to come back to after shifts are done."

"I remember the temptation from the first time I fell in love," Prowl smiled with a soft fondness despite the ache of the long-ago loss. "It was quite a shock."

"I imagine it would be for you," Wing agreed. "Do you mind telling me about it? I'd like to know more about the mecha who helped make you the good mech you are."

"My original unit laid most of the foundation. I may have been an experimental model but Enforcer protocol said that all new Enforcers begin in patrol and work their way up and into other specialties. So I was assigned to a patrol unit of seven others. The eldest became my partner and primary mentor. He was Fevor. He'd seen a lot, learned so much and really enjoyed drinking hard at a place called the Smelter after shift. He learned quickly that it's almost physically impossible for me to become overcharged but he tried. It left me largely unable to understand the enjoyment of the state. It seemed like a very bad idea. It still does. I just no longer object off duty," Prowl began with old warmth.
"Even after I'd been promoted far above the basic patrol unit he was always there when I needed a shoulder or audial or opinion from the front line."

"He sounds like a good mech," Wing observed. "I'm glad you had someone you could count on for good advice."

"He was," Prowl agreed. "I needed him more often that I would have liked and he was always willing no matter what kind of orn he'd had. I did my best to be like him to my subordinates."

"What made it so different among the Autobots?" Wing asked, recalling Jazz's early descriptions of Prowl.

"Basic culture," Prowl could only shrug. "Enforcer culture was based on the idea that when you needed anything you turned to your leader. When they needed something they turned to their leader and so on. Among the Autobots it seemed you turned to your peers. Leaders weren't to be bothered with trivial things, non-work things."

"Sounds like the leaders weren't treated like they were part of the unit in the Autobots," Wing said thoughtfully. "The Knights don't quite work the same way as the Enforcers in regards to structure, but the relationship between Daoshi and Initiate sounds similar to what you had with Fevor. Watch how Marwir and I interact if you want an idea of a closer to typical relationship that way. Dai Atlas and I are in a strange situation given he's the Sovereign and I am the Voice of Dissent."

"I have watched when I can," Prowl lightly rubbed Wing's hinged cheek guards. "She cares for you as a unit leader should. Discipline when you need it, care and understanding when you need that. The Knights act as an extended unit from what I have seen. It's another reason I still believe it is the best choice. I could function in the priesthood. I will feel at home here because of your culture."

Wing squirmed just a bit on the berth, delighted that the Knights were somewhere Prowl thought he would enjoy not just the only decent alternative. "So Fevor was your primary mentor in the Enforcers. What were the others like?"

"Flashlight and Padlock were a bonded pair. Unusual among Enforcers, but that they had a civilian third was almost unheard of. Cocktail had been support when they met. By the time I was created he ran a bar for Enforcers. I liked him well enough though I never understood their attraction to an outsider."

"Does it feel as strange that Thundercracker is looking to civilians for a trine? He was an Air Martial although he'll probably never be allowed to have that role here in the city," Wing asked. "Does Master Aurora being trined with two civilians seem as odd to you?"

"They are not Praxian Enforcers; they're Seekers," Prowl said. "Well, perhaps it's a little odd for Aurora but nothing I've found in the rules and history of the Knights of Light indicate that mating to an outsider is discouraged much less forbidden."

"So Enforcers were discouraged from mating with outsiders?" Wing asked, wondering how this would impact the new mech's social life outside the Knights.

"Strongly so. It's easier to enforce the laws justly when there are no personal attachments to community or individual. It's simply how we did things," Prowl shrugged slightly. "When you don't draw your numbers from the populous you don't bring in any of their issues either. Both Air Martials and Knights are volunteer organizations. Praxian Enforcers are sparked into it."

"I think I understand," Wing said considering the difference Prowl was explaining. "It's going to be
very different here for the new mech given we don't really have a sparked population. Hopefully he'll adjust given it's going to be the only way he knows."

"I adjusted to far worse conditions," Prowl reminded him. "He'll do fine. He'll have a unit. He'll have an extended unit. He'll have a function he finds agreeable. It might not be his most desired situation any more than it would be mine but he will do well," he added with absolute belief. "I expect he'll seek hiscompanionship from the Praxians among the Knights, though without the cultural lessons and rules he may not care about function or frame as much as I do."

"Dagger is definitely going to be interested in helping him learn to fit in here," Wing agreed. "Most of the others will volunteer as soon as they're given the option. They like you, and they'll want him to succeed."

"That's still such a strange thing to hear," Prowl hummed. "No one's liked me since Praxus."

"Well, I obviously can't speak for the Autobots and what happened with them, but I find you to be very good company. I know some of the Praxian civilians are excited because you brought them a tradition they thought would have to end, and I think a few look at you and see the Enforcers they trusted back on Cybertron. Maybe some of it is the commonality you spoke of between the Knights and the Enforcers in structure. There's also the reality that most of us aren't war-damaged, and you don't have to send us off to fight," Wing said thoughtfully.

"All true, and my damage from the loss is not nearly as raw now," Prowl agreed. "Trackdown was that first love I mentioned. She was our best resource when someone bolted. Fasted thing on four wheels in the precinct."

"Sounds like someone that would give Dart and Dagger a good race," Wing said. "What was she like besides fast?"

"Oh she would have driven them to the ground," Prowl chuckled deep in fond memories. "She had the strangest personality. She was as serious and gruff as I was on duty and as playful as you in private. She was smart as well. Smarter than I was when I brought my tac-net down to the level of hers. Mostly she was able to translate so much I found confusing into terms I could understand better."

"She could explain the emotions and illogical actions of those around you," Wing guessed, enjoying Prowl's good mood and memorizing what he was saying about his first unit. "That'd have been very handy especially when you were first online."

"She was also the first to successfully explain the reason it is good to let folks go with a warning sometimes and not others," Prowl's field was warm and soft. "It wasn't a lesson I ever fully absorbed despite both our efforts. My tac-net did learn though and I learned to listen to it. I enjoyed simply being near her no matter what we were doing."

"She sounds like someone special. I wish I could have known her," Wing said, although he realized there was no real way events could have gone to allow him that opportunity. He'd have a better shot at meeting Skywarp.

"She was special," Prowl agreed with a field that spoke of a loss fully healed from. "Intake on the other hand could be a bit of a braggart although he mostly kept it in check when on duty. He was a Master of Crystalocation and often helped take down our more aggressive suspects."

"Was he your teacher?" Wing asked.
"Yes, though not my only one." Prowl chuckled. "Once I expressed interest in learning more of the martial arts he introduced me to panki and masters in various disciplines. He encouraged me to explore and find the styles that best fit my strengths."

"It seems you found many," Wing nuzzled him and purred at the continued stroking of his cheek guards. "You learned so many disciplines and then mixed them."

"The first was more the tac-net than anything else, though I do enjoy the challenge of incorporating moves from various styles into my own. It's helpful as well when an opponent believes they know how you will fight and you know they don't," Prowl purred in a moment of pride.

"Throwing surprises in is a good way to stay online and win a fight," Wing agreed. "I know that's why Dart likes to play in the rafters sometimes when sparring with a larger opponent."

"It's effective. His agility is his primary advantage. Syntax was the best of us at talking to witnesses and calming down many of our intoxicated suspects. He had a way of keeping his voice low and steady that forced those listening to focus in order to follow him. He liked reading horror stories and mysteries, although he would get disgruntled if he couldn't figure out the perpetrator before the ending."

"Because he hated to fail or because he hated not being given the clues?" Wing asked.

"Both although having the clues hidden was what annoyed him the most. He would re-read a well crafted story where the answer managed to elude him multiple times until he understood why he had missed it. He said it was good practice for our more elusive cases," Prowl said with a soft hum.

"It probably was," Wing snuggled into the frame that want to snuggle more than any lover he'd had and of the gestalt Prowl came by it most honestly. He caught the shift in Prowl's field before the shift in the caress though as always it was never a demand, only a question.

Wing unlocked his chestplates and stroked a hand over Prowl's helm, also offering without demanding. "They were good for you and to you. I'll happily remember them for you."

"Thank you," Prowl moaned softly at the promise and spread his armor to bring his spark chamber forward. Bright white tendrils reached up for golden ones as soon as their chambers spiraled open.

Wing groaned softly and let himself be drawn in towards Prowl's powerful spark. He felt safe with Prowl however they chose to connect despite the power and potential danger the tac-net could represent in a hardline. He respected the limits and was respected in turn.

Once Prowl's large dense spark had fully enveloped Wing's memories began to unfold as a means to impart knowledge. Early interfacing, cultural lessons, what brought joy and what hurt, the importance of structure and rules.

Wing paid careful attention to the gift Prowl was giving. It was a privilege to see so much of his early life, and Wing wanted to treasure it and use it to help the new mech that would soon join their gestalt. He understood this meant Prowl was trusting him to translate what had been to what would be for a being that couldn't understand why there were different rules for different situations very well.

It was a duty Wing embraced with all he was.
Jazz sneaking into the command center.

Two groons after returning from his normal round checking on his unit and pretending to settle in for the night, Jazz made certain not to trigger any sensors or alarms the second time he slipped out of Dart's quarters and made his way through the Citadel. He'd been patient and accommodating as he felt out their current hosts, but it was time to see just how secure things really were here. He was headed for a room he knew the location of and knew full well there was no excuses if he was caught in it. Even if he wasn't Jazz he'd have been confident of getting in and out undetected. These mecha were lead by a military mech, an experienced leader with an understanding of security. They were not on any level prepared for a top notch saboteur trained on Red Alert's and Soundwave's security.

It didn't make him any less careful as he worked towards his goal of the Citadel's security center.

Red Alert would have immediately objected to Jazz's actions, especially since he wasn't a resident and was here on probation, but Dart had just been amused at times by his charge's habit of crawling around the ceilings and walls instead of just walking down hallways during these treks. The Knight still didn't seem to realize that Jazz was taking the opportunity to learn where the blind spots for the surveillance systems were and there were plenty of them. Doors were watched, that was without question, and some areas where injuries were expected or records likely to be recorded like the sparring rooms, but they seemed to be operating under the theory that anyone who entered would do so through an entrance.

Simple things like ventilation systems, sewer access and even high decorative windows were exposed and apparently not monitored. The rafters made it simple to move across the ceilings and avoid detection by any passing Knight on the ground or in the air. Dart's earlier comment about Axe wanting the saboteur to test their patrols was looking more and more like a necessary action. Jazz was convinced that the Citadel's main defense from invasion had previously been its isolation and was now the populous they brought with them. Even a rookie SpecOps agent would have considered this a ridiculously easy infiltration.

As it stood the most difficult part of the entire trek was when he got to a vent into the room and understood that it was a small circular command center rather than the security room that Red Alert kept. Three Knights were there but there were stations for three more and a station central to them with a holo table displaying nothing at the moment. Normally easy, but the vent he was in was directly over a used station. On the plus side, sitting beneath him wasn't a Praxian or flier; it was a gray and cream grounder designated Tamerix. Dart seemed to like the Gygaxian mech, and they'd had a few conversations over energon. In Jazz's opinion he was fairly naive but that seemed to be true of many who had joined the Knights after New Crystal City was founded.

Jazz debated briefly but he didn't want to hurt anyone so most of his usual tricks weren't a good option this time. He could simply wait for a shift change but that would increase the likelihood Dart would discover his absence. Even as he was pondering his options he had already silently opened the vent peering in to see who else was stuck on monitor duty tonight. Atl has his back to Jazz, and at
the third station was the Seeker Jazz jammed with sometimes, Atron.

Of the three Altron was potentially the biggest challenge, but the lack of any real threats meant none of them were paying even a third of the attention Soundwave or Red Alert would have at their laziest. Like right now, no one was noticing what was going on above them even as Jazz slowly worked his way out of the vent and crawled across the ceiling. Really, if it wouldn't get himself, Wing and Dart in trouble, Jazz would be doing some complaining to Axe at the end of this mission.

He froze every time Altron's wings twitched but the Seeker never looked up or moved them into scan mode.

He made it all the way across the room to right above an empty station without incident. At this point being caught would actually be embarrassing. Even Sideswipe was better at monitoring than this and he loathed the job. Complaining to Prowl about how poorly the Knights were doing wasn't going to happen with his conflicted state regarding his place in the Knight's although the tactician would be as professionally insulted as Jazz felt right now. There was simply too high a risk that some duty code would compel the Enforcer to tattle to Dai Atlas. Demeter would understand his complaints but wasn't an option because she'd have to report him. Maybe Thundercracker and Deadlock wouldn't mind hearing him gripe about it? Wing might be a good one to carefully nudge about it. He had the most to lose here and he was fiercely protective of all sides.

Or Jazz could just keep his mouth shut until he was given official sanction to test security. That was probably the best idea for everyone, and he could already think of a few ways to push for that date to arrive a little quicker. He could always arrange to test each of these three another orn. He waited a moment to see if anyone was going to bother to get up or look around before making his way down the wall and over to the security station.

Curling up beneath the station, Jazz got to work accessing the network and seeing just how functional everything was. The physical station was a standard pre-war model Jazz could probably hack while offline and overcharged. He was habitually cautious as he accessed the system since there was the remote possibility someone like Demeter had planted a nasty surprise inside, but the firewalls and protocols were barely upgraded from their initial activation state. The actual security available for the Citadel wasn't quite as bad as Jazz feared, but it was obvious no one considered an attack likely to occur.

As he explored further and access what the Citadel pulled in from outside its walls Jazz had to admit that it was true. The odds someone could get on world and then here without being detected was fairly remote. The security they hadn't invested in the Citadel was on display in detecting intruders at range. First from getting to Aelios and then from getting anywhere near the city. The network of sensors in the tunnels and territory around the city was extensive.

The threat from locals was almost as low as it was from the outside. It just left Jazz uneasy to know how simple it would be.

With what he was seeing here Jazz figured their small unit could cripple the city's defenses too quickly for anyone to react. Despite what they had fled, this truly was a culture and base unprepared for the idea of destruction from within. Between Dai Atlas and all the former military he knew were here it wasn't an attitude he expected. Sure, he knew they had no reason to be as paranoid as he was, much less Red Alert, but internal conflict was a mainstay in the military nearly as much as it was in politics. Or at least Jazz had always been lead to believe that.

It was possible that being able to control which civilians came along on this expedition had helped the pair keep the idea of rebellion to a minimum. The Knights had elected Dai Atlas as their Sovereign which did imply a certain amount of internal loyalty. Aurora didn't seem to object to
having lost the election to the current Sovereign, and it appeared that her loyalty had allowed her to keep her position as Second. Wing was considered something of a rebellious sort among the Knights but even he was loyal to Dai Atlas.

With a small shake of his helm he slipped in a small virus to give him remote access to the system and began to work his way out. It was a bit of a novelty not leaving behind a nastier surprise, but he still checked to make certain it would be incredibly difficult to notice his intrusion. At this point he didn't really expect anyone to go looking for it but caution was always good protocol.

None of the Knights had moved the entire time he was in the system, and he understood exactly why Wing must find it so boring. Once he could test the security systems officially he was going to suggest more physical moments during shift to keep the Knights from getting so dulled by the monotony. Getting up and shifting would force those with sharper sensors to actually use them.

For now he was grateful for the inattention of the watchers as he crossed the room and climbed up to the vent again. Two stops along the way for Altron's movements and he was out of the truly restricted zone. From here getting caught would be of minimal concern. Embarrassing for Dart, a lecture for him, but unlikely to hurt Wing.

As a habit he still stuck primarily to the ceilings and walls. If he did happen to encounter anyone it was his normal method of travel at night so it wouldn't seem suspicious to the Masters. Three corridors and a small intersection passed without incident, but as he was making his way across one of the larger intersections Jazz felt and heard a familiar rumble coming his way. A flier smaller than Thundercracker and not as powerful as Wing was moving towards him. After a moment of frozen study he placed the sound as below him and soon saw the sleek black, gold and red shape of Thorn flying sedately through the hallway. It wasn't common but the place was built with fliers in mind.

Jazz hadn't been willing to hack Redline's medical records just yet, so he didn't have a full rundown on the various Knights' capabilities like he would Autobots or Decepticons. What he had managed to do was glean some useful information from deliberate gossip and casual conversations with a number of Knights. He didn't have a grasp yet on Thorn's full capabilities, but he did know enough about the systems of the average Aerial in flight to realize that Thorn was likely to detect him if he didn't do something quickly.

A quick move and bit of contortion molded Jazz into a position where those flight-heightened sensors shouldn't pick him up and clamped down on every system to go into stealth mode while Thorn passed below him.

Once he had moved almost directly below Jazz, Thorn paused in flight and took a moment to scan the area around him. Jazz kept still even as he pondered what might have caught Thorn's attention so close to him. The biggest unknown variable right now was that Great Sword on the Knight's back. Wing occasionally mentioned his Sword approving of his actions. Dart had already allowed him to teek that the Great Swords were sentient, but Jazz didn't understand them well enough to know how they interacted with the area surrounding their bearer.

Whatever it was didn't seem to have continued as Thorn soon lifted off to continue on his way.

Being cautious after one of the first close calls he'd had sneaking around here in the Citadel, Jazz waited until Thorn was well out of range before heading off towards his quarters. At one point he could hear some fliers outside one of the open windows, but the trio moved passed far too quickly to be a concern.

"Where's Dart?" A familiar voice asked from just out of striking range.
Reining in the impulse to strike Jazz turned his head toward Demeter sitting comfortably on a small ledge in alt mode. Even as he silently cursed that he'd missed her presence Jazz had to admit she was the biggest challenge to any intruder in the Citadel and one of the only Knights he considered a worthy opponent in the stealth field. "Back in our quarters," he admitted, knowing she mostly likely already knew that.

"Then that's where you're going," she said firmly. "I don't want to catch you out solo again."

"That's where I was going just now," Jazz agreed even as he obediently followed her. "I just got antsy and needed to stretch my legs again. I figured Dart needs his recharge since I already got him up once tonight."

"What's your mod for not needing much recharge?" she asked with mild curiosity.

"Used to going without?" Jazz said with a shrug, still reluctant to mention all the adjustments to his frame over the centuries. "It's hard to get a standard amount of recharge on infiltration missions, and I didn't tend to sit still like this for long."

Her chuckle was one of understanding. "Been there, done that, glad to have left it behind. Infiltration might not have been my function but a scout got it when there wasn't one around or the locals were too small."

"You gotta use every advantage you can," Jazz agreed quietly but cheerfully before continuing with a partial truth. "Visiting the ports and being in stasis on the way here helped, but I'm running without much of a function right now. Learning to integrate into civilian life helps some, but it doesn't really use a lot of my abilities. The most I'm doing anymore is keeping an optic on my unit, and there's not much threat to them here."

"Very true," she agreed with a swish of her long fluffy tail. "Most of your skills aren't going to be needed here, though I expect your knowledge of security systems and programming could be put to good use. I'm sure you'll get to test security here soon even if not soon enough for you. Unfortunately most of the jobs I know could suit you are ones you aren't likely to be allowed until you're a citizen. Bounty hunter, security mecha, detective, educator, probably a few others."

"Most of those are going to require a level of trust I'm not going to have for a long time," Jazz agreed with a sigh as he climbed through a window and along one of the ledges. "I'll be one of the first suspects if anything goes wrong just because I don't have a reputation. It'll help if mecha in the right places know I worked on things."

"It will and overall you're doing a good job in convincing many of us you aren't a threat so long as Wing exists," she agreed before jumping to a high windowsill. It was the first time Jazz had gotten to watch how she moved such a small frame around a space that was too large to strictly climb to.

"Wing's pretty much the binding force for most of us right now although that will eventually change," Jazz agreed, pondering how Demeter's frame must work to make such impressive leaps for her size. "Thundercracker will create ties to the Seekers with his new trine, and Prowl is going to be starting over so his loyalties will be here. Deadlock is a bit trickier since he had such a rough start, but the three of them are a strong incentive to find a way to fit in here."

"We know," she accepted the statement and watched him make a much easier leap before they both began crawling up the wall to a roof. Well, she crawled with claws. Jazz used his magnets. "Have you been having difficulties Dart isn't good at understanding?"

Jazz thought back for a klik over things from the past orns. "A few but most are worldview issues
more than anything else. We've had a few discussions where he just couldn't follow my logic on a subject like punishments, but he's getting help from others on how military mecha think. He doesn't really understand why we're all so paranoid about our fuel rations; it must be nice to have never really starved. He knows now not to let anyone try and clean up after me until I say I'm done, even though it will probably take centuries to get better on my end. I don't think he really understands why I move around the way I do especially at night. He doesn't understand why being split up like this sometimes makes me edgy. Back on Cybertron no gestalt would live the way we are right now; you don't risk mecha you're that close to being alone and vulnerable."

Demeter was silent and thoughtful for long kliks as they moved towards the window to Jazz's room. Eventually she spoke. "I will bring this up to Redline and the Masters. If this is a coding thing that it should be handled as such. Did you have plans for after you were citizens, or at least allowed out on your own?"

"At one point we'd talked about trying to find a district close enough to the Citadel where Thundercracker and I could live close together and still be near the others, but that was a lot of speculation that didn't really go anywhere at the time. The coding wasn't as strong back then either. Wing, Deadlock and Prowl here in the Citadel at least puts the three of them where they could get quarters close together. Thundercracker should be safe residing with his trine and new flock so he's mostly covered on that end. It does help that TC and Wing can fly; they can get to the rest of us quickly if something does go wrong. We'll have to see how things go," Jazz said with a shrug as he crawled up next to the window and silently opened it.

"Understood. Will you stay in your berth the rest of the night?" she asked politely for all it was a serious question.

"Yeah, I think I can get a bit more recharge tonight since I burned off some of my restlessness," Jazz answered before deciding to add a bit more for politeness sake. "Sorry to inconvenience you like this."

"A small inconvenience to see to one I like," Demeter smiled and watched him slip into his room. "Recharge well Jazz."

She waited until Jazz was actually on his berth before leaving the ledge. Once she was further away where Jazz was less likely to try to overhear her, she commed the one Master she was certain would still be online this late. ::Master Axe, do you have a moment?:

::Of course. In my living room. Just drop in. Should I rouse my mate?:

::No, something has come up but it's nothing requiring his immediate attention.:: she answered as she headed for the pair's quarters. As high as it was at the top of one of the towers it was still and easy climb and transit and soon she'd dropped onto the back of the chair Axe was lounging in.

He put the datapad away and looked at her. "So what has come up at this odd joor?"

"Jazz brought something new to my attention about our gestalt; he said he is getting antsy sometimes being separated from the rest of them. He also said no gestalt back on Cybertron would live separated like this. I'll admit I don't know a lot about gestalts; I was too small to interact safely with one in combined form," Demeter said.

"He is correct in one regard. No gestalt would be housed as they are. Even in open bunkhouses they would always be put together. It was a choice between honoring their code demands and the safety of the city. We needed to keep them separated until we are sure they are safe," Axe explained. "That it will help build bonds with their watchers was a bonus."
"Are they going to be able to manage with three in the Knights and two living in the city as civilians?" Demeter asked, relieved that this wasn't just a war problem and had already been considered by the Masters.

"Yes. While the exact arrangement is yet to be determined I expect that all five will either live out there or here. We intend to leave it largely up to them with some options dropped in Wing's audial," Axe explained. "There is clear precedent for the second, less for the first, but we will work with them to find something that is agreeable."

"Good. I'll keep an optic on them and let you know if Jazz or any of the others seem to be getting more stressed out. I'll leave you to your reading," Demeter said with a small bow before heading out the way she entered.

"Thank you, Knight," Axe inclined his helm to her and relaxed back into reading.
Chapter Summary

Jazz gives a report on security to Dai Atlas/Axe.

Axe knelt behind his mate; his hands moving across the wings spread out in front of him as he enjoyed the deep rumble he could feel and hear coming from Dai Atlas. Both of them were still running hot even after two overloads. When both of their amorous cycles lined up it was difficult not to sneak a few quickies during the orn and this was favored over recharge. He thrust forward again before his mate growled in a tenor that meant an intruder.

"Never mind me. The report can wait," Jazz grinned at them from the top of a plush chair back Dai Atlas favored for reading in the morning.

Axe stilled and waited for Dai Atlas to respond, unsure whether he would want to continue in front of their unexpected guest. Even knowing Jazz was ISO it was still disconcerting that he'd made it that far into their quarters unnoticed. It spoke of a senior officer very much like they were: heavily involved in orn to orn operations and just as likely as a subordinate to be in the field.

Dai Atlas huffed and shifted forward. ~We'll continue when he leaves.~

~Agreed,~ Axe never took his attention off Jazz as he moved back giving Dai Atlas more room to rise even as he cycled his own systems and retracted his spike. Once he was a bit more presentable and felt a slight bit less exposed, he said, "You already have a report?"

"I know a lot from my shadowed outings," Jazz grinned at the pair. "Main point covers a lot. Nothing about this place is ready for an attack from the inside. You've got a respectable watch on things coming in for a peace time base, but if the enemy slips past that you are totally screwed."

Axe knew his mate was as displeased as he was with this initial assessment, although both kept their fields as impassive as possible given their recent activities. Outside threats had always been their priority here, and it was a compliment of sorts to have someone of Jazz' caliber call any part of their security close to adequate given they didn't have anyone truly qualified in his field along. It still galled the two former generals to have anything about their base deemed inadequate by anyone.

"What needs to be addressed immediately?"

"How lazy everyone is while moving about. There have been a dozen times where I should have been challenged, or at the very least given a look, since my arrival. Knights flying or walking about. How confident everyone in the command center is of their safety was rather cringe-worthy," Jazz spelled out the things that could be addressed immediately. "I get that I have high standards and I'm really skilled, but it was too easy. This place couldn't be designed for my type better and only one Knight I know of actually uses it that way or thinks to pay attention to the ISO walkways and doors. They're everywhere."

"Demeter most likely, or is it Dart?" Dai Atlas asked as he pondered the assessment Jazz had just given.
"Demeter. She's caught me a couple times but just escorts me back to my room and watches for a while," Jazz tried to make it sound less like dereliction of duty than it probably was.

Dai Atlas flicked his wings in acceptance. "The original building this was based on back on Cybertron may have had them for secret reports to the leaders by mecha like you. We'll need to have the three of you and anyone else that agile go through and help secure those paths."

"Both have reported that patrols often miss seeing you," Axe agreed, still annoyed that Jazz was so often missed even when he wouldn't have been truly hiding. "They've been keeping track of the patrols that fail to notice your presence during your nightly trips. Now we have an excuse to take action that won't be as negative an impact on you."

"Because you asked me to do this?" Jazz wanted to check their logic.

"Yes. Before your nightly wanderings although excused due to your coding were not technically sanctioned. Now you are acting officially for the Masters for the betterment of the Order and protection of the civilians," Dai Atlas said. "Make Dart aware immediately if there are problems. Those who are disciplined for this should treat it as any corrective measure."

"Even the Order has become too complacent here. We do have pirates and slavers who occasionally pass through and could cause trouble. You are not the first Cybertronians to make it here despite the distance and our efforts, although this is the largest group to arrive and did so with Wing's help. We do not need to search out trouble, but we do need to be better prepared in case it comes to us," Axe agreed. Wing's walkabout had been a foolish idea that could have cost everyone dearly, but it had made them realize their own overconfidence here in their sanctuary. Paranoia was not as warranted as it was in the middle of a vicious war but complacency was just as bad.

"What else should be looked at in the longer run?" Dai Atlas asked.

"Upgrade the software. I get you wouldn't have the same updates as I'm used and you never needed as many but there aren't any. It's pretty much factory defaults and that, my mechs, is a scary thing," Jazz told them.

Axe couldn't stop a grimace at the realization that a half-trained mechling could have broken into their systems. "We'll get on that immediately."

"Glad you see it," Jazz relaxed a bit. "Your mecha are well trained. They're just complacent after not having faced an attack in however long."

"Not since we left imperial space and then only pirate ships that didn't know what they were attacking," Dai Atlas rumbled with a nod. "Give us an update in a metacycle unless there is something of immediate importance sooner."

"Send me a list of designations or descriptions of those who have noticed you on your nightly trips when you get a moment. We want to be able to reward as well as chastise." Axe said after a thought.

Jazz nodded. "I'll have it to you in the morning."
Chapter Summary

Jazz gets a new paintjob. Jazz and Lightwing go dancing at Zabri.

Jazz sat on a bench inside Deco's shop fidgeting with a couple of other design options while he waited for his escort for the night to arrive. Two nights ago while the two of them were having a friendly discussion with Lightwing and Lightstrike over energon, Dart had mentioned that Jazz was due for a trip to Zabri soon. Jazz knew Lightwing's enthusiasm for the club was a lot more genuine than any Dart had shown, and it hadn't taken much convincing to get his chaperone swapped out to the mech who would actually enjoy Jazz's style of dancing. One trip to Deco's shop later and Jazz was ready to let go a bit and enjoy this small taste of freedom.

"You look nice," Lightwing whistled as he took in Jazz's new appearance.

He'd decided to go with a silvery white paint job highlighted by two thin blue stripes down his arms and legs the same color as his visor. Two jade green trapezoids on each of his shoulders and hips accented the look, and the gestalt's unit decal in gold on his right arm.

"Thanks," Jazz said with a grin as he jumped up to his feet. "Not as good as you, but it'll do for now."

"Flattery doesn't get you far with Knights," Lightwing chuckled and flashed good humor and thanks in his field as he walked with Jazz out of the workshop. "Do you want to drive or be carried?"

"Will it take too long to get there driving?" Jazz asked. "I promise I'll keep to the rules of the road here."

"Not long, it's probably only three or four breems from gate to door. It's just much faster by air," he explained easily.

"If you don't mind I'd like to drive there. It'll give me a better feel for the route and the mecha around here. You might have to carry me back though," Jazz said with an easy grin.

"No problem," Lightwing agreed readily.

They settled into a comfortable silence for the walk to the main gate of the Citadel where they both transformed. Jazz pulled onto the only road out while Lightwing attracted attention with his transparent orange wing-fingers that even Jazz admitted he'd never seen the like of. It had to be a bit boring for the Knight to have to circle around above him as he drove, but actually having a real road under his wheels was something Jazz couldn't pass up, especially being out here practically on his own. There were a few other mecha driving when he merged onto a major road in the city and he was passed by a flashy orange and blue cycle headed the same way.

He teeked the challenge to race and was sorely tempted. His desire to keep the freedoms he'd earned kept him at the speed limit and let the challenger zoom by. He could see that Lightwing was pleased with his choice to show restraint. Traffic got heavier the further into the city he drove, but no one else
seemed interested in racing. Most of the mecha driving with him were flashy colored, and they looked very lightly built and delicate even compared to Jazz's pre-war frame. True civilians that had never really feared violence in their existence. All were well fueled and in good repair, something Jazz hadn't seen in ages.

Lightwing pinged him ahead of the turn to a smaller street and then to the club. Even as Jazz transformed he had agreed that it was a good spot for the young Knights and anyone more interested in a beat to dance to than real music. As the Knight landed next to him the reaction of the regulars said as clearly as any words that the young Knight was indeed known and welcome here. The small cover for both was paid by Lightwing and they were inside a space that was mostly dance floor with only a quarter of the area given to small tables and the bar.

The dj, a green and gold Nyonian femme, was playing an unfamiliar tune, but the rhythm matched some of the music Wing had introduced Jazz to since they'd arrived. A crowd was filling the dance floor, moving in no determinable pattern to the music as multi-colored strobes sent lights flickering and cascading across the mass of frames.

"Snack, high grade or dancing first?" Lightwing asked.

"Dancing, snacks, dancing, high grade then more dancing?" Jazz replied with a grin itching to join the crowd. It wasn't so full that paint would randomly transfer just yet, and it was better to get out there now to get in to the spark of things.

"Agreed," Lightwing's wing-beams flared in excitement and he want right for the dance floor, only his field keeping track of Jazz.

Jazz followed eagerly, keeping close to those unusual wings. He wasn't going to let anything spoil this night out for him. Once they were actually on the floor Jazz started to move with the other dancers, feeling out the crowd while he found his own place in the rhythm. He could tell already that Lightwing enjoyed the freeform movement that was the norm here and having a chaperon happy to be there enhanced the good mood all around. No one would ever think that Jazz required a chaperon the way Lightwing teeked or acted.

More than one dancer cast an appreciative look at them as the dj switched smoothly to a new song, just as fast but with a stronger beat. Jazz could also pick out a hyperbass flute and a crystal-sax trading off the melody in this new tune.

Primus it felt so good to move with no constraints other than his frame and not running into anyone.

Wanting more access to this freedom, Jazz knew better than to get too far away from his chaperon. Even with other fliers also out on the dance floor keeping Lightwing in sight wasn't difficult and he was sure the Knight was making more of an effort to stay close than Jazz was. After all, Knights took their duty crazy-seriously and it was Lightwing’s duty to keep track of Jazz for now. The music shifted again, and magenta lights began flickering in sync with staccato pulses being plucked from a piezoelectric violin while a driving beat slowly swelled beneath it.

All around him the energy was building, the dance floor full of eager mecha enjoying themselves and letting go to that beat just as they were.

They stayed out for four more songs before Lightwing commed, ::Ready for a snack? They have several varieties of crystal patties.::

::Sure, sounds good.:: Jazz grinned at him and willingly made his way to join the young Knight by the tables.
Once they got to a clear table, Jazz watched Lightwing call up a menu on a screen built into the table. "They usually have lime crystal patties available; miners located a vein of hiddenite about four vorn back that produces a sweet but tart flavor they like using here. Looks like they have vermillion as well tonight; that's probably sardonyx agate."

"Can't remember any of it so I'm game for trying anything," Jazz flashed him a grin. "I do prefer things on the not-acidic side."

Lightwing chuckled and put in and order with his ID. "Had a bit too much Praxian cuisine prepping for Prowl?" he grinned at his 'date'.

"Something like that. It's pretty sharp for me, though I like their crystal energon," Jazz nodded. "How'd you get exposed to Praxian tastes?"

"My creators. My sire was Praxian, a warrior noble. I was introduced to a lot of styles to prepare me for coming to the Citadel though," Lightwing answered easily.

"You said you'd planned to come here; I just didn't realize your creators approved that highly of the choice that they'd help you prepare even down to types of fuel. What did your carrier do?" Jazz asked curiously as they waited for their snacks.

"He was a warrior too. Stood at my sire's side in war and peace," Lightwing trilled with pride. "I'm sure it helped that between both my sire's mates there were already those needed to manage the House and carry on the lineage by the time I came along and by the time I was a mecling and such things were spoken of seriously there were another three with full expectation of more. They could easily afford to allow a few of us to follow our sparks away from the House."

"Must have been nice to have a supporting family like that growing up; Thundercracker's the only one of us who really did," Jazz said.

"Seeker. I'm not surprised. They're even more community and family oriented than Praxians are. It was nice. I had a lot to live up to and more to learn than my siblings, but it was good to be supported in my desires," Lightwing admitted. "It also hurt so much more than most when they helped fund the Exodus and refused to join it."

"Warriors have difficulty abandoning what they believe are their duties," Jazz pointed out. "They probably felt responsible to those who were staying behind on Cybertron."

"That's exactly it," Lightwing nodded. "Honor's a big deal with Praxian warrior Houses. Now if Praxus had decided to leave they would have come, but nothing short of the Lord of Praxus would make them abandon their posts."

"That's similar to why Prowl had such a hard time adapting to the Autobots and had to struggle to accept the Sovereign," Jazz agreed, habit making him pause as their order was brought to the table. Lightwing nudged the four small baskets to be exactly equidistant between them.

"I'm sure having the Prime there made the Autobots easier. He might not normally be thought of as part of the chain of command but he is. Lord of Law, Barasi of Praxus, Lord of Praxus, High Lord Prime," Lightwing spoke the title in a dialect so old that it barely sounded like the title Jazz used. It was the title of the highest of high priests, the living embodiment of Primus that the Primes hadn't really been in a very long time.

"Yeah, Prowl obeyed Prime even when he disagreed with him over policy and tactics," Jazz agreed as he picked up one of the lime crystal patties and placing it delicately in his mouth, savoring it even
has he checked it discretely for toxins. The mixture of flavors was exactly what Lightwing had promised.

"I met Sentinel Prime a few times. You really interacted with his successor oddly?" Lightwing asked with a sense of the awe as he popped a puffball in his mouth and let it dissolve.

"Yeah, Prowl and I were two of his officers. If you only ever met Sentinel, Optimus Prime was an entirely different category of mech," Jazz said as he picked up one of the vermilion ones to try. He didn't take nearly as long testing it as he had the last one. This was more sweet but had a touch of acidity as a counterpoint. It was really a nice mix overall, something he decided he should expect at a club that catered to a wide range of frametypes.

"I'm not surprised. From all I heard Sentinel Prime was very different from his predecessor," Lightwing said the more common, though still fully religious, variant of the title. "It's too bad he couldn't avoid a full fledged war."

"Yeah," Jazz agreed neutrally using the same variation. "Sentinel wasn't as bad as his predecessors but none of the Primes were good at taking advice if it isn't what they want to hear."

"Even this one?" Lightwing asked with a sad tone.

"Optimus is better than the others, but he wasn't willing to make the sacrifices war requires especially one this violent," Jazz clarified.

Lightwing nodded. "A good Prime for peace then, but not one well suited to a war of survival." He shook himself. "On to better topics. How do you like the beat here?"

"It's fun and has a good mix. Blaster would love this place," Jazz agreed, happy for the change of topic. "You're lucky to have it this close to the Citadel."

"We are. Even though this is the most common place for Knights to go we're hardly the main clientele. It's especially nice for the ground frames not to have to drive for a joor or more for a good place to dance," Lightwing agreed. "Any of the snacks ones you'd like again?"

"These crystal jellies are pretty tasty; I bet Deadlock would like them," Jazz said as he finished off the last of the lime ones. "You ready to get back to dancing?"

A quick glance showed all the snacks gone and Lightwing nodded as he stood. "Care to dance with me this time or on your own again?"

"I'll gladly dance with you. I like having a partner," Jazz said with a grin as he followed Lightwing onto the floor that was a bit more crowded now. It felt good to dance more and even better to dance with someone who was skilled. Sure Jazz knew he was better when he really wanted to show off but Lightwing was more than good enough to be an enjoyable partner for a night of fun. Fortunately no one tried to cut in on the pair as they danced across the floor. It let Jazz concentrate on the flow of the music and Lightwing's moves.

The fields around them were alive with the music, high grade and enjoying the movement and they both willing fed it and fed on it. Jazz didn't even care how many songs they'd danced to when Lightwing suggested a cube of high grade. Looking at the clusters of frames, they decided to head over to the bar rather than the crowded tables. A few of the patrons noticed the Knight's unique frame and shifted over allowing them access to the bar. It didn't take too long to get the bartender's attention. "Two Engex," Lightwing called.

He got a nod and they were delivered in short order, the shanix passed over and Lightwing handed
one to Jazz before raising his in a toast.

"To an evening of fun away from the Citadel," Lightwing grinned, raising his cube a toast.

Jazz joined him in raising a cube in return and took a long drink enjoying the flavor and company. A small bit of familiar movement a few stools behind Lightwing caught his attention. Even from behind Jazz could read the anger in the dark purple mech's posture. He caught a carefully controlled resignation in Lightwing a moment later as they both got an audial full of an argument that was as intense as it was senseless.

"Hey now, both of you," the bartender was interrupting the dispute just in time for the first punch to be thrown.

Jazz jumped off his stool and darted around Lightwing, grabbing one of the civilians who was just standing there staring at the brawlers and pushing him back. Getting the idiot out of the way meant fewer potential casualties and more combat room.

"Security's coming!" the bartender barked at both the combatants and those gawking.

Then Lightwing was in the middle of things, his peacebound weapons untouched as he tried to separate the pair, and then three as someone else joined in. Jazz noted two other Knights he knew only in passing moving towards the disturbance. Knowing they weren't going to get there quickly since the civilians were finally getting out of the area, Jazz shifted from moving civilians to helping Lightwing. The purple mech still had his back to him, so Jazz grabbed one of his arms and twisted the joint back, trying to immobilize the overcharged mech without doing too much damage.

It earned him a roar of pain and abruptly made Jazz the focus of the fight and shifted Lightwing's focus instantly. The one next to the Knight went down in a lighting fast strike right out of Jazz's playbook that dropped the mech before he registered the hit. The Knight whirled on the third one and dropped both hands to his short swords with a growl of warning.

"Everyone calm down," Jazz growled, projecting a calm but steady warning in his field and voice. The screeching, struggling mech he was pinning couldn't actually strike at him well with his other arm. "There's two of you and four of us, and you're not going to do well against a trio of Knights."

The last combatant standing stepped back and raised his hands, though his focus suggested it was Lightwing's weapons that had him backing down.

That suited Jazz just fine since the words had been as much for the surrounding civilians as they were for the combatants. He didn't think anyone else would be stupid enough to join in but it never hurt to remind mecha of the possible consequences. He kept the mech pinned until the other two Knights reached them. He handed over the pinning of the purple one readily when asked to and the switch went smoothly. Close as they were Jazz could teek clear approval from the one closest to him. So at least what they saw they liked.

It wasn't long before local security, then the Peacekeepers arrived. Statements were taken, the two that had started the fight were taken into custody and the third let off with a warning when no one had anything they felt was worth charging him with. The Peacekeepers seemed pleased with the lack of damage and minimal injuries.

"Thanks for the assist. You don't look like a Knight though," the bartender said after the third brawler left the bar quickly.

"I'm not. Just in their charge for now," Jazz answered as Lightwing came close to protect him from
any mistakes.

"Your help was appreciated in this case but you should be careful getting involved in situations like this. You could have been injured," one of the local security people chastised gently.

"I understand. I'll be careful," Jazz responded, earning a thankful look from his companion.

Once the Peacekeepers were gone the bartender whistled for their attention and nudged four cubes to the edge of the bar. "On the house, for stopping that with no damage."

"Thank you." One of the Knights, Jazz guessed he was the most senior, took them and gave one to each of them. "To a job well done," he nodded to them before slipping away into the crowd.

"Thanks for the prompt assistance," The other Knight dipped his head briefly before stepping back into the crowd as well.

"That wasn't that difficult," Jazz said quietly to Lightwing as they sipped their cubes. "None of them were armed or trained fighters. Neither of us were at risk of getting hurt."

"Every conflict carries risk, though I agree it was very minimal," Lightwing said. "Though if I thought you were in real danger of damage it would have gone quite differently. As it stands you did well, acted as a Knight, and you are now seen in a better light by others."

"Anything to make things easier for everyone else," Jazz agreed. "Me having a better rep will help Thundercracker in the long run."

"It certainly won't hurt him," Lightwing agreed. "Care to dance some more or head back?"

"Let's dance. I've got some energy to burn off," Jazz finished his cube and grinned as Lightwing subspaced his mostly full one.

Having finished visiting with his friends earlier Dart waited in a light meditation for his charge's return. He'd enjoyed the time by himself, but Lightwing should be back with Jazz soon. He was curious about how Jazz's first trip out had gone, and it was a good sign he hadn't heard anything yet. At a minimum it meant that anything that went wrong hadn't caused the evening out to be shortened. Hopefully it meant nothing went wrong.

The door opened and Jazz stepped in, his step easy and his energy good.

"Thanks for letting me take him out," Lightwing said before the door closed with just Jazz and Dart inside.

"Enjoy your time off?" Jazz's grin was infectious and full of good energy.

"Yes, I visited a few friends and did some meditation. Did you have fun?" Dart asked.

"So much. It's been way too long since I really got to dance for joors. It was great," Jazz tried to express how grateful he was without saying it.

"I'm glad Lightwing was able to take you out," Dart agreed silently acknowledging that the evening would have been less enjoyable if he'd been along since he didn't enjoy those types of clubs that much. "Anything of interest happen besides a lot of dancing?"

"I tried some new things that were good. There was a scuffle that was ended without damage. I haven't had that much fun in ages," Jazz grinned again and flopped in a chair nearby. "Lightwing
said I did well and he'd be seen with me again."

"I'm assuming you didn't start the scuffle. Was there a problem at the bar?" Dart asked. It was unlikely that Lightwing would have tolerated anyone harassing Jazz while under his care.

"A couple mecha a few seats down from us got over-energized and one threw a punch. Then a third joined. I immobilized one, Lightwing downed the second and the third decided he didn't want to try fists vs. swords. Then two other Knights were there, then club security and then Peacekeepers. It was a lot of fuss about nothing but it could have turned into a major brawl some places," Jazz shrugged.

"But it didn't, and you helped stop it from becoming a problem," Dart said with a pleased smile. "Those that were present won't forget your assistance."

"If you say so," Jazz could only say. "It wasn't a big deal."

"Not to you, but it helped prevent damages to the bar. It also showed your willingness to help in what to many civilians is an unfamiliar situation," Dart elaborated. "It also helps begin establishing your reputation as someone helpful and not prone to causing damage. That will come in useful if you decide to continue with testing security systems or anything where your reliability is important."

"Okay, I can get behind that," Jazz nodded. "Ready to go on my nightly rounds?"

"Sure," Dart rose and headed for the balcony and waited for Jazz to join him. The trips sneaking around the Citadel had gotten a lot more challenging since Jazz had begun reporting the potential problems he found to the Masters. Everyone was taking patrols more seriously, and some of the Knights, including Wing, treated trying to spot Jazz almost like a game when they weren't on patrol. Despite the efforts to keep tabs on Jazz by others, Dart found himself spotted far more often than his charge. He just didn't have the training or instincts towards avoiding being spotted.

Long used to the pattern he wasn't surprised when Prowl was first, though the soft coo Jazz made as he looked in was unexpected.

"What's up?" Dart asked quietly knowing comms would probably disturb Prowl as much as voices.

"It's so cute," Jazz grinned and shifted so the Knight could look into Prowl's room to the sight of the two Praxians curled up together.

"Dagger finally wore him down?" Dart said with a small chuckle. "Good, Praxians need the company almost as much as Seekers."

"You'd never have known it from the war," Jazz said almost sadly before moving on.

::Was it really that different? I know Thundercracker had mentioned that Seekers didn't recharge together, but from everything you've said I didn't think that would apply to Autobots.:: Dart asked.

::The other Praxians, all two of them in Iacon, were often together or with someone else. Prowl wasn't. He never let anyone within arm's length.:: Jazz explained as they moved.

::And now he has your unit and the gestalt code helping the lack of war here break down those barriers.:: Dart said, still horrified every time he was reminded of how devastated Cybertron really was.

::Yeah, mostly the code and all the damage his enslavement caused. He really was a mess.:: Jazz admitted. ::It's still good to see him acting normal no matter the cause.::
Now if only Thundercracker would recharge in a Seeker pile they'd both be a step closer to normal for their frame types. Dart agreed as he watched a trio of fliers pass outside the hall. He figured they'd report his presence, but he'd taken to wandering around sometimes without Jazz to help keep complacency down. The nights that Demeter went out with Jazz were the real security challenge. She was at least as good as Jazz at not being seen and moving along routes no one expected.

I think he's getting there. He wants to, he snuggles with Wing often. It's just a question of when he'll trust himself enough to do it. Jazz said with certainty.

He's even recharged with you a few times. Dart agreed as they reached an intersection. Looking around beneath them he spotted Talon and Atl walking down the other corridor towards them. I bet that's something you never would have expected before.

Definitely not, on so many levels. Jazz agreed and shifted, his tension visible to Dart as he made a clear effort to really hide from the approaching pair under them.

Dart obliged by settling on the other side of the rafter. It was a bit crazy but he'd learned that acting like Jazz wasn't around sometimes seemed to lull some of the other Knights into a bit of complacency. They'd used it twice before to Axe's annoyance at the success of the diversion. In this case Dart didn't want to place any bets on it working. Talon was notoriously observant and difficult to distract. The moment the multi-colored jet's Persian rose optics lifted to look at Dart he knew it wasn't going to work this time either. Still, he had to try.

"Hay Talon, Atl," Dart grinned and waved down at them. He grinned a bit more when Atl jumped slightly and glared up. "You're out late."

"I had an off shift today and went out and got some treats. Talon was filling me in on how Blacktip's testing is going," Atl said. "What are you doing up there? Mimicking your charge?"

"I have to keep it from looking like every time I'm out in an odd place it's because I'm following him," Dart said cheerfully. "How is the testing going? Anything interesting Wing's likely to go on about?"

"They've gone over the history of their art, which several of the Knights have found fascinating," Atl admitted even as Talon stood silently staring at Dart with his multi-jointed wings shifting and rustling. "Wing's going to go on about some of the blade maneuvers they used. It's similar enough to our style to be compatible, but there's enough differences he's going to want to learn them."

Dart had to laugh. "At least he's far enough along that it won't harm his standing to take the time off."

"Once he gets done with probation he'll probably be bugging anyone who knows any of it for lessons," Atl agreed. "Hopefully it will keep him busy so he doesn't start another prank war."

"I expect he'll have Prowl teach him," Talon said as he made a lighting fast twisting ascent to come face to face with Jazz. "He's watching you this night."

"You're good," Jazz said giving up on staying hidden now that Talon had called him on his presence.

"I tried," Dart said with a small shrug to his charge.

"He's the pit master's own demon to hide from," Jazz both complemented Talon and reassured Dart he wasn't upset. "I kinda hope Wing does ask Prowl to teach him. It'll be a good connection for them."
"First time in a long time someone besides Demeter has given him a challenge," Atl said with a chuckle even as he looked pointedly at Dart for his attempt at subterfuge. "If I know Wing he will be bugging Prowl about it as soon as he can."

"Spending the time training like that would build a stronger connection and trust between them," Dart agreed.

"So another point for Talon. See folks in the morning, and no alerting others as to where I'm going," Jazz reminded them and took off towards Deadlock's room.

Dart waved at the pair before following Jazz down the corridor and out of sight.
Dagger kept most of his attention on Prowl and the surrounding area as Wing and the Seeker trine transformed and set down neatly near the eight grounders. He didn't think anyone here would cause trouble given how pleased most Praxians were to have an actual grandmaster in the city and the number of Knights present, but Thundercracker's near fiasco with Gloaming had the chaperons being a bit cautious when the members of the gestalt went out in public.

"Prowl!" Wing called happily as he bound into the group obviously wanting a hug and was willingly indulged. Prowl's doorwings spoke of the welcome even more than the embrace did to those who could read them. It generated more than a few coos and teasing trills before they finally separated and gave Kimark cover to greet Firefall even more warmly.

"You do remember you just saw him yesterday?" Dagger asked while suppressing a grin. Wing was going to enjoy the rare chance to spend some time with his friends outside the Citadel while Marwir was getting in some personal time back at the Citadel with a promise from Dagger to comm her when dinner and dancing was over.

"Doesn't he greet everyone he likes this way?" Prowl's tone was teasing as they turned to enter the upscale club and fell into a loose column with Prowl towards the center with Wing on one side and Dagger on his other.

Dagger couldn't help grinning at Prowl's show of humor and welcomed the more subtle recognition of it in several nearby Knights. Hopefully Prowl would enjoy his first trip to Del Sarineni; Dagger always enjoyed eating here and it was one of Wing's favorite upscale spots. Everyone along was a regular when such an excursion was announced so everyone has a solid idea of what to expect and could focus on making sure Prowl had a good time.

The music had a good beat without being too loud, a mix of live bands and DJs depending on the time and orn, and the food wasn't just flavorful it was exquisitely beautiful. He'd never regretted going with Wing that first time even if it had cost at least five times what a normal evening out did.

"This is nicer than anywhere I've been," Prowl spoke softly to Wing, a polite warning that he might need a bit more attention than usual to get through the night without incident.

"Even as a command officer?" Wing didn't hide his surprise though he did keep it discreet as they found a large table a bit away from the dance floor.

"By then nothing this nice existed for anyone," Prowl said.

"We don't make it here very often, but we do try to make it when a good band is playing like tonight," Windsinger said as the Seekers settled in some of the larger available chairs.

"Do you ever perform in public?" Prowl asked politely while everyone else found chairs around the

A large group of Knights+Prowl go for dinner and dancing at Del Sarineni.
two circular tables the group moved close together. Distantly he recognized that of the twelve mecha in the group the majority were larger or heavier than he was and wondered if it was intentional.

"Mostly we perform in the Citadel, but we have performed at a few street festivals. We don't make a lot of shanix playing like that but it's fun to see mecha dancing and having a good time," Telika answered with a grin. "Deco always fancies us up before we do."

"Always some of my best orns," the detailer grinned as he finished placing his order through the holo-menu at the table. "I don't get to make mecha look fanciful very often."

"Our unit will be continuing to give you opportunities for work for some time. Deadlock's paint job is very well done, and Jazz seems to be enjoying his recent change although I don't believe he has settled on his preferred coloration yet. Thundercracker will be looking at a new paintjob once his mourning period is over. What I've seen of it is very complex," Prowl said, drawing some discrete but respectful wing dips from the Seekers.

"What about you?" Deco asked. "Will you be looking for a new look?"

"Yes, though I have no clue what yet. Much needs to happen first," Prowl answered smoothly enough that only those who knew could have guessed he meant his reformat.

"I don't intend to change my base look right now, but I might talk to you about adding some more markings especially if everyone else is going to be tweaking with the gestalt symbol," Wing said as he finished his own order then shifted over to check if Prowl needed any help only to see him send his order for a savory liquid-solid sampler. He didn't hide his smile that Prowl went for such a very Praxian choice. It wasn't just a variety to give him a good understanding of both kitchen and flavors but it was easily shared in this social setting.

"I'm looking forward to it. It's been fun to work with non-Knight aesthetics," Deco smiled.

"It's been a bit of a refresher on how different things are here compared to what we left behind," Kimark said as he relaxed next to Firefall. "Makes you appreciate better all we have."

"As much as we brought with us you brought something we didn't manage. The city is better for your arrival," Matorral smiled and shifted as the group's orders began to come out. Most had chosen craft brews of strong midgrade but there were a few plates of solids as well.

Prowl made certain his samplers were displayed so everyone could see them and their contents. He started by picking up a midnight star and eating it. Wing knew by now it was one of Prowl's favorites which also meant it was a good baseline for comparing meals. The dimming of Prowl's optics and quiver of his doorwings was more than enough to make Wing smile and relax that his favorite chef hadn't failed to impress.

"If you like those you should try the light spirals. They usually use quartz energon and dust them with a little bit of gold and pyrite to enhance the flavor," Dagger said with a gesture towards the shimmering spirals on the tray even as he picked up a granite bar with incredibly fine layers. ::It's a Praxian thing to share when a plate is like this. Mine's out too. It's a really, really good sign he can share fuel this well.:: he explained to Deco's look.

Prowl hummed and selected a light spiral. It didn't matter how many treats he had here. Every bite and every cube was savored. It wasn't even a wartime lesson. It was as inherent to him as the sharing with unit and kin-by-choice was.

"May I try one?" Deco asked Prowl, mindful of the aggression some of the gestalt had shown
regarding energon and other forms of fuel.

"Yes," Prowl said with doorwings and voice and nudged the plate towards the big Knight.

"Thank you," Deco said as he selected one of the light spirals and savored it, enjoying both the flavor and the sign of Prowl's success in his attempts to regain parts of his civilized past.

When a slower melody began to play, Atl looked over at Prowl and asked, "Would you like to dance now or would you prefer to wait until our current course is over?"

Without so much as a glance Wing took possession of Prowl's trays and gave him a shooing motion with a grin. Prowl shook his helm as he stood and reached over to give Wing and affectionate scratch along a helm fin before he joined Atl to walk to the dance floor with a relaxed frame.

"I'll lead if you don't mind," Atl offered, belatedly wondering if Prowl remembered the steps. Still, it was a style that had been popular in Praxus long before the war started so Prowl should be familiar with it.

"I do not mind," Prowl purred softly and leaned against the well-armored Knight, a mech that made him look completely normal to be next to.

Atl guided them through the basic steps, enjoying the feel of the warm, relaxed frame pressed against him. It was more like dancing with a fellow Knight than a civilian, and he didn't have to worry about overbalancing his partner. The enjoyment in Prowl's field as theirs entwined was just as good. It was difficult to remember that not even two decaorns ago this mech was a runaway slave and a lifelong war veteran before that. Even the military mecha that had come to the Citadel on Cybertron hadn't settled this easily. As enjoyable as it was, as good a thing as it was, he knew enough to realize just how badly Prowl's coding and memories had to be damaged to act civilized this quickly.

He put all of that aside and focused on the dance and ensuring no one bumped into Prowl. Even Knights could react when startled by physical contact and he was not about to risk Prowl's good time by triggering combat reflexes. Most of the dancers kept a respectful distance on their own, long experience having created a cultural understanding that a Knight out on the town needed a bit of space in public in order to stay relaxed. Atl did noticed a few of the Praxian civilians were giving Prowl respectful looks and even occasional doorwing dips as they danced past their tables. It wasn't lost on him that Prowl replied without looking or that it made the mech feel good to get those reactions.

Firefall approached as the song ended and asked, "Prowl, would you care to dance with me?"

Prowl paused fractionally then nodded. "Yes."

With that Atl easily surrendered his place to the well-built femme, one of the few civilians trusted to be that close to any of the newcomers.

"You're going to have to lead. I'm not as familiar with this song," Firefall admitted as they started to move. She'd been curious about this member of Deadlock's unit for a while now.

"I'll do my best," Prowl accepted the challenge and focused on guiding them through a set of steps that fit with the beat even if it wasn't specific to the song.

"You dance quite well," Firefall said as she followed him in the slightly faster moves than he'd done with Atl. She was keeping her optics on the mecha around them but most of her attention was on Prowl. She trusted Kimark to watch for any potential issues that might approach to spoil their fun. She suspected every Knight facing the dance floor was to some extent.
"Thank you," Prowl replied with a flare of warmth in his field for the complement.

It was a teek she knew all too well how to manipulate and wondered if Prowl realized how much he was giving away in it. Once she knew where his hard-set morals were she could convince him of anything. She wouldn't and she knew she wouldn't be allowed to even if she tried but it was something to chat with Kimark and possibly Wing about later. A reaction like this was surprising given the rank he had once held. It also made her wonder how many honest compliments he'd been given over the many vorns in the Autobots, or if this reaction was another sign of the processor damage Kimark had mentioned.

No matter the cause it was nice to make someone feel good so easily. It tugged at her first responded coding and rewarded her with a soft hum of non-sensual pleasure across her entire frame. As the song came to an end, Firefall realized how well Prowl had timed their movements. They were close to the group's table and could easily continue dancing or go and join the others. The choice was made when Wing asked Prowl to dance and she went back to sit with her mate.

"He wasn't treated well by the Autobots, was he?" she asked Dagger quietly.

"He wasn't abused but no, I don't think they were kind to him either," he admitted.

"He reacts too openly to praise to have heard it often," she almost growled before glancing over at Kimark. "He'd be easily manipulated into loyalty."

"Something tells me, Deadlock and Wing won't allow that," Kimark replied.

"Coding prevents that even if they don't," Dagger sighed. "You could probably win his personal loyalty but it won't get you anywhere. Besides it won't matter soon. He'll be raised with the praise and structure a mecha like him needs this time."

"Have there been any decisions made on who is going to raise him?" Firefall asked, knowing there was no hope for her or Kimark being involved other than through Kimark's ties to Deadlock. Too many higher-ups would want access to the new mech tied to the gestalt.

"By my understanding his gestalt will do much of it, every Praxian who can get past them will have a hand and Dai Atlas will do the rest as his Daoshi. I'm planning to be involved and they'll let me since I'm their medic, Praxian and a Knight so I can help him understand what he's planning to be," Dagger spelled out what he knew.

"Sounds like he won't lack for attention," Firefall said, pleased overall with the group listed. "His gestalt will look out for him, and they won't let anyone close who's going to mistreat him. Not that many higher-ups would want access to the new mech tied to the gestalt.

"He won't and none would think of trying to mistreat him in the Citadel," Kimark reminded her before someone else could take stronger offense. "It's not how Knights are."

"No, the Knights are not like that but there are civilians who would do so," Firefall pointed out, reminding Kimark that she lived in a different part of their world than he did. "Not all of the power-hungry got left behind on Cybertron, and the ones who made it here can be sneaky. There are those who would see someone like him as a way to access the Knights and the Sovereign."

"True," Dagger hummed. "I don't expect he'll spend much time around civilians before he's a citizen and Knight. Being an Initiate doesn't leave much time for a life."

All around were agreeing hums and fond chuckles.
"And he's going to have more to do than most between the attention he needs to give his gestalt and growing up," Matorral added. "I expect it'll be four centuries before he's out in public."

"Two and a half, max," Dagger grinned at her. "He learns fast and he won't have a past to work through."

"Average is three centuries," Kimark whispered to Firefall.

"He'll probably make citizen before Deadlock does," Firefall whispered back, pleased the Knights didn't seem to have taken offense to her concerns since she'd explained them better. She felt a bit protective of the badly damaged mech and hoped the new Prowl would have a much better life here. It definitely sounded like he'd have a good chance at it.

"I'm sure of it," Dagger nodded.

"He'll likely make it before Deadlock sorts out his past," Kimark agreed. "Though of them I expect Thundercracker to be a citizen first. Jazz and Prowl are a tossup."

"The difficulty is going to be in telling whether or not Jazz is still faking it. He's charming enough to convince you he's settling in well, and then he reacts to something and you realize he's been playing a role," Telika said, remembering the earlier incident with the energon cube.

"While I don't disagree that he's likely acting, remember what I was like and I worked hard to be here. I wasn't acting. It just takes a long time break reflexes that have kept you alive for centuries," Kimark reminded him.

"Yes, but it's easier to see the gradual change in someone who is more open like you or Deadlock than in someone who is used to playing a role for others," Windsinger said.

"True," Kimark nodded to the glittery femme just before her wings perked up. A couple snickers from her trinemates and she was off to dance with an equally showy Seeker. The pair quickly dominated attention the dance floor and left Prowl that much more shielded from attention as he danced snuggled against Wing.

"They really are rather adorable together," Atl smiled at Prowl and Wing.

"It's good given they're bound for life," Dagger agreed. "You must admit that of all of us he's the best suited to handle what happened."

"I never imaged Wing bonded to anyone, let along four other mecha," Telika admitted.

"It's not the kind of bond anyone chooses," Atron reminded his Action. "None of them would have agreed given a choice. Still they get along admirably for their pasts."

"They're all pragmatic in their own ways. All survivors," Dagger smiled at the dancing pair. "The coding uses that to keep them thinking the best of each other."

"It's kind of eerie how the coding directs their feelings towards the others in the gestalt. Is all gestalt coding like this or is it because of how they were created?" Blueflash asked.

"I know the coding that was used was heavily modified Decepticon gestalt coding. From what I've been told all gestalts have some code along these lines but it ranges from even more severe than they have to something close to trine or triad coding. It encourages rather than forces. Redline and Meley could give you better answers; they've been studying the modified coding that's been embedded in their systems," Dagger admitted.
"It's sad they can't have the slave code removed," Blueflash murmured. "At least it doesn't seem to be harming their quality of existence."

"I don't know at this point if any of them would want to remove that section of the gestalt coding, but they might go along with hacking it if it proves possible. They all broke the separate slave coding embedded by the Nijihito before they escaped. From what we've learned it was partly by brute force, but Jazz and Prowl are both good coding hackers given it isn't their primary function," Dagger said as he watched Wing and Prowl dance and the open affection and closeness on display. Whatever else was going on Wing made Prowl feel safe and cared for. "I have no doubt that they could break this code if they wanted to."

"I think I'm glad they don't want to. Their past would be a significant impediment to their gestalt function otherwise," Atl murmured.

"I have to agree," Dagger admitted reluctantly.

"Early on they probably would have tried to offline each other," Kimark agreed having talked to Deadlock a bit about his time in the Decepticons. "I also don't think they would have trusted Wing enough to come here without it."

"Definitely not. Prowl would have torn Thundercracker's wings off at a minimum. Jazz probably would have been quicker about deactivating both 'cons," Dagger nodded. "Wing's good but he's not that good."

"So the Nijihito's slave coding kept the five of them from offlineing each other long enough for the gestalt coding to cause enough changes so they would to tolerate each other," Deco said after he pondered the situation. "I can't say I approve of slave coding, but I can see the advantages of the trine or triad style coding in their situation. You'd never think they were once that hostile if you watched them now."

"By the way, I really like Deadlock's new look. You did a great job painting him," Firefall said.

"Thank you," he beamed at the praise. "It's been so much fun to work with them and materials I don't usually get to. Thundercracker is going to look amazing when he's ready and I'm really looking forward to Jazz making up his processors. I'm hoping that Prowl will go for something creative as well."

"Has he given any hints?" Kimark focused on Dagger.

"Nothing. I don't think he's capable of contemplating looking different. Enforcer is what he is," Dagger shrugged.

"He might expect the new mech to create his own look once the reformatting is complete," Matorral suggested. "Staying with his current look until then would be a way to differentiate visually that someone new is in the frame."

"That's the plan. While he's under he'll be refinished in white with no markings at all. He'll decide from there what he'll look like," Dagger nodded. "Including a new frame design if he wants to look more like us."

"I'll regret missing the opportunity to experiment with highlighting his unique frame if he does choose that option, but it would probably help him feel more like a part of this world," Deco said.

"Which he will be more than any of us," Dagger nodded with a small motion around the group, every one of them having traveled to Aelios and not created here.
"It'll be a nice having a fledgling Initiate, even a flightless one, running around the Citadel," Telika said with a smile. "After all, he is part of Thundercracker's flock."

"He is and by all accounts he was rather adorable young, at least to his friends. I'm looking forward to making friends with him again and seeing what that undamaged mech was like," Dagger smiled softly. "It's been ages since we had a youngster around."

"This could be interesting," Kimark remarked as he watched a red and teal Praxian approach Wing and Prowl on the dance floor as the song was about to change.

"May I have the next dance?" the civilian asked Prowl politely.

Wing had taken notice of the mech as soon as he started to approach them. Even though he wasn't exactly happy about it, he didn't find it too surprising that a civilian would want to dance with his attractive flock mate. Wing hovered a bit protectively beside Prowl waiting to see how he responded to the request. He knew just from teek and feel that Prowl was inclined to agree and when Wing didn't make a direct objection Prowl smiled slightly.

"Yes. What is your designation?" Prowl asked and smoothly transitioned from Wing to the newcomer.

"Flourish," the mech said as the melody picked up a bit. Once they were in rhythm, he continued, "I'm a receptionist. I assume you're a Knight?"

"Not yet. I have centuries of training before I have that honor," Prowl felt a little happier that it wasn't his doorwing markings that had earned this attention.

"I just assumed given all the Knights at that table," Flourish said, a bit of embarrassment flickered in his field before he settled and focused on their steps. "You're a good dancer. I confess I couldn't help watching you for a bit before I got up the nerve to approach you."

"Thank you," Prowl's doorwings wiggled happily. "Am I that intimidating or is it my company?"

"A bit of both although mostly the company," Flourish admitted. "Most of them look like they could break me in half if they wanted to. I know they won't, I mean Knights aren't like that without a good reason."

"They are not. Violence without serious cause goes against everything we believe in," Prowl agreed smoothly as he took in the differences in frame between himself, the lightly armored Knight Dagger and this true civilian who's chevron barely reached Prowl's throat and was lighter than just Prowl's bare protoform. It was a reminder than it wasn't just his outer shell that was heavier than a civilian. He was simply larger from the core out and always would be.

"Yes, but Knights don't often mix with the rest of us so they're a bit intimidating. My friends didn't think I'd be willing to actually come over and ask you to dance," Flourish nodded towards another table with four Praxians who were all staring at the pair with different degrees of shock and surprise. "It wasn't a dare or anything, I promise."

"Even if it was you are a pleasant dance partner," Prowl promised no offense honestly. "I take it you are not the most forward socially."

"Not normally," Flourish admitted. "My friends keep trying to get me to push my boundaries. That was probably one of the riskiest things I've ever done. I mean, you're obviously way off of my normal route."
That raised an optic ridge and definite curiosity in Prowl's field. "What makes you think that?"

"You're gorgeous and self-confident," Flourish stressed as he looked at Prowl in disbelief. "You're here with all those the Knights including Seekers, and you fit in with them perfectly even though you say you're not a Knight yet. That exotic Aerial who was hanging all over you glared at me for daring to approach you."

Prowl's good humor rumbled up in a chuckle and deeply in his field. "Thank you. That exotic Aerial is my gestalt mate. He's just protective. I live with the others except Firefall. She's the other one without swords and is Kimark's mate. Though I'm pleased I look like I belong with them more than I feel like I do yet. I'm still getting used to how Knights exist."

"Gestalt mate? The only gestalt I know of here is..." Flourish looked confused for a klik before he flushed with embarrassment. "I'm so sorry for not recognizing you, sir. I can't believe I asked an actual Praxian Enforcer to dance. You're even more off my route than I realized."

"Yet I am enjoying your company. Perhaps I'm not so far off your route as you believed," Prowl suggested gently.

"Maybe," Flourish said with a bit of disbelief in his field and stepped back as the song ended. "You're being very kind to a mech who's obviously in over his helm. Meeting you has been a real treat tonight."

"It was enjoyable to dance with you, Flourish," Prowl said in parting.

"It was my pleasure. Thank you for the very memorable dance," Flourish gave him a doorwing dip and headed back to his own table and his still-gawking friends.

Wing was waiting for Prowl at the edge of the dance floor. He'd obviously been watching the pair closely. "He was a decent dancer. Did you have a good time?"

"I did," Prowl smiled slightly and leaned into the contact. One doorwing slid down to shield Wing's back as Prowl would a Praxian unit-mate and rejoined the table. "He'll spread that story far and wide."

"We ordered some oil cakes if you worked up an appetite," Dagger offered as the pair seated themselves. Amusement rippled in his field as he continued, "Wing was too busy watching you and glaring at your dance partner to contribute any suggestions for dessert."

"I wasn't glaring; I was making certain he didn't cause any trouble for you," Wing replied as he picked up a piece of oil cake topped with bluish-gray spongy metal foam. He wasn't expecting the flush of warmth in Prowl's field and loved it.

"You were glaring like a protective creator," Dagger snickered and noted that Prowl willingly accepted that fairly sweet treat. "It was cute."

"Deadlock would have been glaring as well," Kimark said with a grin of his own. "After all, the barely-armored civilian smaller than either of you might possibly be a threat if Prowl managed to trip over him."

Firefall, Blueflash and Telika began to snicker, a sound that only increased at Prowl's amused hummed and good humor in his doorwings.

"I'm fairly sure my protoform weighs more than he does right now," Prowl chuckled after a bite of the oil cake was swallowed. "It's good to let civilians get close. Reduces their fear to know one of
"That really was a tactical move?" Wing blinked at Prowl.

"While I never lied to him, yes, it was a tactical choice. He was a pleasant dance partner," Prowl nodded.

"A public place where either could withdraw without creating a scene if the situation became awkward. It really is one of the better places for an initial introduction," Atl agreed after thinking it over.

"He looked a bit dazed near the end of the dance," Blueflash observed.

"That was when Flourish realized I was a Praxian Enforcer," Prowl replied calmly as he accepted another bite of oil cake from Wing. This one was drizzled with cyber-bee honey.

"He didn't know who you were when he asked you to dance?" Firefall asked.

"No. He only seemed to realize it when I explained that Wing was my gestalt mate and not my lover," Prowl smiled at the memory. "He originally thought I was a Knight. I'm not sure he's realized yet that I'm also a Grandmaster of Teris-Spi, which is going to be a much more important social standing. And I believe his friend just pointed it out."

Looking over, they could see Flourish staring in complete disbelief at Prowl before he buried his head in his hands and tried to duck under the table. His friends were preventing him from doing so, but he was obviously refusing to look over at Prowl again.

"I think he would prefer to go hide in the sewers right about now," Kimark couldn't help commenting, amused by the display.

"It's kind of sweet he's acting so embarrassed instead of bragging about getting a dance with you," Firefall retorted as she pressed against her lover's side.

"He didn't read you wings or didn't understand them?" Dagger asked, wondering how a Praxian had missed everything written so blatantly on Prowl's doorwings.

"I expect he didn't understand them. He's young and likely hasn't needed it. There were large swaths of the city that paid little mind to the martial arts but would know an Enforcer," Prowl could only guess based on the odds. "At least he found my old function and titles something to respect rather than a problem. It was not always the case."

"Praxian Enforcers still had a fairly good reputation when we left which wasn't something every city could say about their law enforcement," Dagger pointed out.

"We did right to the population," Prowl gave his perspective. "Being myself in Iacon and as an Autobot was a different situation. Being unwilling to take a bribe was both shocking and angering to them."

"Being caught taking a bribe is a good way to get reprimanded or fired if you're a Peacekeeper here," Firefall said.

"Good to know," Prowl hummed with a nod. "I learned it was a vanishingly rare attitude during the war."

"It was pretty rare in many cities before it too," Kimark added. "Didn't hurt the Decepticon recruiting
efforts, I'm sure."

"I'm very sure," Prowl agreed with a grumble of a long-accepted irritation. "My insistence on law-keepers obeying the law did as well. I can't be sorry for it. We were better off for not having that corruption."

"Agreed, especially since keeping law enforcement honest is one of the better ways to keep those in power from getting blatantly corrupt," Firefall said. "The majority of the current leaders claim to want to the political structure honest, although I can't tell you who is saying that just because it is popular sentiment. Many of the citizens here were harmed or saw the harm the political corruption caused back on Cybertron."

"I haven't studied it, though I would say it would depend on how fair and honest the election of the leadership is," Prowl said. "Corruption typically begins at the lowest levels and works its way up. When shanix can buy city leadership then corruption is complete."

"There are supposed to be preventative measures in place, although I admit I don't know what all of them are," Firefall admitted. "One of the less official ways of keeping it out is how small the districts still are. It doesn't take long for word to get around if someone is less than honest in their dealings, whether it's the products they sell or the integrity of their work."

"That is a definite advantage. Being in your first generation is another. I wouldn't expect any pervasive corruption to appear while the majority of citizens are those that left Cybertron," Prowl nodded. "I would watch how the districts are created. When the politicians choose their voters rather than the voters choosing their politicians the situation will quickly give a minority in the city power."

"No danger of that any time soon," Firefall said. "The districts are stable right now mostly as reflections of the good parts of the Cybertronian cities but with a mix of frame types everywhere. Minibots and convoy class tend to keep to a few districts but that's mostly because it's cheaper to make housing for their frame types that way. Even the Vosian district has a number of grounders occupying the lower levels of the structures."

"So I've been told. The practicality of merging a planet into a city has done a great deal to disrupt the frametype politics though from what I've seen it still exists," Prowl said thoughtfully. "It seems some parts of various cultures have spread well beyond their district," he made a small motion towards the menu projector recess in the table. "I know I recognize at least four cuisines here and not one was labeled for its origin."

"That's the chef as much as anything," Wing spoke up with a grin. "Sweets tend to travel the furthest fastest. I think everybody likes sweets no matter where they came about."

"True, look how quickly mountain drops spread once they were created," Blueflash agreed. "It's not to everyone's taste, but enough mecha of different origins enjoyed it for it develop a following. It's like how cattari has mecha who rave about it while others think it should never have been called a dessert."

"Mmm, that is good, though I can understand how someone like Wing wouldn't call it a dessert," Prowl chuckled with an affectionately teasing flick of a doorwing.

"And some of us question that it's called fuel of any kind," Windsinger said as she sat down by her trine. "But I would say that about anything from the Rust Sea or Kaon."

"And those who love those cuisines usually think that most Cybertropolis or Polyhexian main courses are unbearably sweet," Telika pointed out.
"They are to me," Prowl shivered slightly.

"Good stuff. Those are cities that know their sweets," Wing purred with a playful grin that Prowl's field replied fondly to.

"I think they're a bit too sweet to eat on a regular basis, although the main courses do make filling desserts if you look at them that way," Dagger offered.

"I could see that. It would explain Jazz's ability to keep up with Wing in the sweets department as well," Prowl chuckled.

"So is Jazz is going to be joining us on the sweets trips later?" Atl asked with a small chuckle.

"Until he's a citizen and able to be out and about on his own," Wing said with a nod. "He does love sweets."

"I recommend watching his intake. He might just become too hyper for anyone's good," Prowl teased his absent gestalt mate.

"I don't know if I want to see him hyper," Telika said thoughtfully. "On the other hand it might be fun to watch."

"From a distance," Kimark said with a chuckle.

"And not in public," Prowl played up his alarm at the idea of a hyper Jazz among civilians. "Preferably a great distance. I'm not keen on trying to contain him overcharged and playful either."

"I can't wait until he's comfortable enough to be playful," Wing laughed.

"Primus help us, there's two of them," Kimark moaned theatrically.

"Just be grateful Sideswipe, Bumblebee and Hound aren't here as well. Between the four of them they ran the prank war among the Autobots and did their best to run me ragged," Prowl grumbled without malice. "They did a solid job of it as well."

"It's a perfectly good way to test everyone's observational skills and situational awareness during noncombat situations," Wing said, successfully keeping a straight face.

"Isn't that exactly what you told Axe the last time you got caught?" Atl laughed.


"Annoyingly accurate," Prowl huffed despite his amused doorwings. "I suspect they'll both get back to their games around the same time as well."

"Well, that's something to look forward to," Windsinger said before dissolving into giggles at the idea.

"I'm sure the Masters are looking forward to it as much as the rest of us," Dagger offered before chuckling and picking up a bit of oil cake.

"I think we can all agree that Wing behaving for decades is a depressing concept," Atl grinned at his friend. "It doesn't suit you."

"I expect it'll wreck the betting pools on him as well," Prowl chuckled softly.
"Such as they are," Atl nodded. "We aren't much on gambling."

"Now betting on games of skill are another thing," Wing added. "Always small bets though. I don't think I've seen any pool go over a cube of high grade."

"We keep an optic out for anyone who starts getting tempted to bet more on a regular basis," Dagger admitted candidly. "A small wager doesn't hurt anything, but anyone who gets addicted to a gambling high usually winds up needing help."

"They do no matter how good they are at it," Prowl agreed. "Is that city-wide or just among the Knights?"

"Just among us as far as I know," Wing answered. "There's probably some version of it for civilians. Same as how they watch out for substance abuse."

"There's some," Firefall nodded. "Nothing as effective as a small closed society though."

"Very little is," Prowl nodded to her.
Chapter Summary

Thundercracker recharging with Wing, Aurora, Tornado, Windsinger, Telika and Atron.

Aurora watched Thundercracker as he fidgeted with the datapad in his hands, obviously not paying attention to what was on it. She wanted to ask him about what was troubling him but instead waited for him to decide to come to her. It could be as simple a distraction as memories of his old trines or perhaps contemplations of the future. Patience, discretion and respect were important when dealing with grief as powerful as his even this many orns after a mourning flight. He had much further to go than most could comprehend.

She didn't have long to wait somewhat to her surprise.

"Aurora, how many Seekers are among the Knights?" Thundercracker finally looked up.

"Sixteen," she answered truthfully.

Thundercracker mulled over that number for a klik before almost mumbling, "All of whom are warriors. How many of them do you consider flock?"

"All of them," she answered confidently. "I trust them all."

"Who would you trust to be able to defend themselves from me if needed? I don't trust myself around Haji or Cheoseo when in recharge." Thundercracker asked her directly.

"All of them. Every one is a full Knight. They are all skilled enough to survive a memory purge or your being startled into a combat boot," she flicked her wings firmly. "Are you ready to attempt recharging with others?"

"I think so but I believe Wing needs to be there," Thundercracker said almost ashamed of the weakness of needing an Aerial to be around other Seekers. "He is my flock and has recharged with me many times now."

"He is also a well-respected and well-liked Knight who loves to cuddle. I doubt anyone will be surprised he is there," she smiled and encouraged him with field and wings.

"It should be more than two other Seekers tonight. I don't want tricks of the processor making me think it's my old trine here now, but I also think too many present could also cause a bad reaction. It's been a long time since I've recharged with a large group," Thundercracker admitted.

She thought for a moment, running through who was available and how many she wanted to suggest.

"What about six, including Wing? Myself, Tornado, Windsinger, Telika and Atron as the others. You know them all," she suggested.
Thundercracker thought about the designations, pondering each individual and what he currently knew about them before answering, "A large enough group to allow me to recharge without concern about outside attack but not so large as to cause paranoia. If it can be arranged that would be a suitable option."

"Easily done. Would tonight be too soon if none have other plans?" Aurora asked.

"Probably for the best so I don't dwell on everything that might go wrong for too long," Thundercracker said with a small smile, admitting to his own tendency to brood.

"I will arrange it then," her wings fluttered in anticipation. "It will go well. Are you going to watch Prowl today?"

"Yes. Wing and several Knights are enjoying the recordings, and it is allowing me to spend time in Prowl's presence, even at a distance," Thundercracker said with a small wing dip. "I have been avoiding playing with the gestalt bond while his is testing Blacktip."

"A good idea," she agreed and allowed the morning to slip into its usual pattern.

Aurora and Thundercracker were the only ones in the eyrie when Wing swept in, only barely shadowed by Marwir to ensure he arrived to his destination and the charge of the other Master Knight.

"Hello Wing," Thundercracker greeted his flockmate warmly.

"Hi," Wing called as he immediately headed over and hugged Thundercracker. After they relaxed the hug he turned to Aurora, "Hello to you too, Aurora."

"Welcome. You should have a good time tonight with so many frames to snuggle," she teased him lightly.

"Always," Wing agreed immediately with a chuckle before putting on a slightly more serious face. "What do I need to do tonight besides get a good recharge?"

"Be ready to stop me from hurting anyone if I boot badly," Thundercracker said just as seriously. "We agree it is unlikely. It is not impossible."

"You won't," Wing said confidently even as he nodded in agreement to the request. "You've all been doing really well so far. Jazz said Prowl is even recharging better."

"Always good to hear," Tornado's voice preceded his touchdown. "Knights, Thundercracker," he dipped his wings in greeting.

"Hello," Wing called back.

"Greetings, Tornado," Thundercracker said more formally with an amused look down at his smaller flockmate's casual behavior. Aurora's relatively casual wing-nod in greeting was more understandable. They were political equals and he was her creation. Wing though, Wing shouldn't be so casual and yet no one ever seemed to correct him.

"Windsinger's trine shouldn't be long," Aurora told them all.

"Haji and Cheoseo settled for the night?" Wing asked.

"Yes. They decided to visit their creation flocks for the night," she answered and watched
Thundercracker finish putting the small cups of warmed evening high grade out. She queued up some soft evening music.

Wing picked up his cube and settled in the nest of pillows and blankets with Thundercracker in tow.

"Nice to know he hasn't lost that skill," Tornado chuckled lightly as he got his cup and handed another to Aurora.

"Yes," Aurora agreed softly as she accepted the drink. Once the pair were settled she approached the nest as well, watching subtly for any tension in Thundercracker's frame. She took the spot on his other side knowing he would be more comfortable with her there than the other Seekers.

"I don't recall this piece. Is it new?" Thundercracker asked.

"No, it just hadn't come up before," Aurora said as she sipped her drink. "I have a very large collection of quiet music."

Everyone looked over as three sets of thrusters came close before the musical trine landed.

"Good evening, Aurora, Tornado. Hello, Wing, Thundercracker," Windsinger said with a polite wing dip to the group as the trio entered.

"Welcome. There is warm energon on the table for you," Aurora spoke as the owner of the eyrie.

"Thank you for the hospitality," the Order said with a smile as Telika walked over and picked up two of the cups and offered them to the others before taking his own. Once they all had a drink they found their places in the nest.

"Long day?" Atron asked Wing, allowing Thundercracker the option to join in or stay silent if he wished.

"Always. It's been ages since I pulled serious punishment shifts for this long. They'll probably feel normal by the time they're done," Wing said easily, earning a sideways hug from Thundercracker.

"I regret that you face such punishments for bringing us here," Thundercracker said quietly.

"Even if I hadn't brought you I'd still be in trouble for leaving like I did," Wing pointed out. "It's worth it seeing the four of you adjust and thrive here."

"I'm glad you believe so," Thundercracker's gratitude could be teeked deeply in his field.

"You're all doing very well settling in here," Aurora agreed after taking another small drink. "It has been a privilege having you in our eyrie."

"Thank you," Thundercracker's gratitude deepened further. "It is an effort that is worth it."

"I think ultimately your flock is going to shake things up here for the better," Aurora admitted. "Jazz is already strengthening our security. Prowl has filled an important role testing Blacktip for grand master."

"Yes, an entire art has been revitalized with a future thanks to him. As I understand they had the knowledge between the masters but not the testing to be culturally legitimate," Thundercracker agreed. "He is likely to make anything he looks at far more efficient if allowed."

"We've noticed," Tornado said with a smile. "He's too busy right now with the testing, but it will be interesting to see what happens when he starts looking at the Citadel like Jazz has. Especially if he
remains interested in becoming a Knight."

"I doubt that will change. He needs the structure that very few places in this city can provide. It's a bonus that Dai Atlas is strong enough to keep him in check if he develops any unhealthy ideas," Thundercracker admitted.

"The Sovereign disturbs you?" Windsinger asked with a curious lilt.

Thundercracker startled fractionally, then twitched a wing in agreement. "Mostly his reputation as a General."

"Yes he did have quite the reputation, although I've rarely seen any actions from him as a master and later as Sovereign that would make me concerned about him now," Aurora admitted.

"Think about it a bit like the four of you," Tornado offered. "Decepticons and Autobots in general have reputations among the civilians of the city and the Knights in the Citadel. The four of you are working to make new reputations under these very different circumstances."

"I understand, though I would argue there is a difference between a faction reputation and a personal one. It is only that we told the truth on arrival that anyone here knows we had a faction, much less which one. Dai Atlas is Dai Atlas no matter his faction or title," Thundercracker kept the debate tone light. "I don't hold it against him."

"Agreed," Tornado said as he sipped his drink and flexed his wings briefly. "A person reputation is much more than factional. All I'm asking is that you give him a chance, which you said you're going to do."

"It's the least I could do given how much of a chance he's giving us," Thundercracker said seriously. "I was of rank enough to understand what he's risking politically if this blows up. When I think about this gestalt in abstract terms rather than specifics I find it very difficult to believe it's real."

"No kidding," Atron added quietly. "I've heard a few of the rumors flying around from some of my friends in the city. I know a few mecha who originally thought this is a joke until you started going to flight classes."

"It's an idea bordering on the impossible and yet we are. It does show just how potent the coding is," Thundercracker agreed. "It also answered my questions on how some of the Decepticon gestalts survive themselves."

"Hopefully everything continues to go well for all of you," Telika said as he pressed a wing against his Order's shoulder lightly.

"Agreed," Thundercracker willingly took the out to change the subject. "Thank you all for coming."

"Thank you for trusting us enough to extend the offer," Windsinger said seriously, looking at Thundercracker and Aurora. "Hopefully this can become a common event."

"Agreed, though who is involved will vary, I am sure," Thundercracker offered his hopes before finishing his cube and directing a tiny a charge into his palm to dissipate it.

"I can still recharge with you, right?" Wing asked playfully.

"Always, even after I trine," Thundercracker trilled affectionately as they both snuggled into the pillows and blankets a bit more. Aurora waited until they were settled before moving closer to Thundercracker's other side. She paid close attention to his field to keep from stressing him. This
needed to go well tonight. Fortunately he was a ready as time was likely to make him and welcomed her and snuggled back just a bit in encouragement.

Aurora kept her field calm and soothing even as she privately cheered at this positive sign. She gave Tornado a small nod, and he made his way over to her and settled down next to her. During the entire time she kept her attention on Thundercracker, making certain the grieving Seeker didn't feel pressured in any way. With each addition to the pile around him Thundercracker seemed to calm more, reacting as a Seeker should to the company of fellows. It wasn't as good as a real flock but it was light eons ahead of where he'd been when he landed.

He had just as far to go and she didn't fool herself into thinking it was over, yet it was so much progress, such a real sign of coming back to civilized norms she couldn't help but be thrilled by it.

She waited until he finally settled into recharge before entering a light recharge, ready to online immediately if he showed signs of distress. She knew she wasn't the only one.

When Thundercracker began to boot it was a smooth process, much as it had been for several orns. Wing's field was the key to that, yet the other fields nearby were a balm as well. Once he onlined his optics the first thing he saw was Wing's smiling face.

"Did you recharge well? I did. These Seeker piles are great."

"Very well," Thundercracker shivered his armor in the welcome warmth of the group.

"Good," Atron murmured from his spot between his trine mates. "We should definitely do this more often."

"I'd like that," Thundercracker agreed and settled again, content not to move until he had to.

After almost half a groon, Tornado reluctantly rose and said, "Wing, time to get up and get ready for your shift this morning."

Wing groaned and reluctantly extracted himself from Thundercracker and the pile.

"Be good and it'll be over soon," Thundercracker advised his adoptive creation.

"Not soon enough," Wing grumbled good-naturedly. "Good orn to all of you."

"Good orn and clear skies, Wing," Thundercracker called out among the rest of the well-wishing goodbyes.

"Fortunately we don't have to go anywhere just yet," Windsinger said with a happy hum and quickly found Thundercracker a willing snuggle-mate in the warm nest.

"Good. I'm not fond of mornings," Thundercracker rumbled.

"Likewise," Atron muttered sleepily as he cuddled up closer as well.

"You staying too?" Telika asked Aurora. "We can stay and watch him if you need to go out."

"Thank you. I'll be back in two joors," she promised with a warm fluttering of her wings at the sight of her charge snuggling with three Seekers he had limited connections to.

"See you then," Atron muttered as he drifted back into recharge.
Jazz kept his giddiness to himself although he doubted the small animal-former in his passenger seat was at all fooled. His hard work and generally good behavior had earned him not just an afternoon out but even enough extra shanix to add to his pittance of a stipend to get absolutely anything in whatever cafe they stopped at in the Shaku market. He could even get a nice trinket or two if they passed 'not a weapon' muster by the Knights. That he was getting to hang out with two Knights that he knew and honestly enjoyed the company and wit of was even better. He liked Dart well enough but Demeter spoke the same base language he did and Thorn was simply too smart for anyone's good. Maybe not Prowl-smart, but far more social and better read.

It was going to be so much fun to just get out and enjoy himself for a while.

Keeping track of Thorn overhead wasn't difficult despite how well most of him blended with the cavern's ceiling; his gold, which he kept in glittering gold leaf, and the glowing red highlights made him stand out even if the majority of him in black was invisible. Eventually the Aerial came down for a landing as Jazz drove up.

"Where to first? How about a snack?" Jazz asked as Demeter hopped out of his passenger door.

"A snack sounds good," Thorn agreed willingly with a nod towards the nearest cafe. "Unless you had somewhere in mind?"

"Looks good to me," Jazz agreed readily as the three started towards the Silver Fire. It wasn't the largest or busiest shop on the street, but it had a decent sized crowd of mixed frame types. Hopefully it would have something appealing to all of them. Once they went inside, Jazz was even more optimistic. The furniture was a bit worn but very clean and obviously geared for its mixed clientele of the economic range he believed the three of them were. The two Knights received a double glance, and Demeter often more than that, though Jazz got the longest looks. Some nervous, some confused, though largely it was simply curious. He wasn't of a frame design they recognized and in this city that was something of note.

The basic design of the cafe was nicely familiar as well. Seating inside and out at small tables with a counter and display rack of their offerings.

Jazz politely ignored the looks and checked out the available offerings. There were three different oil broths available for a starter or main course. One was thinly sliced solar gels in an oil and low grade solar broth; the second option was gelled magma mid-grade slices and chunks of thermal in a similar base. Third was a thermal high grade oil mix with thermal gel slices laid neatly across the top. The last option was obviously geared towards fliers although it would make a good meal from some grounders. From experience Jazz knew a mech built like Prime needed a lot more fuel than one would expect. Like Prowl's, those processors were energy sinks of the first order.
"There will be a lot of snacks all over the market," Demeter grinned at him, her long fluffy tail waving slowly.

"Fuel and walk or fuel here?" Thorn asked with a look mostly towards Jazz.

"Let's grab a quick snack here and then walk around for a bit. There's some stuff that looks good here but I want to see what else is available," Jazz offered.

"Then order when you're ready," Demeter instructed even as she took her time checking out the offerings.

Jazz debated a bit on some of the other options which also looked appealing. It'd been a while since he'd had a good oil broth, and the light appetizer sounded like a good start to the orn. Once he got the attention of the silver femme behind the counter taking orders, he said, "I'll have a small #1 oil broth please."

"Is that all for now?" she answered in a light Crystal City accent as she dished up the soup and presented it to him. "Two shanix please."

"Yes," he smiled sweetly and passed the credit stick for the exchange, then got out of the way for Demeter.

"I'll have one mild grade atelixi," she yipped after hopping up on the unobtrusive block for short frames.

"A sweet oil cake," Thorn ordered.

"Anything else?" the server asked almost rhetorically as the atelixi and a sweet oil cake were neatly placed in front of each of them in turn. "Three shanix for the atelixi and two for the oil cake." Both offered credit sticks were accepted and returned.

"Nope," Demeter yipped cheerfully and took her plate with its rust-coated round thing the size of her fist.

"That good, or outside?" Thorn pointed to a table with a nice view of the door and establishment.

"That works for me," Jazz said, a lot happier being less exposed and an easy view of any possible trouble. That was a pre-war instinct he never expected to lose. Once they'd taken a seat, he took a slow sip of the broth, enjoying the smooth taste even as he habitually checked it for poisons or intoxicants. It was nice to be with mecha who knew what he was doing and didn't look at him oddly. Even Demeter still checked her fuel, though she admitted once that sometimes she forgot in the Citadel when she was in a hurry.

"Are there any shops you want to make sure to get to?" Demeter asked as she nibbled on the edge of the flattened sphere until the deep red jellied energon inside began to leak out.

"Definitely need to make it to some sweet shops while we're here. Prowl and Thundercracker both want sparkleberry tarts, and I wouldn't mind seeing what else is available. Depending on how much it costs I wouldn't mind checking to see if there's any new music available. If I'm going to go into entertainment I need to start brushing up on what's popular here," Jazz said as he ate more of the soup.

"Several of both here," Thorn nodded. "You might like the jewelry shops as well. Performers often add sparkle and motion that way."
"I can't afford anything too fancy just yet, but I should check it out and see what's available," Jazz agreed immediately. "I might see if there are some datapads I can pick up for the others. Thundercracker might like something new to read and maybe a blank one or two to keep notes on. Prowl might like something historical to read when he's got the time after the sessions with Blacktip."

"I'm sure Thundercracker would like to read some more modern fiction. I know he's gone through most of what's in the Citadel. On the historical texts be careful. The factual histories are all in the libraries and free to all. Those that are sold tend to be either opinion pieces or repackaging of what is free into a form that qualifies as a new work," Thorn said seriously. "I'm very familiar with what is and is not worth paying for if you wish my opinion."

"I'll take you up on that," Jazz agreed as he finished his soup and waited for the others to finish. "No way I'm giving Prowl false information."

"What did you think of the broth?" Demeter asked as she politely cleaned up with a washcloth instead of licking the last bits from her fingers and face.

"Smooth. It has a nice balance to it even if it's not the most complex flavor palette on the menu," Jazz said. "I wouldn't mind trying other things here whenever we come back."

"If we have room we can certainly return," Thorn agreed willingly with a tail wag of agreement from Demeter as they all stood to leave.

Thundercracker and the others all looked over at the door as a nearly bouncing Jazz came into the room followed by Demeter. She gave everyone a friendly nod and jumped up to a spot on the table next to the door to chat with the Knights there. "Looks like you had a good trip," Wing said with a bit of suppressed wistfulness in his field. He obviously missed being able to come and go from the Citadel, but Thundercracker could tell he was happy that Jazz had earned a trip into the city.

"It was a blast," Jazz grinned as he bounded over and claimed the chair left empty for him with his gestalt. "It's been forever since I've seen a city, a real, living city. And goodies," he grinned and brought out two full travel cubes stacked to the top with small to-go boxes of various shapes. "Brought back lots of goodies."

"New treats to try?" Deadlock said looking interested in Jazz's excursion now that he was back with things to share. It was definitely an improvement over the earlier disgruntlement that he still couldn't go outside the Citadel and wander around even with Kimark along.

"Yap," Jazz gleefully began unpacking, slipping a small one-treat box towards each of them while the rest went to the center of the table. "I expect Wing's had them all and there's something for everyone but it's mostly new tastes. First though I snagged something special for Prowl and Deadlock. Next outing I'll get something for our fliers," he promised as he took out a flat box the length of his arm and width of his hand from subspace for Prowl.

Prowl stared at the box for a long moment before reaching out to accept the gift. It was obvious to everyone that it had been a long time since Prowl had been given a gift without an unspoken expectation of returned favors hanging over the offer. Even with the gestalt coding poking at him it took time to link up that unit mates didn't give bribes and that was the only reason Jazz wasn't grilled about it. With great care, Prowl opened the package and removed a long tray with raised sides. Resting in the tray were four sealed and labeled cubes. Three of them were filled with something solid. Thundercracker thought it looked like some sort of strange serving dish, but the pleasure that he could suddenly teek from Prowl meant it was much more important.
"What is that for?" Deadlock asked as Prowl's doorwings lifted a bit more on inspection.

"It is a desk crystal garden starter kit," Prowl actually beamed when he looked up, an expression of thanks and also of honest surprise. "Meant so those stuck at a desk all orn could have something living with them."

Dagger caught the very specific variant of life first with Jazz a close second.

"It's a Praxian thing. All crystals have an energy resonance. Those we use in decorative and meditative gardens have a resonance that can mesh with spark frequencies and make one feel good. The best of the small gardens have crystals picked specifically for the mech it was for to resonate best with them," Dagger gave the basics then looked at Prowl. "Do you know what works for you?"

"Yes, both to sooth and to rile," Prowl smiled softly for very fond memories.

Dagger couldn't help smiling at Prowl's obvious pleasure at the gift and suggested, "There are a number of crystals in the gardens around the Citadel. If you give me a list of your preferred types I could check with the head gardeners and see if there are buds available. Almost all of the Praxian Knights have a small garden or two so it wouldn't be seen as an odd request."

Prowl's hesitation this time was visible in his doorwings as thoughtfulness. "A single soothing one," he pinged Dagger a dozen varieties and what frequency range to look for. "More can be added in time when he decides what type of garden he wants."

Dagger nodded, "I know we have many of those types of crystals especially in the meditation gardens. It should be easy to acquire one for you." Privately he was seriously considering giving from his personal work desk garden though he wasn't nearly ready to admit to that just yet.

Thundercracker sat silently through the exchange, listening closely and thinking about Jazz' gift for Prowl. It was an obvious and yet incredibly thoughtful gift for a Praxian and one suited to be passed down.

Deadlock watched, twitched and managed to hold his silence until Jazz brought a smaller and far more normal looking box from his subspace for him.

Opening the box, Deadlock removed and held up a purple crystal carefully fashioned into a hexagonal prism. It was just longer than his hand. "Solid. What am I supposed to do with this?"

"This appears to be a fluorite crystal," Prowl said as he looked over Deadlock's gift. "They have been known to help prevent memory fluxes."

"Meditative focus, at least according to Thorn. Something useful for a Knight," Jazz offered.

"So am I supposed to hold or hang it from something to do that?" Deadlock turned the clear, frosted and purple crystal over in his hand studying it. He frowned thoughtfully but then held it up and stared at it intently.

"Knights use them in either fashion," Dagger offered, hoping that this would get Deadlock interested in a meditation style other than katas. "Some of us study the imperfections inside the crystal to help us contemplate our own internal flaws. Others find the patterns made by light passing through them soothing."

"It's not likely to break if I hold it," Deadlock observed before showing the present to Thundercracker.
The Seeker looked the crystal over, trying to determine why Jazz had selected this gift for his gestalt mate. An Autobot giving a purple crystal to a Decepticon could be interpreted as a show of acceptance. It flitted through his processor that it was shaped for a weapon, though you'd have to be very precise to seriously damage a mecha with it.

"It's pretty at any rate," Thundercracker decided to avoid speaking about the more subtle options. "I can think of far more annoying things to have to stare at."

Prowl extended his hand in request and took the crystal when it was handed over. A quiet, sub-vocal hum resonated outward and he quirked a smile before offering it back to Deadlock. "I believe it will suit you nicely."

"Thanks," Deadlock grunted at Jazz before placing the crystal back in the box and subspacing it. No one failed to notice how careful he was even as he tried to act like the gift wasn't a big deal. "So, what else did you bring us?"

"Treats," Jazz grinned and opened a few of the boxes with a variety in it. He named and described, rote from the shop descriptions, what each was as the pieces were passed around.
Chapter Summary

Cuddle time with Wing, Prowl and Thundercracker in the eyrie after Prowl finishes for the Orn and Prowl getting ready the next morning.

The evening was well underway, the artificial sky dark, when Prowl took the lift up to Master Aurora's eyrie.

"Welcome Prowl," she greeted him more warmly than she did most. He was her creation's flock no matter what his frame.

"Thank you, Master Aurora," he dipped his doorwings to her in polite greeting of a better.

"Greetings, Prowl," Thundercracker said once Aurora was done greeting his flock mate. "I'm sorry my flight class prevented me from staying for the entire testing match today."

"Duty before pleasure," Prowl accepted the apology and assured that it wasn't needed as he closed the distance between them to exchange teeks.

Thundercracker studied Prowl's frame and field, taking in the intermixed traces of exhaustion and satisfaction. "I trust everything continues to go well with your sessions, and you're not wearing yourself out in the process."

"He has learned well and I am no more taxed than expected," Prowl promised, his field warmed slightly at the inspection. "I'm glad you are in a place to accept our company tonight."

"I welcome the company of both of you tonight," Thundercracker admitted as both of them heard Wing landed outside while Marwir headed back to her own quarters, freed for the night of her duties to her former Initiate.

"Prowl, Thundercracker!" Wing greeted them with his natural enthusiasm as he bounded forward to hug Prowl tightly enough to get a startled squeak from the Praxian before he turned on Thundercracker and did a full walk-around inspection and deep teeking before he stepped close and hugged the Seeker with a relaxed, relieved manner of seeing what he'd hoped for: no signs of self-harm or neglect.

"Wing, you're late," Thundercracker said, tolerating the inspection as just another sign of his flock's concern for him. In truth it felt good whether it was Prowl subtle look and lack of comment or Wing's blatant one and the hug.

"I figured Aurora would rather I was late than showing up smelling like the sewers," Wing replied cheerfully.

"Agreed," Prowl wiggled his doorwings with firm agreement and gently tried to nudge the pair towards Thundercracker's circular berth padding with its pillow collection. "Especially this late at night."
"Recharge well you three," Aurora said as she settled onto her own berth. Her trine mates had volunteered to spend some time with Haji's flock tonight in order to give Thundercracker some privacy with his flock mates. Unspoken but understood was the possibility that they'd end up talking about warrior things that had the potential to traumatize the civilians.

"Recharge well Aurora," Thundercracker replied and willingly snuggled into the middle of the berth with Wing against his chest and Prowl low enough along his side to avoid more than his helm on the broad wing.

"Night," Wing chirred to her.

"Good night, Master Aurora," Prowl said before he finished settling so his doorwings covered as much of the room as he could manage.

"Recharge well, Prowl," Thundercracker said, understanding that the Praxian would be keeping watch tonight even in this secure location.

"Recharge well," Prowl replied, his optics already off and his frame relaxing. Despite needing the rest he roused fractionally when Jazz's helm poked above the edge of the balcony but settled back down without a twitch when the ID marked the movement as an ally. He remained where he was once he finished booting for real near dawn, enjoying the comfort of his unit's fields as they snuggled together. He enjoyed how often he woke cuddled on the berth with Dagger, but being here with his unit was more satisfying. It would be even better if Deadlock and Jazz could join them next time. Thundercracker was fully aware but relaxed, Aurora moving quietly about and Wing still deep in recharge.

"Recharge well?" Prowl asked softly.

"Yes," Thundercracker answered just as softly. "Having the two of you here made recharge much better."

"Unit always makes it better for me," Prowl purred happily that it was true for more than just him. "Hopefully we can convince the others to join us soon."

"Jazz will be easier to convince than Deadlock, although we have a better chance of succeeding now that he is settling in here. It might be easier starting somewhere other than the eyrie; he still isn't fond of heights and the openness up here might make him more uneasy," Thundercracker admitted.

"Very true. Now it's a question of if Kimark is difficult to convince to give up his living room for the night," Prowl's purr deepened at the idea of having them all together. "Does he always recharge that deeply here?"

"Yes," Thundercracker answered with a soft smile. "He loves to indulge, and recharge with a friendly frame or two nearby is always better."

"He really is adorable," Prowl relaxed as he looked up Thundercracker's frame to their lax unit mate. "Unfortunately I must get up if I am to be ready for the tests," he said as he stood, careful not to shift either of them much.

Wing mumbled incoherently and reached out randomly for his missing cuddle partner. Prowl trilled softly to him and knelt to stroke his helm until he settled.

"He'll be disappointed when he onlines and finds you gone," Thundercracker said as he gently stroked the Aerial's shoulder. "I know you have your duties you must attend to today, but I do wish you could stay longer with the two of us."
"As do I. There will be orns I can remain, both before and after the reformat," Prowl promised. "Enjoy the rest of your morning snuggle," he cooed affectionately before tipping his doorwings to Aurora and walking to the lift to meet Dagger.

"Good orn, Prowl. Looks like you recharged well," Dagger said as Prowl exited the lift.

"I did. It feels good to be with unit, even part of it," Prowl admitted as they walked towards one of the smaller washracks that the gestalt often claimed. "It's nice to have a friendly field. It's better to have unit."

"Good orn, Grandmaster Prowl," the highest ranked of the three assistants greeted him.

"Good orn," Prowl replied, noting who these three were but not concerned with designations. There would be little small talk and the orny rotation so as many as possible would have the honor of preparing the grandmaster for the testing of the first native grandmaster meant that it was never the same mecha twice.

Dagger stopped just inside the door and faced it as he did every orn, alert as always while he waited patiently for the preparations to finish. His position as Prowl's official chaperon meant that he had been the logical choice to stand vigil during the morning rituals. Not that anyone expected any disruptions here in the Citadel, but the precautions must be maintained. This being their first native grandmaster everyone was extra keen on following every tiny thing in tradition that was possible, from the number of attendants to the quality of cleanser to being touched up every single orn with the best paints to the guard to the decorative robes Prowl would wear. The entire district was involved on some level. Even those that didn't participate or hadn't trained had been caught up in the excitement of a long-lost tradition recovered.

Even some non-Praxians were being drawn into helping with the proceedings in their own small ways. Praxians employed in other districts were finding it relatively easy to request necessary time off to help out. When tradition allowed the Knights and many other martial practitioners in the city often took the opportunity to watch the testing and the events surrounding it. While these were not their traditions they understood the importance of this ritual to those involved. It had reminded Dagger that his city of origin was nearly as insular culturally as the Knights of Light were and in this, as a major celebration, they opened up about who they were and while outsiders weren't exactly welcomed they were no longer carefully kept in a handful of tourist areas.

Personally Dagger wished his frametype kin had become more open during the journey but like the Seekers and a few guilds they only adjusted as much as law and situation required. It would take a long time for those attitudes to begin to fade even in this isolated and diverse city.

Keeping faithful to his duties even if they seemed almost unnecessary at this point since neither Prowl nor the attendants were likely to do anything to cause trouble, Dagger kept an audial on his charge while most of his attention was focused on the door. He could hear the normal preparation sounds going on behind him. His doorwings said the same. After a hundred and thirty five orns it was a well-established pattern for Prowl and despite denying it as inappropriate Prowl did enjoy being pampered and tended to. Dagger thought it was adorable to doorwing-watch him relax into the focused attention, moving and angling himself to best assist the ritual and practical aspects of this.

It was all done, from first rinse to final polish, in less than a groon and Prowl had thanked the three, ready to leave with Dagger for morning energon.
Despite being ready and knowing it processor and spark, Thundercracker was nervous. His flock approved of the new look. He didn't think there was anything in it that was locally objectionable with Wing agreeing to it but Wing wasn't Seeker. Finding out if there were hidden taboos he'd be treading on was why he was waiting with Aurora for her trine mates to examine his choices before heading to Deco's shop to officially end his mourning period. He'd still miss his old trines and conjunx for the rest of his existence, but it was time for him to move on and once again start a new chapter in his life.

"You'll look very striking," Aurora spoke up first as she stood from the table where the trine was studying it. "That's a great deal of history to put on your wings."

"Both good and bad as far as the average civilian will be concerned," Haji agreed as he pondered the glyphs in the wing symbols. "A few bitter sparks will fault you for admitting your time in the Decepticons, but no reasonable mecha would expect you to deny or hide your past."

"I like the color scheme," Cheoseo declared. "It makes the glyphs stand out. Do the colors mean something to you? They seem like an odd combination."

Thundercracker's wings twitched in confirmation. "I've always been a medium to dark blue. It feels right on me. Skywarp was black and purple. Starscream was white, red and blue. Sound Barrier was a deep red and silver and Farcry was a pale blue and silver. So I used those for highlight colors."

"Then the color scheme is one more way to honor your past," Cheoseo said even as he nodded. "A highly appropriate action. Fortunately it's not gaudy."

"Agreed and thank you. So no one is likely to think any are restricted colors?" Thundercracker asked pointedly.

"The red's far enough of priest red no one is going to make that mistake. At least no one older than a small youngling," Cheoseo hummed thoughtfully. "The swirls on your wings around the gestalt glyph set, is that special? A small change would make it look far more elemental," he offered carefully.

"The design is not. I'm open to looking at your idea," Thundercracker willingly took the artist's offer.

"Something a bit more elemental would suit you with your Sigma ability," Haji agreed thoughtfully as Cheoseo happily started working on designs on the datapad. "So, since Deadlock has a similar base symbol I'm assuming this is what your flock has decided to use to openly acknowledge your gestalt. You might consider registering it with the Peacekeepers so they are aware of your unique circumstances if any of your flock get involved in an accident or confrontation."

"That is a good idea," Thundercracker agreed. "Yes, the solar corona and the gestalt glyph are going to be standard. The glyphs inside the arms are individual. Though as I understand Jazz's design they aren't glyphs, just decorative."
"I'll help you navigate the forms," Haji said.

"Thank you," Thundercracker dipped his wings.

"I know Jazz hasn't finalized his color scheme just yet, but Deadlock seems satisfied with his new look. I doubt Wing will change much of his look, and we won't know what Prowl will decide until after he is reformatted. The five of you are going to make a striking if highly unusual flock," Aurora said thoughtfully with a thankful nod to Haji. Her Order had come a long way in his acceptance of Thundercracker, and she appreciated his efforts.

"Very true. Jazz in particular will be very striking no matter what he settles on in a given metacycle," Thundercracker chuckled. "I don't expect he'll look the same for long. The rest of us though seem to settle on a look and stay there."

"He seems to be one of those restless sparks who used to move from city to city. He may wind up moving around the districts here as he searches out his function out in the city," Aurora said with a small smile. "Axe thinks he's doing a very good job pointing out where we've grown lax here in the Citadel."

"I don't doubt it," Thundercracker snorted with deep amusement. "He's getting to do for fun what he used to do for real. I think it's been good for him to have a legal and useful way to channel his experience and tendencies. You don't break a saboteur out of sneaking around and that one'll break whatever honestly tries to stop him."

"We're still a very trusting society since our population volunteered and was selected for this venture. Unfortunately we couldn't leave all the problems behind, and some new ones develop as our population grows. Having someone around with his skills will become more useful as time passes and more generations are born," Haji agreed reluctantly.

"What do you think of this?" Cheoseo stuck the datapad in front of Thundercracker. The swirls were a bit heavier, more squared off with more dramatic flares but were no more dominant in the design than before.

"I really like this," Thundercracker's response was honest and carried through his wings and field. "Thank you."

"Well, if everything looks good, your appointment with Deco is in a groon. Do you want to grab a quick snack before heading down?" Cheoseo asked.

"Yes," Thundercracker agreed readily. The readiness for fuel at any time and in any form something that hadn't dimmed yet and Thundercracker expected it to be centuries before he could make himself pass up an offer.

"There, exactly as you requested," Deco said simply as he watched Thundercracker examine his finished paint job in the mirror.

"Thank you," Thundercracker said with a deliberate wing dip, admiring his new colors. It was comfortingly familiar and yet was different enough that he felt renewed.

"Looking good," Cheoseo interrupted with an exaggerated wing flutter. "Ready to go see Northwind and show off the new look?"

"Yes, I believe I am," Thundercracker still took the time to give himself another admiring look. How long had it been since he looked good? Since he looked at himself and felt pride in his wings and
what they displayed?

It had been a while he knew.

"You did very good work, Deco," Aurora said after a final inspection of Thundercracker's frame. "We should head out now to avoid having to rush."

"Have a good time," Deco nodded to the four Seekers before focusing on cleaning up his workshop.

"How long did it take you to get use to the shifting authority?" Thundercracker asked the trine after the workshop door closed.

"Quite a while, although I hardly think about it anymore unless someone new is around to get startled," Cheoseo said. "It helps that most of the time Knight business is separate from normal civilian life. You seem to handle the odd situation well, but I guess that makes sense given everything. How long did it take you to adjust to Starscream's position?"

"Publicly they thought we were a duty trine, something I've spent most of my existence in, so I had some slack in the first few decaorns but after that I had to get it right and treat him as my senior Order. Privately I don't think I ever did. It grated on me more because he never acted like a Vision. He hated it that much," Thundercracker sighed and shook himself. "We never settled the way you have."

"That's rough," Cheoseo said with a grimace. "I don't think I've never met anyone stuck in that position."

"It must be very difficult when one hates what one is," Haji said with a sigh. "That is one big difference for our respective trines; Aurora accepts her nature as a Vision but has channeled it in a way most civilians find unusual. She does not hide what she is. She might have had an easier time in a military flock, but her own flock has been accommodating and accepted her more unusual choices."

"Including us," Cheoseo chimed in. "We're not exactly conventional ourselves."

"True, and I know from my creation flock that Visions like Aurora and even Starscream can have a stable trine and function well. One that trined into my flock was a military sniper. There are Orders and Actions that can trine well with them. I'm just not among those," Thundercracker admitted.

"Just as not everyone can trine with a more passive and submissive Vision," Aurora agreed as they fell into formation and took off. "That is why dating is so important when looking for a trine. We try to stress to the youngsters not to rush their choices."

"That is a lesson I remember well, though my first trine I took long enough there was concern," Thundercracker's harmonics were warm with memories of them and slightly humorous. "We were well balanced in our desires."

"Hopefully you can find such happiness again, although it'll probably be different from your first or second trine," Aurora said enjoying the happiness coming from her charge. He was truly recovering from what could have been crippling losses. "Haji and Cheoseo are little like my first trine mates, but I love them because of the differences not in spite of them."

"Agreed. As much as I still love Sound Barrier and Farcry I have changed too much to trine well with them now. I need a stronger Vision than Farcry was, but not one nearly as aggressive as Starscream. There are Actions I am sure I could trine with and several Visions I believe are of a good temperament for me," Thundercracker paused with a brief quiver in his field. "And every time I
think of it I feel like a blasted mechling with a crush again.:: He muttered in annoyance. ::It's ridiculous at my age.::

::Not really. You are a mechling after all the law says so. Enjoy it while it lasts.:: Cheoseo added with a laugh.

::Skywarp would have said much the same.:: Thundercracker's voice was deeply fond and still sad, though not nearly what it had been decaorns before. ::Though he would have pointed out that I skipped it the first time and this is universal payback.::

::Everyone has to be a fool at some point. You should have seen Cheoseo when he was courting with Aurora.:: Haji added. ::Sculptures, treats ... he even tried his hand at making a sword for her.::

::You promised not to bring that up in public ever again,:: Cheoseo almost whined playfully.:: Thundercracker doesn't count as public,:: Haji snickered almost primly. It was one of the first times he'd actually teased out loud about Thundercracker's place in their eyrie.

::He has a point. I'm your mechling,:: Thundercracker snickered in good humor. ::And I think it's adorable.::

::It was actually quite pretty and I was impressed. Useless as a weapon but it showed his intent wonderfully.:: Aurora added warmly.

::At least it accomplished that much. It'd probably snap if anyone actually used it.:: Cheoseo grumbled, please it had worked as a present but annoyed he'd failed at his original effort. ::I've gotten better at my efforts.::

::Yes, the last one had the sharp edges on the correct sides of the blades,:: Haji agreed cheerfully.:: He made a double-bladed staff sword recently.::

::That's impressive.:: Thundercracker was honestly amazed. ::Are you trying to become a weaponsmith?::

::No, just decorative things. When I'm better they could be used in plays I suppose, but really just a different kind of art,:: Cheoseo said firmly.

::He likes adding spikes, grooves, twists and extra frills to them,:: Haji explained. ::They sell reasonably well. Especially when there's a theme that matches someone's decor.::

::Sunbursts, crystals, plants, and geometric shapes are all popular in different districts,:: Cheoseo agreed. ::The less practical it looks; the better it sells in civilian markets.::

::He also made a pair of short swords in a complementary design to Tornado's Great Sword. They hang on the wall on either side of its stand,:: Aurora said with a bit of pride in her voice as the eyrie came into view.

::I bet that looks good.:: Thundercracker purred, easily visualizing the basic idea. He quieted as Northwind appeared on the eyrie roof to greet them.

After waiting for them to land, Northwind smiled openly, "Good orn to you, Haji, Cheoseo. Greetings, Aurora. Welcome, Thundercracker. You're new look suits you well."

"Thank you, Flock Order Northwind," Thundercracker put on his best manners knowing this flock was aware that he was formal in an effort to lock in good manners and proper Vosian in his
processor. "It feels good to fly among the living once more."

Northwind gave him a small wing dip in acknowledgment as he said, "Come, everyone is waiting inside to welcome you back among us."

While the group descended in silence it was an easy one of those looking forward to what was coming. They could hear the hum of many Seekers talking before they saw everyone in the main room. It was obvious almost the entire flock was here tonight. Thundercracker stayed close to Aurora and her trine mates as they entered the room, falling readily into the traditional mechling position behind but beside her. He was used to being on display for much more hostile audiences, but it was almost comforting to know she had his back even here with her flock. After all, these were Seekers he needed to have accept him.

"Haji, Cheoseo, Aurora, good to see you. Thundercracker, let me get a good look at you," Saamanjasy cried cheerfully as he almost pounced on the new arrivals. "Aurora told me you were getting a new look, but I never imagined anything this elaborate. The mechlings are going to be falling out of the sky when they see you now."

"Really? There are far more elaborate designs in the sky," Thundercracker suddenly hoped he hadn't gone too far again.

"Yes, but not in the class," Saamanjasy grinned with a happy wiggle of his wings. "How much has meaning?"

Relaxing Thundercracker recited what the colors meant, what the gestalt symbol was and a few details on the glyphs around them, then talked a bit about the parts that were simply artistic that he'd added as more of a break from his simple war-time colors.

"And the empty places are so you don't have to remove anything to add your new existence here in?" Saamanjasy asked.

"Yes, exactly. I intend to add my new trine as soon as it has been formalized. I haven't decided how to handle my functions here yet. I expect I'll add the one that matters most to me, the one I want to be thought of as part of the most."

"It's an attractive way to show off what you have been and what you are now," Saamanjasy agreed. "I imagine some of the other mechlings are going to follow your example pretty soon, especially when they see the attention you're going to get."

"Ohh, pretty," a pair of voices below them chimed in as Airwave and Redtail stopped and stared up at Thundercracker.

"Thank you," Thundercracker fluttered his wings happily.

"Black," Airwave said pointing at the patterns that seemed to have entranced the fledglings.

"Pretty blue," Redtail pipped up as she reached out to pat Thundercracker's leg.

"Yes, he's very pretty," Skywatch said as he picked up the twins. They squirmed for a bit until they realized they could see Thundercracker's wings better from this angle. "Sorry about that. I didn't realize they'd made it over here. They really like bright colors and patterns."

"It's all right," Thundercracker spoke to their creator-Vision and trilled at the fledglings. "I am quite colorful."
"Red," Redtail said happily, pointing at Thundercracker's wing and then at her own arm. Both fledglings proceeded to excitedly name off every color they knew on Thundercracker's frame.

"What?" Airwave pointed to the metallic lines.

"That is silver," Thundercracker answered easily.

"Pretty. Why look it different?" Redtail asked.

"It's based on a polished metal. The others are not," Thundercracker explained.

"Thank you, for being so patient with their curiosity," Skywatch said once they were done. "You do look good like this. You'll be attracting more than just fledglings once you start going out."

"I hope so," Thundercracker's wings gave a slight shiver of anticipation. "I'm looking forward to dating again."

"I have a few friends I could introduce you to if you're interested." Skywatch offered immediately with a bit of a mischief in his voice. "One of them is Peacekeeper. He's not looking for a trine mate obviously, but it would be a good way for you to practice socializing. You could exchange stories over energon."

Thundercracker paused, then flicked his wings in agreement with a field that went beyond polite agreement. "That sounds good."

"I'll comm him later and set things up," Skywatch shifted the twins in his arms. "Well, we've taken enough of your time, and I'm certain you must be hungry. There are also some copper foam topped oil cakes for dessert later if you're interested. Nuage brought them; he'd live on the stuff if Asaltar let him."

"I'll save room for one then," Thundercracker rumbled as eagerly as any mechling for the promised treat and followed his 'creation' trine further into the gathering. It could have been a bit overwhelming after so much time being respectfully ignored. Instead it was comforting and welcoming. Everyone he passed made a point to smile, give a wing dip or say a quick hello, but there wasn't any pressure behind it. His paint job was a center of attention but he wasn't. It was very similar to when he had repainted after pre-war losses with his creation flock. Everyone was happy to see him, to remark on his new look, though no one was out to get something.

It felt really nice to be among civilized Seekers again.

Just as he made it back over to Aurora and the others and settled down, Nebula stopped by. The Action looked him up and down before saying, "Saamanjasy was right, you do look good in that. He said you're going to start dating soon?"

"Yes. My focus must be on finding trinemates, though I hope a lover or three will come of it as well," Thundercracker answered honestly with a tiny wing-wiggle of anticipation. "That was when I knew I was ready. I'd begun to look forward to the future and the changes it would bring."

Nebula grinned, "I know a medic currently stationed over in New Tesarus who wouldn't mind meeting you if you're interested. He's heard about you and your flying skills from one of your classmates in his flock."

Thundercracker chuckled. "I'm game to meet him. Though it may take a while. I must give priority to potential trine mates."
"He'll understand," Nebula agreed easily. "Any interesting prospects right now?"

"Not really. Highdive will no doubt be an early contender but I don't know how well she'll fair in the long flight. Tailslide and Cavu have also been looking at me more than most settled Actions," Thundercracker said.

"Tailslide is a good catch if you're compatible; his flock has connections that could help your gestalt flock," Nebula said with some thought. "I don't know much about Highdive herself but there are some strong Actions in her flock."

"I will keep that in mind and we will see who I connect with. There are so many factors in this," Thundercracker accepted the tidbits.

"There always are," Nebula agreed. "I've been keeping an optic on the new fledglings ever since the twins showed up. We weren't expecting anyone here courting this generation; you're giving us something fun and different to talk about."

"I suppose the new gossip is rarer with such a small community," Thundercracker chuckled. "There aren't nearly as many sources of news here."

"No kidding," Nebula continued. "You can only listen to certain Actions grumble about Sonic Flare's Peacekeepers giving out tickets so many times before you want to smack some sense into them. They didn't get issued a citation because he's jealous that he's obviously not a strong enough flier to pull that kind of maneuver; they got a ticket because of almost ramming a roof with that stupid diving stunt."

Cheoseo laughed, "I heard that all happened over a bet."

"Of course it did. Why else would three Actions be trying the same stunt one after the other?" Nighteye said as he joined them and turned his attention to his sibling's mechling. "Now, you look good, and I know you think you're ready to start dating. Do you having any particular characteristics in mind?"

"Able to accept the strange flock I am bound to. An Action strong enough to stand up to me when I start veering off course, because sooner or later I'm likely to. Not fight me down, just to tell me I'm being an idiot to my face and back it up with why. A Vision much mellower than Starscream but not one of the really mellow ones either. I need someone strong enough to at least get out of the way when I'm in a mood and not take it personally. Just because I've mourned enough to move forward doesn't mean I don't have issues and I'm going to see even Visions with a military processor for a long time yet," Thundercracker covered what he considered the most important aspects beyond getting along. "I'd like to avoid the socially ambitious as well and not just because I'm not going to be of rank again. I survived Starscream. I'd rather not deal with his type again."

"Sounds like you have a good grasp on what you need. Now, what do you have to offer them?" Nighteye asked seriously.

"I long existence worth of experience in balancing two radically different trines. Knowing how to lead isn't just useful for command. It comes with how to deal with conflicts and negotiations where beating or yelling the other into submission isn't the answer. The maturity that such a long existence brings. I've survived more in any given century than they hopefully will in their combined existences. I'm mellow for an Order and tolerant by most accounts. The flock they'll trine into is much the same and of a solid economic status. I can expect a good income from my duties no matter which functions I settle into," Thundercracker tried to think of the major points.
"In this city your tolerance of non-Seekers would also be considered an asset by many," Nebula said with a nod as he listened to Thundercracker's list. "Most occupations require friendly interactions with other fliers and even grounders. You've got an advantage there."

Thundercracker dipped his wings in acknowledgment. "Both of my prior functions required it. No matter what I might have thought of a given mecha or frametype I had to deal with them and often I had to get them to cooperate with me when they weren't keen on the idea."

"Sounds like you've got a grasp on what you offer and what you need. That'll help a lot on the dating scene," Nighteye said.

"Especially since most of them have no real idea what they're actually going to need in a trine mate," Cheoseo agreed. "You've already accomplished half the purpose of dating."

"From what I remember of those early centuries so long as the three got along and basically agreed on what kind of existence they hoped for they tend to grow into a functional trine," Thundercracker hummed as he dug back into truly ancient archived memories. "It's when one's older that it's much trickier to get it to work."

"True, but I've occasionally seen some truly incompatible mechlings debate trying to trine," Nebula said with a small wing shudder. "Normally they realize it isn't a good idea in time or someone manages to discreetly steer them all in better directions."

"The rare times I've seen that someone in one or more of their flocks is involved, usually vying for power grabs or shanix," Nighteye grumbled. "We don't have to worry as much about that here. There's so few mechlings and second trines are rare. Most aren't willing to risk the bad fallout."

"Thankfully. I may not have seen as much of it with my creation flock's background. Both sides may have earned a good income but none of us were of significant enough rank to be political," Thundercracker relaxed and sipped his energon. "I will never be sorry to get away from politics. I survived it but that's about it."

"Fortunately as one of our youngest it should be easy for you to avoid most political situations for a very long time," Wind Shot said as the older Order approached the group hovering around Thundercracker. She gave an approving nod to Thundercracker for knowing his limitations and accepting that politics was something he should avoid.

"Another welcome truth to my status," Thundercracker agreed with a polite wing-nod to her. "How many in this city have outlived their first trine?"

"Aurora for one, maybe a half a dozen others in total. Most of them came here with their second trines," Wing Shot said after some thought. "It's not something most like to contemplate and is unlikely to occur here. I think we did have an Action who retrined shortly after the city was founded, but I'd have to hunt down the designation to be certain."

"It's not of serious concern," he assured her. "I was merely curious. Aurora and I have had several conversations about it but never really talked about who else here had faced it or how well it was still understood here where deactivations are so rare."

"It's not a cold practicality that we might have to face here," Wing Shot agreed before turning to the surrounding Actions. "Now, you lot give the youngster a break and let him refuel before you continue the interrogation." After she shooed most of them away, Wing Shot scowled at Cheoseo who obligingly turned his attention to Haji. Once the Action was acting like he wasn't paying attention, she refocused on Thundercracker, "Now, you're going to have to court these mechlings
properly."

"I intend to." Thundercracker perked up, vague half-memories marking this as good even if he wasn't so sure why.

"Now, I know you're new here. Do you have any idea where you're going to take your dates?" Wing Shot asked.

"The Silver Fire and the surrounding market was suggested by one of the Knights for a more casual, low-key date. It would give me a chance to pick up a trinket or two my date likes as a gift," Thundercracker offered. "Wing has already given all of us a list of places including Confection's Energon Cafe."

Wing Shot nodded, "That's a start, although too many sweets for my taste on Wing's list. Anywhere else?"

"I understand that The Azure Fountainfly is flier-centric cafe and good for a casual date. Where we'd go further on depends on what we have in common, though I hope one of them likes museums, art galleries and classical concerts. I'm sure there will be several times to the obstacle course and simply flying around. I wouldn't mind some of the dance clubs I've heard of. I'm not looking to go anywhere more expensive until I have a better idea that they really are a potential trinemate. Nicer meals were reserved for after they were close enough to be brought to the eyrie and introduced the way I was raised."

"Most civilian flocks tend to move to a bit nicer restaurants a bit sooner but nothing too upscale in the beginning," Wing Shot answered, although she nodded and flickered her wings in approval of most of Thundercracker's reasoning. "It partly depends on the flock's wealth; a lot of the venue choice will depend on who does the asking. If someone expects to go somewhere fancy with you early on they'd better be the suggesting the date and one paying. You also don't owe them anything or any special consideration just because they paid for a fancy dinner. Understood?"

"Yes ma'am," Thundercracker's response was immediate, reflexive and completely honest. A bit to the surprise of many pretending not to be aware of the conversation it was also without any of the conceit they expected considering he was among those trained to give this little talk in his creation flock.

"Good," she said with a decisive wing flip. Lowering her voice a bit to keep it from most of the crowd even though they obviously knew what she was going to do, Wing Shot said, "Now, I know you don't have access to a lot of shanix right now since everything you must have brought with you is tied up until you pass all those tests and can be on your own. I also know it takes shanix to court a Vision properly." With that, she shifted her wings to briefly obscure them and pressed a hand against his, passing him a credit stick. "You can consider this a loan you can pay back by helping out our flock's future mechlings later on."

"Thank you Wing Shot," Thundercracker accepted and made it vanish smoothly. His wings and field backed that up, especially his field. "It will be my honor to help them when their time comes."

"Of course you will; you're an Order," Wing Shot said with a firm nod and a lowered voice. "Now, I've got a few tasks you can do for me and my trine later. Nothing that will be a problem with your current status, but it'll help us out a bit. I'll compensate you for the hassle, of course."

"Thank you and I would be happy to help," Thundercracker smiled at her and he honestly would. He would help out even without compensation because that's what flock did, but he also recognized this as what it was: a way for him to earn a few extra shanix for dating.
"I have to say, I like your new paint job. It makes you stand out in a good way," Wing Shot took a moment to walk completely around him examining all the markings and color choices, ignoring the chuckles from the other Seekers who seemed use to this behavior from her. "You're a fine addition to this flock. You should attract a fine Action and Vision and have such cute fledglings."

Thundercracker didn't hide the pleased wiggle of his wings or the way he shifted so she could get the best look. It earned a few more grins at the old adult acting like a new mechling.

"I'm not certain you've been eating enough though with everything you've gone through recently," Wind Shot turned and called out to her Action as she began hustling Thundercracker into a seat next to Aurora. "Jetjack, go get Thundercracker and I some grilled illuminum and some of those light spirals I saw you sneaking earlier. For grounders Praxians do know how to make some interesting meals. I think someone said you have one in your flock."

"I do. Prowl is planning to become a Knight of Light," he said with real respect for the title as he allowed himself to be fussed over.

"That makes two?" Wind Shot asked.

"Three. Wing is a long time Knight. Deadlock and Prowl both intend to join."

"Everyone's heard that fuss about the new grandmaster the Praxians are so relieved to have around. Good thing you brought him here with you since they're too caught up in their traditions to adapt. Primus bless them though they are trying to carry on the old ways. Thank you, Jetjack," she said as she accepted the plate from her Action without missing a syllable. "Try one of the orange light spirals, it's a lovely solar jet grade with a hint of carnelian added for color and a hint of spice to pep you up. Now, I haven't heard much about this Deadlock yet, but what I have heard says he's a bit rougher than most folk around here. Not too a bad thing to have in a grounder I guess, especially with someone like you around to keep him on course."

"Thank you, and he is rougher than most. He's made connections with some Knights already, including one that has a similar background. He'll manage even if it's just to prove his detractors wrong," Thundercracker chuckled. "Mech's stubborn like that."

"Stubbornness can get a mech only so far, although he has to have something in his processor to have survived this long. You keep an optic on him and make certain he doesn't cause more trouble than he can handle," Wind Shot said with a pointed look.

"I will," he promised. "I'm watching them all and they're watching out for me," he added in their defense. Strange as they were they were flock and acted like it surprisingly well. "I've known Deadlock for a long time."

"Sounds like you trust them, especially since you're willing to defend one of your grounders even to an older Seeker," she pointed out before grinning and picking up a light spiral and holding it delicately. "Good. If they're really your flock like you claim then they deserve that loyalty. The right Action and Vision will agree with you."

"True, and something I am grateful for having this flock before I have a trine. I believe it easier to find a trine that can accept them than try to get an existing trine to accept I am flock to old enemies. Or my flock to accept old enemies as my trine," he admitted. "For everyone this will be a fresh situation to build into a functional set of relationships."

"You're definitely give us something new to watch for a change," she said with a small chuckle before popping the light spiral into her mouth. After she finished it, she continued, "While it's always
wonderful seeing mechlings find their partners and trine up, I'm looking forward to you shaking things up a bit around here."

Thundercracker chuckled deeply. "It will be entertaining for the most part. Though I expect a few orns of screaming frustration and shock in there as well."

"That's what makes it entertaining," Wind Shot said with grin as she offered him some more treats that were readily accepted along with more casual chatter and the general happy socializing of a freshly repainted member.
Thundercracker hadn't felt this nervous about a gathering since just before his first battle. It was the first flight class since being repainted, something he genuinely enjoyed as Saamanjasy liked to use him to demonstrate maneuvers but hadn't since his mourning flight. The instructor could then stay with the score and a half of mechlings to explain and critique Thundercracker's flawless form and the occasional more advanced maneuvers he allowed Thundercracker to perform for the group. He was still looking forward to that. He was less sure how to handle the knowledge that there were several Actions and Visions that wanted to feel out training with him. It was a thrill to know he had choices. Primus, was that a thrill. It was a stress knowing some of their creators were very unhappy with their interest.

It was also a relief to know that Saamanjasy agreed with Cheoseo's suggestion and had promised to have a discrete talk with the interested mechlings. Now Thundercracker just had to wait until one of them was willing to be the first to approach him. Given the way Highdive kept flicking her gaze over to him during the brief lulls in Saamanjasy's instruction, he'd be willing to bet she would probably be one of the first to do so. Fortunately she seemed strong without being too bossy.

He had to admit to himself that not just taking the first offers he got would be his test at being civilized. He'd been conditioned for so long that trinemates were scarce that it would be difficult to play the getting to know them games that were expected in civilized flocks. He had to do it right. He had choices. He had time. There would be two, maybe even three more sets of classes before the coding really got on him. He could make it until those ready to hatch now were old enough if he needed to.

Logic and truth weren't that great a help against so long with scarcity.

No offers had come before class started but everyone, even those well settled in their choices were fascinated by his new look and how much of it had meaning. It had actually taken Saamanjasy a couple tries to get everyone to focus away from the complex and colorful new look.

He wanted the class to end soon so he could at least get this first encounter dealt with.

He felt like a blasted mechling again, and he hadn't even first trined that young!

At least he had Wing and several Seeker Knights to recharge with to help ease some of the loneliness, and living with Aurora and her trine was helping remind him of how things could be so much better than what he had with Starscream. It reminded him to aspire to have a good trine. He still missed Skywarp and he was sure he always would. The mech should have been his first Action. If he hadn't freaked out about his heritage at that wrong moment Farcry and their sparkling may well have survived with Skywarp there to whisk them to safety. That would have changed so much. It would have changed everything.
Refocusing his attention back to Saamanjasy as the verbal explanation ended, he took off and made a sharp bank veering to spiral around one of the pillars. After making two passes to demonstrate today's lesson, he waited for the rest of the class to join him. He was no longer ignorant of who jockeyed to be closest to him. Highdive, assertive Action that she was, got right on his left wing where Skywarp, Shimmerlock and Sound Barrier used to fly. She owned it, and now that he was looking, she was daring the two other Actions posturing nearby to challenge her right to be there. Cavu tried a couple times but didn't have the skill or openings to drive her out.

Two of the Visions, Acharaj and Mubakkir, were almost dancing around each other as they tried to enter Farcry's position at his right wing. Neither seemed willing to outright fight for the position, but they were obviously trying to out-maneuver each other to take it.

It was adorable in a way, and triggered Thundercracker's creator coding more than his trine coding. No matter, it was enjoyable to fly in a group again and know no one would shoot at him. Like all of them he was disappointed when Saamanjasy called them down to end the class. Unlike most times, Thundercracker hung around to allow anyone who wanted to talk to him plenty of time to approach him. He'd thank Aurora for the indulgence later. He understood full well just how much of her time he was taking up and how much of her work others had to do because of him and his status.

As he'd suspected, Highdive flexed her wings at one of the other Actions and turned to approach Thundercracker. Any hesitation she felt at being the one to initiate was well masked when she asked, "Do you have a moment to talk or does Master Aurora need to leave?"

Aurora gave a small wing-flick and Thundercracker focused on Highdive. "I have a moment."

Highdive visibly straightened her frame. "I know Master Aurora is busy, and I don't want to take more of her time than necessary. Is there a way we could meet later and talk more? I would like a chance to get to know you better."

"Yes," Thundercracker couldn't completely hide his relief that she was willing to be that forward. He pinged Highdive his comm ID and looked towards Aurora. Her wings lifted in almost creator-like amusement and pinged him the times various Seeker Knights had agreed to be available for his trine courting efforts. He forwarded that to Highdive. "Those are the joors I am available to meet off the Citadel grounds in the next decaorn. We will be able to meet in the Citadel as well soon. A Knight must trust you first."

"Looking forward to it; I've never been there. None of my flock are Knights," Highdive grinned and flicked her wings. "I'll let you know when I can get away to meet. I'd rather not let certain flock mates know where I'm going. No need to stir up any more trouble for you."

"Thank you. We can face them if we decide we are right to trine," Thundercracker agreed readily, suddenly unsure if he should end the conversation or if she did. He ended up with going with the fact he was the Order. "Clear skies, Highdive."

"Clear skies, Thundercracker," Highdive tipped her wings and stepped away before leaving.

Once Highdive had moved out of the way Tailslide immediately stepped forward before Cavu could approach. He hadn't fought Highdive much in the air for the position beside Thundercracker, but he'd been among the more blatant admirers of the Seeker's new paint. "May I have a word with you as well, Thundercracker?"

"Yes," Thundercracker answered after a quick glance at Aurora.

"I wish to extend an invitation for dinner to you. I think we should take an opportunity get to know
each other better, and it would be easier to do so over a meal." Tailslide asked, seeming very confident with what was a rather unusual situation.

"I would like that," Thundercracker pinged him when he was available and privately marked this one as either a very good choice or another Starscream in the making.

"Thank you," Tailslide paused for a moment to check over the available times and compare it to his own schedule. "Would seven orn from now be suitable? I can make the arrangements, and let you know where we should meet."

"That is agreeable. Joor thirty four?" Thundercracker suggested.

"Excellent. Thank you for the opportunity. I will take my leave now of you and your lovely creator," Tailslide said with a bit of bow and a wing dip to them both.

"I look forward to it," Thundercracker bid him farewell with a flattered flutter of his wings before giving the third Action who'd moved towards him a look that invited him over.

Being given that much encouragement seemed to make Cavu willing to approach, and he said, "You're impressive to watch in flight."

"Thank you. Experience is a fine instructor," Thundercracker flicked his wings in appreciation of the complement.

"I was wondering if you'd be willing to go flying with me some time?" Cavu asked. "I'm not up to your level, but the only way to improve is with practice. We could meet for lunch and go flying afterwards."

"I would like that, Cavu," Thundercracker gave an encouraging wing-flick. "What time is best for you?" he asked as he pinged the shyest Action his availability schedule.

"I'm free in eight orns," Cavu said trying to be a bit bolder now that he wasn't going to be immediately rejected. "We could meet at The Azure Fountainfly around joor twenty and then go flying later."

"That sounds good. I like The Azure Fountainfly," Thundercracker agreed happily. He was really trying not to show how delirious he was at having three Actions on the first orn he was available.

"I'll see you then," Cavu said with a grin before turning toward Aurora. "Sorry we've taken so much of your valuable time today."

"You are a sweet one," she trilled at him with a smile. "It is a welcome duty to see him build a trine."

"Clear skies, Cavu," Thundercracker said in parting before taking off with Aurora.

::Saamanjasy was right; you do seem to have a varied collection of admirers:: Aurora teased him gently as they headed back to the eyrie.

::Indeed. They are quite different. And three!:: He still couldn't fully believe it.

::Three very different but acceptable choices, plus you know you have other options who are still maturing:: Aurora pointed out happy for her charge. ::You can relax and find the Action who is right for you::

::I'm very glad we thought to have the Visions wait. As much as I'm ready to take the first Action to
offer I truly doubt I could not try and claim the first Vision I had a chance at.:: he said with a quiver in his voice as the tension of keeping his war-time reactions in check began to unravel.

::You also don't have to worry about having to settle for a duty trine or someone incompatible. Your Action will help you make the best choice for everyone.:: Aurora agreed immediately. Skywarp might have been Thundercracker's mate, but Starscream had been a disaster for the pair. Avoiding something like that this time would be an important way to keep the gestalt happy. Fortunately he seemed to understand that even better than she did.

::Yes, even if it is a struggle to remember I have choices. It's been so long.:: Thundercracker admitted.

::We'll make certain to remind you if you start to falter.:: Aurora promised.
Thundercracker had already dropped the small warm frame in his cockpit below awareness when he set down near the edge of the Shaku market and walked the few paces to the Silver Fire cafe. The restaurant was exactly what Jazz had mentioned the other orn when he dropped off the sparkleberry tarts. There were only a handful of Seekers present in the market so the Peacekeeper should be easy to spot. He was looking forward to meeting Skywatch's friend and hopefully hitting it off with the Action. Even if they hadn't met before the war they did share history there that Thundercracker didn't have with most.

"Thundercracker?" a voice asked from behind him as someone came in for a light landing.

"Yes," he turned around to get a look. "Ciel?"

"In the spark," the former Air Martial said before stepping forward and gripping Thundercracker's arm to prove both of them were solid and real. "The rumor mill in the eyries gave your designation as the Seeker who arrived recently, but that didn't mean it was actually you. It wouldn't be the first time someone faked a claim. It wasn't until the cavern shook and I read the report that I truly believed you might have made it."

"You knew of me in Vos?" Thundercracker didn't hide his surprise even as he willingly gripped the arm in return glad for the connection.

"I heard about you occasionally from Captain Jetsky," Ciel said with a bit of muted loss in his field. "He mentioned you on several occasions, especially that poisoner case."

Thundercracker's wings gave an unhappy quiver as they turned to enter the cafe. "Sick spark, that one. How'd you know my captain?"

"Well, we went through some training seminars together and usually wound up talking when there was downtime," Ciel said as they approached the counter. "We weren't related but two of my siblings were trined with members of his creation flock."

"Ah. It's nice to know an Air Martial survived. Are there any others?" Thundercracker asked as he studied the menu and display.

"Not here," Ciel said with a sigh. "I'm the only Air Martial who joined the Exodus and survived the journey. My Order is a medic and decided that joining the Exodus was the best choice for our trine."

"I'm glad they allowed you to remain in law enforcement and a detective," Thundercracker spoke softly. He stepped up to the counter. "I'd like a bowl of abelsonite dumplings in a rust broth and a sparkleberry tart."

"I actually helped train most of the current Peacekeepers since I was one of the few trained law
enforcement officers who made the trip. I'd be higher ranked now if I didn't hate paperwork so much," Ciel admitted as he joined Thundercracker at the counter. "Two solar jet gel granite sandwiches with morganite and gold filling please. I'm paying this orn," he told them both.

"Coming up," the lightly built silver femme with blue highlights smiled warmly at the pair and put together their tray.

"You have a trine to court and I have a better income for now," Ciel told Thundercracker firmly and with much the same tone he did with flock mechlings.

"Thank you," Thundercracker dipped his wings and privately was very grateful. He knew the Peacekeeper spoke the truth.

"Add a pair of mercury fudge squares," Ciel said as she finished gathering everything for them. Once the tray was in front of them he handed her a credit chip. "Looks good, thank you."

"You're welcome. Enjoy," she trilled and focused on the next customers as the pair headed for the outside tables.

"It's nice to get a change of scenery. This isn't my patrol route, so I don't have one optic out for troublemakers right now. Just half of one as a habit," Ciel explained with a chuckle.

"I know the feeling, though I must admit I'm surprised there is so little for a detective to do that you actually get assigned patrol," Thundercracker said as they sat at a small table, each facing one direction of traffic.

"I do it at least once or twice a decaorn to keep up with the feel of the district," Ciel explained. "It's also easier to meet up with some of my informants if I'm known for occasionally do patrols."

"Ah, I did that. We just didn't schedule it with HQ or call it patrol," Thundercracker nodded his wings and skewered a dumpling to bite it cleanly in half, intent on savoring fuel better than he'd for much of his existence. "How busy are you kept compared to Vos? Do you still work with a duty trine?"

"There are two Aerial Detectives and four grounders over in Neo Altihex where I'm stationed right now, and we all tend to be kept fairly busy," Ciel said after taking a small bite of his sandwich. "When I go out to patrol I swap into a duty trine that patrols the district. One of the Actions and the Order are Seekers; the other Action is a Seeki."

"The Seeki, created after Cybertron?" Thundercracker asked cautiously.

"She's one of the fledglings from the second set of fledglings after we settled here," Ciel said with a small nod. "She's a good patrol officer and extremely agile in flight."

"At least she's an Action," he abruptly paused. "What is the official standing on impure Visions?"

"Officially there is no such thing as an impure Vision," Ciel said quietly. "Unofficially all Seeki are classified as Aerials by the flocks as far as creating is concerned. Fortunately that particular issue hasn't arisen yet. There's less than a handful created so far. All but one are Actions, the other is an Order."

"I'm glad," Thundercracker relaxed but stared at his dumplings briefly. "I'm not anywhere close to ready to choose a side on that debate."

"Very few of us are looking forward to it, although I know it's going to eventually happen with the
way some of the younger Seekers are around certain Aerials," Ciel admitted with a grimace. "It's a
debate we don't want anyone outside our flocks involved in either since we know the traditional
policies won't go over well with certain groups in the city."

"Including some very powerful voices among the Knights," Thundercracker agreed. "We may be
lucky and it'll be generations before another Starscream comes along. I'm hoping so at least."

"Starscream was your second Vision," Ciel said with a glance at Thundercracker's wings. "I take it
he was difficult?"

"Understatement of the eon," Thundercracker groaned. "His current designation says it all."

"I assume most didn't know he was a Vision because I can't imagine the traditionalists following one
as Winglord or tolerating one in a true war zone," Ciel flicked his wings briefly in amazement. "You
certainly had an interesting existence after I left."

"No one but Skywarp and I knew until our trine bond broke when the gestalt first linked up. Now
everyone knows, and no, I don't expect he'll keep his rank. I'm less sure if anyone could control him.
He's likely to fight it until someone tears his spark out. Or defect, though I can't see him accepting
any Prime as a leader. It's going to be a mess," he poked at his dumplings before spearing one. "My
apologies. I didn't intend to dampen the mood so much. So how is working here different than in
Vos?"

"Well, there's the obvious that there are a lot more non-Seekers to interact with in the districts," Ciel
said, accepting and following the switch of topics. "Including in New Vos since it wasn't built with
solely fliers in mind. Also anyone of any frame type who enters into a job like the Peacekeepers or
firefighters gets stationed in a district as they are needed. They try to keep areas from getting too
insular."

"Which makes sense in a city like this," Thundercracker accepted the truth. "They can't afford to
allow the districts to be as insular as many cities became on Cybertron. Do you still enjoy it, even
working with so many grounders?"

"Surprisingly enough, yes," Ciel admitted. "I wasn't certain I would like it, but there was already a
bit of common ground among the various law enforcement communities to use as a starting point. It
also mixes up the routine having so many different frame types and cultural standards to work with
and through. There isn't the levels of violent crime and corruption we left behind so the stress levels
aren't as severe either."

"It's hard to imagine though it does make sense," Thundercracker admitted. "What things do you
usually investigate here? Are there still types of detectives?"

"We all have our specialties although we all take up the slack if someone's overburdened for a while.
Since I have the most experience in our district I typically work the worst or most complicated cases:
homicides, violent assaults, kidnappings, anything like that. We have a grounder who specializes in
hacking cases. Another has a talent for anything Vice. Though that works very differently here than I
was used to," Ciel finished his first sandwich and picked up a mercury fudge square to nibble on for
a bit. "Most vice cases here are tracking what junkie of the dozen in the district crossed a line. It's
way more community building than I ever saw in Vos."

Thundercracker hummed thoughtfully as he worked on his last dumpling. "That must be nice, really.
Has a criminal element developed much yet beyond junkies?"

"Not as much as you would expect although it is slowly growing. The screening process left the
majority of the criminal elements behind on Cybertron, so we started with no gangs. You can have the other piece of mercury fudge if you'd like," Ciel offered as he picked up his second sandwich. After taking a bite he said, "We've had a mecha or two try to make a living smuggling things between districts, but there's not enough differences or distance yet to make that worth it unless it's stolen goods, especially since there is no real contact with the rest of the universe. We don't have an empties problem, thank Primus, so that cuts out a lot of the more desperate criminals."

"Thank you," he willingly took the fudge to nibble on. "What is there to smuggle?" he asked as he tried to wrap his processors around the idea of smuggling inside a city.

"Like I said it's mostly stolen goods to try to sell in another district. Sometimes they try to sneak around homemade weapons and explosives; that can get a bit nasty since most weapons are banned or severely restricted," Ciel winced in remembrance of a particular past incident. "You have the occasional fraud that claims something came from off-world. They might have rooted out most of the criminals before we got here but a few gullible sorts made it through."

"And youth," Thundercracker tipped his wings in understanding. "I always suspected that a few criminal types are created every generation regardless of upbringing. Otherwise good flocks wouldn't occasionally produce a monster."

"Agreed," Ciel dipped his wings briefly. "Just like you can have someone brought up in the worst conditions who manages to claw their way out and become something worthwhile. Enough about me for now, how about you? Do you know what you want to do now that you're here?"

"Since I'm not allowed to go back to law enforcement I'm looking at search and rescue, flight training and writing, if it has a market here," Thundercracker answered with a soft smile. "I'll probably start with the flight training since Dai Atlas has mentioned he'd like to hire me to improve the Knight's performance. That'll get me through the classes for search and rescue."

"It's too bad you won't be joining us, but I agree search and rescue would be a good choice for you especially with that frame. It's not going to keep you busy all the time, but they need mecha there who can keep their processor straight in dangerous conditions," Ciel finished his sandwich and relaxed a moment enjoying the company. "I wouldn't mind flying with you to pick up a few tricks, and I bet I could talk the Captains into a training class or two if everything goes well with the Knights. You lived a long time in a very dangerous environment; you know things most of us have forgotten or never learned. Now, what genre do you write?"

"Romance mostly," Thundercracker's wings fluttered at the approval and offer he was genuinely excited about. "I have no idea how good I actually am though. No one's been willing to read it since Vos fell. Not that I've had much time to write. It's mostly something I remember I enjoyed for my off joors."

"Well, romance isn't one of the main genres I read, but I'm willing to take a look at it once you get started," Ciel offered. "You've got a lot of experiences that are rare here, so you do have an angle you can work to make your stories stand out from the crowd."

"True," Thundercracker hummed thoughtfully. "It might be a few vorns before I have anything I'm willing to share. I'm still relearning how to speak well. Writing is much more complicated. I want to get a lot of reading in before I try my hand at anything more than stream of consciousness type things and those are not to be inflicted on others."

"Well, the offer will still stand. Now, I've got to ask you. What is it like being in a gestalt with a bunch of grounders?" Ciel asked leaning forward intently.
"Very, very strange," Thundercracker shook his helm. "It's probably made me far more suited to this city, but it's still unsettling to think of a grounder as flock when I'm not in the middle of it. Or that Wing, a stunt frame many times my elder, is firmly locked into my processors as my fledgling. The hardest parts are more related to the war, but Flightplan is comprised of Wing, myself, a ranking Decepticon warrior and two senior Autobot officers. The expected result of putting the five of us in a room would be a minimum of two gray frames. But we haven't fought once and it's all on the gestalt coding."

"Wing ... he's the white Aerial Knight with a serious sweet tooth. I haven't encountered him many times personally but almost everyone has at least heard of him," Ciel muttered. "It's a very strange circumstance indeed. Under normal circumstances I would find what you are currently enduring appalling. On the other hand it brought you here; something that wouldn't have happened any other way. If you have no reservations about this gestalt as flock I can't regret being given the opportunity to get to know you better. There are very few here who understand what it's like to be an Air Martial."

"Regretfully that seems true everywhere. Law enforcement didn't tend to last long on either side. At least not the good ones. I'm glad at least one other Air Martial survived. It's nice it was another detective," Thundercracker smiled and finished off the fudge.

"Do you want to visit the market or go flying?" Ciel asked now that Thundercracker was finished. "I'm off until morning unless I get called in for an emergency."

"Is that common?" Thundercracker asked as he stood and subspaced his tart for later. "I'd like to walk around the market a bit. I don't get out of the Citadel that often yet."

"It doesn't usually since we're not all slammed constantly, but when it does it seems to be while I'm enjoying company," Ciel said with an easy grin. He headed towards the pedestrian-only street, letting Thundercracker fall into the standard mechling position beside him. "Where to now? To the right there's a bookstall that's normally found a few stalls down next to the floral stall that's set up in the same spots for vorns. If you're looking for some jewelry to accent that paint job I think there's a stall about three blocks down on the left next to a masseuse who likes to set up here to attract new clients."

"It all sounds good," Thundercracker chuckled. "I don't have anything in mind other than seeing what exists and enjoying some time without creator-class wings shadowing me."

"Let's go down to the right first. You can pick out a few volumes to start expanding your reading and maybe pick out a few flowers for your creator," Ciel teased lightly before grinning. "I might even pick up a spark flower or two for Cloudrite as a surprise. Featherlight claims not to be fond of them, but he knows our Vision just melts when he gets them."

"Which means he likes seeing them around. I always loved to indulge Farcry, though his weakness was for glowing roses and purple suns," Thundercracker said nostalgically.

"Cloudrite likes those too," Ciel agreed as they headed down the street threading their way through grounders and Aerials. Scents from treats, waxes, polishes and perfumes wafted through the crowd from the stalls around them. "His creators used to grow spark flowers back in Vos. Unfortunately the talent for raising them bypassed him, so he has to be content with the ones we bring him."

"Perhaps a creation will find a talent for it," Thundercracker offered as they walked by the first florist and slowed to study the offerings of both fresh-picked and preserved flowers in arrangements and singular.
"Hopefully our fledgling will carry that knack when we are allocated one," Ciel agreed looking over the arrangements carefully. There were no blue spark flowers available here, so he simply waited for Thundercracker to finish looking before moving on. "If not we will be accepting of whatever path their spark chooses to follow."

"It is the best choice in my experience, though many ways it was done before likely are no longer viable. I don't imagine it is acceptable to send an ill-suited fledgling to another flock anymore."

Thundercracker asked as much as said.

"Officially no, there are too few fledglings for most flocks to consider it," Ciel agreed but paused for a moment before continuing his train of thought. "However, there are rare circumstances where I could imagine it might temporarily happen such as a spark gift emerging that another flock is already better equipped to handle. Even then, the fledgling would still be considered a member of their creation flock. They'd just be training with another flock. Rather like having a lover of another flock. It gives you some rights but it doesn't make you of that flock."

"Understandable, and I expect most of the flocks who were prone to do so didn't come. They tended to be military or closely linked," Thundercracker accepted the truth. "I can see the value of joint custody in that case. Skywarp's gift of teleportation is one I can readily see as something of the like. Has it actually happened here that you know of?"

"There was a Seeker a few cycles of mechlings back who had a gift involving sonic vibrations, vocally based not like yours. I heard he went through several different trainers before he learned to control it. We haven't had any teleporters yet, and I can't say I'm looking forward to one showing up," Ciel said.

"If it happens I know something about it in practical terms. I knew Skywarp both as an older mechling and during the entire war," Thundercracker said as much a reminder to himself that such knowledge was valuable as to share that he did know it. "I'm sure Dai Atlas and Axe have worked with them as well."

"With that kind of experience if we have one develop I can almost guarantee you will be drafted to help control it. All but the most stubborn Seekers will get frustrated trying to learn how to handle a fledgling like that," Ciel promised as they closed in on the bookseller he'd mentioned.

"Believe me, I know."

"Skywarp was fairly wild when I was assigned to civilize him. He knew how to control his gift but he was a trial," he quieted as he began to look over the offerings.

"I can only imagine," Ciel said with a smile as he started browsing as well. He picked up a romance set in Helix and another set on an imaginary colony. "These authors are fairly well established if a bit formulaic at times. I've seen several coworkers reading them during their breaks at work."

"Thank you," Thundercracker responded and accepted the two files to read the flash screen and skim the promo screens.

The first flash screen identified the story as *Rising Heights* written by Snaptight. Further reading indicated that the author had seven stories self-published that were now public access before she was picked up by Steamward Publishing. This was her forty-third story under this publisher. The main characters, both Aerials, were apparently introduced in her last book, *Falling Forward*, also set in Helix. From what Thundercracker could figure out after reading the author's notes, summary and promo, almost all of Snaptight's stories were interconnected in some fashion but she took some effort to make them readable as standalone stories.
The second said that this was *Orns of Light and Sparks* by Kurf, a Praxian who was listed as authoring over 100 stories still in publication by The Azure Cloud publishing company and over thousand that were public access. The story was set on a colony world that was subject to spectacular aerial light shows during certain weather conditions which were a tourist draw. It gave Thundercracker the impression it was set at the height of the Golden Age, or at least in a setting with a similar economy.

"I'm amazed they allowed so much of their work to become public access," Thundercracker murmured as he logged both their designations as ones to start reading from what was free.

"It was part of the deal with coming. Basically everything pre-Exodus is public access and once something's copyright or patent expires it is too," Ciel explained something he had little knowledge of but abruptly realized could be function-affecting for Thundercracker. "That's something you might want to talk over with your lawyer-kin or even the Sovereign. I only registered it enough to do my job and know it wouldn't affect me directly."

"Haji would most likely know since his specialty is business law," Thundercracker agreed. "It makes it likely I should consider writing a tertiary occupation since search and rescue and flight instruction are more likely to earn me a decent long term income."

"Certainly for a few centuries. The top selling authors do make a good income as long as they keep writing. It's not like old stories tended to cost a quarter shanix. No real income to them anymore," Ciel agreed as Thundercracker put the two files back and they moved on, continuing to browse.

"True. Almost all old stories were traded on the secondary market rather than the primary where the author saw any income from it," Thundercracker hummed thoughtfully.

"It is something to keep in mind, so you still might look at writing as a long term prospect. Oh, Featherlight's been waiting for this to come out," Ciel picked up a story entitled *The Ruby Note*. Glancing over at Thundercracker, he explained, "Vendrin is a dj by trade. She started writing horror stories a few vorn ago, and they're selling really well. She creates recommended soundtrack lists to help heighten the mood while you're reading. Featherlight's addicted."

"Definitely not what I like to read, but I could probably write it very effectively," Thundercracker's wings gave a shiver. "Between Shockwave, Soundwave, Vortex and my case files I saw too much."

"Hmm...you could try exploring that genre and see if it bothers you too much to write it. I've been told some find writing down their experiences cathartic," Ciel tipped a wing thoughtfully. "Or you could use those experiences as a backdrop for a series of stories, either as wartime romances or making law enforcement characters your focus."

"Both true and the worst an effort will create is a better understanding of what I want to write," Thundercracker said thoughtfully as an image caught his attention and he took a couple quick steps towards the new releases. His wings gave a shocked flutter of real excitement as he read the flash screen and confirmed it wasn't just an illusion but actually was one of his favorite authors and he was still writing the first-contact stories he liked best. A quick check also confirmed that this was only the latest in a list that hadn't taken a break from the public access ones from what he'd written back on Cybertron.

"Find something you like?" Ciel leaned over to take a look at the title and author. "I've heard of him; he's been writing for a long time. Come to think of it, he probably would want to talk to some of you about the aliens you've met. See if truth is stranger than fiction."

"It typically is, and I liked Wilaki before the war. I'm glad he survived and is still writing,"
Thundercracker trilled in excitement and kept the bookfile as they continued to look.

"I didn't know Azure had started writing poetry," Ciel said as he examined another bookfile. "She's a dancer by trade. I think I'll need I'll take a look at these."

"Do you like poetry in general or her?" Thundercracker asked.

"Both," Ciel admitted with a slight wing shrug. "She's attractive for a grounder and is a very skilled dancer. I'm interested in seeing what kind of poetry she decided to write. There were several authors I enjoyed back on Cybertron, and a couple made the trip here. Most of them wrote to challenge assumptions and make you think."

"A worthy goal, especially here," Thundercracker said with honest approval. "Admittedly I tend to read for escapism, though here it might change. My work and flock life was serious enough on the thinking aspect I rarely went looking for it."

"Oh, I read my share of escapist comedies before we came here, and I still enjoy a good chuckle after work especially when it's been a rough orn," Ciel agreed. "The one thing I still have a problem enjoying is the crime of the vorn stories some mecha market about past killers. It's the same reason why I can read many procedural stories especially if the writer did some thorough research, but I can't take most legal drama vids seriously because too many of the writers obviously never worked in any aspect of law law. Featherlight has the same problems with a lot of the medical dramas. I've seen him throw things at the screen when the inaccuracies get too bad."

Thundercracker couldn't keep the laughter to himself as his wings shook in mirth. "My great-grandsire forbid any fiction related to flock functions to be watched after losing too many screens one vorn. I think it was Wargames or something. We kept the rule for the good of the screens ever since."

"I'm not allowed to be in the room when someone in the flock wants to watch Street Patrol," Ciel said with a grumble. "Not that I want to be there; it's one of the worst. They have absolutely no evidence collecting skills and couldn't recognize a false lead if it walked up and introduced itself. One episode a detective actually tried to claim that a Host could be fooled into thinking a random symbiot was its own by a paint job even after they physically linked up."

Thundercracker choked and just stared for a long moment trying to collect his thoughts from the corners of the universe they scattered to at that idea. Somewhere between Soundwave's unimpressed stare, Starscream's outraged screeching at such a thing presented as fact and prank-masters on both sides of the line being gleeful if it was true it nearly sent him into a glitch.

"Tell me there isn't someone on that production responsible for research," Thundercracker finally got out.

"I've never made it all the way through an episode to see the credits to honestly answer one way or another. That episode was the one that got me banned from all further viewings; I threw a bench at the screen when the end reveal was that the Host in question went insane after accidentally killing the original symbiot and the new one was being forced to act as a replacement," Ciel grimaced. "You might want to warn your whole flock to avoid it. Enforcer Prowl would probably be offended by it as well."

"I don't doubt it. At a minimum no war or LEO fiction vids around me just for the sake of the flock's audials and probably for all of us. I can imagine some of the rants I could get going just off what you told me, never mind the rest," Thundercracker grimaced even as he really did find some humor in it. "It'd be interesting to find out if any of the better productions would do with a critique."
"There are production companies that are actually trying to be close to realistic without sacrificing storytelling. They might be up for some feedback from someone who's lived the experience," Ciel said with some thought as he picked up another bookfile and examined it. "There was a short LEO vid series a while back called Condoned. It was set on a colony world and was actually something I was willing to watch. They producers are supposed to be working on a new series soon. I heard it was going to be set in Iacon."

"I'll look it up. Is it public access?" Thundercracker asked.

"Yap. A century after production it enters public access, aired or not," Ciel nodded his wings. "As strange as it was to get used to I've really come to enjoy how quickly and smoothly things enter public access. Especially now that we've been here long enough to prove that production is still going strong and every class can still make a living. I don't know who did the research on how quickly each type of media had paid out what it was going to but they did a good job. It's a lot harder to lose what's public access than what's owned by someone."

"There are some vids and stories I'll need to look for to see if they survived," Thundercracker said as he tried to remember some of his old favorites.

"Anything else you want to look for here?" Ciel asked.

"No, I'm good with this," Thundercracker smiled and they headed for the merchant to pay. It felt odd to Thundercracker not to haggle, or to have a price listed for that matter, but he paid what was asked with a reminder to himself that it was how things were done here and it was a good price.

Ciel waited patiently for his turn and paid for his purchases before they headed back out onto the street and the surrounding stalls. Looking further down the way he spotted a small table. "Has anyone introduced you to mountain drops yet? They're something the confectioneries came up with after we arrived; small pellets of high grade magma gel coated in oil and dipped in powdered jasper. Some places make them with our high grade but those are harder to find."

"I don't think I've had that yet," Thundercracker perked up at the description. "Are they common?"

"You can find at least a couple of shops or stalls in every district, although they're not as popular as some of the staples from back on Cybertron. The convoy class grounders in particular seem to like them. I like the mix of heat and sweetness, and there's almost enough high grade to make them worth our time eating them," Ciel admitted.

"A plus for a treat and I do like mixes such as that," Thundercracker hummed thoughtfully. "It would be interesting to find out if convoys like them for the taste or because it does have enough of a buzz to be worth it. I know during the war more than a few convoy and triple changers basically survived on grounder high grade rather than drink so many cubes of the regular grounder fare. They might not have our energy needs but the upgraded ones do need quite a bit."

"There are only a handful of places that make them with jet high grade, and they're usually only available by special order. Featherlight sometimes orders them for me as a treat," Ciel said as he stepped up to the small stall and glanced quickly at the offerings before handing a credit stick to the proprietor. "Three orders please."

"That'll be six shanix," the green and pink mech said as he placed nine of the treats in a container, handing it and the credit stick back to Ciel. "Have a good orn."

"Try one," Ciel offered them to Thundercracker after they stepped away.
"Thank you," Thundercracker accepted it and popped it into his mouth. He allowed it to roll around as the coating began to dissolve. The first thing that hit was the heat. It wasn't a strong enough burning sensation to be painful to any but the most sensitive of receptors, but it definitely grabbed his attention. A smooth sweetness followed mellowing the spicy taste into a complex mix. He knew his wings were showing every reaction and made an effort to keep that true. As a civilian he should display what he was feeling for the most part. He'd never be as open as a true civilian but as long as it was enough for Ciel to pick up he was calling it good.

"Definitely a good treat," Thundercracker rumbled his approval. "I like the mix."

"Another convert," Ciel said with a grin as he ate one himself before offering another as they started walking again. "So, anything else around here look interesting?"

"You mentioned jewelry and flowers," Thundercracker suggested.

"True. Looks like something might be available over there," Ciel said with a chuckle and walked across the street and three stalls down before stopping at a stall manned by a pink and gold Aerial with what looked like a Crystal City style frame. The proprietor gave both of them a deep wing dip before taking a long klik to look over Thundercracker's frame. The wings and their glyphs held him still for a shocked moment where he didn't seem to know what to do with himself, much less Thundercracker.

"Relax, he's a new resident, not something weird we're up to," Ciel said as he began to examine the flowers. These were largely of the crystalline varieties that had been preserved and would hold up almost indefinitely. He did take note that Thundercracker had held still for the staring and hadn't seemed sure how to break the tension from it.

"Sorry for staring," the Aerial apologized after a moment, giving Thundercracker a deliberately low wing dip. "I seldom see anyone announcing their past connections like this anymore. Welcome to my stall."

"I hope will look less strange in time when I have more of my current existence to write on them," Thundercracker accepted the apology. His optic caught on a spiral of rich purple topped in a spray of hundreds of filaments. Then he noticed that they came in other colors as well.

"Likely so, though the one with Winglord in it will always stand out. I'm Blossom. The Nebula Bursts are doing very well this vorn," the Aerial chatted as he picked up Thundercracker's gaze.

"Yes, it is nice," he hesitated. It was going to be more than he wanted to spend but what was the last time anything nice reminded him of the good past? He was sure he could afford it. He'd just have to be careful for a while.

Blossom picked up the purple flower and offered it. "An apology for being rude. He was a lovely color."

"Thank you," Thundercracker accepted it, his tone honest as was the soft smile at the complement towards Skywarp. He wasn't exactly startled by the action but by the lack of fear that came with it. He understood well the idea of groveling of many flavors to avoid trouble. He wasn't going to cause any trouble though. He couldn't.

"If you come back at the First Light Festival I always have spark lanterns available to help guide the way for the departed," Blossom offered quietly. "I know it was a tradition in my city and not many others, but it might bring some comfort to some of your gestalt."
"I will pass that on," Thundercracker promised and he really meant it. He had no idea if it would apply to any of the others but it was a nice thought.

"Now, is there a particular flower you are looking for today or a special occasion you're celebrating?" Blossom asked both Seekers, switching back to a bit more professional attitude now that his faux pas had been properly rectified.

"I was looking for spark flowers, though we're both mostly just enjoying the evening," Ciel said easily. "You do have some lovely stock for celebrations."

"Thank you," Blossom responded. "Unfortunately I don't have any spark flowers available right now."

"It's all right," Ciel said before he and Thundercracker wandered off to see what else there was to see.
Chapter Summary

Thundercracker's first date with Highdive followed by an interrogation by Wing, Jazz, Prowl, Aurora, Haji and Cheoseo about it.

Thundercracker landed just behind Tornado as they arrived at the small cafe midway between the Citadel the flight training area. Wing and Cheoseo had assured him that The Azure Fountainfly was a flier friendly mid-range eatery that was appropriate for a mechling of Thundercracker's current status to frequent and the credit stick he'd been given was suitable for a mechling of his eventual flock to have for such a date. Even with their assurances, he was a bit nervous about his first real date since long, long before the war. Deadlock oddly enough had been the one to put him most at ease when he pointed out how Highdive couldn't possibly be more uptight than Starscream. Indeed, the young Action gave every indication of being the friendly, good humored, open-processored being he desperately needed to balance out his too-serious and often morose nature.

::Try to relax. She's your peer, legally. We all agree she's a good match if you like her,:: Tornado assured him via an ultra-short rang comm before he walked inside to order a cube and snack to indulge in while he watched the mechlings from several tables away.

It left Thundercracker outside to wait for Highdive so they could order and sit down together. That was something else that left Tornado strangely uneasy. He had shanix again, not the ubiquitous galactic credit or the IOUs that both armies and much of the neutrals seemed to function with. He knew how many he had and had passed the 'small purchases' section of economics so he knew what he could afford and what a good price for various common consumables were. Thanks to Wing and a few others, those lessons often came with examples to sample so he knew what things were when he saw the glyphs. He was still a bit uncomfortable with the idea that Highdive would be paying for her own fuel even though he had asked her out, but everyone had insisted that was appropriate for a first date because she was an Action and it was traditionally her function to bring home most fuel.

Movement above caught his optics and he looked up to see dark blue and white Action dropping down to land near him. "Good orn," Highdive said cheerfully as she joined him.

"Good orn, Highdive," he dipped his wings in greeting and smiled a bit shyly before turning to go inside. "Have you been here before?"

"Yes, several of my friends like to meet here after classes," she said with a bit of a nervous wing flicker as they entered. "They have really good silica wafers. I like to dip them in cyber-bee honey, but they have lots of other flavors. The mini copper cakes are pretty good too when they're available."

"They are good," he agreed readily even as he gave the display a solid look for what actually was available. "Thanks to Wing I've found quite the taste for gels and jellies, and anything with sparkleberries," his engines gave a deep rumble of anticipation when he spotted the classically red and yellow swirls of said fruit tart.
"Wing, he's one of the Knights, correct?" she asked with a bit of forced casualness as she ordered a mid-grade cube and a small order of silica wafers with honey.

"Yes, and he's part of my flock," Thundercracker added before placing his order for a tart, half a dozen jellies in random flavors and a cube of sweet solar mid-grade for himself. "He's one of the oldest Knights still functioning."

"So he's the Aerial in your flock," she said, relaxing a bit as they turned and followed him to a table relatively near Tornado. "I'll have to thank him some time for bringing you here."

"Yes," Thundercracker agreed with his wings and settled down. "Do you have friends among the stunt frames?"

"A handful of stunt frames, a rotor and an Iaconian Aerial," Highdive said with a measured glance. "I don't let the more bigoted of my relatives know exactly who I'm studying with if I can help it."

"Understandable," he agreed with a small sip of his energon before nibbling on the tart; something that had been a treat to him even before the war. "You may have crossed paths with Wing then, at least in passing. As I understand it there are only a few dozen of his frametype in the city. He's the only one that's a Knight and almost all white."

"I think I've probably seen him around, but I don't think I've said more than a polite greeting in a line," Highdive said after some thought. "My flock Order isn't the problem if you're worried about acceptance. He knows I have a few Aerial friends, and he hasn't vocally objected to my interest in you."

"Much as I'd like it to be otherwise, it is a consideration," he admitted. "I'm not in a situation to push back against much resistance. Not for centuries at least, if ever. The lowest ranked Order without spark or frameline ties to their flock can be a tenuous position at times. I believe the Knights are taking my integration seriously and will ensure I'm never without a flock. It does not mean I can make demands."

"I'm not exactly high ranked in my flock and never would be with my attitude towards non-Seekers being contrary to some of the members," she admitted as well. "You will always have your gestalt, correct?"

"Yes. Even if at some point I never speak to some of them again, they are more than flock, to be blunt. The gestalt code ensures we can never completely leave each other. The way it is currently planned we will not reside in the same eyrie. Wing and any who become Knights will remain in the Citadel. Deadlock is very likely to do so. I believe Prowl will, though I am less certain. I will reside with my new flock, Master Aurora's creation flock, with some kin rights in her Order's flock and the flock of the Citadel. Jazz intends to live on his own near an entertainment district where he'll work. We are likely to see each other often, though how often is impossible to know," Thundercracker explained.

"You're going to have an interesting life. What do you intend to do once you're settled?" Highdive observed as she finished half of her silica wafers before offering the container to Thundercracker. "Do you want to try one? They're really crispy today."

"Thank you," he took a single one to nibble on and allowed his wings to express his agreement that they were good. Not on his top ten list of treats in the city, but definitely good. "There is still a great deal of discussion, however the likely mix includes search and rescue, flight training and finding out if what I write has an audience in the city. There wasn't much during the war, but romance isn't exactly what grunts like, the few that could read that well. I'll earn a respectable income even if my
"Writing doesn't do well. I'll probably do some work with the archives to include what I know about events after the Exodus. Have you had sparkleberry tart before?"

"I'd like to try a little bit if you don't mind," Highdive sampled the offered sliver of tart. "That's really good. I've had it with pyrite in it before, but I've never tried their straight tart. I'll have to pick up one to go when we finish. Interesting that you should mention search and rescue as an option. I've been trying to decide whether I want to be a firefighter, Peacekeeper or paramedic. I guess it will mostly depend on how I do in my classes. It's also my available excuse for why I've been trying to make friends outside Seeker circles; I'll need to be able to interact with other frame types to do my job properly."

"True with any of them. First responders need to be open minded in a city such as this," Thundercracker agreed with a pleased flick of his wings. "What aspect of firefighter?" he tried to smother his unease.

Highdive thought for a klik, trying to put her ideas into words. "It depends on what is needed of course, but I was thinking of rapid response for high rise fires. I'll outpace any rotators getting to a blaze, and I could help locate trapped mecha and pinpoint hot spots that need extinguished. I thought briefly about trying for Arson Investigation, but there's not a lot of call for that specialty so the few positions are usually full."

"I imagine so," Thundercracker hummed thoughtfully as he relaxed.

"You went to the crazy mecha that walk into fires, didn't you?" Highdive grinned at the way he ducked slightly. "No worry. That is so not in my game plan. Air support. Where you a writer before the war?"

"No," he managed a smile. "I was an Air Martial. I made lieutenant detective and was in line to lead my creator's flock."

"Wow, no wonder you're so confident," Highdive flicked her wings appreciatively and was once more drawn to the history on his wings that she could only read the basics of. "That's something to be very proud of achieving. Is that why you're looking at search and rescue? Did you think about the Peacekeepers?"

"I was raised to be," he agreed. "I would go back to law enforcement, but they won't have me. It's too much authority to allow a warframe like me," Thundercracker explained simply. "And yes, that is why I'm looking at search and rescue. It's a way to use my experience and command presence to help without making city leaders uneasy. The authority I'd have would be very situation-limited."

"Search and rescue also means you won't have to deal with as many of the boring calls and paperwork," Highdive pointed out, dipping her wings a bit in embarrassment at having possibly brought up a sore subject. "A heavier frame would probably be welcome when dealing with an actual emergency."

"It certainly won't hurt," he agreed with a reassuring smile for her. "What I lack in grace and agility I have in strength and armor. Even as an Air Martial I had a heavier frame than most civilians for just that reason. Your agility will give you advantages I could never have. How much schooling do you have left before specialized courses?"

"About half a vorn or so," Highdive said, smiling as she relaxed again. "Given I'm looking at being some type of first responder most of my initial classes will apply to any of those functions. After all, firefighters and Peacekeepers need some basic medical training, and all three of them have to know how to quickly assess a scene and a lot of the same rules apply to them all. According to my
instructors I won't have to decide on a path until after the first round of classes are finished."

"Perhaps we will be in some of the same classes. Despite my experience I do need to be certified locally and before that I have a lot of things to learn about how this city works," Thundercracker nibbled on his tart, savoring every bit a little too much for a local. "It could be something we do together, if the timing works out."

"I'm always on the lookout for study partners," Highdive agreed immediately. "Even if we aren't in the same classes we can still quiz each other. I could also try to answer your questions about the city if you like. After all, I grew up here, and since I'm not tied to the Citadel I might have a different perspective than some of your other sources."

"It would be most welcome," Thundercracker trilled his pleasure at such an intelligent Action. "I need to focus on building my Seeker connections, my future depends on it. I wouldn't mind spending some time with your study group, if all parties are okay with it and they really don't mind a badly socialized warframe around. I have a lot of ... inappropriate ... social habits from the war and before that need to be worked on. I can be as bigoted as anyone you know and likely worse at times. I'm just trying to get better. Part of that is being exposed to other frame types and having my behavior corrected."

"I'll talk to them about it, both the Seekers and other fliers I know," Highdive agreed. "I know most of them will be interested in at least meeting you since your flock has rumors flying all across the city. Some of them will just want to brag that they've met you, but every contact is a chance to settle some rumors and try to make a good impression." She glanced down at her empty plate. "You mind if I go grab another treat since I finished mine?"

"Not at all," he agreed readily. "Though I had thought to share the jellies."

"Oh that sounds good. Let me just grab something to share with you," Highdive excused herself and quickly headed over to the counter to make a quick order. After a few moments she grabbed the offered tray and darted back to the table. Settling down, she put two boxes off to the side and slid a plate of candies to sit between them. "Here, I got a plate of crispy gels for us to share."

"Thank you," he smiled and added his half dozen bite sized treats to her plate, making a visible statement in mingling their fuel from the start. "Do you have any favorites?" he asked, both to be polite and to learn about her tastes.

"I tend to like the mix of flavors like the pyrite and iron oxide ones over here," she said, pointing out the small golden-red glittering treats. "I like experimenting with different combinations, although I'm hopeless as a baker and candy-making is even harder. Do you have a preferences besides sparkleberries?"

"A mix of flavor-types. Sweet and sour, sweet and spicy, savory and spicy and the like. Though when damaged I am a typical warrior in liking things very sweet and when morose I favor sour or burningly spicy," he said as he selected one that memory said was an arsenic and silicon gel with a gold crust.

"Well that's something else we have in common. I'll have to keep an optic out for when your fueling preferences change," Highdive flexed her wings happily as she nibbled on one of the pyrite treats. "I think those grayish ones are nickel with a cupric oxide filling. It might be carbon inside though. I always seem to get them mixed up."

"Either way it is worth trying," he smiled warmly at her and quivered his wings in thanks for the tip and her thoughtfulness. It was true he'd be unlikely to be damaged here, but his emotional state was
far less stable than he'd ever been and would be for a long time with good cause even without taking his natural inclinations into account. "One never knows when a new flavor or combination will be enjoyable."

"I've tried telling my flock that, but too many of them dislike new things," Highdive sighed and snagged another treat, nibbling on the edges before popping in her mouth. "So, are you interested in having creations someday? I'd like to at some point. They regulate the population growth fairly strictly here, but everyone is encouraged to contribute."

"I imagine so," he hedged a bit. "I'm not at a place where I fully believe the peace is real, though when I am I've always thought I would have a few clutches. My Vision was expecting before the war and part of the deal with putting up with Starscream for so long was that he would carry for me when the war ended. I expect a few centuries before I'm ready. I will be ready in time."

Sympathy flickered through Highdive's field at the mentioned and implied loss. "I'm still rather young to think about actually having creations, and I'd want to be in a full, stable trine before I even seriously considered all the ramifications of having fledglings."

"I good idea," Thundercracker agreed readily as he tried a crispy gel with a shimmering silicon shell. "There are many considerations beyond the obvious of finances, physical maturity and trine stability."

"Not to mention flock stability," Highdive agreed as she snapped up another pyrite-coated crispy gel. "New fledglings can put a strain on flock dynamics if another Vision in the flock is having problems sparking. There's also your gestalt to take into consideration, especially when the fledglings are young."

"Very much so," he agreed and selected a small square at random, this one with a thick coat of rust on the outside. "Though I am sure Wing, Jazz and Prowl will be safe enough around them. Deadlock will be when he's trained. Though like the flock I live with their lives would need to be considered. How many flocks have creations that century would play in as well, to give a good selection to trine with when the fledglings are older. While less a factor here, the overall crime rate and strength of the crime flocks are something I would watch. In most cities the crime rate fluctuates in a natural cycle. It's best to have creations near the beginning of the down cycle rather than too far into it where it might be high again before the fledglings are grown."

"A lot of the past issues the elders told me about are already controlled here," Highdive said, listening intently as she picked up an aluminum dusted silica treat. "Energon and housing shortages don't really happen here, but potential disease outbreaks are also something to watch out for before trying to create. I've heard that some are much more serious for sparked carriers or brand new fledglings, even though they're mostly a nuisance for most adults."

"Quite true," he agreed with a thoughtful hum as he searched his memories. "Part of that is also taking into account all of the creator's heritage. Some framelines are more prone to such conditions and infections than others. I know my is unusually healthy. Largely because many who were weak either did not survive or went to less aggressive flocks. Those who came in were expected to pass muster if the trine created. Not every Seeker was meant for a flock such as the one that I grew up in."

"Those kinds of flocks and standards don't officially exist anymore, but we do expect everyone to be healthy," Highdive pointed out. "It's good to know that your line is not prone to known issues."

"I was informed less than subtly that I had better not hold my trine to military standards," Thundercracker said dryly but without rancor. "I don't intend to do so, though it will fall on my trine and flock to inform me of when I am. I know the major things I'm not to do, but it affects every
aspect of existence and I've never been anything else. Some things will arise when I don't realize I'm straying from civilian airspace."

"I get it. No different from if I'd joined with a Knight's flock. Sure I know the basics, by the time we trined I'd know more than most, but some things are so basic no one thinks of it," she flicked her wings in reassurance and understanding and teeked more than saw him relax a bit as he selected another treat at random. She watched and held back a giggle at his expression when he crushed the shell against the roof of his mouth and got the impact of what was inside.

"That was sweet," he managed around an effort to wash the worst of the taste away with his cube.

"Looks like it was gold and rust infused silicone," Highdive snickered. "I'll remember not to get that one for you later."

"It would be appreciated," he said honestly before trying another at random. Still on the sweet side but much more mellow. "Are there any Visions that have caught your optic?"

Highdive thought for a moment as she snacked on another piece. "Well, Eryu is kind of cute, but he's interested in Flameshot, one of the other Orders. Acharaj is quiet but does have a wicked sense of humor once he warms up to you."

"Yes. You saw him speaking with me the other orn?" he asked softly.

"Yes, I've been watching to see if any other Actions were going to approach you," she admitted. "Acharaj's is a member of flock that has had a couple of members join the Knights."

"Good to know, though I bring it up for another reason. Because of the ratio of Visions left on Cybertron I don't have it in me to say no to one bold enough to ask to trine other than to respect the Action I'm trined with. To ensure a suitable Vision is selected my Action will be chosen first and it will be their responsibility to ensure that the Vision chosen is a good choice for all of us. I don't expect a problem, not with how civilized things have been, but I had to cope with a very difficult, unhappy Vision with political ambitions for a long time and I don't wish to do so again. Are you okay with doing that, saying no to me about a Vision you don't think is right for us?"

Highdive flicked her wings briefly as she gave the decision the serious consideration it deserved. Finally she looked back up at Thundercracker. "I have no wish to live in an unhappy trine or bring that stress into a flock. You and I both deserve to have trine mates who can live together and form a solid family. If you and I decide we are suited, I will do what I can to keep potential problems away from our eyrie."

"Thank you. How well my Action will stand up to me is not the deciding factor, though it is important. If it is not a duty you believe you are suited for it benefits us both to know early," Thundercracker smiled and shifted to finish his tart in small bites. "Do you have any hobbies yet?"

Highdive started ticking things off, "I dabbled in painting but got frustrated with it. I already admitted I'm a disaster in the kitchen. I read some when I'm in the mood. I like races, but I know I'm not fast or agile enough to go pro. I like sky dancing, and I'm trying to learn the electro-zither."

"Sounds like some of that we could do together," Thundercracker smiled warmly. "You read while I write, and I enjoy both racing and sky dancing. Perhaps in this life I'll find time to see if I have any ability in music. I can't say I've ever tried, other than overcharged karaoke during the war. That definitely does not count."

"There's a karaoke bar I've heard about over in Kalis we could visit," Highdive snickered. "They
have a contest every decaorn. Best and worst get a prize."

"Maybe after I have a full trine," he groaned at the thought. "I'd never get anyone if they hear me like that first. Come to think of it, I might be barred from getting overcharged given my reflexes."

"I didn't think of that," she admitted. "I don't know if I could handle all these restrictions you're under. You have a lot of patience."

"Desperation is the most impressive motivator in the universe," he said seriously. "Though honestly, once I get used to it there are only a couple restrictions I expect to notice much."

"Which ones?" Highdive asked quietly.

"Any limits on high grade and the expectation not to take charge. I was raised to be a leader from before I hatched. Unlike most expectations of me here, I really don't have memories of not being either in charge or working towards it. Even the demand I not fight has a correlation in my entire pre-war existence. Air Martials were expected to be very careful with the use of force whether on duty or not. But to not give an order when I know what needs to happen? That's going to be a whole lot harder for much longer."

"Thus you're looking for a career where you can have some limited authority. Flight instructor, search and rescue ... both of those have ways to take charge without actually seeking a position of power," she noted.

"Exactly. I know I'm a better than fair instructor, or I was before the war. I was considered a good one during the war as well, but the standards were very different," he chuckled a bit at fond memories.

Highdive angled her wings curiously. "How can it be that different?"

"Well, I didn't have to make nice since I was their commanding officer and answered to no one beyond my trinemat, who was a lot more frightening than I was to most," his gaze unfocused slightly but his field remained warm with good memories. "Your flight instructor is likely judged on some combination of how quickly and well his students pass the various flight tests and to do that you have to like him to an extent. In war the only real standard is how many of them survive their first battle. I kept a lot of them functional by scaring the spark out of them in training."

Highdive just stared a long moment before saying, "I never thought of it that way. I know that the Sovereign and a few of the Knights were warriors before the Exodus, but most of us don't even think of the possibility of real fighting and what that actually means."

"There is no reason for it. Even in Vos, a city with a fair sized and active military, not many civilians thought about what battle really meant. Stories and histories usually romanticize and sanitize it because the folks who write or distribute those histories don't want to traumatize the population and turn them against any use of military force," Thundercracker shrugged. "I'll try not to traumatize anyone with it too. Another reason to limit my high grade consumption. I've got unsanitized first person stories dating back generations in addition to my own and an inclination to tell them once I've had a few cubes."

Hivedive cocked her helm slightly and selected one of her favored jellies. "How many is 'a few' to you?"

It made Thundercracker pause to really think about it, and he wasn't ignorant that Tornado was paying close attention right then.
"In general, two cubes of jet high grade in a social situation will not cause issue. A third is okay as long as the mood and my decaorn has been good. At five things will go down. Fortunately I'm generally a sedate drunk, but I'm not quiet. If I ever need it again it's best to have me with the non-Wing members of my gestalt somewhere isolated. I can't do any harm ranting around them. They've all seen and done at least as much as I have and lost nearly as much."

Highdive nodded, hesitated a nanoklik and then said, "If we are to trine, I will eventually need to have at least a general understand of what you and your gestalt have endured. Not only did it shape who you are now, but you have admitted that it will affect your reactions for a very long time. Having at least an idea of what it was like will help me learn to help you all avoid triggers or problems before they occur."

"Agreed, and that can be done without giving you the scars I have from it," he said readily. "A basic idea doesn't require the worst details. I would want you to know the basics so you can understand my gestalt mates as well. We've all been affected, though not all in the same ways."

"I wouldn't expect it to have caused equal damage to three grounders and a Vosian," Highdive agreed. "Just as I wouldn't expect the grounders to have the same scars. Each has had their own tragedies and deals with them in different ways. Do you think they will accept me as your trine mate?"

"As long as you don't give them reason not to. The gestalt code ensures they'll want me to have what I need, which means getting along with my trine if they can. The only thing I know won't go over well is if someone gets the idea you're harming me in some way. For that things will have already gone very badly between us," Thundercracker answered seriously. "Deadlock will always be ill-tempered and anti-social. Jazz will always be at least three paces ahead of everyone and plotting. Prowl will always be planning centuries in advance and a workaholic. Wing will always be his friendly, flirting, mechling impersonation self. I'll always be the broody one. Overall though, I don't think they're that difficult to deal with once you learn what not to say."

"So ultimately not that much different from interacting with a normal Seeker flock. This flock just happens to be a little more lethal than the ones I'm used to," Highdive said with a nod, glancing down at the empty plate between them. "Do you want something else to snack on? I saw some granite bars with some interesting fillings."

"Perhaps next time?" he suggested instead. "I would like to fly with you for a while."

"I'd love to," Highdive got up, her wings twitching a bit as she casually passed one of the two boxes over to Thundercracker. "Here, it's a sparkleberry tart for later."

"Thank you," his wings flicked up in pleased surprise, something his field made even more clear was honest. Falling into their respective trine roles was instinctive for Thundercracker and new enough for Highdive that she paid close attention to it as they walked out and took off. A tight loop in front of the building surprised her briefly until she saw the slate blue and gray Knight leave and take off. He didn't join them, but he did remain where he could see them from well above. It allowed her to forget he was there, and they both knew nothing could make Thundercracker lose track of him.

She knew Thundercracker was holding back given he was a much more experienced flier, but he wasn't making her feel like she was completely dragging him down. ::I'll get better,:: she promised. ::Especially if you're willing to show me a few tricks later.::

::I am, and you will. You fly well for your age,:: he added honestly as he made a clear path to loop the city rim in a slow, touring path.
Thank you, coming from you I know that's not an idle compliment. Have you had many chances to tour the city yet? I'm not intimately familiar with all the neighborhoods, but I do know quite a few good restaurants and sites we could visit later that I could point out to you. She offered as she followed him, admiring the view below and in front of her. Or we could just enjoy the flight and do the tour another time.

I haven't toured much at all and I would like to know what you think to point out. I'm mostly inclined towards a simple flight. I don't get to fly nearly as much as I'd like yet.

Then let's enjoy the time in the air together and leave the tour for another date. We can end near the Citadel when we're done. Highdive agreed as she followed him on a banked turn. The less we inconvenience your chaperons the easier it will be to get them to agree to follow us on more dates.

Very true," Thundercracker chuckled with good humor at her tolerance and thoughts.

The sound of familiar engines caused Wing to almost launch out of his seat near Haji. He could hear Jazz snickering at his excitement, but they were all anxious to hear if Thundercracker's date went well even if Wing was the only one willing to visibly show it. He had to admit that listening to Jazz and Cheoseo talk art like Jazz was some kind of experienced dealer or collector had been fun. The incredible breath of the grounder's knowledge was still stunning on a regular occasion when Jazz saw fit to show it off.

Aurora and Haji stood to greet the returning creation and their charge as well as watch the mechling Action do a quick spiral for Thundercracker as she flew away.

"It looks like it went okay," Wing chirped happily, his slender wings fluttering out from their fold.

"Yes, Highdive is an interesting conversationalist and a good flier for her age and frame type," Thundercracker said after he politely greeted everyone. "Thank you for taking time out of your schedule and escorting us, Tornado."

"It was worth it to watch the two of you in action," he said with a chuckle. "It's been a long time since I had any reason to watch a trining."

"So besides she gets a pass for Seeker skills, what do you like about her?" Jazz spoke up with a playful grin from where he was sprawled with Cheoseo in the conversation section of the eyrie's floor.

"One important thing is that she seems to be accepting of the unusual nature of my flock," Thundercracker said with a small nod towards Jazz while they all moved to join the pair already relaxed in the large group space. "I detected no hidden hostility from her the times I mentioned any of you, and she claimed to have several Aerial friends as well as a helo. She said that her flock Order knows about them, but she has managed to keep them hidden from Gloaming and the others that share his views."

"So she's good at keeping her social circles separate," Jazz nodded his approval. "She have a function yet?"

"She's a mechling," Haji objected.

"I had one a lot younger than her," Jazz shrugged. "Some folks know young."

"She hasn't picked one just yet but expressed interest in first responders. She mentioned Peacekeeper, paramedic or firefighter as options," Thundercracker said with a small flick of his wings. "She's also
practical enough to know that the first vorn of classes will apply well to any of those careers."

"Her experiences in any of those careers would give her something else in common with you and your past as an Air Martial," Wing observed. "And those are some of the few careers in the city that would help her understand the mentality of those of us in your flock who are Knights and former soldiers."

"It would also be a good fit if you decide to follow through with the idea of going into rescue work," Haji added. "Most situations requiring those skills would have your Action on the scene with you."

"I have to admit the more I think about it the more I like the idea of doing rescue work," Thundercracker nodded. "Not just as a contact with what I once was, but also being there to help more than keep criminals in check. How well she sticks to it once the coursework becomes challenging will say a lot about her and her ability to manage me."

"You can hold on that long?" Jazz asked quietly.

"Maybe," Thundercracker could only shrug. "I have a few vorns. I hope I have long enough to see whoever they'll be into their adult frames. Actively working on it will give me longer. Maybe a century, maybe three, maybe much less. It's difficult to know and very personal. I trined very old originally, but the time between their loss and my second trine was a matter of ... an orn or three. I've never been through a grieving cycle before."

"You can always come to me to help with your grief," Aurora said softly, faint traces of the old pain in her field as Haji gently brushed against her. "I am one of the few here who knows what you are going through."

"I'll ask what no one else has. Is she interested?" Cheoseo said as he rose to join his own trine mates.

"She bought me a sparkleberry tart," Thundercracker said as he pulled out the treat box.

"That's a definite yes," Cheoseo trilled happily for him as he explained for the non-Seekers.

"The Action's traditional role is that of the long-range hunter, the provider of the trine. The Order was the guard and would only hunt near the eyrie while the Vision remained very close to home to raise the young and ensure they were civilized when they went out to fly on their own," Aurora offered a more detailed version for them. "Offering food, whether a treat or fuel, is only done when there is interest and some hope of it working."

"She noticed it's something you like?" Jazz asked, correlating the gift with a more standard dating behavior he knew even as he filed every tidbit the Seekers gave up. He knew more than most, but even in his own rather insular society in ISO the Seekers didn't often talk of Seeker things with non-Seekers. He saw, he knew behaviors, but in many cases he never knew why.

"Quite a bit. A favorite from before the war," Thundercracker nodded. "I like the sweet-sharp mix."

"You two shared enough treats off that plate I was almost half-expecting her to try to pop one in your mouth," Tornado said with a small grin.

"I think my age might have made her too nervous to try that on a first date even if we are officially of the same status," Thundercracker pointed out with a chuckle. "I wouldn't put it past her to try after a couple more dates."

"So you already made plans?" Wing asked happily.
"For a second meeting, yes. She's going to give me a flying tour of the city and some of her favorite spots," Thundercracker's wings gave an excited wiggle, something in it making him seem much younger than he was and giving a hint of what he might once have been like before experience made him jaded. "I also have a date with Cavu and Tailslide soon."

"Sounds good. It's great that you have choices," Wing agreed. "Deadlock asked us to let him know when you get serious about a trine mate."

"I think that should concern me," Thundercracker almost deadpanned, though there was humor in his wings.

"He just shrugged whenever we mentioned you had a date tonight, almost like he doesn't care. Then he asked to be kept informed once it got serious. Maybe he just doesn't want to hear a lot of gossip about civilians?" Wing speculated.

Jazz snickered. "I think he wants to play the scary creator/big sibling. He does it really well after all. Though he probably doesn't want to listen to endless gossip about TC's interfacing life."

"I do not need him scaring my potential trine mates," Thundercracker mock groaned, although he seemed a bit pleased by the positive attention from the most aggressive member of his flock. "I did warn Highdive about the four of you, and I will warn any other serious contenders as well."

"You don't have to warn them about us; we're perfectly harmless," Wing said with a snicker. "Just ask us."

"Harmless?" Thundercracker barked a laugh, his wings quivering in humor. "The four of you are as 'harmless' as I am. You and Jazz just hide it better."

Cheoseo stopped snickering long enough to say, "At least knowing about all of you didn't scare her off. She's either brave enough or crazy enough to think she'll fit right in."

"She's a mechling Action. It's in her coding," Thundercracker smirked at him. "Though I think it's mostly the second," he added more somberly. "She does like non-Seekers more than most. It's probably the strongest point in her favor."

"Putting up with us is one thing," Wing said staring straight at Thundercracker, remembering those long orns with just the two of them on the ship and the despair he'd felt from the Seeker. "Do you have an inclinations that she's someone you could see spending the rest of your existence with? I don't want you to think you have to settle for someone just because of us."

"From one meeting and a few classes, she could be," he answered as seriously. "She's either got good code or fakes it flawlessly and I have enough issues on my own to need a strong Action to keep things in check when I'm having a bad time. I'll know more over the next vorns. I'm unlikely to formalize any trine bond before they're in their adult frame. That's another decade."

"You can hold out that long?" Jazz looked at him with concern even as he also checked out the generally relaxed reactions of the other Seekers to the statement.

"I should be able to. It's something that I will deal with as it comes. Their age and honest progress will go a long way to keeping the coding content," Thundercracker explained.

"As long as you're sure. You will let someone know if things start to change, right?" Wing asked, relaxing a bit since it sounded like Thundercracker was more than just okay for the time being.

"Even if he doesn't, it becomes glaringly obvious," Tornado informed him. "Deny trine coding too
long and it causes ever more serious glitches. We'll know."
Chapter Summary

Thundercracker's first date with Tailslide (at Del Sarineni).

::Del Sarineni has a good mix of civilians that go there to socialize and enjoy dancing. You're going to stand out, but it should ultimately be a good thing. The exposure to you in a civilized setting should help settle some concerns. Don't worry, it's not so high upscale that you'll trip over your manners.:: Wing said soothingly as he and Marwir followed Thundercracker to the restaurant to meet his date, Tailslide. They were just playing visible escort while on their way to watch a civilian stunt frame race and wouldn't be going inside; chaperon duty for this date was falling to Demeter tucked comfortably in the Seeker's cockpit. Privately, he was wondering if Thundercracker was this nervous because of this particular date or the location Tailslide had chosen. Del Sarineni was several steps up from a small cafe like The Azure Fountaintfly in status and was a much more visible choice for a first date.

It was a political move as far as Thundercracker was concerned, but he wasn't sure whether it was to give the impression that Tailslide could bring resources into the trine when the Order couldn't to impress Thundercracker or if it was an attempt to say he was already on the way up to an Order he expected was as well. The evening would tell a lot and Thundercracker put on his best manners without walking in as a force of command. A sweep of his optics took in the dance floor and the tiers of seating around small tables. It didn't take the things mecha were eating here to remind him what gourmand meant.

He quickly spotted the young Action sitting at a table on the second tier looking down over the dance floor. He'd taken the time to polish his light blue, black and silver frame to a shimmering shine in what had to be a deliberately optic-catching choice.

"Good orn, Thundercracker," Tailslide said after Thundercracker made his way up to their table. "I took the liberty of ordering us some fire tea, the local version of Zarita Mattri and some arsenic copper cakes to start out. Is there anything you'd be interested in ordering for us to try? They have a full menu here."

"Good orn," Thundercracker canted his wings in greeting and was grateful for the primer Wing had given him on this place. He could at least pull up the menu without difficulty, though it turned out that reading it was far more difficult than he expected. He knew he'd once known enough to recognize much of what was on it, and while the descriptions still held dim memories in a couple sections he recognized as Praxian and Koanian, he quickly focused in on Vosian as the only one he knew he liked and could actually read easily. Keeping in mind how spicy what was already coming he focused on the sweeter end of the offerings he recognized to balance it out for himself, then changed his mind entirely and decided to use this as an information source on several levels and ordered a very mild high grade sampler. "Do you come here often?" he asked to begin to understand why such a high-end establishment was selected.

"Yes, my creators enjoy the food and occasionally bring clients here as well. The three of them all practice law although not in the same firm of course," Tailslide straightened. "I'm think I might
follow in their wake and focus on defense or malpractice."

"Worthy subjects. What drew you to those two?" Thundercracker asked with genuine interest.

"Well, my creators focused on family, estate and business law and do quite well at it, but I want to do something different. Defense, malpractice, those are things that make a difference in mecha's lives. Not many mecha talk about the lawyer who helped your creators draft a will; they do remember and mention the lawyer who kept a sibling out of jail." Tailslide tipped his cube to Thundercracker and took a drink.

"That is true, though the flip side of it is that the victim will remember you badly and if you end up defending someone widely believed to be guilty you will be remembered as either without morals for taking the case or reviled and thought a cheater for getting them off, even if you didn't do anything wrong," Thundercracker replied. "It is not much different from law enforcement that way. In any given case there will be someone who is thankful for your effort and someone who hates you for it."

"All true, but it is a duty that needs to be done to facilitate the cause of justice," Tailslide said with a small smile. "Or I could go into personal injury cases and help those who have been wronged by the negligent or malicious actions of others."

"It does decrease the likelihood of the city viewing you as a monster," Thundercracker hummed thoughtfully as their orders arrived. "Personal injury only requires some care not to be caught up in the scams that are ... were ... common. I helped jail more than a few lawyers over that. The temptation is strangely high in the field. You'll need a strong moral core and trine to keep you out of trouble. Manage that and you'll help a lot of mecha."

"I think both fields can be rewarding both monetarily and socially. They are also fields that will probably grow as the population increases. Thank you, that will be all," Tailslide said with a sigh, waving the server away as their food was brought to the table.

"Quite true. Every city needs more lawyers as it grows. I'm afraid my upbringing leads me to see the downside more often than not," Thundercracker apologized. "I tended to only interact with lawyers when they were trying to tear my work or personal integrity apart, or to arrest them when they were corrupt. Knowing that's the minority isn't the same as experiencing it."

Tailslide waved away the comment with a flick of his wings and a tip of his cube of fire tea. "I guess that's understandable given what I've been told Cybertron was like by the time everyone left. You'll get used to a different view of lawyers now that you're here, living with Master Aurora and not going back into law enforcement. Her Order is a good business lawyer my creators speak highly off."

"Yes, he's a good mech," Thundercracker said without reservation as he mixed a small acidic and sweet cube to take the harshest bite out of the fire tea. "I guess that's understandable given what I've been told Cybertron was like by the time everyone left. You'll get used to a different view of lawyers now that you're here, living with Master Aurora and not going back into law enforcement. Her Order is a good business lawyer my creators speak highly off."

"Yes, I've been searching for a suitable firm to join once I finish my legal degree. Of course there are several who hire new lawyers for a few decavorns until they move on where I could get an initial job if necessary, but I would prefer to start out at a well-established firm and make my way up through the ranks to partner," he glanced at Thundercracker's cube. "We can order something else if you would prefer a drink other than fire tea."

Thundercracker considered the idea and knew his wings showed something of his reflexive distress when Tailspin's expression edged towards confusion. "It's both strong and spicy for me," he admitted. "Cut with the sampler it will be fine."
"If you're certain," Tailslide said leaning back and preening a bit for those below him. "So, what are you planning to do now that you are here in New Crystal City?"

"A good deal is still up to the winds, though I'm likely going to go into search and rescue and flight instruction for an income, and see if my writing has an audience here," Thundercracker sipped the fire tea. "It's as close to my true function as I'll be allowed."

"Initially, I can see where the established order would be concerned about having one of Cybertron's Winglord's duty trine here and want to control you, but eventually you'll be able to work your way back to your true position," Tailslide waved away the concerns. "You naturally radiate authority like a true flock Order."

"I was raised to be one," Thundercracker acknowledged with a small flick of his wings that was undeniably pride at the statement. "It will be a very long time to earn that much trust, though I have hope that having three of my gestalt in the Knights will speed things up some."

"Three Knights? That would be impressive connections for a flock to obtain even if they are mostly grounders. Wing at least is an Aerial, and I understand he's been in the Knights a very long time," Tailslide observed thoughtfully as he took a dainty bite of the Zarita Mattri.

"He has. While not the oldest mecha among them, he does have the most vorns as a Knight of all but half a hand." Thundercracker agreed as he sipped the sweetly acidic blend and found he rather liked alternating them beyond some relief from the spice. "As I understand it training is likely to take centuries, though it could take much longer given the situation. Trust takes time to build. In the meantime I intend to be on my best behavior, which includes being very careful of my high grade consumption," he lifted his fire tea for another drink, savoring the kick more than the bite, but still finding enjoyment in just having variety. "What are your interests, besides law and matching your creator's status?"

"I'm part of a debate group who get together to discuss alternative solutions to current policies and hypothetical events. I've also been working with my sister Crimson Sprite who is developing a new strain of vermilion solar flowers," he took another bite, obviously savoring the flavor.

"What will be its unique trait?" Thundercracker asked, intending to get back to the more varied topic later.

"She's been trying to breed them to double the number of petals on the flowers while still keeping the petals uniform in shape and size. Consistency has been the biggest difficulty in development, but I think we'll eventually get it. She'll get to name the strain when it's stabilized. It's a passion for her, but I find it more of a relaxing hobby to dabble in right now," Tailslide admitted.

"Relaxing hobbies are important, especially when one has a stressful function," Thundercracker encouraged it honestly. "What have the last few debates been on?"

"We've discussed the creation ratios among the populous, tax structures, allocations of building permits, and the likelihood the mecha-soccer tournament will be won by New Tesarus or Tiger Pax," he said after a klik, then smiled a bit at the way Thundercracker perked up at several of them.

"Quite the variety. Is it the same group that debates every subject or does it vary?"

"It's a varied group although there is a stable core of us that usually show up. It's not just Seekers who show up; anyone who is interested in New Crystal City's future or just likes to debate is welcome to attend. We get more interest from the casual crowd when the topics are things like mecha-soccer, but what can you expect from the masses," Tailslide shrugged.
"There's a reason it's called entertainment for the masses," Thundercracker agreed. "Where is the schedule posted?"

"Here. The organizers post the topics a decaorn in advance so everyone interested can prepare," Tailslide immediately sent him the appropriate links. "There's also a suggestion area if you have something you think would be a suitable topic."

Thundercracker's wings gave an excited shiver before he took a carefully constructed bite of the Zarita Mattri, then finished off his cubes and began to mix another tasting cube, this time intent on really using the sampler to full effect. "Thank you. I look forward to crossing paths there often. It has been ages since I had good debate partners. How formal are they, typically?"

"Most are moderated, although the degree of control depends on the topic. You'll notice going through the list that a few are marked casual, typically things like sports or historical debates," he smiled, pleased to have found something of real interest to offer the other Seeker. That it was something to do together and required a sharp processor and broad depth of knowledge was an added bonus.

"What are some of your favorite subjects?" Thundercracker asked as he tried a sweet and sour mix.

"I'm partial to the historical debates, especially the ones involving past political decisions made by the Senate and Primes. I also participate in a lot of the debates about resource allocation in the districts. I was outvoted in the debate about the last skip-jack tournament, but my choice won in reality so I claim that one as a win," Tailslide chuckled and took another bite of the Zarita Mattri. "I'm not knowledgeable enough to participate in the military debates, but I do listen to them so I can eventually join in properly."

"Something I expect to do for some time on many of the subjects," Thundercracker nodded with his wings and really began to relax. "Is there anything from my timeframe you were curious about?"

"Well, there are many decisions and past actions that hindsight has shown to be flawed I'd love to know more about. Being able to site a new source that was present during those events would be a bit of a coup for me, whether the source is you or one of your gestalt or all of you," Tailslide flicked his wings excitedly. "For instance, why did the hostilities between Tarn and Vos escalate as they did? Was it economics or another factor that truly tipped the scales? My current research implied economics with frame prejudice secondary."

"I wasn't of the rank to be involved back then, but I do know that from the military in my flock and Air Martial officers I was counted among it was considered a personal political issue. The Royals got into some kind of fight that even the Prime couldn't get them to back down from. It wasn't a city thing. It was personal," Thundercracker recounted what he remembered. "What I know for sure is that Tarn won, in the end. The city may have been destroyed with Vos but several of their royals survived and continued to wield considerable power in the rebellion. That could not be said of Vos."

"Fascinating," Tailslide said leaning forward and tipping his wings. "There's very little in the records that would imply that was the primary cause, although it does fit with some of the other events I've researched. Most likely it's missing because so few Air Martials, high-ranked politicians or military Seekers came along on the Exodus. Most civilians wouldn't have access to that sort of gossip and intelligence."

"Agreed. Among Air Martials it was just gossip, but among the military of my flock there was actual knowledge. Edited when told to us, but just knowing their missions and the mood says a lot in the end," Thundercracker agreed. "Actual military officers and the Trine Elect survived the destruction as well and I got the same impression from them. Even without specifics everyone in the know..."
seemed to view it as a personal fight they were caught up in. Not that different from what the war turned into, but that's another subject. I expect Jazz knows in detail. He was ISO long before the war. Any kind of high-level squabble he'd know all about. Whether he'd tell the truth is a separate matter.

"You don't trust him?" Tailslide cocked his helm, his wings canted in confusion.

"I trust him with what matters. But to tell the truth when it won't make a difference? No. He's an ISO lifer. It's simply how they are," Thundercracker shrugged. "It's a processor set. ISO, Intel, SpecOps; they're all like that."

"I'll keep that in mind if I ask him questions about an event," Tailslide said, wings still canted a bit as he sampled the copper cake. "So are they prone to exaggeration and misdirection to keep things interesting or just to keep everyone else guessing about what they actually know?"

"Honestly, I have no clue. I've never understood them, just how to survive around them. Though I expect it's the later for the most part. Jazz is playful enough he might do it just to see what you do with it," Thundercracker shrugged a bit. "Giving only one person a bit of intel does a good job of indicating who they communicate with, where and how often."

"I can see the use of that," Tailslide's wings tipped up thoughtfully. "Especially if you suspect research theft or corporate espionage. Crimson Sprite has misdirected several of her fellow horticulturalists to make certain her best specimens are ignored by anyone trying to tamper with her results."

That raised an optic ridge. "Has anyone tried to?"

"We don't have enough proof to be certain, but a couple of specimens did succumb to problems that shouldn't have occurred, like contamination. That's actually why she originally brought me into the project; I was standing watch and helping her set up surveillance but then I found out that I actually like working with the plants. We haven't had any issues in a couple of vorns."

"Why would it be worth anyone's trouble?" Thundercracker asked, curious if there was an industry or specific issue or if it was the usual.

Tailswipe canted his for a moment, trying to think of how to explain it. "Part of it is the prestige and recognition for having bred something new; in many ways it's like writing a manuscript or composing a new piece of music. There are also the shanix one can earn selling the flowers or seeds. Vermilion solar flowers are popular gifts between potential lovers, especially over in Yuss."

"Then the usual reasons, for the most part," Thundercracker relaxed. "If you have trouble again, I may be able to help. Even without official status I do have a great deal of training and experience as a detective. If Jazz decides he likes one of you, there is likely none better with security. Anyone who breaks in as well as he does can create a system to protect against intruders nearly as well. She must be gifted to be doing something so advanced at her age."

Tailswipe dipped his wings in gratitude. "She has an incredible way with plants and is looking at horticulture as a career. She and her Vision, Coldsheen, haven't found an Action they like well enough to trine with yet. I'll pass along the offer, and if there is a problem we could pay Jazz to take a look at the security."

"I'll ask on my end to make sure such an arrangement is agreeable," Thundercracker agreed with a pleased wing flick. "Is it just the two of you?"

"Yes, we're a pair. There's another clutch of three in the flock who are about four decavorn younger
than us," Tailslide grinned and nibbled on another piece of the copper cake.

"How did they get permission to have two clutches so close together?" Thundercracker was keenly interested even though he understood it was possible his date wouldn't know.

"I'm not certain if it was luck of the draw or simply because there was such a large gap between us and the next oldest in our flock," Tailslide said with a small shrug. "We went two full breeding cycles without a clutch before the five of us showed up."

"That is a long time," Thundercracker accepted the unknown gracefully and took note of the largely empty plates and cubes. "Would you like to dance?"

"Yes," Tailslide said with a smile and stood gracefully, already looking forward to the movement. It was a bit slower piece than what had been playing earlier, but there was still a steady, solid beat to the music meant to dance to.

They both froze when they realized one was moving and the other wasn't.

"I'm not willing to leave energon to waste," Thundercracker said carefully. "I forgot you would not know that yet."

"Sorry about the misunderstanding," Tailslide apologized as he sat back down with Thundercracker. "I have never experienced the conditions you must have faced."

"A fact I am grateful for," Thundercracker accepted the apology and focused on finished the small amount left while still enjoying it. "War is an excellent teacher, just a very cruel one. In time I will become accustomed to plenty again. It will just take time."

"It's a good reminder for the rest of us though. To be grateful for the bounty that we have," Tailslide said after some thought. "I've heard from some of the elders about the conditions before we left Cybertron, but it was more story than anything else.

"It only got worse. By the time I last saw Cybertron it was common for even officers to be operating near starvation rations for metacycles at a time and more mecha than not no longer noticed if energon was system energon from the deactivated or not. Seekers were lucky that we were considered a top priority to keep fueled enough to fly. Even so there wasn't always enough to go around. We have very high energy needs relative to most ground frames."

"And to think I used to complain if I couldn't have the flavor of energon I wanted. Hopefully such conditions never happens here," Tailslide said with a shudder.

"Agreed," Thundercracker said fervently as the last of his cube was finished. "From what I've seen it won't happen in my lifetime at least and likely not in my creation's lifetimes even if the corruption was as bad as on Cybertron. That it seems much more controlled here means that many more generations before it's even possible without a catastrophe."

"Hopefully we will learn from the mistakes of the past and prevent it from happening again," Tailslide agreed, waiting until Thundercracker was truly finished before standing once more. "Now, would you like to join me on the dance floor?"

"Yes," Thundercracker smiled with an anticipatory wiggle of his wings and stood, content with the state of his order and eager to burn some of it off.
Chapter Summary

Thundercracker's first date with Cavu. Lunch at Azure Fountainfly and flying.

For his third date and second at the Azure Fountainfly Thundercracker was feeling more confident. Cavu was younger than the other two or anyone else in class and it showed in his manner. He had asked though and Thundercracker was not about to reject a potential trinemate just based on being too young to have a strong sense of self yet. Windsinger was his chaperon this time and the musician-Knight was already inside taking the attention her glittery paintjob and performer's manner tended to generate.

The sound of an approaching engine caught Thundercracker's attention as Cavu landed near him. "Good orn, Thundercracker," Cavu said as he approached his date for the orn.

"Good orn, Cavu," Thundercracker replied with the easy greeting and motioned him to enter the cafe with him. "Have you been here before?"

"A few times with my creators," he admitted as he followed Thundercracker into the cafe. "Our eyrie isn't as close to this one as some others. We actually reside over in Simfur."

"Oh? What brought your flock there?" Thundercracker asked as they hung back briefly to decide their order.

"Jobs," Cavu admitted. "We have a lot of engineers, accountants, chemists, physicists, drafters...we're of a very practical bent. Some of my flock commute to Tiger Pax and other districts for work. Simfur is fairly centralized near a lot of the industrial areas without being too working class."

"Then a good compromise then, and I like a practical processor. Ready?" he glanced at Cavu.

"Yes, I'm ready to order," Cavu said before stepping up to the counter and getting the server's attention. "Two solar light spirals and a bowl of spicy neon noodles. Could you add an order of oil crisps as well?"

"Of course," he smiled readily and began putting the order together with quick, efficient movements. As soon as Cavu collected and paid Thundercracker stepped up.

"A gel granite sandwich, a side of cyber-bee honey and a sparkleberry tart," he ordered and quick work was made of the exchange so the pair could find a table. Thundercracker was grateful his place as an Order meant he could select a place near Windsinger without explaining anything.

"Have you found a function that resonates with you?" Thundercracker asked after they settled down.

"I don't know yet. My creators think I should concentrate on a career in chemical engineering or accounting. My Flock Order suggested I try law or medicine. One of my music instructors suggested I look at starting as a courier so I can earn some shanix while I work on my composing," Cavu said
"How well regarded is this instructor within the music community?" Thundercracker asked and he knew Windsinger was paying close attention.

"Duet is an instructor whose worked for several different flocks and came well recommended," Cavu said with some thought. "I learned to play the halo harp from him."

"If he thinks highly enough of you to recommend you enter his profession I would get another experienced opinion on it and find out what such an existence means. Your flock should want the best for you but they will also be looking out for the flock. It may not be easy for them to accept such a risky choice of a function when they do not share it," Thundercracker suggested. "That is assuming being a composer is appealing enough to work for."

"I'll look into it then," Cavu said after some long thought and a bite of noodles. "I don't know if I'm good enough to make it as a full time musician, but I could always do it as a second job or hobby. There's also the reality of how popular my style would actually be; I tend to write experimental pieces based out of classical Vosian styles. Do you have a favorite music style?"

"It depends on my mood. I like the quiet classical pieces to relax to, the fierce classical such as Firewatch when I'm in a mood to rant, dance or otherwise be energetic and I enjoy a great deal of military music, particularly the cadence songs," Thundercracker rumbled thoughtfully. "That said I've found very little I truly dislike."

"Firewatch has some interesting pieces. I wrote an accompanying harmony for her 27th Sonata in A Major a few vorn ago; the idea was to have the dissonant voice of a halo harp in the middle of the upbeat coronets and cleristal string-horn. The point was to bring up the voice against war. That was the piece that Duet liked the best," Cavu said with a small grin before dipping his wings in a bit of embarrassment.

"If it's good it would be a fine thing to listen to. That is quite the composition to live up to improving," Thundercracker didn't hide that it would impress him greatly if this youth had managed it.

"I don't think it's ready for public consumption yet," Cavu said dipping his wings again. "Duet said I need to work on it more to polish it up. I'm the fastest in my flock, and I think that's why he suggested being a courier."

"I can't say I know enough about being a courier to comment, though it makes sense that being fast is a good trait. Have you been in mechling races yet?" Thundercracker asked.

"I've been allowed to enter a few, and I've beaten almost everyone in the speed trials when I do compete," Cavu said fluttering his white and gray wings with pride. "I've even raced some of the Aerials around Simfur, and I outpace most of them."

"Perhaps we can race some time," Thundercracker suggested with a playful rumble. "See how well you match up with the fastest Seeker created before the exodus."

"You would be able to tell me, wouldn't you," Cavu murmured as he glanced quickly over at the Winglord part of Thundercracker's markings. "That'd be a wonderful challenge next time we get together." He hesitate a little bit longer before offering, "Have you ever tried spicy neon noodles?"

"I haven't," Thundercracker admitted with an angle to his wings that he was curious.

"Here," Cavu offered his bowl to Thundercracker to let him try the noodles. He obviously wasn't
quite bold enough to actually try and feed the Order. "They're not the spiciest thing I've ever eaten but they have a nice kick to them."

"They are rather spicy," Thundercracker rumbled thoughtfully. "Not the spiciest thing I've had either. Do you like spice?"

"Yes, I like Rust Sea cuisine a lot," Cavu said with a grin. "Kaonite food can be good as well but it's fairly heavy fare with all those minerals. The grounders around our eyrie like a sweet and spicy mix in with their energon that is pretty good. If you find scarlet dross on the menu that's a Simfur specialty. The best local Simfur dish in my opinion is called frozen bites. It's lightly chilled gelled magma energon bars with crystal dust and some copper shavings on top. You still feel you can fly after you eat; unlike the Kanoite food I've had."

"I know what you mean with Kanoite fuels. Laziest Seekers always seemed to be there, until I spent a few metacycles and realized they weren't lazy, they were weighted down by the local fuel," Thundercracker nodded his wings. "The frozen bites sound good. Perhaps on another date you can show me some of the places to snack in Simfur."

"We could race and then grab some food afterwards," Cavu said perking up at the idea of another date already being suggested. "I know a few spots that the local Aerials prefer so the dishes are better suited to our frame type."

"I like that plan," Thundercracker agreed readily. "Is Simfur spicy compared to the noodles?"

"Yes, but the mix of sweetness helps with the balance so it doesn't overwhelm your palate," Cavu seemed a lot more confident since they were talking about food rather than himself. "For instance, some of their versions of oil broth have spicy noodles as well as sweet gel slivers."

"It will be interesting to try. Pure spice isn't my favorite, though with a good mix it can be enjoyable," Thundercracker hummed honestly. It would never be a favorite but it could be something enjoyable from time to time. "Have any of the Visions caught your attention?"

"Well, there's a fledgling Vision that wasn't quite old enough for our class," Cavu admitted with a small flicker of his wings. "Penumbra is really intelligent; she repaired my halo harp once when it got damaged at a gathering. She's already talking about going into photonic engineering once she's old enough to get into the courses."

"That's quite a focus for one so young," Thundercracker's wings flicked in honest surprise. "If we last long enough it will be worth getting to know her."

"Her creators are a trine of engineers that work in Tiger Pax so she's had an early introduction to the fields," Cavu explained. "That's why I've met her even though their eyrie is in New Vos; her creator trine worked with some of the members of my flock for a while."

"Have you kept up with her?" Thundercracker asked to get a feel for their current relationship.

"Yes, when I can although it's usually over vid calls. We only get to see each other about four times a vorn with our current schedules although it used to be more often," Cavu said with a small sigh. "She says she's learning to play a laser harp, but I honestly think she's more interested in learning how to build one."

"It's not a bad thing to know how to use what you design or built no matter why she'd decided to learn to play," Thundercracker hummed thoughtfully. "Even if she's only learning to be able to talk to you better it's not a bad thing."
"I hadn't thought of that," Cavu admitted perking up his wings. "Maybe I should take some classes and learn how to repair my own harp. Maybe Penumbra would like to join me in them? I'd be doing design and repair work learning a trade so my flock should approve."

"I have a bias towards knowing how to repair anything you use, so I think it's a great idea," Thundercracker said. "I can't imagine there's a downside to knowing a bit more about your instrument or asking if she wants to go to them with you."

"I think I'll do that. Thank you for the suggestion," Cavu said with a wing flex. "Have you thought about taking any music courses? Learning to play an instrument or singing lessons?"

"I have thought about finding out if I have any musical ability once things settle for me. It's not been something I've ever been drawn to but I've never had all that much free time to explore random skills either. I probably won't for at least a century either. There's a lot for me to learn before I'm classified as an adult," Thundercracker admitted.

"I was hoping you could join us for a music class or two at some point," Cavu said disappointed but accepting that Thundercracker's time was limited. He perked up a bit and offered, "It would be a good socializing opportunity for you or your flock since there are mixed classes with different age categories and frame types."

"I can't imagine you'd be in a beginner class," Thundercracker nudged at the idea.

"I would be if I learned a new instrument," Cavu offered immediately with a bright grin. "I've been thinking about learning saung gauk or wheelharp."

Thundercracker paused to look up those instruments and hummed. "The saung gauk looks fairly simple. I'd still need to get through at least a basic course in reading music before I tried for any course in playing or I'd be dragging everyone down."

"I can help with that," Cavu immediately offered. "I'd help me figure out if I should look at teaching like Duet does or focus on playing and composing."

"It would also give us an insight into how we both react to interpersonal stress," Thundercracker agreed more readily for that reason than to learn to read music. "Ping me your typical open times next metacycle and I'll work out a time you can come over."

Cavu immediately sent Thundercracker his schedule. "Any of those times should work. I'll have to check in with my creators before heading over, but they're finally starting to ease off on the over-protectiveness. I don't know if it was because I was the only egg that hatched or what, but they got almost smothering at times."

Thundercracker chuckled. "You're young for this class as well. I'm sure that didn't help their inclination towards it. I'll give you at least a half decaorn notice for when I'm available. I'm not in a situation yet where spur of the moment is possible."

"That sounds great," Cavu glanced at the table and his empty bowl as well as Thundercracker's empty plate. "Are you interested in dessert? They have a good dazarvi they tend to dust with pyrite."

"Definitely," Thundercracker trilled a bit.

"I'll go get one of them for us to share then," Cavu said and headed over to the counter to place an order.

Thundercracker watched him and wiggled his wings in welcome when he came back to set it
between them and offered Thundercracker a set of utensils. There was the briefest moment of confusion before Thundercracker remembered that dazarvi was only hand food at a fair.

Cavu cracked off a small piece with a knife and lifted the piece to his mouth. After taking a bit, he stopped to savor it before saying, "I think they use a lighter oil here than most places since it doesn't feel as heavy on the palate. The best ones are served hot straight from the oil over in Yuss. There's a stand that sets up every holiday run by a pair of minibots; you'll have to try it next festival."

"If we can manage it you'll have to show me," Thundercracker suggested. "When is the next festival?"

"There's a minor one coming up that includes Yuss in about three decaorns," Cavu said after thinking a bit. "They don't open that stall unless the festival is going on in the district. Apparently there's a local tradition about dazarvi served dusted with pyrite and gold dust, but I've never paid too much attention to the meaning behind it. As far as I'm concerned it just tastes good."

"It sounds good," Thundercracker rumbled as he took his first bite and took the time to masticate it thoroughly as he enjoyed it. "This one is good. What festivals are your favorites?"

"The Honoring of Vos and the Nightdance," Cavu offered immediately. "The stunt frames do a great job flying in formation with the light shows during the Nightdance. It's amazing to watch, especially when you're a fledgling."

"No doubt," Thundercracker's memories drifted back to other displays when he was young over a city now long gone. "I wanted to fly with the stunt shows so badly as a fledgling. I can't say I know of any fledgling that didn't. They're incredible to watch. They're always so fast and agile, though it was the precision that always got to me. I loved the idea even if my first mechling frame weighed more than a full frame stunt flier."

"I'm nowhere near precise enough in flight to pull off those kind of maneuvers even if I have the speed," Cavu agreed with the sentiment completely. "Watching those shows is probably the only time I ever wished I had a lighter frame."

"Take solace in the truth that even of those light enough for it only a fraction ever make it onto a team of any renown," Thundercracker smiled. "Though given time and practice you can learn to pull off all but a couple of their maneuvers."

"Like you. You make everybody think when Saamanjasy lets you show off," Cavu's wings fluttered with a sense of the awe and desire he'd felt.

"Yes," Thundercracker's wings dipped in enjoyed embarrassment. "Time, training and experience can enable even a heavy frame to fly well."

"There are things I've seen you pull off that I would love to be able to learn to do even half as well," Cavu admitted. "Especially some of the tighter turns and banking tricks you pull off. It's so gracefully and looks so effortless I have to remind myself that you're pushing your frame when you do it."

"If you're serious enough about it to fly hard half your booted joors you'll be able to in a few thousand vorns," Thundercracker said seriously. "You're looking at the results of twelve millenia in the Air Martials and the entirety of the war on the front lines in what I can do now. Realistically, unless you intend to go into a function where your wings keep you functional it's not worth it."

"I'd still like to try to learn some of those banking maneuvers," Cavu said even as he tipped his wings in embarrassment at the chastisement. "I should challenge myself to learn new things and push
"That is always a worthy activity," Thundercracker smiled. "It is something I am willing to help teach you when I can. There is always something new to learn, even for me. I've discovered new maneuvers in surprising places."

"Could you tell me about one of them?" Cavu asked with interest.

Thundercracker dipped his wing in agreement while he thought. "Well into the war, less than a thousand vorns ago, the Autobots created a new gestalt from Aerials sparked as adults. While the Autobots have a few Seekers and several Aerials of various kinds there was no time to really train them before they went up against us."

"That doesn't sound good," Cavu murmured.

"It's war," Thundercracker could only shrug. "Though to your thought, not only have they survived they've taken down Seekers because no one has taught them. They invent new moves on the fly, literally, in large part because no one told them they couldn't do something. They do things that we had no defense for."

"What sort of things do they do?" Cavu asked.

"For starters, one of their members, Fireflight, is almost incapable of flying in a straight line or a consistent direction. Trying to chase him in the air usually results in crashes and scattered formations as someone accidentally flies through friendly fire," Thundercracker sighed.

"So their lack of training worked for them. How is that possible?" Cavu asked confused. This was contradicting almost everything he'd been taught about flying.

"The Aerialbots are a mixed team of frame types with very different capabilities. Normally no one would put them together on a flight team because they'd be considered almost incompatible and a hindrance to one another. One seriously should never have been in a flight frame; he's afraid of heights. Instead they've learned to use those differences as an advantage. Others have had mixed results trying to implement some of their tactics, including my own trine," Thundercracker admitted. "Part of the reason they are so successful and have survived this long may be the gestalt bond since it allows them a tighter form of communication than most teams have. I suspect another part is the fact that they were sparked during a war. Primus may not interfere in our struggles but I doubt he'd send sparks ill-suited to how they were called. No matter what the Autobots may say about free will, they called those mecha as a unit meant for the front line. They would have gotten what they asked for: sparks ready to fight and survive against Seekers."

"It doesn't make sense," Cavu could only repeat his confusion.

"I know, and yet it's true. There are lessons there and as frustrating as those five were I endeavored to learned what I could from them," Thundercracker explained.

"They certainly sound strange, but I can see why they could be challenging to go up against," Cavu said after pondering the strange gestalt.

"You saw it faster than I did," Thundercracker admitted. "My pride had to take some hard knocks before I would admit I had anything to learn from vorn old hatchlings. Yet it was a lesson that also made me far more suited for surviving here as well."

"Because you learned that Seekers weren't necessarily dominant in everything involving wartime flight or because they taught you that even younger fliers can teach you something?" Cavu asked
curiously.

"That a non-Seeker had anything to teach me and that Seekers weren't always the best fliers around," Thundercracker answered and there wasn't a winged thing in range that didn't know how difficult it was for him to say it. "I doubt I'll ever completely lose the beliefs I was raised with but they opened my processors enough not to fight that it's not always true."

"Well, there have always been areas like stunt flying where other fliers have advantages," Cavu said with some sympathy at the world view change Thundercracker had forced to make although he himself hadn't had quite the same experiences.

"True enough, though I never did think of specialist frames in the same context as general frames. Academy beat any ideas I might have had in that out of me fast. You don't chase a stunt frame unless you are a stunt or racing frame," Thundercracker told him.

"Did you have specialists available like we do to go after them if they caused trouble back in Vos?" Cavu asked curiously. "Or did you have to chase them down and coordinate to get ahead of them during a chase?"

"There were specialists on the force, though at times we had to chase in sequence until one could reach the chase and take over. Even when a specialist was there you still shadowed a chase in sequence so they had backup if they needed it," Thundercracker relaxed as the conversation wound back to something he was more comfortable with. "A crash at those speeds is always terrible."

"We've had a couple of fatalities from crashes at speeds like that in the air. It's one of the things they warn us about in early flight classes," Cavu agreed. "I've heard that the grounder mechlings get similar warnings about high speed chases."

"While I don't know I can't imagine they don't. Mechlings are mechlings from a lack of experience and a coded need to push themselves and the limits as much as frame stage. That much is consistent across every frametype and specialty known. Even sparked adults have a period where they are fine tuning their self-knowledge," Thundercracker said as he thought about it.

"Why are you listed as a mechling? You know yourself so well," Cavu asked.

"Many factors played into it. While I do know myself very well I don't know the local flight laws, the local flocks or the flock I'll be joining. The transponder that gives our legal status means I'll get some leniency for minor mistakes as I adapt. It puts me in the same social status as every potential trinemate," Thundercracker explained. "It doesn't hurt that thinking of myself as a legal mechling also makes me far more inclined to be submissive towards adults. Something I must do and get used to if I'm to be accepted. There is also the reality that I have been in a war for a very long time. I need time to re-adjust to civilian life and find my place here in the city."

"You seem so self confident that I guess I never thought about it that way," Cavu admitted. "I know some of the adults have mentioned concerns about your presence and what it might mean for the rest of us, but I guess it just didn't occur to me that there was so much involved in assigning you the way they did."

"There was a significant discussion. It's not something the others are doing. For them being a legal adult offers more advantages in assimilating than disadvantages," Thundercracker said thoughtfully. "I never did wonder why before."

"Except for the Knight they're all grounders, right?" Cavu asked. "It might be because they don't have the social structure Seekers do. I mean, have you heard anything about any of them being
"Yes, they are. I have a very strange immediate-kin flock. I expect the two who aren't Knights but intend to become one don't need the leniency since they aren't entering the general population. Jazz, his options as a dancer would be severely curtailed as a mechling, and no, I haven't heard of any of them being taken in by a family. Prowl is likely to have significant connections within the Praxian community but it's not like us. They will develop more naturally."

"It's good to know that they are taking your flock's individual needs seriously, even if it means treating the five of you differently legally. After all, Wing is from here and doesn't need all the accommodations the rest of you are being given," Cavu said with a small nod of satisfaction at how well this delicate situation was being handled.

"It's far better than I had any of hope," Thundercracker admitted. "I trusted Wing that he wouldn't take us into a trap and that there were Seekers here. I honestly never expected how well we're being treated. It makes the effort we must put into adapting easier when it's not entirely on us."

"Meeting partway is always easier even if one side has to move further than the other both are still doing some compromising. It's how my flock handles working with so many grounders," Cavu agreed.

Thundercracker noted the empty dishes and flicked a wing towards the sky. "Ready to fly?"

"Always," Cavu agreed immediately before hesitating. "Do you want to circle the neighborhood while I point out some places for a possible second date or see how far we can go before you have to be back at the Citadel?"

"I know this area reasonably well, so I'd like to fly for distance. I'd like to find out how fast you can fly as well," he gave the youth a playful smile as they stood to leave.

"Sounds good," Cavu said as he stepped into the Action's traditional position and followed Thundercracker out, giving Windsinger a polite wing dip but otherwise ignoring their chaperon. In turn she remained as invisible to them as she could be while they looped the short tower once and angled towards the edge of the city to loop it before returning to the Citadel. She fully expected them to take a lap or two of a marked racing course before they made it there.

Cavu stayed in formation with Thundercracker even as he tried not to be so obvious about how much he wanted to show off for his potential trine mate. Instead he used this time while they were almost alone to try to match Thundercracker's pace, demonstrating his willingness to follow the Order's lead. Being able to stay in formation when he was faster was part of being a good Action as well and he was going to show he was a good Action. With as much competition as he knew there was going to be he had to.

::Care to race?: Thundercracker suggested as they neared an entry point to one of the longer courses around several stalactites.

::Ready when you are:: Cavu answered and followed the Order towards the entry point. Once they reached that marker he shot forward as this shifted from being a demonstration of his formation skills to an actual race showing off his potential trine mate. Instead he used this time while they were almost alone to try to match Thundercracker's pace, demonstrating his willingness to follow the Order's lead. Being able to stay in formation when he was faster was part of being a good Action as well and he was going to show he was a good Action. With as much competition as he knew there was going to be he had to.

::Care to race?: Thundercracker suddenly began to catch up by both raw speed and being able to cut the corners and take tighter turns. It was experience showing and Cavu was reminded of the moves Thundercracker had done in front of the class.
He had practiced a few of the more interesting moves with some of the younger members of his flock, but he wasn't nearly as skilled as the experienced Order. Still, it was worth taking a chance if it meant he could show Thundercracker he was willing to learn. Cavu started cutting closer on the turns, not getting as near to the stalactites as Thundercracker was willing to risk but gradually moving tighter with each pass.

Suddenly Thundercracker was in front of him and they were coming up on a turn. The big Seeker made a move Cavu couldn't quite trace but as he came into the turn he realized Thundercracker was using air currents more than he expected. He decided to go along with it, working out how the air currents were helping or hindering as he followed Thundercracker through the turn. He wasn't completely confident that he could pull off the maneuver on his own yet, but it was definitely an improvement on his previous efforts and he had to respect the Order just a bit more. Instead of offering a critique or potentially embarrassing him, Thundercracker had put the knowledge out there to pick up if Cavu was willing to watch for it.

He was definitely going to have to keep better track of the older Seeker as he surged ahead in the straightaway where his speed was undeniably faster. Even here his lead wasn't as great as it normally was considering how well Thundercracker had done in the turns. He fully expected the older Seeker to know some tricks for dealing with a faster opponent besides just shooting them down like a few disgruntled mecha he'd heard claim would happen. The mech kept pace with the fastest Seeker in generations if what he'd gotten from Starscream's designation was an indication. His other trinemate could teleport. Somehow he must have kept up with that pair even if Cavu couldn't imagine how.

In three full laps the pattern was set. Cavu had the straightaways and Thundercracker owned the turns.

This was a tighter race than most Cavu had flown against fellow Seekers, and he was enjoying the challenge. He was still working on mimicking Thundercracker's demonstration of how to use the air currents, but it wasn't going to help him much this time on the course. In time though, with some practice, it would give him the same advantage Thundercracker was displaying. It would make him even faster on these courses.

It was a gift, especially to one that wasn't yet flock.

He'd have to come up with something to give Thundercracker. Perhaps a performance of one of Firewatch's solo pieces on their next date? He'd have to take most of his spare time practicing it, but it could be a pleasant surprise for the Order.

At the end of their fourth lap Thundercracker commed that he needed to head home and they fell into trine formation just outside the course.

::You are fast. With some work you could be one of the best racers among us,:: Thundercracker said as they settled into a leisurely path towards the Citadel.

::Thank you,:: Cavu almost fluttered in midair at the praise. ::You would be a challenging opponent on the mixed race courses for almost anyone.::

::Thank you. It is something I intend to enjoy when my restrictions are lessened a bit or if I find a Knight who enjoys watching,:: Thundercracker responded.

::I don't know any of them well enough to suggest a particular Knight, but I have seen several of them at the races I've watched so you can probably find someone who will enjoy the option,:: Cavu said.
Anticipation flashed across Thundercracker's field. ::I will ask around. Were they flight frames?::

Cavu thought for a long moment before answering, ::Three flight frames and two grounders, I believe. None of them were Seekers.::

::Good. I'm sure I can find out who. There's a board in the Citadel to advertise for events as well. It might be enough to draw a bit more attention,:: Thundercracker said thoughtfully.

::Why would going with you be a bribe?:: Cavu asked.

::Ah, while I require a chaperon for all activities being my chaperon counts for duty time. It's a much more pleasant duty than many,:: Thundercracker explained.

::I guess going to a race and having it count as work would be a desirable option,:: Cavu agreed with a chuckle. ::Let me know when you're going and I'll see about trying to meet you there.::

::I'll keep you appraised,:: Thundercracker trilled willingly as they angled in to circle the Citadel. ::I had a good time, Cavu. I look forward to our next date.::

::As do I,:: he agreed. Cavu waited for Thundercracker and his escort to land before heading back to his own eyrie.
Chapter Summary

Thundercracker, Highdive, Prowl, Jazz, Dart, Wing, Aurora, Haji and Cheoseo go to Towodi's gallery opening.

"There they are!" Jazz grinned and pointed shamelessly to the incoming group of three Seekers as the gathered group waited on the street in a middle-class area close to New Praxus.

"That looks *so* strange," Haji shook his helm as they watched Aurora lead Thundercracker and Highdive in, with Thundercracker flying in the Vision's position without any stress.

"He was in a number of duty trines during his time as an Air Martial. He would not have led all of them," Prowl said. "He also flew in that spot on Cybertron when Starscream was pretending to be an Order."

"That kind of adaptability is going to continue to serve him well here," Dart said with a small smile at Prowl's sociability.

"You'd never know how much he thinks of himself as a stodgy old-time Order," Jazz grinned at his keeper. "Sometimes I think it's what he thinks he should be, not what he really is."

Haji hummed thoughtfully as the arrangement landed and thought back to older times and even events with Gloaming. He could see it, though he wasn't going to speak about it. Thundercracker had enough to cope with without trying to decide whether his upbringing had harmed him.

Another set of engines drew their attention as Wing, Lightwing and Talon also came into view. The trio landed next to the others, and Wing bounded over and latched on Thundercracker in a quick hug.

Highdive joined in the chuckles at the familiar display of exuberance. "If I didn't already know better I'd be jealous."

"He's like that with everybody he likes. He'll glom you soon enough on greeting," Jazz grinned at her. "How's existence?"

"Going well so far," she answered just as cheerfully, shrugging as she turned and hugged Wing. "Got you first."

Wing hugged her back before glomming onto a startled but tolerant Prowl.

"It's *so* good to see you out and about, especially to a nice event like this," Wing said with a blinding grin for Prowl.

"I happen to enjoy art and cultural displays from many cities," Prowl said with a bit of a smile.

Cheoseo chuckled, "That's cute and all, but Towodi is waiting for us inside."
"Sculptor, right?" Jazz focused on the artistic Seeker.

"Yes, primarily sculpting metal, but he does a lot of work in the local stone too," Cheoseo answered as the group of eleven shifted as they walked the half block to the gallery so they didn't block traffic.

"For an up and coming artist it looks like a decent crowd and a good mix of potential clientele. None of us should be too out of place in this mix," Dart observed as they neared the gallery and took in the pairs and small groups making their way inside. "It's too bad your entire gestalt couldn't come, but given his reaction to the idea I can't imagine Deadlock would enjoy a conventional art show."

"Likely not," Thundercracker agreed with an internal shudder at trying to keep the mech polite in such a setting. "It's not something I expect Kimark would be too keen on either."

"Not really," Aurora admitted with a soft tone of affection and approval.

"I think someone's creator instincts have started to latch onto TC," Jazz stage whispered to Dart.

"Would that make Wing her grandchilder?" he whispered back with a chuckle.

"Yes," Wing said, drawing more laughter from the group as they entered the gallery and looked around. None of them missed that while Prowl didn't laugh he did smile and his doorwings lifted in good humor. It was laid out as a single large room with figures and smaller creations on pedestals and the larger pieces on bases.

"He's quite versatile," Jazz commented with open appreciation of the mix of stylized mecha and more abstract forms.

"Indeed," Prowl hummed as he looked around without ever losing track of or moving far from a Knight.

"Thank you. You must be Jazz," a deep, richly welcoming voice greeted as a largely black rotor with red, bronze and white highlights. "I'm Towodi."

"I am," Jazz smiled back.

Pale yellow optics flicked over the group and brightened even more when they landed on Cheoseo and Thundercracker among the group. "He never said you were so good looking," Towodi smiled a bit more.

"Cheoseo failed to mention that you were as well," Jazz answered back, amused as the rotor ignored him and focused his attention on the Seeker near him. He couldn't help but push things a bit as he watched Highdive's wings flex briefly as she started to get a bit irritated that the artist had focused his attention and flattery further on Thundercracker. It was the first time he'd seen Highdive around someone else flirting with her potential trine mate, and Jazz was interested in seeing how she handled it.

"Thank you," Towodi smiled at Jazz with the easy shift in focus that took a lot of practice to master. "Did you come just to humor my friend?"

"No, I enjoy art and was interested as soon as he described some of your work, although the description didn't do it complete justice. It takes some real skill to master different styles like this," Jazz stepped towards one of the more abstract pieces nearby, nudging Dart and Prowl as he did so. It was almost time for the three grounders to slip off to the side and listen as things developed. Though how long Prowl listened instead of exploring would be a matter of interest as well. Jazz knew Prowl was a gossip packrat.
"Thank you," the rotor fluffed in pride, his four rotor blades giving a happy wiggle-click as Dart moved with Jazz. He turned his attention back to the trine he knew and the pair of Seekers he didn't.

"Yes, this is Thundercracker and Highdive," Cheoseo introduced the new Seekers.

"Good orn, Towodi. You are quite the accomplished artist," Thundercracker said politely as he looked around the gallery.

"Yes, you have created some lovely pieces," Highdive said, trying to match Thundercracker's politeness even as she kept fairly close to her date for the evening.

"Order, Action," Cheoseo told him, earning a nod from the rotor.

"A pair already?" Towodi asked, something that made several Seekers wince to various degrees.

"Still dating for trine," Thundercracker surprised everyone by answering even as he slid his wing in front of Highdive's, close enough that the tip of his wing was behind her frame. It settled her rapidly and far more than Jazz would have expected of the simple posturing. It wasn't lost on Jazz that Prowl didn't seem at all surprised. He just wasn't sure if it was a Praxian thing or a Prowl thing that lead to the knowing.

"Cheoseo mentioned the show, and Thundercracker invited me to attend with him," Highdive said, tipping her own wing closer to Thundercracker's back.

While the floor show was going on in front of him, Jazz watched Wing wander past, talking animatedly with Lightwing and what appeared to be a civilian racer. The stunt frame took the opportunity to give Thundercracker a quick accessing glance but seemed satisfied and moved on with his friends to join three more civilians over by one of the sculptures across from the group. It left Jazz half surprised that Prowl took the opening to join them and really surprised Jazz when he picked up Prowl not just joining in the conversation but doing so intelligently and as part of a conversation rather than giving a lecture.

"I'm pleased he thought my display was a suitable date," Towodi fluffed up happily even as he moved a bit closer. "How do you like the city so far?"

"Almost everything I've seen here so far has been impressive and enjoyable, and I believe I will find a suitably productive place in society," Thundercracker said.

"That's great," Towodi grinned. "Your flock is doing as well," he flicked one rotor towards Jazz and another towards Prowl and Wing.

"Yes, we are working to find our places here. Although Wing already had a place he is helping all of us," Thundercracker said with a small nod towards the Aerial.

"I'm glad it's working out," Towodi smiled and rustled his rotors in pleasure. "Please enjoy the show," he added before moving off quickly to greet another new guest.

"Well, he's certainly friendly," Jazz said cheerfully as he and Dart rejoined the Seekers.

"He is, and he likes Seekers. Something about being Praxian," Cheoseo chuckled. "He's harmless though. The worst he does is flatter and flirt."

"Must be a Praxian thing because Prowl admitted he thought Thundercracker was the most attractive of all of us," Jazz offered as he watched the Seekers' reaction. "He is good looking rotor."
"He's Praxian?" Highdive glanced towards the rotor. "I didn't know they had flight frames."

"They do, of all flavors. Back on Cybertron there were even a few Seeker sparklines," Thundercracker told her. "Rotors are very uncommon, but they're rare everywhere." He shifted to look at Cheoseo. "Is he pure, if you know?"

"I think so. If he's not it's not recent," the artist twitched his wings. "He hasn't said outright, but he's spoken of Praxian grand-creators."

Thundercracker hummed and gave the black rotor a glance. "Perhaps someone to introduce Prowl to if he doesn't introduce himself first. It would be good for Prowl to have friendly mecha to be around."

"So you think we should keep Towodi in mind as another connection for Prowl?" Aurora asked.

"Yes, civilian Praxians were almost wiped out on Cybertron. It will be good for him to find out how many have survived. I know he's been told but it's not the same as seeing," Thundercracker said. "One that's friendly and harmless will help offset how many of his contacts and gestalt mates are entirely too serious for his good. Prowl likes sculpture too."

"When'd you find that out?" Jazz's laser-sharp focus was hidden, though he knew several around him picked it up.

Thundercracker paused, thinking back. "It must have filtered in when we were Flightplan. It wasn't in conversation."

"You really learn things like that about each other that way?" Highdive asked.

"It can be awkward, but we are going to learn even more as our bond strengthens," Thundercracker said with a slight ripple of his wings.

"Yeah, it's a lot like being hardlined with half your firewalls and most filters turned off," Jazz gave her a different description she might understand better. "Only we do it cross-linked with four others and an extra mind that only exists when we're joined up."

"Sounds very complicated," Highdive said after mulling over Jazz's description.

"It's understandable that information would transfer in that situation," Haji agreed. "Fortunately the five of you seem to be making it work."

"The gestalt bond is slowly changing us to work together," Thundercracker agreed. "Flightplan helps a lot; he triggers everyone's protective instincts."

"There's a lot of coding to 'help' us get along," Jazz agreed. "If you looked at us before it happened I'm not sure you could have chosen five worse mecha to put together. Says a lot about the code, and a lot more about the pragmatic survival traits all five of us have."

"Prowl, Starscream, Megatron, Shockwave and Prime," Thundercracker suggested dryly as they wandered further in. Wing and Prowl came over to briefly join them.

"You win. They'd definitely slag each other," Jazz shuddered at the idea.

"How much change is left?" Highdive asked uneasily with a glance at Thundercracker as the one she cared about.
"We aren't completely certain, especially since Prowl wasn't active for so long so we haven't merged into Flightplan in several vorns. Most of the changes seem to have been to temper our hostility towards each other," Thundercracker admitted. "Redline and some experts have been examining all of our coding to determine how many more changes we should expect."

"My take: basics aren't going to change. Things we've learned are up for debate. TC here will always be rule-inclined leadership material. I'm always going to be observant and adaptable. Prowl's always going to be logic bound and a rule monster. Deadlock'll always be aggressive and an act before thinking type. Wing'll be Wing," Jazz snickered at Wing's grin. "Who we are on a basic level hasn't changed that I can tell. If you like him, I doubt anything you like is going to change. Probably the hard part to accept is how high we'll be in his priority tree and how hard that'll be to change."

Highdive nodded thoughtfully and relaxed a bit. "I knew going into this that he had a strange flock, and flock is always important. It might be less strange to me than to you," she told Jazz.

"That makes sense considering you don't have firmly shaped expectations about most of our behavior," Wing agreed. "I do have to agree with Jazz since no one has called me out on having dramatically changed since I came back."

"Always good to hear," Thundercracker agreed before shifting to look around. "I really did want to look at the art."

"Right, go on," Jazz smiled and shooed him off with his date. Cheoseo wasted no time finding his artist friend and socialize himself with mecha that might patron him as well. Prowl went off as well, this time on his own, though to Jazz's endless shock he seemed to be socializing with random strangers well.

"So what do you think of Jazz?" Thundercracker asked quietly once there was a bit of distance.

"He's very friendly, and it's hard to juxtapose that with him being as dangerous as you say," Highdive admitted. "I think I wouldn't want to be on his bad side because you wouldn't see it coming."

"All true, and it's one of the things that made him so effective," Thundercracker twitched his wings in agreement and absently wondered how many Knights were there in part because of him. "He's very, very good at playing a part, just about any part. He'd make an exceptional actor if that industry exists here."

"Do you think he'd prefer theater or film?" Highdive asked amused. "There are a couple of film studios and a few theater groups if he's interested in either as a career or hobby. Dramas, comedies and romances are all popular to varying degrees in different districts."

"I'm not sure, though I expect theater given he's been looking at performing on stage as a dancer," Thundercracker hummed as they paused to study a piece that caught his interest. It drew up memories of the more artistic public statues of his youth; heroes created in color crystal. This wasn't big. This wasn't a Seeker. It was barely a mecha. Yet it still invoked the same sense of awed respect in his spark for whoever it represented.

"There are troupes that perform choreographed routines on a semi-regular basis, and some of the theater groups occasionally put on musical numbers with a degree of success," Highdive paused and looked the piece over, wondering what about it had attracted Thundercracker's attention compared to other sculptures they'd seen tonight. She couldn't help impulsively checking the price and sighed mentally. No way she could afford that as a simple gift for a date. Even if she could it might well be insulting given he had even less than she did. Maybe it would work as a bonding present if they
chose to trine?

"I will suggest it. It never hurts to try and be nice," he agreed with a thoughtful hum. "Is there anything here that has caught your attention?"

"There's an interesting bronze piece over there where Wing is right now. I originally thought it was supposed to be a Seeker but the longer I look at it the more I think it might be a CE-gull," she admitted.

He focused and guided them towards it while he studied the abstract creation. "That is part of the difficulty in being a good abstract artist. Creating something that speaks to the viewer strongly, but is not obvious as to what it actually is. In truth it could be either, both, or anything else that is seen in it. The piece that caught my attention reminded me of the sculptures of heroes that were in Vos's parks and public squares. More than once I wondered if I had what it took to be immortalized like that. I know now, and I wish I didn't. Times were much better when I wondered. It's not about replicating a piece, but invoking the feeling."

"Normally abstract stuff flies over my head," Highdive admitted as she stared at the sculpture, still trying to determine what it actually was. "I tend to prefer more realistic paintings, but Towodi does a good job keeping this sort of thing interesting."

"He does, and abstract isn't for everyone," Thundercracker agreed readily.

"It's too bad I have to get going soon," Highdive grumbled, enjoying the time with Thundercracker and not wanting it to end. "I thought about calling this an educational experience and trying to skip the meeting, but everyone important knows it's a date."

"There will be another," he promised with a smile and happy flutter of his wings. "Next time it won't be cut short."

"I'm looking forward to it," she agreed, slipping her own wing behind him as they headed over to where Aurora was waiting. It was a show, but it was also an honest one. She did like him, and he liked her, though neither was ready to say they'd trine yet.

"Ready to go?" Aurora smiled at the pair.

"Since I have to be, yes," Highdive didn't quite huff, earning a chuckle from both her elders before the three walked out. Highdive and Thundercracker fell easily into formation behind Aurora. Highdive knew it surprised many Seekers that an Order would fly in formation behind a Vision so readily, but she'd heard enough about Starscream to understand. She also liked the fact that he could be that flexible, especially compared to the rigidity of some of her own flock. He might not always like it, but she was close enough to tell it wasn't a level of dislike that would affect his choices or actions.

She saw it in him too, when they came in range of her flock's eyrie, that how little time it took to reach surprised him.

::Vos was much larger than the city, wasn't it?:: she asked quietly.

::Much larger,:: Thundercracker agreed. ::It was a much older city we well. All of New Crystal City would fit in a single district of Vos.::

::I can't truly comprehend that many Seekers living in one vast place like that, let alone the idea that there were so few grounders or Aerials there.:: Highdive admitted. ::I've seen images of Vos and heard stories from those who lived there but that is completely different from actually experiencing
"It is. Memories can be shared, if you wish," he offered as they came in for a landing.

I'd like that. If I can't experience it myself, at least I'll have a better idea what it was like from your perspective. You would have a very different view as an Air Martial than anyone in my flock," Highdive said as she landed and turned towards the older pair. "Thank you for escorting me, Master Aurora, Thundercracker."

"Thank you for joining me at the gallery, Highdive," Thundercracker's reply may well have been expected, but it was spoken honestly. "Are we still going to the cafe after class?"

"Yes, as long as you continue to tolerate my obsession with flavor mixes," she smiled impishly. "I had chocotar with cuprous oxide and silicon drizzle the other orn. If they still have it you have to try it."

"I will," he smiled with fond tolerance. "Believe me, it's an enjoyable obsession even when I don't share it." He glanced at her creator trine and several flockmates waiting politely for them to separate and stepped back. "I will see you soon. Clear skies, Highdive."

"I will look forward to it. Clear skies, Thundercracker," she said with a smile before dipping her wings to Aurora. "Clear skies, Master Aurora."

"Clear skies, Highdive," Aurora smiled and launched, noting absently that even given the opening Thundercracker didn't take the Action's spot on her left wing and didn't break from the trine arrangement despite being a pair that could fly wing to wing. Of the many things it could be she was fairly sure it was a statement of his submission to her.

::So, what do you think of Highdive so far?: Aurora asked, curious about his opinion now that they'd had several dates. ::She still seems interested in you.::

::I like her. We seem nicely compatible and she's definitely strong enough to check me without being ambitious or dominant enough to challenge me unduly,: he summed up his impression. ::She's a good Action, and smarter than my last.:: Despite the praise of the young Seeker there was no hiding how much he desperately missed his second Action.

::My regrets for your loss,: Aurora answered quietly, feeling sorry for Thundercracker and Skywarp being forced apart by circumstance both past and present.

::Thank you,: Thundercracker fell silent for a bit. ::In a strange way I feel lucky that each of my trines has been for a very different existence. I'm not trying to replace anyone, but to find a new balance for a new functioning.::

::You have a healthier attitude than many who have been in your position, knowing that trine mates are not replaceable,: Aurora agreed, remembering her own loss and her search for her current trine. ::You've seen Cavu a few times. What do you think of him as potential trine?:

::He's younger than the others and it shows in his hesitancy and eagerness to please,: Thundercracker admitted. ::He's also fast and has an interest in a younger Vision. It's a reminder that I don't have to settle for someone who's a mechling now since there are others who will come of age soon. I have time as hard as that is to remember on occasion::

::That would be something to keep in mind,: Aurora agreed. ::What about Tailslide? The two of you seemed to get along well on your dates::
"Yes, and I hope we continue to get along. I like him, though I have growing doubts he would be good for this trine. He's socially ambitious. He would not be happy if we trined and then realized that no matter my former ranks, I have little ambition for it and a great deal of resistance exists here to granting me any."

"That is a valid concern given your likely circumstances for the foreseeable future. I can only hope he will remain friendly once you explain that aspect of things to him."

"Aurora agreed. "If he is socially ambitious, you do have enough contacts in the Knights, especially through Wing and I, to be potentially useful in the long run."

"Yes, and I wouldn't be surprised if he considers Haji a contact of mine as well."

"Thundercracker agreed. "We do have several shared interests. At a minimum I expect to encounter him regularly at the debates. Depending on what specialty he settles on we may also cross paths professionally."

"I'm glad you seem to be enjoying the debates, and I noticed that most of the mecha there seem to like have a new, alternative view available for debate and source material. You made quite a stir when you spoke up about military cooperation and training programs between Vos and Helex before Sentinel Prime came to power."

"Aurora said approvingly. "Thank you. The response was warming. It seems strange to me with so many that are my age and even much older, only to make sense when I remember that those who would know such things wouldn't have been invited or are among the Knights."

"Many of them would not have chosen to come with us. Law enforcement and military mecha outside the Knights often had loyalties to their home cities and divisions that would prevent them from considering joining something like the Exodus even if they had the temperament to do so."

"Aurora sadly agreed as they circled in for a landing. "Quite true. No military mecha I knew before the war, not even the retired ones, would have gone. Some Martials may have like Ciel, but as a group, no, we were all loyal to city and empire. The rebellion was too much to back. The idea of leaving; far too much,"

"Devotion on that level can be a difficult topic for many civilians here to comprehend," Aurora admitted, looking around the city for a moment as they stepped into the gallery to rejoin their party. "Even on Cybertron most civilians did not understand the nature of the loyalty Knights, law enforcement and military mecha have for their positions. Maybe that could be a topic to suggest to the debate society? What loyalty is, how it develops, how it is maintained and what can cause it to break. From what I understand the leaders of Kaon and Tesarus managed to destroy most of the loyalty mecha held to them."

"Both were a long time in coming, and honestly fell in line with the empire's descent rather accurately. Leaders too focused on themselves, resources that dried up and not enough effort to find something new to support the city. Most of the cities that joined the rebellion by population were like that. Others, like Polyhex, joined because they had cunning mob leaders that saw Megatron for what he would become early on and knew that they could gain power in the new order under him. Cities that resisted, or would have, were better managed. The destruction of Vos shook that up with the flying community. Helix wouldn't have joined if Vos's survivors had remained with the Prime, but the Prime didn't send help and Megatron did, so both cities went to him."

"The abandonment of the loyal and the dependent for short sighted personal gain caused so much suffering and destruction. I can understand why Helex would see Vos being abandoned by the Prime and would chose to follow them into Megatron's army. I definitely think this is something that we need to remember as our new city grows and prospers. After all, those who do not learn from past mistakes will eventually repeat them. You should definitely suggest the topic for discussion. I know
several Knights who would attend to listen to it," Aurora said.

"I will think on it. It is a complex subject and not one I am comfortable with," Thundercracker admitted quietly. "I would be more willing to speak with a group of Knights on it, if there is interest there. Civilians though; I barely understood them when I technically was one."

"I will speak to the Knights, but I am certain you would have an interested audience. Many are curious about what happened during the time we were planning the Exodus and after we were gone. You and your comrades have a perspective we should hear. Don't be too hard on yourself; no one expects you to understand every aspect of civilian life. Haji sometimes has a hard time listening to Cheoseo's friends especially when they start discussing their business practices," Aurora said, shifting the conversation as they rejoined her trine.

"Lack of business practices," Haji grumbled, although tolerant amusement flickered through his field. "Fortunately Cheoseo listens to me when he's signing contracts for commissions."

"A wise move," Thundercracker didn't quite hide his understanding amusement. "There were artists in my flock, fortunately with the same sense to listen to those that knew law and economics. It can be a fine line, ensuring the trine's success without alienating your trine in the process."

"Especially when you have a trine with diverse interests," Haji agreed. "We've managed to make it work, but I've seen others struggle with it."

"As have I, though largely in a professional capacity. Whether as an Air Martial or a command officer, it's never good when things get bad enough to warrant your attention," Thundercracker nodded his wings.

"You came back," Towodi's voice was eager and happy as he and Prowl headed over to the three of them. It was obvious by the cant of Prowl's doorwings that he seemed to be enjoying the rotor's company. It left Thundercracker unaccountably more agreeable to the mech.

"Yes, we weren't done viewing the sculptures even though Highdive had to leave early. It'll take us some time to drag Cheoseo out of here," Haji said with a professional smile as he watched the rotor's interest in Thundercracker. It wasn't really a surprise, though it was interesting to see how uncomfortable Thundercracker was with the light flirting. Another reminder than for all he did get along with other frametypes he was definitely not okay with the idea of being intimate with one. Not that many who came from Cybertron were. That was a kink of the very young.

"You really are a good artist," Thundercracker tried to be polite with the truth.

"Thank you. I'd love to use you as a model for one of my sculptures if you're interested?" Towodi said with a wider grin. "You have such an interesting frame structure."

"I'm standard ... maybe," he struggled with conflicting reactions and instinctively shifted a little closer to Aurora.

"Standard for Vos perhaps, but here you are exotic," Towodi pointed out. "I've seen a few Knights with close to your structure, but you are quite the imposing figure."

"Rotor's got a point," Jazz's cheerful voice added as he walked up with Dart and patted Towodi on the shoulder. "Don't mind him. He's still getting used to the idea that anything but a Seeker would dare flirt."

"I'm surprised anyone could hope to ignore someone so aesthetically pleasing," Towodi said with a small nod to Jazz even as he turned his attention back to Thundercracker. "There's a commanding
presence to you that inevitability draws attention."

Thundercracker flicked his wings in understanding-acceptance and an almost unconscious pointer to what was written there. "I'm still getting used to the idea of being available. It's been a very, very long time since everyone didn't know it was a bad idea to flirt. My trine and mate would not have tolerated it."

"Of course they'd want to keep a treasure like you close lest another snatch you away," Towodi agreed.

Next to him Prowl had small but visible markers of his displeasure at losing the artist's attention. Not enough to worry anyone, but it was enough for Jazz to gravitate over and distract Prowl with a doorwing rub that was just shy of too erotic for public.

Haji could barely keep his wings from twitching at the blatant flattery and could teek Aurora's mixture of amusement and concern. Still, if Thundercracker really wasn't used to being flirted with by non-Seekers, this over the top performance was a good way to break him into the idea.

They both teeked a sort of resigned sigh in his field before Thundercracker spoke. "You do realize I'm not going to say yes?"

"Yes, I figured that out," Towodi admitted before smiling with genuine friendliness. "That doesn't mean I can't extend an open offer if by chance you become interested later. And I am genuinely interested in having you model for a sculpture if you are willing."

"Noted," Thundercracker relaxed slightly. "I will consider modeling when my existence has settled some."

"That would be wonderful," he said happily. "Now, tell me truthfully you think of my works. I'm not looking for mindless flattery; that doesn't help me improve."

"You are an abstract sculptor, correct?" Thundercracker asked just to be sure and was given a nod. "It's not my preferred style, though you do a good job of capturing motion and form in several. Your use of color is odd to me, but keep in mind my tastes are early Golden Age Vosian, not necessarily what's wanted here. I think my primary critique involves consistency. Some pieces I can pick out what I think they were meant to represent, and some of the others I can work out are too esoteric a subject for me to figure out, but there are also things that don't tell me anything. Given the form that is to be expected past a certain level of abstract, but it is not a trait I enjoy."

"I understand and appreciate your honesty," Towodi said. "Some of the pieces may be harder for you to interpret because we are coming from different backgrounds, and the symbolism is different between our cultures. Is anyone else having a similar issue?"

"Yep, although I think I can figure out most of them," Jazz admitted.

"Most of the subjects are familiar to me, although like Thundercracker my tastes are typically for less abstract art," Prowl added. "Trident is my favorite artist. His work is as close to abstract as I get."

"His work was good, though I only remember a couple pieces," Thundercracker agreed.

"Would you mind pointing out some of the pieces you think you understand and others that you don't? I can see if I can explain what the piece is from my perspective and see if it makes sense. It will help me broaden my audience." Towodi asked the group.

Thundercracker gave a subtle look to his guardian-trine before he nodded. "Highdive told me her
thoughts on some I can pass along as well."

"Sure, I'm game," Jazz was much more eager, always looking to understand the different.

"I would be pleased to," Prowl agreed.

"Well, let's start with something that at least one of you did enjoy," Towodi offered.

"Highdive liked this piece," Thundercracker moving towards the statue close to them by the door.
"She admitted that she wasn't certain if it was a Seeker or a CE-gull, but either way it appealed to her."

Towodi nodded and hummed thoughtfully. "It was inspired by winged flight in general, so other interpretations would be accurate, though in truth abstract is more about what is seen than what I was inspired by."

"That is what I have difficulty with regarding most abstract art," Thundercracker reluctantly admitted. "I expect to be able to understand what the piece is."

"This one is fairly straight-forward," Jazz admitted. "I can see why she liked it though given the feeling of motion it presents."

"It's something any flight-frame is going to be drawn towards," Thundercracker agreed.

"This is piece which I found interesting," Prowl said, drawing the group over to what appeared to be a set of tendrils made out of blue crystal spreading out from a central base.

"I saw an image of an organic plant from one of the worlds Dai Atlas had conquered and was intrigued by it," Towodi admitted.

"It reminds me of the creeper nests of Ankmor Park. It was a lovely city even if they had no respect for a structured street plan," Prowl elaborated.

"What is a piece that wasn't liked?" Towodi asked.

"This one I didn't understand," Thundercracker walked across the way to a corner where two figures stood next to each other. One had his arms straight out from the sides with his hands up, while the other had his hands at hip level almost like they are going to either grab weapons or put hands in "I'm disappointed" position. The trouble came with the smooth lack of detail and careful design of the pedes meant that there was no way to tell which way they were facing. "Are they supposed to be arguing or watching each other's back?"

Towodi smiled. "It's meant to be what you see in it. So this one is a case where the style is not to your liking. Is that all you dislike about it?"

"It is probably the lack of understanding the style causes," Thundercracker said after a thought. "What I don't understand is likely to get me slagged. That was true even before the war."

"Now this one I don't really get," Jazz said as he walked over to a piece sitting against the wall. It was a white oblong piece of smoothed upright rock with a divot line along the middle of the oval.

"Agreed," Thundercracker said looking at the object that came to his knee joint. "Though I can appreciate it more because it doesn't look like anything. There's no confusion, it's just an object."

Towodi's smile was warm and honest, delighted with the way these two were discussing and really
looking at his work as more than just objects but things that might have meaning and intent behind them.

"It's something I saw in a skydance once. A movement in the light and air that made that in my processors," he told them.

"Makes sense I wouldn't recognize it easily then," Jazz said with a shrug. "I don't have a lot of experience with those yet."

"Was it here in this city?" Thundercracker asked staring down at the statue again.

"Yes, the last First Light Festival," Towodi nodded. "Most celebrations are still held here, even the Showcase, though we don't call it the Imperial Showcase anymore. The only one that doesn't seem to be held anymore is the Rite of the Storm Flight. Kinda hard to without any storms."

"That's more than we had left back on Cybertron," Thundercracker admitted, regretting the lost of that Rite but understanding it was impossible here. "Perhaps it will be more recognizable when we've had more experience with the way light and wind react here in the cavern compared to under the open sky."

"You may, or not. An artist's processors aren't wired the way more literal mecha's are," Towodi cautioned.

"It's true," Haji muttered. "I've lived with one for Primus knows how long and I still don't understand him that well."

"Still, the more experiences we have here in the city the more likely we are to see what you see," Jazz agreed, although he didn't expect Thundercracker or Prowl to ever see things the way Towodi did. The artist had a point there. Some processors just weren't built for abstract art.
Chapter by gatekat

Chapter Summary

Jazz goes over Crimson Sprite’s security.

Even though he was in no way worried about losing Thorn flying above him, Jazz made certain to keep to the speed limit as he approached the Horticulture Center just outside the academy. Every time any of the gestalt were outside in public they were on display and potentially being judged, and Jazz was not going to be the one to ruin any part of their gestalt's reputation with the Peacekeepers or civilians by appearing reckless.

A delicate looking red Seeker with gold highlights waited for him to stop and Thorn to land before looking the pair over intently. She gave a flick of her wings in greeting to Thorn before focusing on the expected grounder. "Good orn, Jazz. At least, I assume that's who you are since you match Tailslide's description and you're traveling with a Knight."

"That's me. He understated how pretty your wings are though," Jazz grinned and walked up to offer her a hand to shake. This wasn't just best manners not to get in trouble. This was a client ready to pay for his knowledge and not just his frame.

Crimson Sprite looked at him for a brief moment before taking the extended hand. She had a good grip and obviously did work not just putter around looking pretty. "You enjoy flirting as much as Tailslide does, don't you?" she observed with a small nod before continuing, "I wish I didn't have to make use of your services like this, but I'm certain someone poisoned three more of my plants."

"I do like to flirt," Jazz smiled before going serious. "Why don't we start with some basics as you show me what security there is?"

Crimson Sprite nodded and lead the pair towards two very different greenhouses both bearing her designation on the doors. As she lead them towards the smaller of the two, a single story glass building smaller than Dart's quarters, she said, "This was where I first started out. My first attempts were a bit of a disaster, but I kept some crystal spines alive long enough to get hooked on plants. They're still over there and growing nicely," she nodded towards a long planter directly underneath a ventilation grid at the far end of the greenhouse. "They wouldn't stop a mecha obviously, but anything looking for a snack that crawls through there gets a nasty little surprise."

"Those look mature enough to leave a mecha with marks and itching like crazy," Jazz hummed with a nod. "I see you have some basic security. How many successful break-ins have there been since the last upgrade?"

"I think two but I don't know for certain," Crimson Sprite said looking frustrated with the lack of information. "The three plants that died in the other greenhouse tested clean for every known disease that impacts solar flowers; my instructor ran the tests himself. I had another pair in this greenhouse that were unusually wilted when I came in five orn ago, but they perked back up with a batch of nutritional supplement and a small change in lighting."
"How often would you expect have such losses?" Jazz asked as he assessed every opening with an optic towards breaking in. From there reverse-engineering to block the routs was easy enough. "Were any poisons or bad soil tested for?"

Crimson Sprite thought for a long moment before answering, "I ran the normal tests after each incident and different kinds of contamination were occasionally found. My instructor tested everything the three incidents; he focused on the more common substances toxic to solar flowers. One of the earliest incidents was traced to contaminated fertilizer, and a few other students did have problems as well during that incident. I stopped using anything but the ingredients I purchased after that occurred. It's been very aggravating."

"No doubt. Where do you keep your supplies? They should be as protected as the actual plants," Jazz suggested.

"Most of them I keep in storage areas in both greenhouses," Crimson Sprite led him over to the carefully labeled bins and barrels under a work table. A tray of pruning instruments and measuring devices rested on a corner. "These are what I used in this greenhouse. There's less chance for cross contamination of pollen or disease if I keep the tools separated."

"Good, that also means that securing the building will secure your supplies," Jazz nodded. "Have you gotten a sense of why you're being targeted? Do you have enemies, anyone who would want to hurt you?"

"Hurt me?" Crimson Sprite stared at him confused but gave it some serious thought. "Not that I can think of. Although, if you mean professionally, I know there are several other horticulturalists around who specialize in solar flowers. Some of them consider me an upstart newbie demanding attention. A couple of those have requested to see my work. I've kept my best results under wraps so far since I haven't quite perfected them to a level worthy of submitting to a show."

"You have some lovely variants here," Thorn hummed as he studied what was out.

"Thank you," she smiled at him.

"Are you looking to secure these buildings until your current project is done, until you're finished your education or are these likely to be long term facilities?" Jazz asked.

"At least until my education is done," Crimson Sprite said immediately as she turned a small pot of flowers to adjust their exposure. "If I go with Goldsheen's suggestion and try and to get a job teaching horticulture here, I may continue to use these greenhouses for a very long time. Otherwise I'll probably sell these two after I set up a different facility."

"To me that means wiring and sensors are worth putting in but not structural changes," Jazz said. "Are there any compartments or spaces I can't see from here?"

"Here? No," Crimson Sprite flicker her wings briefly before shaking her head. "I've had this space since I first started out. I've replaced the tables and shifted the racks as I grew to what you see now."

"Then I'm content with my assessment for this one. The two story one will be more complex," Jazz suggested they move on.

"I've seen equal trouble in both places," Crimson Sprite admitted as she lead the pair over to the larger structure. It was two stories and twice again as large as the first. "This was a present from my entire flock when I proved serious about my desire to be a horticulturalist. My creators were hoping I'd go into law or business, but they agree that becoming an educator or scientist is a noble pursuit."
"The future doesn't exist without them," Jazz agreed and watched carefully as she unlocked it. Security wasn't bad for an off-the-shelf system and some improve ideas he privately found delightfully amateurish but it was a long way from what he could do with even a moderate investment. "Those with the right processor set for it can do as well as any lawyer socially and economically. From what I've seen and remember if you make contacts with a good business-mecha your creations could bring in a solid income on their own."

"That's what Tailslide thinks," she agreed with a small smile as she let the pair scan the translucent ceiling above them and the open access area at the far end. Pointing out what Jazz could already see, she said, "There is a ladder over on the far wall. My primary instructor is a grounder, so he has to have a way to the upper story to review my work. There is a sensor on it that triggers an alert if anyone microbot weight or higher uses it."

"How many times has an alarm been triggered?" Jazz asked as he began a careful walk-through of the ground floor. "And where do you keep the very important plants?"

"Other than the times my instructor uses it? Twice, although we only caught someone on camera once. That was a student trying to borrow some of my tools because she kept forgetting to buy her own. The school disciplined her for trespassing," Crimson Sprite said with a small rumble. "I don't turn it off even when someone is in here with me. That way I know something's wrong if it's not active. It's not designed to tell me the weight of the user."

"That can be changed, though I'm not sure it's worth it. I will work on the camera angles to make sure who's triggering it is caught, and good idea on leaving it on," Jazz told her with honest approval.

"Thundercracker recommended you. I know he held an important role in Vos before the war, and Tailslide values his opinions. I'm not important here, but my flock can give you recommendations to others. He's a Knight; they're supposed to be above this kind of pettiness," Crimson Sprite glanced at Jazz and then Thorn as she almost reassured herself. Setting her wings, she faced Jazz directly and said, "I don't keep all the plants in the same place. Upstairs would be the logical place to secure something, so I don't use it for the true successes. Some of them are in the other greenhouse; the others are over here on this shelf by the orange solar flowers. I tried to put them where the color would be masked so they'd be deemed less important."

"We are," Thorn told her seriously. "Thundercracker is the adoptive creation of Master Aurora. Jazz's actions will reflect on her."

Jazz nodded and gave her a thoughtful look before being as serious as he could be for her. "I can design a room that can't be broken into by anyone in this city. I can hide it so even knowing it's here the door can't be seen. I can also design hidden spaces if you wish to keep them separate as you do now. That said, I'd recommend doing a simple building security update first. The more drastic and thus more expensive changes can be done later if the first set of upgrades don't work well enough."

"You don't prune an irontree bonsai by randomly hacking it," Crimson Sprite said with a nod and a much more relaxed posture. "Starting with a simple upgrade does make sense, especially if that is all it will take to discourage trouble. What are your recommendations?"

"Improved door upgrades so it's not a simple passcode. It can be a longer more complicated one or it can be upgraded to read your spark energy. More cameras and sensors to trigger them," Jazz began with the most obvious things. "I'd also upgrade the vent grates and confirm that all panels and the floor are solidly together. It's possibly to remove one and replace it without being detected if they aren't well secured. Given you know there have been break-ins I'd run a sweep for listening and recording devices that shouldn't be here."
"I never thought about most of that," she admitted as she glanced around at her plants. "I don't know if we need to upgrade to a spark detection door just yet. I'll also need to arrange for temporary housing for most of the plants while you're working. You'll probably need the space especially if there are any loose panels, and I'd rather not worry about them getting damaged accidentally. Do you have a rough estimate on the time and materials that will be necessary? I understand there will be additional expenses that will need to be negotiated if there are loose panels or any other problems are detected. Once we get to the stage of an actual contract for the work I would prefer to involve my creators and Haji unless you have another lawyer in mind to represent you. This way no one can claim you took advantage of me."

"Great idea with the lawyers. I haven't asked Haji but he'd be my first choice. I'll chat with him tonight," Jazz agreed willingly. "One last thing I need to know before we go to time and cost. Do you want any intruders to be taken out by security?"

Thorns' wings gave a shocked wiggle and his rich red optics brightened but he kept quiet and let the exchange happen.

Crimson Sprite let her own red optics focus on Jazz for a moment before answering with a small sigh and a rueful grin. "I don't want to get you or me in trouble with the law, especially if we actually catch someone in here. The things that Tailslide and I thought of to take out an intruder were gasses, tangle traps and sticky traps. Unfortunately most of the gasses we could think of that would work effectively would have to be used at doses that might harm the plants, and those two kinds of traps aren't exactly reliable for holding someone no matter what they show in the vids."

As she spoke Jazz relaxed. "Good, cause I got out of the lethal traps business on planetfall. So to your timeline question. If I'm working alone, expect a full decaorn for both buildings assuming I don't have supply issues. Cost for what I have in mind would run about 17K all included."

"I should be able to handle that as long as my creators find the material costs acceptable," Crimson Sprite said before glancing over at Thorn. "You'd have to have a Knight present for all of the work as well. If you know any that would consider helping you on it instead of having to stand around looking bored we could talk to Haji about negotiating payment for their labor into the contract as well."

"I'll see if anyone's interested in doing the work and factor that into the final estimates along with the schematics of what I have planned," Jazz agreed. "Would meeting again in ten orns to go over the details suit you?"

"Yes," Crimson Sprite said with a firm nod. "I have a class during the morning, but most of my afternoon is spent here working. Let me know when you are available to meet."

Jazz shot Thorn a glance.

"Would joor twenty work for you?" the slender black Knight asked.

"Yes, I'll note it and make a reminder so I don't get immersed in something in here and forget," Crimson Sprite agreed, admitting how important this was to her.

"We'll be here," Jazz promised before they shook hands again and the pair left the young Seeker to her plants. He waited until they were on the road well away from her before comming Thorn, ::So I think that went fairly well::

::Agreed. If the work goes as well you will earn not just some good shanix but contacts and goodwill that will be invaluable:: Thorn replied. ::Did you really think she'd suggest something illegal with me
standing there?::

::Not really, but she's a mechling. If she's got any inclination towards it or ignorance of the law she may have. Mostly I wanted it out there that while I know how to do lethal traps I won't.::

::Given what Aurora has said about her flock I don't think she would use ignorance of the law as an excuse. She's very mature for her age; most wouldn't think to have lawyers involved to protect your reputation.:: Thorn pointed out.

::No, not even I thought about it. Though her flock is heavy with them. She probably knows even more about how things can go wrong with a contract than I do.:: Jazz admitted. ::Hopefully Haji will be agreeable and not too expensive.::

::I'm certain he'll understand why you're approaching him. You're not a Seeker but your client is, and it's not a complicated or expensive contract. You're a part of Thundercracker's flock, and he seems to have grown on Haji.:: Thorn observed.

::That he has. I have to admit, TC is way more sociable than I ever expected. Mech's crazy different than he was as a Con. He may have lost Skywarp but I think losing Starscream and the war has done a lot of good for him.:: Jazz mused. ::He's changed at least as much as Prowl, but I got to watch it happen.::

::I cannot speak for how your flock was before the four of you arrived here, but I have noticed some changes in Wing as well.:: Thorn admitted. ::He's still outgoing and friendly, but I've noticed he's a bit more aware of potential problems around him.::

::That would be partly Deadlock and I working on his situational awareness.:: Jazz admitted. ::The idea of Wing being that oblivious to threats was spark-twisting to those of us from a war zone.::

::I can see that. It says something that you got him to mature in ways nothing in his very long existence could. He's seen a lot.::

::We also did it without managing to destroy his base personality.:: Jazz agreed. ::It's soothing to battered sparks like us having someone like him around.::

::He's good for a lot of us, battered and not. The Citadel wasn't nearly as bright while he was gone.:: Thorn agreed.

::Well, with all of us around he'll have plenty of back-up if anything ever does happen here. I might be becoming a civilian, but I'll never lose most of my skills. They'll be available if Primus forbid they're ever needed.:: Jazz promised.

::That willingness is appreciated and I don't doubt will be used should we need it. Dai Atlas will always remember how to win a war no matter how much he wishes otherwise.:: Thorn's harmonics echoed his full belief of all of it. ::How much do you intend to raise your prices by the time you are a citizen?::

::Depends on what the job requires. Someone like Crimson Sprite doesn't need the time and effort I'm putting into the Citadel for example. The more complicated the job; the higher the price.:: Jazz said.

Thorn hummed thoughtfully as he rolled that around his processor. ::That's a different way to do pricing. I can see your reasoning, though it may upset folks you charge more.::

::The idea is to lay it out by type of work.:: Jazz explained, interested to hear an opinion from
someone from this city, even though a Knight would have a different perspective than a civilian.

::Labor for actually putting the system together is spelled out at one set price per joor. The variable costs depend upon how in depth someone wants the system to go. Tracking down viruses and hacks in a system will have one set fee; crawling around exploring a building to find weak points would be a different set price. All the costs would be up front in the contracts.::

::That would go over better. It still seems odd to me to price different activities at different rates when the same being is doing it. I'm far more used to the type of contractors that simply have a rate per joor. Crimson Sprite wouldn't cost much because it's a quick job. The Citadel would cost a lot because it's large, complex and high end.:: Thorn explained. ::You'd still likely catch some folks off guard, but a specialist often gets to set many of their own rules.::

::The fees for the majority of the security work wouldn't vary too much, so it shouldn't be too much of an issue for most clients.:: Jazz agreed, relaxing a bit now that Thorn seemed agreeable to his option. ::The majority of the time, what's going to cost more is anything potentially dangerous to me. Anything involving tracking down or locating viruses in systems, locating toxins that have been planted to harm someone...things like that. I don't expect it to come up much honestly, but it pays to be upfront about it like I was with Crimson Sprite about the lethal traps.::

::Very much agreed.:: Thorn promised him. ::That's more of a personal risk surcharge than anything to me. Just how much work is there going to be on the Citadel?:::

::I don't know how much the Masters have told you, but I know what I can tell a Knight.:: Jazz started, mindful of his own responsibility to keep his client's secrets and pinged Thorn to set up a secure channel before continuing. ::Those runs I've been making to test patrol awareness weren't for show and exposed a few weaknesses. There are a few Knights who've gotten a bit lax since so little happens here, but you already know Dai Atlas and Axe are taking care of that."

::No kidding. Plenty of news on that front. The Sovereign had something of a public fit about the control room lack of attention as well. I probably know more than most but not nearly as much as gets reported or ordered done.:: Thorn admitted. ::I'm primarily wondering if you think structural changes are going to be needed.::

::You're one of the ones who didn't need those lectures; you spotted me more often than most even when you weren't actually patrolling.:: Jazz admitted. It was something he and Demeter had talked about during some of their explorations. Even from well below the circling jet he could see the happy wiggle in those wings. ::Structurally the Citadel is sound although it needs a serious security update. Given what I've seen in my exploration I don't think the building was originally designed with your Order in mind.::

::You don't?:: Thorn's surprise was audible and visible. ::What could it have been designed for if not us?::

Jazz thought about how much to admit before answering, ::I'm not entirely certain who it was originally housed, but there are a lot of passages and hidden access-ways especially along the ceilings designed for someone like me or Demeter.::

Thorn was quiet for a long klik. ::I'll look into it. The archives date back to before our art was the center of an Order. I do know that this Citadel is a reasonably faithful reproduction of the one we fled, and it was based on the one before it. I'm not sure how far back the plans go before that.:: Thorn told him. ::I'll let you know if I find anything on it. There may well be a good reason we no longer use it for.::

::It could have been ways for observers of the outside world to report to the Masters without being
seen, but it all seems too deliberate and elaborate for that to be the only reason behind it.:: Jazz said thinking about the building he'd been exploring. :: Anyway there are a lot of sensors and cameras to set up and link into the control room.::

::No doubt. I've been on monitor duty enough times to know just how little of the interior is monitored. I never thought about it as a security issue though. It's just not how most Knights think.:: Thorn admitted and privately wondered why Demeter never brought it up. It wasn't as if she was uneasy around the Sovereign. They'd served together before either were Knights.

::It wouldn't be for most of the Knights. Most grounders, even those who live with a bunch of fliers, don't look up unless they have to. Fliers don't tend to actually look at ceilings even when they're inside.:: Jazz agreed.

::We don't like the reminder the ceiling is there.:: Thorn explained.

::That makes sense and proves my point.:: Jazz agreed and filed that away as an incredibly valuable tidbit on flier psychology. ::That's why it's one of the most common places for architects to sneak in SpecOps routes.::

::Have you ever run across other uses for those type of routes, or a potential they could be decorative or have a function other than routes?:: Thorn asked as they neared the Citadel.

::Sometimes they get used as maintenance routes or ways for servants to scuttle around hidden from the nobles.:: Jazz said. ::I've used architectural decorations to hide behind before. There might be others I don't know about too. Plenty of functions and Houses had quirks of design that matter only to them.::

::No doubt. I know the Citadel has some quirks because of how the Order functions.:: Thorn agreed and landed lightly on his pedes when Jazz pulled into the Citadel's entry yard.

Jazz transformed and stretched a moment as he looked up at the imposing structure of the Citadel, "Thanks for coming with me today. Having a flier around helped put her at ease."

"Not a problem. It was interesting to get a look at a working breeder's greenhouse," Thorn gave his wings an agreeable flick as Dart came out to greet them.

"Teeks like it went well," the cycle-former smiled brightly at his charge.

"Yeah, she's one of the more self-confident mechlings I've ever met and definitely interested in a contract. It shouldn't take too long to get her setup in respectable shape," Jazz said cheerfully.

"Glad to hear it," Dart smile widened.
Chapter Summary

Jazz/Crimson Sprite sign the contract with lawyers there and signing confirmation it's valid. Thorn tells Jazz why the Citadel really had all those upper walkways.

Jazz sat with Haji and Aurora in the private room of the Gentle Breeze, an Ankmor Park type tea house not far from the Citadel by the wing. It wasn't at all like the formal service by specialized servants type Jazz was used to from Iacon before the war. This one was more like a cafe with a couple private rooms that could be rented. The hot energon infused with various flavors was nice though. Soothing and tasty and incapable of leading to a charge. The soft finger treats were tasty too.

It was finally time to do the last of the negotiations, finalize and sign the contract for Crimson Sprite's security system. As simple as the actual job of securing the greenhouses would be, especially compared to the Citadel, the fact that it was a civilian contract was an important step for him in his new career. "Thanks again for accepting me as a client," Jazz said to Haji, wanting him to know how grateful he was that the Seeker had willingly taken on a grounder client at a reasonable rate.

"You are a part of Thundercracker's flock, and it is important for him and his flock to make a positive impression," the Order said. "Your success reflects on him and thus reflects on my trine and flock."

Jazz accepted the explanation with a smile and put on a more relaxed manner than he was feeling. The door opened for Crimson Sprite and her attorney Astro to join them and she smiled to see two Seekers with him.

"Hello Haji," Astro flicked his wings in polite greeting to his fellow business lawyer.

"Greetings, Astro," Haji returned smoothly and motioned to the empty seats. "Join us, refresh yourselves and be welcomed."

"Gladly," Astro seated himself as Crimson Sprite settled next to him. Picking up the pot he carefully poured some energon for himself and his client. Once they had taken a sip, he turned his focus back on Haji. "Thank you for meeting with us. I assume you've taken a look at the tentative contract. Do you have any changes you wish to propose?"

"Detailing the limits of my client's responsibilities after instillation is complete," Haji handed over a datapad with the suggested changes.

Astro took a careful look at the requested changes. After studying them, he nodded, "We can agree to the changes regarding incidents outside the scope of the system and Acts of Primus. We do not expect that a system of this caliber could stop a deliberate drive through, cave-in or earthquake damage for example. In regards to liability for malfunction issues, I propose that about ten orn after the installation is complete Jazz performs a test of the system to help make certain there is no defective equipment. Equipment defects within warranty will need to be replaced as part of the contract."
"That is reasonable," Haji nodded with his wings and looked at Jazz. "Will that change the estimate?"

The grounder thought for a moment, then nodded. "An additional joor under general labor."

Astro glanced at Crimson Sprite before answering, "That is an acceptable addition, however we have one other term we would like to include. We want to make an addendum to the 10 orn inspection. If an installation issue is discovered during the inspection it will need to be rectified with no additional charges. This includes but is not limited to items such as crossed wires causing short-circuits, incorrectly installed components and other defects of this nature."

"Agreed. If I screw up, I fix it," Jazz said firmly before Haji could respond.

Haji looked at Jazz a moment before taking a sip of his drink, "As Jazz has said, we agree to that term in the contract provided the actual issue is with installation and is not from user error. Repairing damage caused by accidental misuse of the system will require payment at the prices dictated in the original contract. Repairing damage caused by deliberate abuse of the system will require a new contract."

::That isn't what he said?:: Jazz shot Haji a glance.

::You understood the original intent of his statement. I'm clarifying that point to protect you from having to fix careless damage and neglect for free. I don't expect it from this contract, but you want the established protection clauses when dealing with systems for other clients. Especially any with a larger group of users.::: Haji replied.

::Ah, got it.::: Jazz nodded slightly. "So does it look good to everyone?"

Crimson Sprite took the time to carefully read over the contract again, looking for anything that might be an issue. One of her biggest concerns had been regarding discretion clauses about her work. Those had been among the first things agreed upon and were all properly laid out. "Everything appears in order to me."

While she read so did Jazz, though he tried to view it as maliciously as he could. How could he use this against her or if on the other side how could he use it against the contractor. Haji definitely did his work there and Jazz knew that for what little a grounder's opinion mattered he'd speak well of the lawyer's skill.

"I'm good with it," he nodded.

"Good," Astro said tipping his wings slightly to Aurora. "Although trined with Haji, I consider Master Aurora a suitable witness for the signing of the contract. I'll comm the manager and request that he act as the second witness; that should cover any potential challenges that might occur."

"Acceptable," Haji tipped his wings in agreement when Jazz didn't override him again.

"Agreed," Aurora accepted both the role and the complement to her reputation that it was for Astro to accept her as one.

It didn't take long for the signatures to be set on the contract and the manager returned to his duties.

Crimson Sprite glanced at Astro before lifting her drink and saying quietly, "To our new contract. May it be as successful as these negotiations have been."

"To success here and the future," Jazz smiled and lifted his glass to tinkle lightly against hers before
the others did so in the traditional round of a toast.

Thorn paused as he entered the grand foyer of the Citadel to take in both the work being done and Jazz, a non-citizen, directing three Knights in the work of adding additional cameras and sensors into the existing grid. Dart was no real surprise. The mech was a great choice for a grounder when overhead work needed to be done and he was Jazz's keeper. He hid a grin at Flashfire's presence. The Seeker had been getting a bit full of himself for being a Seeker lately. It was a perfect penance for the lesson that frames were frames and all sparks were equal to have him taking orders not just from a grounder but a grounder that wasn't even a citizen yet.

The Seeker did not seem to be enjoying running wires along the walls and rafters, unlike the other Knight working with them. Matorral's heavy exploration frame was fastened securely to one of the rafters as she hung upside-down affixing a camera to the underside of a beam. The scout was another solid choice for this work; she didn't mind heights or tight spaces. One of the first to notice him she said cheerfully, "Greetings, Thorn. Come to help out?"

"Perhaps, though I came to speak to Jazz," he smiled back at her and approached the one directing work. It was only on getting close that he realized that Jazz wasn't just watching them. He was monitoring the new additions and circuits.

"What's up?" Jazz grinned at him in welcome.

"I found the origin of all the high walkways and doors," Thorn said easily. "How is the orn going?"

"Fairly steady with a few minor glitches. This morning we figured out one of the cameras was defective, but Aurora's people are taking care of getting the replacement," Jazz said with a shrug. "I'm happy it was the only one so far."

"That is good," Thorn nodded with a soft smile. "Now, as to the Citadel's design. Are you familiar with mecha-animal pets and symbiots?"

"Yeah, Blaster was one of my good friends back on Cybertron; he and his symbiots love music almost as much as I do. Mech could throw an awesome party and was a great comm officer," Jazz answered.

"Good, then you know the basics of their size and abilities," Thorn nodded. "It seems when the original monastery the Citadel was eventually based on was built when the monks there had several hosts. It remained afterwards because it was useful for the trained mecha-animals to use to launch attacks at intruders from. At one time it was common to have many such trained creatures as part of the defense force of most places. Even as the mecha-animals fell from favor with the advent of blasters and better armor the architecture was never removed."

"Makes sense and is less creepy than the possibility that this was once the home base of an assassin's guild," Jazz said with an understanding glance around the area. "Mecha-animals would enjoy all these paths and hideaways, especially the cats and birds."

"Agreed," Thorn shivered slightly at the idea of an assassin's guild. "You and Demeter prove it still has its uses as well. I'm sure several of the more acrobatic Knights will be inclined to use them more now that we're all aware of them."

"It also makes it a lot harder for anyone to sneak up on all of you," Jazz agreed before turning his attention back to the installation. "You mind hovering over there a moment so I can check on camera angles?"
"Not at all," Thorn willingly moved as directed. He wasn't ignorant of Flashfire's displeasure at him and from the look the pair got neither was Jazz.

Jazz kept instructing Thorn to shift positions, checking multiple sensors and cameras, all the while ignoring the growing displeasure from the Seeker. Dart and Matorral were obviously aware of the situation, but the two grounders seemed content to let Jazz and Thorn handle it. Thorn was certain that the Masters would be hearing about this regardless of how the situation played out, especially from Dart who took his responsibility for Jazz seriously.

Another breem and Thorn wondered if Jazz sending Dart and Matorral to work on opening up a wall to work on the wiring there was an intentional effort to drop the number of witnesses so Flashfire would do something.

If so, it worked.

"Why do you have to be so blasted happy about this?" Flashfire hissed.

"We're fixing a defect in the Citadel's defenses and making everyone more secure," Thorn answered as he wondered just how far Flashfire had actually bought into the Seeker superiority rhetoric. He was sure Jazz could hear this and just as sure he was not going to say anything.

"That's reason to do the work. Not reason to let him order you around," Flashfire snorted.

"Jazz is the one that found the holes in our defenses," Thorn calmly pointed out, testing Flashfire further. "Instead of keeping them hidden and exploiting them later he told the Masters and is helping us to improve security. We should be grateful for the help."

"Section is good. Time to add to the outside ones," Jazz motioned them to come down and follow and Flashfire all but balked at it before complying. Out in the open but with no one nearby Jazz spoke quietly. "You've got more issue with Thorn obeying me than doing it yourself."

"Thorn is a respected Knight who is not assigned to this duty joor. There is no reason for him to be obeying a non-citizen," Flashfire grumbled just as quietly.

"I haven't given him orders either," Jazz pointed out. "Asking if different from orders. He's free to fly away anytime he cares to. I'm just not going to ignore a warm frame that's willing to help either."

"It's still degrading," Flashfire sneered.

"Because I'm not a citizen yet or because I'm a grounder?" Jazz asked.

Flashfire glared at him. "Both. Knights give orders, not take them."

"Sovereign Dai Atlas and the Masters put me in charge of this project. Master Aurora and Master Tornado seem to think that in this area Knights should take orders from me," Jazz said, waiting to see how Flashfire would respond. The Seeker wasn't so bent out of shape he disobeyed orders, even a little, but he made little secret of his displeasure either. Jazz caught sight of Dart keeping an optic on it but he was staying hidden so far.

"Which I am," Flashfire said stiffly.

"Yes, you are," Jazz said with a nod. "You're following your orders and obeying a grounder who is considered part of a Seeker flock."

"Do you have a point here?" Flashfire huffed.
"You might want to reconsider listening to a group of Seekers stuck in old attitudes that don't really suit this city," Jazz said pleasantly. "Especially since so many of the Seekers in charge don't share that attitude. After all, Seekers can't isolate themselves like they did in Vos, and one thing the war proved is that it's dangerous to do that."

It was a response that left Thorn impressed with Jazz's social skills. There weren't many that could respond so calmly to an irritated Seeker, though he was also sure that part of it was that Jazz knew he had nothing to fear from Flashfire. Even if they fought the odds were good Jazz could win and there was no way a Knight would start a fight. Even so Flashfire looked like he was considering it. There was going to be another binding in the Seeker's near future. He'd always been proud of his wings but this went well beyond that. Something was genuinely wrong.

Even as his flame-branded wings gave a shiver of anger Flashfire managed to control himself.

"I will think on it," he bit out much more for Thorn than Jazz.

"That's all I'm asking you to do," Jazz agreed. "New cameras are going there and there," he pointed to two spots that would give an excellent view of the entrance and the wide open yard between the gate and the Citadel door.
Chapter Summary

Thundercracker is introduced to a military-coded Seeker near-mechling (Photosphere) no one knows how to cope with.

For once in her short existence Photosphere was quietly compliant with her creators. It had a little to do with being carried in Mubakkir's arms and flying and a lot to do with being aware that she was at the center of something terrible and it was her fault. Her temper was something that couldn't be accepted but she couldn't control it. Pitchback hovered nervously over them; the Action's field full of both hope and regret. Things that had been far too common recently.

"It'll be okay," Pitchback whispered quietly to either Photosphere or her carrier right before they landed and followed their flock Order Knock Out into the large office. When she squirmed she was set down but Mubakkir's hand never left her.

Inside only the family law specialist was waiting after the secretary told them to go in.

"Please make yourselves comfortable," Nitrite spoke gently with a subtle wing-movement towards the refreshment bar as to not draw attention of the older youngling with the adults. "Gyre and Haji's trine should be here soon."

"Thank you," Stormdat said with a nod and a glance over at Knock Out to see if the flock Order wished to drink anything. After receiving a slight wing dip in response, Stormdat slipped over to fill five cubes, one only partway with a mild energon quickly while Pitchblack and Mubakkir kept Photosphere distracted. "Here, sir," Stormdat handed the first drink to Knock Out before passing one to each of his trine mates. The smallest drink he handed to Photosphere.

"Thank you," she responded correctly, keenly aware that this was one of those situations where she needed to show manners.

"Have there been any developments since the last meeting?" Nitrite asked once they were settled.

"We've been having more problems with her in school," Stormdat admitted. "She talks back to the instructors and has been fighting with some of the students."

"She knows something is happening today, although I don't know if she's understood everything we've told her," Mubakkir said quietly.

"A lot," Photosphere said before tucking in on herself and ducking her helm in a show of knowing she shouldn't have done that.

"Then your decision has not changed," Nitrite nodded her wings. "Are we ready for the other flock?"

Stormdat glanced at Knock Out, hesitating despite his determination to help his fledgling.
"Yes," Knock Out said firmly. "We are ready to see them."

There was a brief comm and the door opened for the four Seekers of the other flock followed by the Peacekeeper that had helped put this together.

"Sonic Flare, Gyre, Haji," Nitrite greeted them. "There are refreshments. We will begin once everyone is settled."

Haji immediately went over to the refreshment bar and began preparing drinks for Gyre and his trine. "Do you want anything, Sonic Flare?" he asked, deferring to the Seeker who although not of his flock outranked him socially.

"Thank you, I'll take a bit of solar with some arsenic if it's available," Sonic Flare said, relieved to have the distraction during this unusual situation.

Haji smoothly handed the cubes to Sonic Flare, his flock Order and then his trine mates before sitting down next to Aurora. No one missed how fixated on Aurora Photosphere had become since the youngling had noticed her swords.

"Now that everyone is settled, let's begin," Nitrite said looking over all the Seekers present before officially explaining the situation. "We are here because a young fledgling is exhibiting traits that do not normally occur among civilians. The situation has reached the point that the Peacekeepers have gotten involved with incidents both in public and in school on more than one occasion. The local precinct contacted Captain Sonic Flare since he is the highest ranking Seeker in the Peacekeepers hoping he would have an explanation. Captain Sonic Flare discussed the issue with Detective Ciel, the only Air Martial to voluntarily join the Exodus, who offered a few options for possible causes that had not been previously considered. Captain Sonic Flare and Flock Order Knock Out have confirmed one of Detective Ciel's suggestions is reality. Photosphere is New Crystal City's first experience with a military-coded fledgling."

Aurora winced internally even though she was familiar with the basic situation and gave a reassuring wiggle of her wings to the dark gray and light blue youngling. She knew this all too well, though she was lucky that one of her creators had a lover from a military flock. Even so it had taken a lot of work to get her civilized and far more once it became clear she was a Vision. She'd had many more options than this youth did and she'd still barely made it into her adult frame. Both her trinemates leaned a touch closer in support.

"With her coding confirmed all parties have agreed that it is to both her benefit and society's for her to be fostered into an environment with those who understand such coding," Nitrite inclined her helm to the Knight among them.

"No! I'll be good!" Photosphere objected and clung tightly to her carrier.

"It's not about you being bad, dearest," Mubakkir said to the fledgling trying to soothe her and ease the coming trauma. "It's about Aurora being able to help you in ways we can't."

"You go to school to learn things we can't teach you," Stormdat offered. "You'll be staying with them for the same reason. We'll visit you often and you will come home for the important orns like your hatching orn and First Light Festival."

Aurora glanced at Stormdat before approaching to kneel optic level with the youngling. "You know all the trouble you get into, the fighting and lashing out that you don't want to do even as it's happening but you can't stop yourself?"
Photosphere stared at her with shock and even the others seemed surprised.

"I know it's that way because I'm like you and that's what my youth was like. Military coded from a civilian flock. They did their best and I'm close to them now but it wasn't enough when I was young. I needed things they didn't know how to do," Aurora said gently.

"What?" Photosphere looked between Knight and her flock Order.

"How to hit back and turn your fire into a weapon rather than the uncontrolled burn it is now. It won't be fun for any of us but I know how to help you avoid the worst of what happened to me," Aurora told her.

"I won't make creators upset anymore?" She asked looking up at her creators.

"We will be sad to have you away from us more often, but we will be happy to know that you are safe and getting the help you need," Stormdat said, his field tinged with a bit of sadness but projecting a lot of hope.

"I will be sad you are not home as often," Mubakkir told her to Pitchback's agreement. "This is for your future, so you have a future. I don't want you to be the first in New Crystal City to fail to be civilized. Once you can control yourself you will not need Master Aurora anymore."

"Our flock will be there for you to help however we can," Knock Out added, not wanting to give anyone the impression they were abandoning their fledgling.

Photosphere nodded and gave a quivering wing flick of acceptance-understanding before Aurora returned to her seat.

"Knock Out, Gyre and I have already had several meetings regarding this situation, and we have come to a tentative agreement. Aurora, are you and your trine prepared to accept this fledgling into your care knowing the time and responsibility involved?" Nitrite asked.

"I am and we are," Aurora spoke for them as the one addressed and the primary caretaker. "I have spoken to some of the other Seeker Knights, those who have military coding or similar temperament issues. I have also spoken to the other Masters of Light and arranged for many of my duties to be temporarily taken over by others so I may focus on Photosphere and Thundercracker fully, just as if I had laid a clutch. There will always be a military coded Seeker nearby who understands what she is going through and ready to act if it is needed." She paused and looked at Knock Out and Stormdat. "You should understand I will guide her towards the Knights or priesthood. There are precious few functions she is suited for on this world. She will always need a well defined chain of command and active duties to function well. It is part of our coding."

"We understand, and hopefully one of those careers that will be well suited for her," Knock Out answered, privately grateful that one of those functions was peaceful and both were highly respectable. "Are there going to be any problems having her and Thundercracker under your care that we can help alleviate?"

Aurora thought, and twitched a wing as a yes. "Do not give in and reclaim her before I agree she is ready. There will be times she will not want what she needs."

"As with any creation," Knock Out inclined his helm in agreement.

"Yes, only this one will be capable of far more force of personality than those you are accustomed to," Aurora agreed, then looked at Photosphere before refocusing on her creators. "I expect she will have true claws as a mechling even though they won't be in the upgrade Redline gives her."
"Why do you say that?" Pitchback asked with concern.

"I did, as did all four of my creations that eventually joined the Order," she said gently.

"We'll keep that in mind when she and her siblings are together," Mubakkir said with a slight wing shiver, imagining the damage those could potentially do when Photosphere lost her temper. It was spark-wrenching in a way to give up their creation like this, but it was sounding more and more like a good idea as they faced what she would be like as a mechling without this kind of discipline. Mechlings were hard enough to control normally. One with claws and a temper even she couldn't control couldn't survive in this city.

"Thank you. Remember, she will always be your creation. You are only fostering her; not completely surrendering her," Aurora reminded them. "I have no desire to change her flock."

"We'll remember that," Stormdat said as he turned back to Mubakkir and Photosphere before glancing over at Pitchback who'd moved even closer to them. "If you don't mind, we'd like to bring her to your eyrie. If you think it would make things easier?"

"I do not mind. It will allow you to make the introductions and see where she will be living," Aurora agreed willingly. "I hope you bring some of her things as well so she can have familiarity as she gets used to her new home. Tonight or tomorrow?"

Stormdat looked at the other two briefly before making up his mind, "We'll bring her over tonight. She's accepting things fairly well right now and hopefully we can get her to your eyrie before she changes her mind."

"I'll be good," Photosphere promised in a whisper as she clung to Mubakkir.

"I know, my dear," he nuzzled her. "You'll be good and we'll see you often."

"I will arrange your clearances to enter Citadel airspace tonight. Before you leave we can complete the forms and scans so you may visit with no more than a comm," Aurora told them.

"That would be wonderful," Mubakkir said. It would be hard being separated from their fledgling, but, for the first time in a very long time, the trine had a bit of optimism about her future. "Thank you so much for everything, Master Aurora."

She smiled at the other Vision. "It is my honor to be trusted with your creation's future."

Thundercracker sat at the dining table reading a datapad on fledgling care and psychology while he and Tornado waited for the resident trine to return. While he made a point of not staring they were both fully aware he was keeping a close watch on Tornado's katas. While the interest was founded in martial training and war's need to be ready there was a growing interest that wasn't founded in the paranoia of survival. In brief moments Thundercracker saw it as beautiful in no context other than movement. Today however he was focused on catching the first hint of Aurora's return with news that would change all their existences for the next couple centuries.

When Thundercracker had first heard that Captain Sonic Flare had contacted Aurora he'd briefly wondered if someone was trying to stir up trouble for his odd flock. Instead, Aurora had called her two surviving Knight creations to the eyrie and explained to the three of them and her trinemates that a military-coded fledgling had been discovered in one of the smaller flocks. Thundercracker had surprised some of the others when he asked if the fledgling was going to be fostered, but it was a tradition he still remembered from his own creation flock. Uncommon at the worst of times but always invaluable when coding the flock didn't normally express came to the fore in a youth. He'd
done more to identify and arrange such fosterings than saw them in his own flock despite the idea that it was always for the military coded types to make them safe for civilians. In truth he'd seen it more often when scientific brilliance or artistic talent were at odds with specialized or common laborer flocks. As tragic as it could be, and he couldn't help but think of Starscream, they could also be some of the most rewarding cases when flock services bumped one up to the Air Martials.

She'd smiled warmly at him and nodded her wings, then thanked him for the reminder that both the glyph and concept were not new.

He heard their engines approaching before Tornado responded, yet by the time the four approached both were standing near the landing balcony.

Gyre was the first to land and transform, and he took the moment to look them both over as the trine settled as well. "So it's just the two of you here tonight?" he asked.

"Yes, Shattercoil started a shift working with Jazz two joors ago," Tornado said. "Did something happen that we need to contact them?"

Gyre shifted his wings and said, "No, there's no need to interrupt anyone's work, and it's probably best to have only a small group here tonight. Knock Out's problem fledgling is going to be brought here by her creators tonight."

"An agreement has been reached, and it's been confirmed I'm going to foster her," Aurora said.

"What is your impression now that you have met her?" Thundercracker dared to speak in this gathering of his social betters.

"She acts a lot like I did when I was younger," Aurora admitted. "She does seem to want to control her temper."

"She had no problems speaking up especially when she didn't like what was being said. Even with six strangers around her she was still willing to interrupt and voice complaints," Haji added. "I can see why she might be a problem for such a small flock especially since she has two siblings who would also want attention."

"She was fascinated by your blades and could barely take her optics off of them," Cheoseo pointed out. "I'm going to fledgling-proof the main areas before she gets here and make certain to remove anything sharp. I don't want her getting angry and grabbing something dangerous to her or us. I'll probably leave most of my projects in my main workshop from now on."

"Have you fledgling-proofed an eyrie before?" Aurora asked Thundercracker.

"Several times. It was a far more dangerous eyrie as well, between duty weapons and collected things," he nodded his wings and willingly accepted the duty to do his own sweep for anything the others missed. "Does she have any special needs beyond being military coded?"

Gyre cocked his helm at the legal mechling. "How many fledglings with military coding have you shared an eyrie with?"

Thundercracker paused and tried to think back over a long pre-war existence that was still primarily archived.

"At least thirty," he eventually answered.

Gyre stared at Thundercracker in near disbelief, "That many? Please make a note of everything you
remember from being around them no matter how trivial it seems. It will help the rest of the flock tremendously."

"Remember that in my creation flock every single creation had military coding," Thundercracker told him. "I will do my best to scourer my memories for anything," he promised.

"My only real experience with military-coded Seekers has been with this trine and the single creation I was here for," Gyre explained. "Having another perspective to draw from will be helpful, especially since you seem to know more about fostering and its results than I or the rest of the flock."

Thundercracker tipped his wings in understanding. "It's a very different processor set when every trine needs at least three creations just to break even for the flock size and many would need several more."

"Gyre and the rest of the flock are used to military-coded creations who started with this trine who knew how to handle them. They aren't used to one that has been allowed to almost run wild no matter how hard her flock tried to control her. Having you around gives Aurora someone who she knows can handle her if something happens and she gets called away. That can be a big help even for an experienced creator," Tornado pointed out quietly as he began helping Cheoseo clean up some of the more obvious issues in the main room. Speaking louder to the room in general, he asked, "Is it going to be a problem for you having her here during recharge?"

"It should not be. My sparkling protocols are fully intact and I have settled enough to recharge with you. She should be in no danger from me," Thundercracker said and took the hint to continue sparkling-proofing the eyrie. "I hope I will be as helpful as you believe."

"Good, the easier it is to get her settled in the eyrie the better. Let me know when she's able to come with you to visit the flock. She may be destined for the Knights or the priesthood as you think, but we would like to help her learn to properly interact with civilians," Gyre said as everyone joined in clearing up the most obvious issues in the eyrie and then went to work diligently on Thundercracker's suggestions for the few things that Aurora didn't spot.

"My creation flock will also help with that. They are civilians as well," Aurora added while they moved and followed the Vision's direction in one of the few circumstances where adult Orders would. The eyrie was hers and when it came to fledglings the Vision ruled all.

"Is everything secured to your satisfaction, Aurora? is there anything else I can help with before they arrive?" Gyre asked seriously looking around the eyrie and noting all the changes. Some of them were things he'd expect with a fledgling arriving, but there were others he wouldn't have thought of doing even after all the creations his own trine and flock had raised. It reminded him that she had raised four such militant creations even if he wasn't all that aware of them. Even now he often forgot that Tornado was Haji's eldest.

She did a slow circuit of the eyrie and dipped her wings in acceptance before facing him. "Yes and no. Thank you for the assistance and your willingness to have her visit when I believe she is ready."

Though no one commented on it everyone saw the excited flicker of Thundercracker's wings as he settled into coding that had half-activated on Wing and now had the prospect of a genuine fledgling to lock onto.

"Do you want me to stay for their arrival or should I head out to give her creators some privacy for their goodbyes?" Tornado asked. "I'd like to meet her, but I don't want to overwhelm her with too many new faces so early on."
"It might be best of it's just the four of us for now," Aurora admitted while Haji said goodbye to his flock Order. "There will be plenty of opportunities to meet her that won't be just before recharge."

"And it will give her creators a chance to say goodbye with one less pair of optics watching if she has a meltdown," Tornado agreed, understanding that this was probably very hard for the civilians. "I'll be heading out now before they get here. Let me know when she's ready to meet me."

"I will," Aurora smiled at her eldest creation and watched as he took off.

"How much time do we have before they get here?" Thundercracker asked as he set out some low grade. He remembered that some trines giving a sparkling over for fostering wanted to linger and learn more about their fledgling's new home and others wanted to depart quickly to grieve over the separation. It was hard to say how this trine would react, and he wanted to be prepared either way.

"A few kliks," she told him. "I believe they wished to get it over with before her mood shifts."

"Understandable," Thundercracker dipped his wings slightly as he made a last scan of the room. He was no Vision, but it looked as prepared as possible for a new temperamental fledgling. "My flock will want to meet her eventually. I think they would be good for her once you are ready for visitors; none of the grounders should have much trouble with her coding or temper."

"Agreed," Aurora dipped a wing and moved towards the balcony at the sound of jet engines approaching.

Standing behind the trine and watching the approaching Seekers, Thundercracker could have picked them out as civilians instantly even if he wasn't on at least visual familiarity with all the Seeker Knights. Their flight patterns and formation had subtle differences anyone with his kind of experience and training could recognize. The youngling the Vision was carrying didn't hurt that assessment's ease.

"Welcome to our eyrie," Aurora said once the trio had landed and set Photosphere down.

The youngling pressed close to her Vision creator but didn't misbehave as her darting optics took in the eyrie and the Seeker she didn't know with a frame that was so much heavier than those she knew. Must to everyone's surprise once she focused on Thundercracker she relaxed a bit.

"Who?" she looked up at Mubakkir.

"This is Thundercracker, my other charge," Aurora introduced him.

Her features scrunched and she looked between the adults before focusing on Thundercracker again. "But you're old."

"Yes. I am new to the city and must have the guidance of a caretaker to be accepted here," Thundercracker explained.

"He's learning from Aurora too," Mubakkir explained, grateful that Photosphere was handling having the other Seeker present so well as it would make things easier for the hosting trine. He wasn't sure what to make of the flutter of interest in her field as she nodded and relaxed a bit more; he could only hope that it didn't turn dark while they lived together.

"She has a box for her toys and things," Aurora motioned the other Vision to follow her with the youngling so the Orders could talk Order things. No one said anything when Thundercracker drifted towards them rather than remaining with the others.
"Photosphere, why don't you put your toys in the box now?" Mubakkir asked as the youngling as he offered her the small bag he'd carried here in his subspace. She accepted the bag and clutched it tightly as she stared at the simple box half as large as she was almost suspiciously. It had her designation on it but otherwise it looked like several others in the eyrie. Thundercracker's was set nearby, the designation on it, like on hers, was the simple variant.

"This box is only for your things," Aurora told her and knelt to open the box's simple hinged lid.

"It's just like your shelf at home. Only you will take things out," Mubakkir encouraged her gently. Aurora glanced at him before focusing on her. "You may put your things on top if you prefer."

Photosphere continued to stare at it suspiciously for a klik longer before reaching into the bag and pulling out a small block which she put inside. She reached out and closed the lid before pulling it open again. Seeing the block still inside, she added a few more blocks creating a small pile. A small blue mesh electron-tiger was placed on top of the box.

Thundercracker held back a coo out of respect that he was a junior Order and these were two Visions dealing with their fledgling.

"Where do I recharge?" Photosphere seemed to gather herself.

"With us in the central berth," Aurora nodded towards the center of the eyrie and its circular collection of padding and blankets far smaller than the one Photosphere was used to.

"So small," the youngling murmured.

"Normally only the four of us recharge here. It is a trine eyrie, not a flock eyrie," Aurora explained.

"I can recharge with you?" Photosphere asked Thundercracker directly.

"Yes, I recharge here as well," Thundercracker answered, grateful that his difficulties recharging with anyone other than his gestalt were mostly over now. Though he was without doubt that his sparkling protection protocols would have defended her effectively.

"Good," she relaxed a bit.

"She's never taken to anyone like this before," Mubakkir hummed.

"Then it's not bad that she likes someone she'll be living with," Thundercracker smiled and carefully knelt, keeping aware of Mubakkir's tension while keeping his visible attention on Photosphere.

"How many vorns before you can fly?"

"I'll be ready in about 300 orns," Photosphere said almost defiantly.

"It might be that her military coding recognizes something in him. She took to me very quickly as well," Aurora pointed out quietly to Mubakkir as they watched the pair talk. "Do you have anyone in mind for her first interface? I expect she'll choose him if she's allowed. She might not be that close to it but she is close."

"It's one of the things I've been almost dreading until now since we didn't know how she would handle it," Mubakkir admitted. "If you believe he will take care of her properly then he's probably one of the safest options available. Certainly safer than anyone we know."

"I have no doubt he will do his very best. He knows how to be a good lover," she made a subtle
motion towards Thundercracker's right wing and the glyphs for two trines and a conjunx there. "He can definitely handle anything that happens and so can we."

"So far you've given me a lot more hope for her future than I had a few short decaorns ago," Mubakkir said. "I'll miss her greatly, but she's a lot safer here than she was with us. Let us know when it will be best to visit; I don't want her to feel like we are abandoning her."

"I'm glad to give you all hope and even more so that she will have a future now," Aurora smiled at how well Thundercracker was handling this. It set her mind to what he'd said of his desires and past. He'd almost been a creator when Vos fell. He'd planned to create at war's end. He'd been more than willing when told about expectations to create here. In all she liked that she'd get to watch him in the eyrie with a troubled youth before he had hatchlings of his own. She pinged Mubakkir a calendar. "I've marked when I know we don't have plans. Just comm ahead. As you know things can come up quickly with fledglings. Are there any celebrations that she enjoys more than most?"

"She enjoys watching The Nightdance," Mubakkir tentatively smiled as Thundercracker seemed willing to listen as Photosphere introduced him to her little mesh friend, explaining the battles that had caused the small patches and fixed tears on it.

"How serious were those battles?" Aurora kept her voice very low.

"They tended to start as fun with her siblings, but she got more aggressive and serious than them especially when she was playing the attacker. She ripped that back leg off during one of her temper tantrums," Mubakkir admitted.

"I remember those games," Aurora nodded slightly. "Always started out as games but they always seemed to become far more after a breem or six. What is her reaction when she damages her toy?"

"Some of the minor rips don't bother her too much during the fight, but she always brings the cat to me afterwards and insists that he needs to go to medbay. She was really upset when she realized she'd ripped off his leg; she reacted worse to that than she did when she broke a vase and cut herself on the shards," Mubakkir trembled his wings a bit at the memory.

"Because she broke the vase or because she hurt herself?" Aurora asked carefully.

"Because she hurt herself. It was the first time she saw energon. She felt bad about the vase an orn later, after she felt better and recharged," Mubakkir explained. "She knows it was wrong to do but it takes a long time for her to process it to those protocols. Far longer than most her age."

"I'm not surprised," Aurora assured him. "It's still a very encouraging sign that she recognizes it eventually. It would be far more difficult if she couldn't recognize a wrong towards others at all."

"She doesn't see attacking someone who teases her as wrong," Mubakkir admitted one of the very frustrating things dealing with Photosphere. "We've almost given up trying to teach her not to retaliate at all, and lately we've been trying to get her to just use words."

"That I am well familiar with. It will take time but she will learn. She's likely to be blunt and forward well into her adult frame but she'll pass for civilized enough," Aurora promised.

"You've given us hope. I'm finally looking forward to her maturing instead of dreading it," Mubakkir said with a smile before turning his full attention back to Photosphere. "Dearest, it's time for us to say goodnight."

That got her attention away from Thundercracker in an instant. Her wings quivered even though she tried to control them as she rushed to her Vision creator and hugged onto his leg tightly.
Mubakkir picked her up and cradled her against his chest. He quietly called out, "Stormdat, Pitchback, I think someone needs a cuddle hug before she goes to bed."

The Action and Order excused themselves and enclosed the pair in a tight hug, putting Photosphere at the center all three fields at once. They all felt and teeked it as she relaxed and snuggled into their joint presences and calmness. As before it helped again and she was already half in recharge before it was over.

"Put her on the berth," Aurora suggested with a soft smile.

Walking over as a group they parted briefly to let Mubakkir place her on the berth. He lingered for a long klik to see if she would start stirring. When she remained in near recharge he removed a favorite blanket from his subspace and tucked it around her before he stepped back and huddled against his trine mates as they stared down at their troublesome but much loved sparkling.

"She will never be far from you," Aurora promised. "When you are ready we will do all the administrative work to clear you for easy visiting."
Gestalt dinner with just Demeter on a shelf.

Deadlock refrained from drumming his fingers impatiently as he waited for Dagger to leave after dropping Prowl off in Wing’s quarters for the evening. He had no idea how the Aerial had managed to convince the Masters to let them have dinner in here with only Demeter around, but he wasn’t going to be the one to mess this up and ruin their time almost alone. He made sure to pass Prowl a cube of low grade magma laced with arsenic and copper oxide after the Praxian settled down with the rest of them. "You manage to do anything other than spar with Blacktip lately?"

"I spend the rest of my time parsing my memories into a form that the reformatted me can absorb quickly with limited impact on his personal development," Prowl accepted the cube and sipped at it. "It's quite enough."

"Sounds dull. At least tell me you're getting in some quality berth time with Dagger," Deadlock grunted. "You should have some fun before you go."

"When I have the energy," Prowl nodded.

"When you have the energy?" Thundercracker frowned. "I've heard you keep up in full tactical mode for orns without a break."

"Yes, but that does not involve thirty joors an orn dealing with ancient archived information. I had active memory parsed for him in the first two orns," Prowl explained.

"How much longer are you going to be keeping this up?" Thundercracker grumbled, not liking the fact that it was taxing the Praxian so badly.

"Another forty-three orn should see the testing completed," Prowl replied taking another sip and savoring the flavor as well as the ability to drift to some extent.

"We're going to have to get you out more," Deadlock grumbled glancing at Jazz. "You found any place he'd enjoy visiting yet? I'm still stuck here."

"A few," Jazz nodded. "The symphony here is really good and they have art like Iacon used to. I'm leaving the restaurants up to Dagger."

"He likes the fare," Prowl chuckled with a knowing look.

"Have you been told about the public debates?" Thundercracker asked.

"Yes, and I believe there will be time for one," Prowl's doorwings gave an anticipatory twitch. "The subject of when regulation becomes protectionism seems most likely."

"You're going to dominate that one," Jazz predicted cheerfully.
"One of them will at least," Deadlock snorted. "Even odds which of our LEO twins it'll be."

"We are not twins," Thundercracker grumbled mildly at his fellow former Decepticon. It was rather insulting to be compared like that to a grounder, even one that was in his flock.

"Not by frame, but by processor and spark, maybe," Jazz said with a chuckle.

"You both love debates and books and law. I know either of you would have eagerly spoiled my fun back in Simfur, and both of you are practically begging to play creator with Wing," Deadlock finished ticking off his points and mock-glared at the Seeker. "No, you have absolutely nothing in common."

"Neither of us were happy with our side in the war," Prowl added, far less insulted to be compared to the Seeker than he once had to pretend to be.

"Thundercracker, you questioned the Decepticon goals and methods as much as Prowl did the Autobots," Jazz agreed. "You might have been questioning very different things, but neither of you were willing to just submit when things started going astray. That's despite the fact that neither of you were truly in a position where you could do much about it."

Thundercracker huffed but stopped objecting.

Jazz took the opening to change the subject and focused on Prowl. "There are a number of race tracks out there where you could compete with other Praxians on different courses. And a lot of other sporting events out there if you want to watch or play."

"Kimark's still talking about convincing the Masters to let me go see a pedeball game. For some reason he thinks I'll like it," Deadlock said with a shrug as he listened to the options available and thought that they all, except maybe for the races, sounded rather boring to him but did sound like things Prowl might enjoy.

"If it's anything like the ones I've seen, he thinks you'll like the shouting in the stands," Jazz said with a chuckle.

"I would not be surprised if he's hoping it will be a social event you will enjoy playing," Prowl suggested. "It is quite physical with limited rules about causing damage."

"They probably don't let you deactivate anyone, but that sounds more up my alley than anything else anyone's mentioned so far," Deadlock deadpanned. "It'd probably be more fun than these endless katas Kimark keeps trying to teach me. At least he doesn't expect me to sit and stare at a wall endlessly."

"That'll come when you believe it's worth it," Wing called as he landed just inside the balcony door.

"Looking good, Wing," Jazz cat-called cheerfully. "You cleaned up nicely after sewer duty yesterday."

"Don't remind me," Wing groaned theatrically as he bounded over and settled briefly on Thundercracker's lap for a hug, one the Seeker willingly gave. "Creator-hood suits you," he trilled.

"I hope it still does when she's an adult in a hundred and fifty vorns," Thundercracker chuckled, then checked out the variant of the gestalt badge Wing had gotten painted on. "What is this one?" he touched the designation glyph among theirs that wasn't one of theirs.

"Challenger of Ways. It's everyone I'm bonded to," Wing explained.
"Makes sense," Jazz said as he studied the badge on Wing's other side. "I recognize Dai Atlas and Dagger's designations in this one."

"Those I've trained that became Knights. The gold are still living, the red are not," Wing didn't hide that he felt the losses even though he was past grieving for them.

"It's a good way to remember the departed and honor their memory," Thundercracker said as he closed Wing firmly in another hug before releasing him to sit next to the Seeker.

"It is," Wing agreed.

"Do the colors mean anything?" Prowl asked.

"There are some in Nyon of who believe that writing the designation of the departed in red honors their memory. I felt it was an appropriate way to remember the Knights I've trained," Wing said with a curiously solemn expression.

"It is. What drew you to Nyon's culture?" Prowl asked with genuine curiosity.

"The group I encountered were colorful but incredibly practical. Every marking and color on a frame had specific meaning, and you could trace a mecha's entire lineage and know almost everything about their kin if you knew how to read it," Wing explained.

"A different form of designation reading," Prowl smiled with a bit of a doorwing wiggle and everyone simply knew he'd stuck a note in for his reformatted self to learn it. "Do your other colors draw from them?"

"Some, although I also followed my own instincts to make some of it work," Wing said. "To them a primarily white frame represents a servant to a cause which I found appropriate. Some of the red markings mean I am a warrior, and the lack of lineage marks means I am of clanless origin."

Thundercracker and Prowl shared a look before looking at Wing again.

"I'm surprised it didn't spread to the highly visual frametypes more," Prowl hummed. "What of the gold and black? Would I be correct that you matched Challenger of Ways' glyph color to its gem color?"

"I imagine it didn't spread to Seekers because it originated from grounders. I have noticed some of their color choices are similar to other cities; many medics chose to have white frames, and medics are servants to the cause of healing. The group I stayed didn't travel a lot and tended to be reclusive. It took me a while to get them to open up," Wing explained. "They normally mark bondmates with spark color although not in the exact same way I did with Challenger of Ways. A Knight's bond with a Great Sword doesn't translate well into their traditions. Gold has a number of different meanings, but using it this way in this context roughly means they are my students. If you actually examine the markings as carefully as they would all the glyphs on that side were originally done in gold and the red was placed over it to show they are gone."

"Huh. I thought medics were white to make it easier to show they were clean and red just stood out," Jazz said thoughtfully. "Do you know if they practiced spectralism or something that came about independent of the main form?"

"I don't think they ever practiced spectralism in its traditional form since I didn't notice a trend to use shades of blue and purple to represent grief and rage," Wing said thoughtfully. "I never did learn if the tradition about white came from seeing medics in other places and interpreted what they saw, pure chance or was adopted by other cities from Nyon's people."
"Did they come?" Prowl asked.

"What does the dark red mean?" Deadlock grunted with a nod to the nacelle with his designation on it.

"There were three small clans that chose to join the Exodus and survived the journey to settle here," Wing said. "I could introduce you to them if you're interested. Just don't ask them about colors and markings the first time you talk to them; they consider that impolite from an outsider."

"Let's wait on that until Prowl's new self decides if he wants to," Jazz suggested.

"I'll skip it," Deadlock shrugged.

"I expect he will wish to," Prowl voiced a cautious desire to learn as his new self.

"If he wants to I'll be willing to do the introductions," Wing agreed and looked around at almost everyone's new paint jobs and markings and what it meant for their acceptance here. Thinking about being accepted and the changes that were happening reminded him of how easily affectionate Thundercracker was being. "So, Thundercracker, how's your new roommate up in Aurora's eyrie? I haven't had a chance to meet her yet, but I've heard from some friends that she's not your average Seeker fledgling."

"None of them ran wild like Photosphere is rumored to have done. At least not without getting disciplined for it," Wing agreed. "I'll admit once she moved in I tracked down some stories from some of my civilian friends. I heard she almost succeeded in getting several other fledglings at school to assault the kitchen to get more treats."

"For her creators she is not," Thundercracker agreed. "She is very similar to the type Aurora and I are used to. Military coded. Her only issue is that she has spent her most formative stages in an environment that did not prepare her to control herself. I expect you saw a very different story in the fledglings Aurora raised despite having the same code."

"I'm not surprised she tried. She must be relatively mellow not to have succeeded," Thundercracker chuckled. "Though I do think she's quite mellow for what she is. As difficult as her mechling vorns are likely to be I expect by her adult frame she'll be disciplined enough in her understanding to become a member of society."

"Sounds like someone I could get along with," Deadlock said with a small grin.

"Only after you convinced her that you were worth it," Thundercracker smirked. "Put her on her back a few times and she may well like you."

"How different are military coded Seekers raised?" Prowl asked.

"With much more violence," Thundercracker was willingly blunt about it. "You can't shy away from beating them when they challenge, even as sparklings. Granting 'beating' a sparkling isn't something you'd recognize as such given how light their frames and armor is. They must understand that there is always someone faster, stronger, more agile than they are and that the price for disobedience is not worth what they gain. By her age the violence tends to be limited as they've learned it hurts to be insubordinate and we've long since moved on to teaching negotiation tactics along with how to advance in rank without fighting."

Prowl's optics were bight and his expression somewhere between shocked and horrified as he sought the words to express himself.
"Sounds like something some of the mecha I used to deal with on the streets should have learned," Deadlock grunted in agreement.

"It's not that dissimilar from ISO training," Jazz agreed, not elaborating on the actual differences.

"You beat a sparkling?" Prowl finally managed to stammer before Wing gathered himself from a similar reaction.

"When they need it," Thundercracker told him, then looked at Jazz. "ISO raises sparklings?"

"If we need to although mostly its mechlings ISO takes in," Jazz said. "Sometimes there was something about a sparkling that just screamed that it needed to be in ISO. Sometimes an operative would get sparked and decide to carry it to term. Neither situation happened often, but I've seen it more than once."

"Why would a sparkling ever deserve to be beaten?" Wing shuttered, wondering if he was going to need to rescue Photosphere.

"For violence primarily," Thundercracker told him. "Remember, these are not civilian mecha. They're coded for war; to fight and to think of violence first unless they know it's a bad idea. Rather like Deadlock, though it's rarely so severe. For one to make it it must understand that violence isn't the first response to frustration and taking isn't the correct response when they want something. The sooner the idea gets lodged in their processor the better it will be for everyone."

"It's still hard to believe a sparkling can be so dangerous that they have to be beaten by an adult," Wing said trying to reconcile what Thundercracker was saying with his own limited experience with sparklings.

"You've never been around an out-of-control military-coded fledgling," Thundercracker pointed out. "I know for a fact that Photosphere has hurt her siblings and her creators at times when she's lost control. It's been so dangerous at times that the Peacekeepers have been called repeatedly because of her."

"But as a sparkling?" Prowl pressed.

"That young it's not because they are dangerous but to teach them the value of self control before they are," Thundercracker reiterated. "Better to teach manners before they are required by society than after. It's simply that her coding understands violence and little else before they much, much older adults. It's generally agreed that a military coded Seeker won't reach maturity, the point when they don't require some supervision around civilians, until they are at least a thousand and fifteen hundred is not unknown. That's when they are raised right from hatching. Photosphere is likely to take much longer than most. She'll be in her mechling frame within three metacycles. That's a time when even well-behaved civilian coded mecha act out."

"So she's going to be even more destructive than a normal mechling? That's not going to go over well," Deadlock grunted. "She going to get stuck here like us?"

"It depends on how well she takes to her lessons before her flight upgrades, though yes, I expect she will be for some time. She's already a danger to those around her far more than any of us. It'll only be worse when she has thrusters and claws," Thundercracker acknowledged.

"I'm not afraid of some mechling Seeker, military-coded or not," Deadlock grunted as he finished his drink and looked around for their actual dinner now that Wing was here and had been given his appetizer. "I'll put her in her place if I need to."
"I wouldn't normally agree with that, however with this one, do it," Thundercracker gave his blessing. "I would recommend getting Aurora's okay as well. Legally Photosphere is her responsibility and she's the one who's likely to tear into Wing if you don't have clearance first."

"So on to the tasting menu," Jazz interrupted before it could get any more disturbing to Wing and Prowl. "Thanks to TC's wings and a bit of extra funding slipped our way we have a finger fuel sampler from each major district."

"A good way for all of us to figure out what we like and don't," Wing said, gratefully seizing the change of topic before his opinion of Thundercracker went into a tailspin. He'd almost expected this sort of talk from Deadlock but not from the Seeker that had been doting on him for so long. "No fair refusing to at least try everything since you never know what you might like."

"I still think most Rust Sea cuisine could double as paint stripper, but I'll try it again," Jazz said with a cheerful shrug.

"I think Praxian beats it," Deadlock grunted as he reached for something red and translucent in a round glass.

"That's from Vos. You'll get a half cube of high grade off it," Thundercracker chuckled.

"That makes this a real celebration then," Deadlock took a long drink, enjoying the stronger kick of jet fuel.

"Speaking of Vos," Wing said as he picked up a small wafer-like sandwich from Yuss, "without going into specifics how is your civilian project going, Jazz?"

"Really well," he smiled brightly. "She's good with accepting suggestions and she's paying on time. It's actually quite fun to have such a simple project."

"Simple compared to the Citadel," Wing agreed. "You certainly stirred things up around here, and it's causing some good permanent changes. Thorn, Talon, Demeter ... they and others did pay attention when they were patrolling, but so many became lax because there was no real threat here. The Knights were getting too complacent here; it's part of why I was so determined to go on a walkabout off planet to get a fresh perspective."

"Getting lax happened even on Cybertron off the front lines. It says a lot for discipline that anyone did still pay attention here," Jazz smiled at him. "So how much am I hated by the rank and file for the shake-up?"

Wing laughed a bit, "Well, for some reason no one complains directly when I'm around to hear it, but some friends of mine say a few of the older Knights are a bit annoyed that they were scolded like a bunch of half-blind recruits. Most of the Knights understand that you were doing your job, and there are a few like Thorn who are actually enjoying some of the changes. It's not just the fliers paying more attention to the ceilings either. I heard a couple of grounders comment that they didn't know some of the paths up there even existed until they helped you rewire things."

"I'm not surprised. Almost no one looks up inside," Jazz chuckled. "Glad it's not being taken too badly though."

"You're far too sociable to be hated by many," Prowl said as he tried a crunchy glowing green cross rose cut item. His optics brightened slightly and his doorwings gave a happy flutter.

"That was from the Rust Sea," Jazz supplied. "Didn't know you liked spice Prowler."
"I don't care for it on its own. This is rather pleasant," Prowl admitted. "It has a good energy level for something so solid as well."

"I'm glad you've got another project you can relax and enjoy doing," Wing said as he picked up a pink gel sphere out of a bed of glow rose petals. "Mixing things up like that keeps things fresh and interesting. I've been playing camera check for some of the other Knights when they're on duty. We've even started making a little game out of it; someone hides an object and whoever finds it during their duty shift gets a point. Axe doesn't mind; he says it'll help keep the players paying attention so they don't start slacking off again later."

"What's the final prize and goal?" Prowl asked with definite interest.

"We still haven't formalized the rules so things are still in flux. Basically, you pay a shanix into the pot to join the game, and a shanix for every five test symbols you want to use. The test symbols are affixed to whatever you're hiding. If no one spots it during the orn, you get five to ten sword points based on a difficulty chart that Thorn is developing. Every member that spots the test, realizes what it is and reports it to Thorn gets a shield point which also deducts a sword point from your tally. Some of the Knights have gotten really creative and amusing with their ideas. Atl hid a practice sword in a partially jammed open supply cabinet; anyone just trying to close the door and calling maintenance didn't get a point. Matorral sat at a table in the library in front of a camera motionless waiting to see if anyone would notice she wasn't moving," Wing chuckled. "Mostly we're playing for bragging rights right now and to keep patrols interesting. Eventually we're going to take all the collected shanix and come up with a prize."

"Why not just a share of the pot?" Deadlock suggested. "Seems simpler and who doesn't have use for a few extra shanix?"

"That's the other idea as a prize, although if we do that we're debating having your built up points drop by based on the amount you take out," Wing agreed. "It's a fun game for a lot of different mindsets. Thorn is enjoying cataloging and keeping track of everything."

"Has Talon gotten involved? It seems like something he'd enjoy a great deal," Prowl made no secret that he found it appealing as well.

"He's waiting for us to sort out the rules," Wing snickered.

"Something about not getting involved without knowing what he's getting into," Prowl deadpanned and claimed a light spiral.

"Exactly," Wing snickered. "I think Dai Atlas is tolerating it because it's keeping a lot of the pranksters busy."

"It's also keeping those involved alert and paying attention to their surroundings," Thundercracker said as he picked up a small piece from the zarita mattri and tried it. Wincing, he grabbed a midnight star and crushed it in his mouth to cut the spice.

"If he's a good leader he tolerates it because it causes no harm," Jazz suggested. "At those rates it's very hard to lose anything of value."

"That's the main reason we're keeping costs and rewards so low," Wing agreed. "This is meant to be a fun, friendly competition not a way to bankrupt someone."

"There are much easier ways to do that," Deadlock grunted. "Risk is different from games."

"Especially games of skill," Prowl agreed as he tried a flower of three colors of liquid energon
contained in thin glass pipes twisted around each other.

"There are a few Knights who enjoy a friendly game of cards on a regular basis, but I understand that any betting at the table typically involves treats not money," Wing admitted.

"That can get quite expensive, though I doubt it does," Prowl hummed thoughtfully. "A dozen of those jet high grade jellies you are so fond of costs more than this entire meal if I did the math right."

"Which you did," Jazz chuckled. "Seriously though, doesn't the code object to serious gambling?"

"Serious gambling, yes, just as we aren't to engage in over-indulgences of any other kind. A competition like the one we're creating, where the fees and monetary rewards are secondary to actual accomplishments, is fine," Wing sighed and nibbled on a small purple energon disk with green flecks in it. "The rules of Order were never intended to separate us from the pleasures of life, only to make certain that those pleasures didn't become our masters."

"Getting overcharged is a pleasure in life," Deadlock objected.

"Getting mildly overcharged occasionally isn't bad; after all I did that once in a while during our trip here. Spending all your time overcharged isn't good for you mentally or physically," Wing pointed out. "It also impacts your ability to perform your duties."

"There's a huge difference between getting completely blitzed when you want to and being overcharged all the time," Deadlock snapped. "Even bigger than the one between mildly overcharged and completely blitzed."

"I'm not saying there isn't a difference between those things," Wing backed off, trying to diffuse the situation before it got as tense as it had when they were discussing Seeker sparklings. "Like I was saying, the rules are to try to minimize the chances of harm being caused to anyone. Kimark or some of the other warriors would probably be better at explaining that distinction; I've never actually gotten completely blitzed."

Deadlock blinked, his features going slack in shock enough to earn a chuckle from Thundercracker.

"You may have just broken him," Jazz grinned at Wing.

"How could you not do that at least once?" Deadlock gathered himself.

Wing paused for moment to reflect before speaking quietly. "Even though I left the stunt clan early in my existence it was drilled into me that anything other than perfect control in flight was potentially disastrous. One of the last things I'd want to do is get overcharged, go out flying and crash into someone."

"It's common for duty-oriented types to be like that," Prowl backed Wing up.

"Have you gotten overcharged?" Jazz suddenly asked as he tried to think of any time he'd seen it. Or even a reference to it.

"A few times, though not since I became a command officer," Prowl answered honestly.

"I seldom get overcharged either," Thundercracker admitted. "It was frowned upon when I was an Air Martial, and although Starscream often made me want to drink, I didn't dare do so most of the time. It would have made me too vulnerable a target to those wanting to take him down."

"Unless Skywarp was there to protect you," Prowl suggested.
"Or they both were," Thundercracker nodded his wings. "Supplies kept it in check other times."

All optics turned to Jazz.

"Pretending to be more overcharged than you actually are is a valid SpecOps tactic for slipping false information out or building a cover. Actually getting so overcharged you're a risk to yourself is suicidal on a mission," Jazz sighed. "Did I do it occasionally back on base, yes, because there are things you want to forget or mourn. I didn't happen very often though since it wasn't safe to do so around anyone not in SpecOps."

"I believe everyone here has things they'd like to forget," Prowl agreed quietly.

"So true. So what is everyone liking?" Jazz asked for a new subject.
Orn 295

Chapter Summary

Thundercracker flight class 28. Jazz works on Crimson Sprite's greenhouses (4-6 joors). Prowl/Dagger go out to a Praxian diner and meet Towodi since Prowl is done parsing his memories and recovered.

Jazz grumbled to himself as he checked the feed from the infrared camera aimed at the main vent in the larger greenhouse. This was the fifth time he'd adjusted it, but it still wasn't focusing properly and the images were almost useless for identification purposes. Something was obviously wrong internally, and it was going to take time to open it up and fix it properly. It left him with a choice: do the work himself or try to work with the laws of this place and find out just what kind of response a defective object return turned into.

The first was his reflex but it wasn't a good use of his time when the law said he should be able to get a replacement for free. It also irritated him personally and professionally to pay good shanix for something that didn't work correctly in the first place. He could try the legal route first and repair it if that didn't work. At least this way he had options besides wasting shanix buying another one or being stupid and risking his citizenship goal by stealing a replacement. After all, he'd be the first logical suspect if one disappeared.

Path set he quickly unhooked it from the system and stored it in his subspace for the drive to the store he'd bought it from. One quick check confirmed all the extra parts were in his subspace with it. He wasn't going to be accused of trying to cheat the store. Heading over to the ladder, he called up to Matorral who was checking some of the wiring upstairs. "Hey, I need to go return this camera. You at a good stopping point?"

"Sure," she grinned down even if he couldn't quite see her and made short work of pausing and climbing down to him.

"Alright, they should still be open so let's head over," Jazz said as the pair headed outside and transformed for the drive. Having Matorral along for the trip was a bit reassuring since the store was unlikely to try to cheat someone with a Knight present, but it also meant that he had to be on his best behavior because she would report it if he got frustrated and stepped out of line. At least Matorral was a mellow and level Knight even by their standards and she drove well despite her heavy all terrain alt. It wasn't as if he could go all out on city streets anyway.

It still felt wonderful to be on his wheels and driving again. It'd be vorns before the good wore off of that. Having a friendly field nearby made it that much better.

They passed a number of civilians on the road but nothing resembling a traffic jam or other such annoyance. It didn't take too long to reach the still open shop. Jazz transformed and waited for Matorral to transform before entering.

"Hello Jazz," the clerk greeted him with a smile. "How can I help you?"

"I've got a bit of a problem with one of the cameras I picked up the other orn," Jazz said as he approached the clerk. He kept a bit of a smile on his face as he pulled the defective camera out of his
subspace.

"Oh, I hate it when that happens," the clerk scowled but his teek was of sympathy as he reached down and produced a datpad. "If you'd fill that out. Do you want a refund or replacement?"

"Replacement," Jazz said keeping the surprise out of his voice that this was going so easily. He passed the camera over to the clerk as he took the datpad and started filling it out. Some of the questions were a bit hard to answer given his current circumstances.

"What's it doing or not doing?" the clerk asked as he started examining the camera.

"I can't get it to focus. The rest are working fine. It's just that one," Jazz said as he struggled with the form. He sent a quiet teek of thanks when Matorral pinged him the answers to some things, like his address.

"Hmm, I assume you already checked the lenses for any protective films," the clerk said as he hooked it up to a nearby monitor and tried to focus it on a display. "Had a mech in a few orn back that hadn't taken any of it off his new toy and was angry it wasn't filming right."

"Yeah, that was one of the first things I checked," Jazz said as he tried to figure out why all this information was needed for something this basic. Was it really necessary to get all this information just to take a new one out of a box and swap them? "I think some of the mechanisms are calibrated incorrectly."

"Yeah, I agree. It's got issues," the clerk nodded. "We'll check the replacement before you leave. Glad it's just the one."

"I can grab it," Matorral offered.

"Thanks. It's the third shelf on the right," the clerk said as he disconnected the defective camera. "Do you have the packaging with you?"

"Yeah," Jazz said as he handed the box over as well. He still wasn't certain why he'd had to dig it out of the trash in order to get a new box to throw away, but it was what the return instructions had said to do.

"Great," the clerk perked up, clearly pleased he'd read those instructions. He accepted the new one from Matorral, scanned it into the system and unpacked it to do the check that it was a good one.

Jazz waited patiently for him to finish hooking it up to the monitor. This return process was going a lot smoother than he'd really expected it to, but he really didn't want to have to make another trip and go through everything again. It'd be a lot easier if the clerk was the one who found out whether this one was defective or not; that way it would be harder for anyone to accuse him of tampering with it. He watched the monitor on what it showed and felt confident that if the feed was real then the camera would be working.

"This one looks good. Are you satisfied with the tests I ran?"

"Seems to be working right. Is there anything else we need to do?" Jazz asked. A part of him wanted to actually handle it himself first, but he need to learn to go along with the civilian way of doing things. At least he'd gotten to see this one in action before he got back to the greenhouse.

The clerk glanced over the datpad, nodded when he saw the signature and put it away. "That's it. I hope this one works for you," he said with an honest smile and handed the once more boxed camera over.
"Thanks. You ready to head out?" Jazz said, glancing over at Matorral to see if there was anything he need to do that he was missing.

"Ready," she smiled and walked out with him. They had transformed and were driving back before she spoke. ::That went well from my perspective. What of yours?::

::It went better than I expected. Why do they need the box? I'm just going to throw this one out too,:: Jazz asked.

::Sometimes the boxes have serial numbers on them for some pieces of equipment. I think the manufacturers require defective product back in the correct package,:: Matorral said.

::Hu. Never thought of that.:: Jazz admitted. ::I guess it might make shipping it back easier too, if it's going back to the manufacturer.::

::It might also make it harder for someone to try to return stolen equipment as well,:: Matorral said after some thought. ::Anyway, you seemed to make a good impression on the clerk by being so careful to follow instructions.::

::Glad to hear it. I still hope it won't be a common thing I have to do,:: Jazz said honestly. ::Just curious, why did you volunteer for today?::

::Partly because I got to see these plants and got to get out of the Citadel as part of my chores.:: Matorral admitted. ::I also found it interesting when I was helping you with the Citadel's systems. I wanted to see how different it was in a smaller setting and stricter rules.::

::So your alt isn't just an aesthetic thing. You do have some explorer coding,:: Jazz made the connection with Hound.

::Yes. My background in xeno-exploration was why I was recruited. I only became a Knight during the trip here after working with them so much,:: she explained.

::Do you get to go out exploring the other caves and tunnels much?:: Jazz asked, curious but not wanting to give the impression he was looking for ways to escape.

::Whenever I feel like it. Sometimes on my personal joors, sometimes I'll asks for a longer time as an assignment of some sort or a walkabout. The Sovereign is very accommodating of both coding and interests so long as the code and the Order are in good standing,:: she explained readily. ::With as peaceful as it is and a solid complement to keep the Citadel in good shape he'll rarely turn down a request.::

::Unless it involves Wing wants to go flying outside,:: Jazz said. He understood why Dai Atlas would object to that from a practical standpoint, but this was a way to see how one of the other Knights viewed that relationship.

::Well, yes, because he wants to go to the surface and above into the sky where he can be seen,:: Matorral tried to emphasize the important differences. ::I go caving; exploring down here. No one goes to the surface unless it's a raid to wipe out some settlement that's become dangerous to us.::

::Wing told us about the occasional groups of slavers and pirates that make camp up there,:: Jazz said. ::I know my gestalt wouldn't mind helping out if a group gets too dangerous.::

::Have any of you told the Sovereign that?:: she asked.

::Pretty sure he knows,:: Jazz tried to think back and track what he knew the big mech had been told.
All five of us are warriors. Even Prowl.

He's a very good one from what he's shown so far. He'll be a Knight in time as well from what I've heard. Matorral said.

That's what his current plans are. I doubt they're going to change, but we'll see what happens once he's done with the grand master tests. Jazz said thinking about his gestalt mate who he'd seen openly enjoying spending his free time with the Praxian Knights. It was so surprising to see Prowl of all mechs developing a real social life, and it was one of the better side effects of their new life. Whatever had broken to bring it about he sincerely hoped it remained after the reformat. Prowl's smile wasn't creepy anymore and no one would mistake him for a drone.

Indeed we will. I am sure that the conversation is not complete about his future, whatever he may become. He has a choice now. she said with the conviction of a true believer.

More than he ever had before. Jazz agreed as the greenhouses came into view. That's true for most of us though. There are a lot of opportunities available here.

There are and you can be anything you want. she trilled happily at a truth she believed in.

Right now entertainer and security expert are looking like a good future. Jazz said agreeably as they pulled up to the job site.

Dagger was delighted to drive just in front of Prowl, to teek how good it felt to the other Praxian to be driving again, to patrol, however abstractly, a city once more. It made him appreciate how important the badly mangled Enforcer coding that still drove much of Prowl's base reactions was. Driving, racing, was a Praxian thing, but Praxians for the most part could be content with a racetrack. That going in circles took the edge of for Prowl, he loved the chase and challenge of it, but this, driving among people living their lives soothed a completely different part of the need to drive. Some might have called it a need to see and teek those he was protecting. Regardless of what he called it, driving like this was something they were going to have to do more often. He was half tempted to take a more circumvent route to give Prowl more time to enjoy the drive, but it wouldn't due for them to be late for dinner. Danic's was having a popular quartet play tonight, and he wanted to get there before all the seats filled up.

When they pulled into the transformation lane for the large restaurant-entertainment venue Prowl's field teeked his delight at the wash of long lost familiar from the architecture to the decor to the music to the dominant frametypes. There were chevrons and doorwings or wings everywhere. It was enough to draw an x-vent of relaxation from Prowl as he took it all in.

"Welcome to Danic's," Dagger said, pausing to let Prowl settle before starting inside. He knew it was going to take many more outings like this before Prowl stopped being surprised by how many Praxians were actually still online.

Once they were inside it was only a short wait until the teal and gray hostess greeted them.

"Welcome, how many in your party today?"

"Three," Dagger answered smoothly. "Towodi should be here soon if he isn't here."

She paused briefly to check. "He has not arrived. Do you have a location preference?"

Prowl gave a glance at Dagger, who gave him a wing-wiggle. "Table near the dance floor."

"A very popular choice. Enjoy your dinner," she said pleasantly as a mech stepped forward to guide
them to their table.

They were escorted to a spot one row away from the dance floor allowing easy access with less of a chance of being accidentally bumped by dancers. Once they were seated the waiter politely listed the specials for the day and left to bring out some cubes of low grade and basket of puffs in hand for them while they waited.

Prowl's doorwings gave a delighted quiver when he spotted what was in the basket and Dagger couldn't help but smile.

"So many wonderful things were saved," Prowl actually purred as he popped an arsenic and purple gold dusted quartz puffs into his mouth.

"You know being around your unit reminds me to enjoy all the small pleasures I usually take for granted," Dagger said as he picked out a copper oxide and silicone dusted quartz puffs to enjoy.

"It's a good thing to remember. I'm glad you didn't have to suffer the losses to appreciate what you have more," Prowl said before taking another puff.

"It's a good thing you're getting to experience all of this now," Dagger said as he nibbled on his own puff. "We'll have to make some more excursions now that you have some more free time."

"The race track was great, and I've heard about the markets. Did you have anything else to show me?" Prowl asked conversationally.

"There are a few crystal gardens around that were started shortly after we settled here. There is a beautiful display of ametrines on one of the paths. There's also a special crystal alcove where several mecha have started growing unusual metallic crystals like cesium and osmium. We could visit them some time," Dagger offered.

"I'd like that very much. How in tune with being Praxian are most of the Praxian Knights?" Prowl asked quietly.

"Most of us do not have a difficulty balancing the two viewpoints of life, especially those of us that practice Teris-Spi," Dagger said. "The thing that some have issues with is that the Code views all frame types as equally important and valuable."

"I'm surprised you have so many Seekers," Prowl said honestly. "As proud as Praxians are, Seekers tend to be far worse in my experience. Was the Order founded by a priest? Many held that view."

"The Seekers we do attract seem to like the discipline and structure," Dagger shrugged, "A lot of the original members of the Circle of Light were priests, although I don't think Windsong was one originally."

"She still had a foundation membership well versed in the idea," Prowl hummed. One doorwing flicked and Dagger looked up to see Towodi coming in. He spoke briefly to the hostess before walking towards them with a wide smile.

"Good orn, Towodi," Prowl said as he flicked his doorwings lightly. "I'm pleased you could join us."

"So am I. You were fun to talk to at the show," Towodi said as he sat down and claimed a puff. "I do love to eat here."

"They keep a good sound balance so it's easy to talk while enjoying the music. So many places Wing
likes to go you're almost better off comming than talking," Dagger agreed as he contemplated what to order. "We're definitely going to have to get a selection of star crunches for dessert. I can never pass them up here."

"Doesn't he call those clubs, not diners?" Prowl asked even as his doorwings agreed on desert. He turned off his menu display to indicate he was ready. "Do we wish to share a appetizer sampler?"

"I'm game," Towodi agreed willingly to both. "I've never had anything here I didn't enjoy."

Dagger did as well and waited for the waiter to reach them. "We'll start with the Medley Sampler. For my meal, I'd like an order of grilled illuminun with a side of green klaver."

The waiter dipped his doorwings in acknowledgment as it was recorded and looked to Prowl, then Towodi before leaving them in peace with a cube of low grade for the rotor and another basket of puffs.

"These are the best I can recall having," Prowl said after claiming one.

"They're amazingly good and they'll keep bringing baskets until you turn it over," Towodi agreed with a grin.

"Just don't fill up on them; we have a full meal and dessert coming," Dagger said with a chuckle even as he discretely monitored Prowl's intake of the puffs. The tactician typically used a lot more fuel than most Praxian frame types, but Dagger was well aware that the newcomers all had issues leaving fuel on a table and puffs were not energy dense by any measure. It wasn't the kind of fuel Prowl could actually afford to consume too many of or he'd run out of energy processing it. Fortunately Prowl had selected a potent main meal so there was room for some low-energy goodies.

The warning was enough to cause Prowl to pause, look at the number of puffs and taking one more before slowing down considerably to the point where he took no more than one for each one his companions took.

"I know you're new; how are you settling in?" Towodi asked politely.

"It has been difficult adjusting to the reality that the war is over for us," Prowl admitted as he carefully nibbled on the puff in his hand. "We are all grateful for the opportunities and options we now have although it will take a while for us to properly adjust to civilian life. I haven't had many opportunities to explore since I am still testing Blacktip for grand master status."

"Oh," Towodi blinked in surprise. "What did you just finish?"

"Parsing my entire memory core for reports. It took a long time," Prowl said easily.

"Ug, I can imagine. I'm glad you're done then and have some free time," Towodi briefly made a face before settling. "What are you looking forward to with your free time now?"

"I am particularly looking forward to racing and exploring the city, especially the Praxian district," Prowl admitted. "It's been far too long since I even hoped to see more than a handful of my own frame kin in one place."

Towodi blinked. "You really mean literally. Wow. I always thought of the settlement here as small."

"It was at one point," Prowl agreed. "Just not anymore."

"Well Praxus still has the finest tracks for ground frames. Helix for rotors. Seekers and stunt frames
took over the entire upper atmosphere," Towodi snorted playfully.

"That's not much of a surprise since those that came along on the Exodus were used to so much more room to fly," Dagger said with a small chuckle.

"It's better than them fighting over the air space," Prowl agreed. "Thundercracker has been enjoying his time in the air here. Although there is less room it is much safer to fly here above the city than back on Cybertron."

"Glad to hear it. I can't imagine he could settle down if the flying wasn't good enough," Towodi said. "What about the rest of your rather unusual flight?"

"I'm looking forward to collecting all the terms used for us," Prowl chuckled at the new variant. "Thundercracker and Jazz are settling in and figuring out their places in the civilian world. Wing is working his way back into the Knights' good graces, while Deadlock has decided to join them."

"And you, once you're done with grade master testing?" Towodi asked.

"The Knights, most likely. I haven't decided for certain," Prowl told him, then paused as their meals arrived. "How did your show go?"

"Very well. I sold five pieces to different patrons and got a lead on a commission," Towodi said after he finished off a nickel-dusted puff.

"That is excellent. Do you have plans for your next show?" Prowl asked, offering the final puff to Dagger who accepted it with a smile and noted that the basket was turned upside down.

"Thanks. Currently I'm working on a piece inspired by a particular color pattern I saw in a small fire a little while back," Towodi said after he took a small nibble. "I'm thinking of making a series of images based on movement and color shifts."

"Where did you see a small fire?" Prowl was genuinely curious.

"I was visiting a friend over in New Simfur during one of their celebrations when a homemade firework went off too close to the ground. The roof of a building started to catch fire so I helped a couple of fliers dump some sand and suppressant on it to keep it under control until the actual fire department arrived. It wasn't very big and didn't do a lot of damage, but it was amazing to actually look at it," Towodi admitted.

"How did fireworks create a fire?" Prowl asked with a bewildered look that didn't survive his next bite of fuel, smoothing his expression to one of great enjoyment.

"I doubt the building did," Dagger chuckled. "But even down here on a sand world organic debris is everywhere and it burns readily."

"Plus the high grade that was being consumed up there and homemade fireworks," Towodi grinned, more than a bit amused by Prowl's reactions. "The mecha on the ground didn't really know what was happening. Most of them thought it was just another part of the show until the actual fire department arrived."

"Did anyone get in trouble for it?" Dagger asked.

"The mecha who created the fireworks had to pay a fine," Towodi admitted.

"Reasonable," Prowl decided after considering it. "As much as I've come to disagree with many
regulations some really are for safety."

"Causing potential injury to others through carelessness or negligence is something that should not be tolerated," Dagger agreed.

"Anyway, I haven't forgotten the flickers of the flames, and now seemed like to a good time to work with that image," Towodi said.

"It will be interesting to see. Even the pieces I don't understand show your skill in sculpting," Prowl spoke honestly. "How long does it take to create something?"

"It depends on the size and complexity of the piece and if I can work uninterrupted," Towodi said thoughtfully. "It can be anywhere from a few orn to almost a vorn for a truly complicated and frustrating piece."

"Rather like tactical plans," Prowl chuckled before becoming lost in his meal for another bite.

"Or learning a new kata," Dagger agreed from his own history, then smiled. "He's quite handsome when he's in bliss."

"Very much so," Towodi agreed. "It's not often you see such honest enjoyment. I wouldn't mind seeing it more often."

"It happens often as I rediscover the enjoyment of civilization," Prowl purred. "As difficult as it was to accept coming here and remaining I'm glad I succeeded."

"I'm glad you came as well," Towodi said with a grin. "Everyone I've met in your flight so far would make wonderful models for sculptures."

"Perhaps you'd like Flightplan for it as well. I have to admit Thundercracker had quite the expression when you were trying to convince him to model for you," Prowl said before getting a little lost in his fuel.

"That would be incredible to see," Towodi murmured, pausing to ponder the implications of such a being. "So much potential for power and grace in one being."

"Power definitely. Grace we'll need a few centuries to work on. We've barely spent a couple orns worth of joors combined," Prowl cautioned. "And there is Dai Atlas to petition for it as well. He'll have to approve any combined time until we are all citizens and likely longer."

"Why longer?" Dagger asked.

"With two or three of us as Knights he does have the authority to stop it if he deems it important enough," Prowl answered. "I do expect it is possible to arrange it in time."

"Does that mean you agree to model for me?" Towodi purred and leaned closer and licked his field out.

"Now that I have time, if Dagger doesn't mind," Prowl purred in reply, though his look was clearly for his keeper's permission.

"I don't mind," Dagger said with a chuckle, enjoying the banter between his charge and the artist. "We can make time to do that if you truly wish to model for him."

"Model and more, if we're in the mood," Towodi rumbled and got a doorwing-flick of agreement.
"Do you think you'll go for the new paint and frame mods I've heard your flight talking about?"

"I expect so though I haven't made any choices on what yet," Prowl said before getting lost in his meal for a klik.

"Well, there are a lot of options available. We could check out Deco's shop or visit some of the Praxian frame artists around here," Towodi offered.

"Indeed. I'm sure I will begin with Deco. It is simply too wasteful for me to agree to for a decacorn or less. I'm very comfortable with this look. It will last me until the reformat," Prowl declined politely. "Let the new mech decide what he wants to look like with minimal influence."

"New mech?" Towodi asked staring at Prowl curiously.

"That's what a reformat does. It strips all personal memory and takes coding to the base one was created with. Mine will be edited to make it more in line with this city though I do not anticipate it will make that large a difference," Prowl explained. "Enforcers serve and protect. Shifting that to come in line with the Knights is not going to take much."

Towodi glanced between Dagger and Prowl for a long moment trying to make sense what the other Praxian was saying. "You're requesting to be reformatted into a new mech? I've never heard of anyone voluntarily making that choice."

"It's common in many fields, none of them those kindled mecha go into often. It's more resource-efficient than decommissioning a perfectly good frame when the mech can do longer do their job," Prowl explained. He sipped at his cube and regarded Towodi quietly. "I expect you also haven't known many who walked out of their city's ruins. Everyone has a limit to how much they can endure. I reached mine a very long time ago. My coding simply prevented me from doing anything about it until I had a commander willing to allow me to. It may sound strange but I'm looking forward to not hurting anymore."

"Strange but I can vaguely understand some of the sentiment," Towodi said thoughtfully. "It would be horrific to someone with protective coding to lose their charges. It isn't in any way the same thing, but I can't imagine living without my art. Hopefully you can enjoy your last decaorn or so."

"I intend to. There is a freedom in knowing that there are no possible repercussions for anything you may wish to do," Prowl smiled as he shoved his pain back into the background where it couldn't hamper a good evening.

Dagger quirked an optic ridge at that.

"I'm an Enforcer at spark. I love what I was originally created to be," Prowl smiled in understanding. "Improper or shameful no longer have meaning as it will not have impact after the reformat. Criminal is still criminal."

"I know there are races available pretty much any time you're free to go, and there are other restaurants I'd like to introduce you to if you're willing. I'd love to know what else I can help you do with your time now that it is your own," Towodi said as he processed looking forward to ceasing to exist in less than a decaorn and what he'd want to do if he knew he'd deactivate that soon. Party hard, indulge in everything he'd been afraid to for any number of reasons and never have an empty berth was the immediate start of that list.

"Thank you," Prowl trilled as his mood settled firmly back into happy-relaxed. "I want to enjoy having a frame. Racing, good fuel, pleasure and exploring."
"And recharge," Dagger grinned at him.

"And recharge," Prowl agreed. "A soft berth and blankets are a wonderful thing."

"I've got a wonderfully soft one if you want to try it out after you model for me. For pleasure or recharge, either way it would be a delight to have either or both of you there," Towodi flirted back at the pair. If it was truly Prowl's last few orns, he was going to do his part to make them enjoyable ones.

"I would enjoy that," Prowl said willingly with a look that invited Dagger to join them or not as he pleased.

"Just comm Jazz. I don't want him waking us up." Dagger chuckled softly.

"I will," Prowl actually rolled his optics.

"Jazz will check in on you?" Towodi asked curiously. "He didn't strike me as the over-protective one in the group when we met but first impressions are sometimes wrong."

"Given a long enough absence they'd all come looking. Jazz is just the one who does berth-checks every night to make sure we're still safe," Prowl smiled rather fondly for it. "He's not over-protective in the usual way but he's likely to cause a fuss if he can't find one of us. Gestalt coding made all of us want to be sure the others are safe. We just express it differently."

"As all of us do at times," Dagger agreed politely. "It does make sense given the situation the four of you came from before you arrived here. Having someone unaccounted for might have meant serious trouble. Just because it's safer here doesn't mean any of your coding has finished adjusting yet."

"I can see that," Towodi hummed thoughtfully. "It's a bit like creator coding then."

"That aspect yes," Prowl turned the basket back over as he neared the end of his meal. "Are you interested in any of the arts besides sculpting?"

"I dabble sometimes in painting although it's nothing I'd ever try to sell," Towodi said with a self-deprecating grin. "I learned to play a tune or two on a pyrophone organ when I was a mechling, but I'm strictly amateur level."

"One does not need to be skilled to enjoy doing something," Prowl smiled softly. "Just check out Thundercracker's writing."

"What do you mean?" Dagger asked curiously.

"His grammar and glyph choice are respectable. Past that he tends to write terrible romantic fanfiction," Prowl summed up what he knew. "He prefers writing stories with organics as the main characters, but he doesn't do a very good job creating a convincing world or compelling interactions. Those that don't interface as we do..." he shuddered faintly. "I will never forgive Jazz for putting a couple hundred of them on a datapad labeled intelligence reports."

"Perhaps it's a good thing that he's looking at other occupations and could take the time to learn to improve," Dagger said. "Although there is a small market for deliberately bad poetry and stories."

"I think he'll be horrified to find out it would qualify," Prowl said softly. "He really does enjoy writing. Though I agree it's good that he has solid prospects in other fields and they're respectable to his new flock."
"Maybe your flight could introduce him alternative scenarios to write by making suggestions of things you want to read? He may do better actually writing what he knows compared to the logistics of making his own worlds?" Towodi suggested, trying to think of ways to help the attractive Seeker succeed in his hobby without insulting him.

Prowl hummed thoughtfully and nodded his doorwings as a fresh basket of puffs arrived. "It can't hurt. Now that he's in a place where it's plausible I might point him to actual data on how organics and some of their societies work. If he understands them he might write them better."

"Or Wing could ask for stories about Vos and ask Thundercracker to write them down," Dagger suggested. "It might get him thinking about writing about something other than organics. Curious how a Seeker decided that would be a good topic to focus upon."

"That I never asked about," Prowl said thoughtfully. "You're right. It is extremely curious. Perhaps he simply wanted something completely unrelated to the war to write about. It is worth a question to him."

"He may have found inspiration in something involving organics and ran with it," Towodi said with a shrug. "I've found inspiration in odder things."

"Like a fire," Prowl trilled playfully with a glance at Towodi's empty plate. "Or perhaps dancing?"

"Would you like to be one of my inspirations?" Towodi said with a glance out at the dance floor and taking in the melody being played by the quartet. "I don't know if you recognize this piece but it is based on a classic bolero."

"Not this piece, though I do recognize the base," Prowl assured him with a smile. "And I would like to inspire you."

"I'd love to see this," Dagger said as he settled back to enjoy the show and bask in Prowl not just enjoying himself but asking for what he wanted. The freedom of his pending reformat really was doing wonders for his enjoyment of existing.

Towodi rose and offered a hand to Prowl to escort him between a pair of tables and onto the dance floor. Lightly guiding Prowl around until they settled touching each other's shoulder with one hand while the other pair were extended, Towodi started to back away from Prowl. He was delighted as Prowl easily followed his movements across the floor and the warming of enjoyment in Prowl's field. It wasn't long before he was sure that Prowl didn't just know the base music, he did know how to dance respectably well. Nothing to the level of Jazz to be sure but more than well enough to enjoy himself.

When Prowl's helm rested on his shoulder in the moments it was possible he felt himself warm at the grounder's mood. There was arousal but it was the soft arousal of one who wanted gentle, slow lovemaking. It was going to be a rare treat for such a short term engagement to want it as slow as this dance.

Dagger couldn't help but smile as he watched them continue to spin and turn in time with the slow music. While they didn't have the grace of long time partners who knew each other's frames and moves perfectly, Towodi and Prowl were obviously growing even more comfortable with each other as a few other couples danced around them. It fueled a curiosity Dagger had long had about why certain individuals seemed to click immediately. It wasn't as if this pair had much of anything in common that he knew about, they weren't the other's preferred frametype and neither were shy on options. He could believe that Prowl's coding hadn't accepted that yet except for the fact that he hadn't reacted this with any of the Praxian Knights who'd spent time in his berth. There really was no
reason for how smoothly they seemed to mesh and it gave him concern for what would happen after
the reformat. Would the newly created mech respond to Towodi the same way? Would Towodi want
anything to do with a Knight in the long run?

There wasn't much Dagger could do about it but keep careful watch and be ready if it went
sideways.

Until then, smile, relax and enjoy seeing his charge enjoying himself for the first time in a very, very
long time.

They continued to dance, graceful doorwings and rotors highlighting their fluid movements. Prowl
let Towodi dip him several times during the dance, displaying some amount of trust in someone he
had only recently met. It was less of a surprise that Towodi allowed Prowl the same privileges when
they switched the lead after two songs.

After four they came back to the table and sat. Prowl casually consumed two puffs before nudging
the basket and its remaining three puffs towards the center of the table.

"You two were wonderful to watch out there," Dagger admitted as he picked up a puff and
delicately nibbled on it. "I'm glad I got to enjoy the show."

"I'm pleased you enjoyed it," Prowl smiled and relaxed as Towodi took the subtle hint to claim a puff
so Prowl could take the last one and turn the basket over. "Are you inclined to watch or join in
tonight?"

"How about I watch at first and then join in when the mood suits us all?" Dagger said with a
mischiefous grin as he finished the puff. "It'll give you two a chance to get to know each other for a
bit."

"It works for me," Towodi rumbled and stood, offering a hand to Prowl. He smiled warmly at his
lover for the night when it was accepted. He'd heard enough to know what was happening was an
accomplishment and he was intent on encouraging what they were feeling. It made him regret that he
had to leave Prowl and Dagger on the ground for the trip to his apartment but at least his alt could fly
as slowly as they drove. It wasn't something that could be said of many of his lovers. Jet engines
didn't go slow.

The two grounders following him certain weren't as fast as a jet, but they both had high performance
engines that they loved to show off. It was obvious that Prowl's Enforcer coding was the only thing
keeping him to the speed limit as they drove through town and Prowl kept Dagger to it. It made an
enjoyable thing to watch; Enforcer code pushed and pushing back. The times he dipped low enough
he knew the pair were enjoying the drive and that made it enjoyable to watch.

Towodi set down at the ground entrance instead of his balcony and smiled at the pair as they pulled
up and transformed.

"Welcome to my home," he said with a slightly theatrical bow before he escorted the pair inside,
minggaing fields with them and enjoying the still building arousal as they walked through the
complex's lobby and into a lift with a clear encasing to give a beautiful view on the way to the mid
level where Towodi lived.

Prowl chuckled and leaned in for the ride, his field making it ever more clear what kind of evening
he was hoping for.

"Oh, I'm sure we can manage," Towodi purred and tipped Prowl's face up for a kiss that only broke
when the lift stopped. By then Dagger's field was just as hot as theirs. It took a lot of willpower to lead the pair to his door rather than simply start putting on a show for his neighbors right now, but Prowl deserved better than that. Dagger wasn't helping as he caressed the edge of Prowl's doorwings, distracting Towodi while he unlocked and opened the door. It was clear enough that the grounders were lovers of some kind.

Before the door closed Prowl's hand found a sensor string on one of Towodi's rotor blades and stroked it with just enough pressure to send a tingle along the length of metal.

"Berth room is that way," he said tossing his head haphazardly before drawing Prowl into another kiss, impishly sliding his fingers across the tips of Prowl's chevron as Dagger guided the pair further into the apartment. The shiver and melting against him the soft touch earned made his vents stall and forced him to remind himself that tonight was about Prowl.

Stepping into the new space distracted Prowl for a fraction of a klik before he stretched up to claim Towodi's mouth while his hands explored the complex frame with little armor. A finger slipped in along the hip seam and Prowl purred. "Let me cool your charge."

Dagger pulled away and knelt on one corner of the large berth leaving plenty of space for the pair while he settled in to enjoy the show.

"Do you want me against the wall or on the berth?" Towodi replied with a moan, readily offering his frame for his lover's desires.

"Berth," Prowl nudged him with an eager flare in his field. "Give Dagger a show."

Shifting his rotors so that Dagger could easily touch them if he wanted to participate, Towodi lowered himself completely onto the berth, propping himself up on his arms so he could watch Prowl and angled so Dagger had a good side view of Prowl as his glossa slid out to tease Towodi's spike cover.

It was a bit maddening being unable to touch Prowl or Dagger in this position, but the idea of Prowl being in complete control of what was happening while Dagger could do as he pleased was a bit intoxicating. The view of Prowl delicately licking him, teasing him until he burned, was fairly intoxicating in its own right. The mech exuded command when he felt like it and Towodi found he really liked it. It was hard to believe while watching and feeling what Prowl was doing that so many viewed what he was doing as a submissive act; Prowl clearly didn't. Towodi couldn't help a moan of pleasure as his spike cover snapped open under Prowl's touch.

With a smile Prowl breathed a hot x-vent over the housing before gently circling it with his glossa. Those actions drew another moan and an aborted thrust from Towodi as he struggled briefly to control his initial reaction to reach out and play those beautiful doorwings. This was Prowl's show tonight, and right now he was clearly enjoying Towodi's submission and enthusiasm. It was in the phrasing; let me cool your charge. This was to calm Towodi enough to take pleasuring Prowl slowly.

As his spike emerged and Prowl teased it further out with lips, glossa and his field Towodi was reminded of the other thing Prowl had said: to give Dagger a show. Half of what Prowl was doing as he bobbed slowly up and down was more to make it took good than feel good.

Well, he could certainly help with that part. Towodi shifted just enough of his attention to monitor Dagger's reactions as the show played out in front of him. The Knight seemed enthralled by what he was watching, and Towodi allowed a few more soft moans and shudders of pleasure to emerge to see how Prowl and Dagger reacted. Every moan and surge of pleasure in his field brought a spike of arousal-desire in Prowl's and Dagger leaned a little closer, meshed their fields a bit more fully.
Oh yes, it was good to be between Praxians. As much as he found Seekers more attractive his city-kin triggered all the kinks he was sure were hardcoded into the lot of them. Not just to enjoy a threesome but to enjoy giving a show and watching one.

Towodi groaned and shuddered when the humming began. Not just around his spike but from Prowl's entire frame to every place they touched. He couldn't stop a sudden thrust up at this added stimulation as it ratcheted up his own charge. The need to overload was fighting against his own desire to know just how crazy they could make Dagger without actually touching him. His fingers tightened in his berth covers and his helm fell back with a throaty moan as he began to lose the battle against Prowl's swallowing intake and humming.

"He's so hot when he's showing off, isn't he?" Dagger's voice was thick with arousal. "When all he'll let you do is lay there and enjoy what he's doing."

"Yes," Towodi answered with a soft hiss that turned into a moan as the humming changed intensity. "He's incredible."

The both teeked the flash of pride in Prowl at the exchange and then Towodi was lost to the surge of his charge and the waves of pleasure every time Prowl swallowed another burst of his transfuid. It wasn't enough of a surge to actually make him reboot, but once he got his limbs back under control it had taken enough of the edge off that he was going to enjoy playing with Prowl in return. Venting heavily, he looked over at Dagger and said, "You want to join in or watch still?"

"Watch for now," he purred before stealing a kiss. "We'll put Prowl between us after you show him how good you are."

Towodi smiled at Dagger before leaning forward to draw Prowl up into a kiss, his own transfuid mingled with the faint traces of dinner and Prowl's own unique flavor. Still on his back with Prowl straddling him, he took the opportunity to run his hands along the edges of those doorwings he'd been wanting to play with all night. They pressed into the touch willingly, eagerly, and Prowl slid to lay nearly flat on top of him with a deepening moan and flush of yes-pleasure through his field.

Towodi activated the magnets in his hands at the lowest setting, running them lightly over the edges and hinges as he continued to kiss Prowl intently. It would be enough to make Prowl's charge slowly climb, but he shouldn't be able to overload just from them any time soon.

Prowl shivered with a wave of pleasure, lost in it and the gently rising warmth it caused. Only half aware and happy to drift he still found the coordination to reach for Towodi's rotor blades, seeking to learn their sensors.

"This time is about you, precious." Towodi murmured, briefly satisfied now that he'd cleaned every trace of his own transfuid out of Prowl's mouth. Shifting a bit lower, he licked and nibbled on Prowl's shoulders even as his hands continued their exploration of those fascinating doorwings. The warframe above him was so different from his normal lovers, and he was keen to learn the secrets of pleasing it. It took some work to really grasp that Prowl weighed as much as a small convoy or average Seeker despite being half their height. The amount of extra metal crammed into the grounder frame, the extra torque required to move it the way Prowl did, it all made Towodi think about what Prowl could do with civilian armor but the rest intact.

He'd be magnificent.

Prowl nodded slightly and tucked his face against Towodi's neck as he offered his frame as much as he could, willingly surrendering all control as easily as he'd assumed it earlier. Even so he moved to help his lover pleasure him and was free with his voice and field about how good it felt.
That much weight resting about him was so much like being covered by one of his preferred lovers it made everything happening right now so much more intoxicating. While one hand continued to play with the center of Prowl's back right between the hinges of his doorwings, Towodi moved the other hand down further towards Prowl's hips, still running the gentle magnetic charge along the armor so he could feel how Prowl reacted to the stimulation. The shivering thrust against the magnetic field when he reached Prowl's hip and began tugging on the interfacing gear inside dragged a deeply resonant moan from Prowl and a tight grip as Prowl's hands spasmed.

"You're so beautiful like this," Towodi murmured into Prowl's audio before leaning down and pressing kisses to Prowl's neck even as he traced his hand and pressed it directly over Prowl's valve. It and the magnetic field was enough to open both interface arrays without Prowl's order. Arousal roiled in Prowl field as he soaked in the attention.

Towodi slipped his fingers around the edges of Prowl's valve, slowly tracing them and letting the magnets stimulate the nodes and platelets that fluttered against them. He let his own spike pressurize and pressed up against Prowl's array, rubbing gently against it, the tip barely poking out. He felt Prowl's spike pressurize against his hip while Prowl shifted and arched up to press the barely exposed spike into himself.

"So desirable," Dagger breathed as he touched himself to keep from touching Prowl.

Towodi kept up the teasing as best he could, letting the gradually exposing spike tip trace the inner edges of Prowl's valve. It was maddening not to just drive into the valve above him, but the whimpers and show he was drawing out of Prowl seemed to be driving Dagger crazy. The Knight's field burned nearly as hot as Prowl's only Prowl was actively trying to entice a spike to extend into him. Arching further with more flexibility than Towodi though such a frame would have Prowl rotated his valve down even closer to flush with Towodi's spike housing and lowered his helm to kiss along the rotor's chest seam.

It was too much and Towodi's spike fully extended straight into Prowl's valve. He held still, enjoying the feeling of the valve spasm around him before the pattern stabilized as Prowl moaned and shivered at the welcome sensation of being full. He increased the power of the magnet on Prowl's doorwing and felt it press into the field and wiggle to generate the most charge in itself. Despite all the physical pleasure it was still Prowl's field, so rich with pleasure, desire and want, that was the most intoxicating.

Towodi began long, slow thrusts, seeking to stimulate every node he could find. This wasn't quite the visual show for Dagger that Prowl's display had been, but their fields and the building charge should be making up for it. Reaching his free hand around to Prowl's spike, he began stroking in time to his thrusts, flickering the magnetic field as he did so. His optics brightened at the way Prowl keened and arched back, his arms extended to brace against Towodi's chest, his helm flung back, doorwings flared wide and field a riot of bliss.

This is what he'd been wanting to see and cause. Sliding his hand from the doorwings to Prowl's chestplate, Towodi kept the magnetic charges flickering on both chestplate and spike even as he started to speed up the thrusts into Prowl's valve. Every shift in modulation closer to Prowl's sparkpulse brought another gasp and sharpening need to Prowl until Towodi got it just right and Prowl screamed with an overload more intense than any in ages.

Towodi tried to get his hands up to brace Prowl's frame even as his own overload hit from the wash of pleasure above him. Another pair of hands helped gently lower Prowl's frame on top of his as Dagger curled up next to them, his own field thick with desire.

"Felt good," Prowl mumbled and reached out with one uncoordinated hand to stroke Dagger's
"Mount me?"

"Gladly," Dagger said as he ran his own hand along Prowl's doorwing while shifting around to straddle Towodi's legs. His spike had already extended during the earlier show, and Dagger took a moment to stroke his fingers along the edge of Prowl's valve teasing Towodi spike at the same time.

"Yesss," Prowl hissed at the not-quite-pain of stretching to take in a second spike when Dagger pressed two fingers in to ready him. It wasn't needed, not with how often Prowl had done it lately, but it would still be a tight fit for them all. The last thing Dagger wanted to do right now was cause an injury when everyone's intent was pleasure. He replaced his fingers with his spike and pressed the tip into Prowl's valve as Towodi pulled back slightly to give him more room. No matter how many times he did this, no matter the partners, it always hit part of his code that usually lay dormant. He'd never learned why triad coding only activated in some or why it only stirred occasionally in him then turned off. It always felt that much better when it did though.

With slow shallow thrusts he worked himself as deep into his charge as he could. The pressure and pleasure from Towodi's spike and the spasms of Prowl's valve almost made him overload when he felt the coding trigger again and be answered by both mechs beneath him.

Prowl nearly screamed as his overload hit hard, fast and unexpectedly to be surrounded by the fields of two sets of triad coding triggering in response to his own.

Towodi overloaded again at the same moment, framing going ridged as both of his lovers collapsed on top of him. Intense. Unbelievably intense. He was quite content to lay there, dazed and buzzing, as his spike began to soften and retract along with Dagger's.

"Been a while," Prowl murmured with a hazy buzz enveloping him in utter contentment.

"Never felt that before," Dagger admitted.

"Me either," Towodi mumbled from beneath them. He fumbled a hand on to each of their shoulders, brushing against the front of their doorwings as he held the pair.

"Triad coding gave approval all ways," Prowl explained and nuzzled Towodi before reaching back to stroke whatever part of Dagger he could reach. "Makes it more intense."

"So we're compatible?" Towodi asked with a bit of a yawn enjoying the company as he debated on a brief recharge cuddled together or immediately heading into another round. Both were appealing at the moment. "Now what?"

"Enjoy it, after a nap. It won't lock unless we all want it to," Prowl suggested as Dagger slipped to the side and stretched out to snuggle against them both. When Prowl began to shift Towodi stroked his side and nudged him to remain. Prowl sighed in contentment and relaxed into a light recharge where he was.
Chapter Summary

Thundercracker/Thorn and Jazz/Demeter meet Crimson Sprite and Tailslide at the debate (should a mechanimal preserve be created) before Jazz leaves with Crimson Sprite to do a security check on her flowers.

"Didn't you want to go to the debate?" Jazz asked the tiny Knight inside his cab while Matorral and Dagger drove nearby.

"Not really. Despite my alt I'm not into mechanimals. It's not likely to say anything new. The project is going to happen even if the average citizen doesn't know it," she explained.

"Then why this debate?" Jazz asked with audible bewilderment.

"I'm not sure, but I believe a bit is to gauge the public, pick up a few ideas and the rest is the same reason they debated who will win various tournaments. A debate that I admit I don't understand even after I went to one," she answered.

"Sometimes some mecha just like to argue," Jazz agreed. "I remember some of the stranger discussions that happened back on Cybertron, usually about things that would never actually happen."

"Some of the really outlandish ones could be fun just because they were so outlandish. I think I'm too practical to understand the realistic but pointless ones like sports debate," Demeter decided.

"I suppose it's no different than when we would sit around trying to imagine what would have happened if Optimus had been Prime earlier or some other change in history would have stopped the war," Jazz said after a bit of reflection. "Just a lot less depressing."

"Yes, just like that. It was one of the more difficult aspects of completing Knight training for me. I'm just not wired to think in what-ifs outside of the hunt or exploration. I can do it with effort now but it's not something I enjoy. Pure fantasy though it a completely different set of protocols and I enjoy that," she explained something that she still struggled understanding the lines of.

"Not everyone's processor can handle every topic well; Prowl is the same way with fiction. There's Thorn and Thundercracker," Jazz said as the pair passed above them and headed down for a landing. "Thorn sure seemed interested when Thundercracker mentioned wanting to go to the debate."

"Thorn loves the debates. He's just thrilled to have someone to go with," Demeter chuckled before they pulled into the transformation lane and she hopped out.

Jazz transformed and headed over to the Knights clustered around the now trio of Seekers as Crimson Sprite and Tailslide greeted Thundercracker. From his perspective it didn't look like a particularly affectionate greeting from the Action although everyone seemed to be friendly enough. "Good orn, Crimson Sprite, Tailslide. I hope everything's gone well so far?"
"No problems," Crimson Sprite actually smiled at him. "I never knew how many vermin were in my greenhouses. I've gotten rid of so many. Who's coming with you?" She looked around at the number of Knights gathered.

"I am," Demeter chirped. "Everyone else is here for the debate."

"Thank you for being willing to come along tonight for the final inspection," Crimson Sprite said a bit awkwardly as she tipped her wings slightly to the much smaller Knight. She was obviously trying to be polite but clearly had expected Thorn or Dagger to join them.

"You are welcome. I enjoy spending time with Jazz," Demeter accepted with the same grace she did the gestalt's efforts to be civil.

"So are we hanging out for a while or heading over?" Jazz asked with a glance all around.

"We've got a few kliks before the debate starts. That's just enough time to find some space together," Tailslide offered, discretely taking notice of all the mecha watching them interact pleasantly with this many Knights. It was unfortunately in a way that they weren't Seeker Knights, but even that tidbit could improve his reputation with the grounders and other fliers.

"Thank you for all of your help with the security system," Crimson Sprite dipped her wings carefully to Thorn and Matorral, trying to keep her voice and field steady. These Knights along with several others had not only brought Jazz to the work site; they had also pitched in and graciously helped with the labor. The pair replied with appreciation in their fields and Thorn's wings.

"Come. I know where some great seating is that doesn't fill up fast," Tailslide said with a careful watch on the various Knights that might just take exception to a civilian mechling being so forward. No objections came and the young Seeker was privately relieved that the winged Knight seemed to be the ranking one in this group and it wasn't long before everyone had a seat with a good view and in good view of the moderator so they could get any comments in.

"Have you been to any debates Anvil has moderated?" Tailslide asked as others continued to file into the room. "I've found that she seems to do well keeping the discussion on track especially during easily side-tracked discussions."

"Agreed. I found that she kept the discussion about the Iacon - Central City trade disputes during the early Golden Age on topic even when several questioners tried to divert towards Nova Cronum's response to the incident," Thorn agreed.

"That one did make every attempt to be a mess," Tailspin agreed. Despite agreeing that he wasn't trine material with Thundercracker it was nice that the experienced Seeker still seemed to enjoy spending time with him and Tailslide could hardly object to having contacts with the Knights.

"Is this one expected to be difficult to keep on track?" Thundercracker asked.

"It depends on how many breeders are here," Matorral answered first. "I expect the primary debate to be on whether a mechanimal built by hand is really what we had before."

"If you went by what was left back on Cybertron there would be very little true wildlife bigger than a turbofox left. Most of what I've seen has been glitch-mice and other rodents, metal-mites, and a few rare feral cyber-cats that survived on the rodents," Thundercracker flicked his wings. "The concept of bringing back nitrotigers or thunderhorns is almost a fantasy at this point."

"Perhaps there where even mecha has a low chance at survival but here there is plenty, including the knowledge of how to build one that is indistinguishable from the wild original," Matorral's
excitement was evident in frame and field. "That's the debate. Even if it is impossible to tell whether we managed to stasis lock them or build them is the build one the same."

"Sounds like the arguments about kindled, sparked and pre-progs," Dagger hummed as he was drawn to think about what his charge had said of being a pre-prog and the bigotry towards them. "Was that ever settled on Cybertron?"

"To my knowledge no city or side ever truly settled that issue. The debate almost became moot when it became too difficult for almost anyone to create new Cybertronians of any kind," Thundercracker said with a sigh, sorrow tincting his field. "There were so few Visions left after the destruction of Vos that fledglings were no longer something any Seeker truly expected to have. The priests were almost wiped out or forced to go to war so pre-progs were rarely called."

"Which also meant sparked sparkling wouldn't be created either," Dagger murmured, then focused as the debate was called to order.

The group paid attention respectfully as Anvil explained the topic and additional rules for the debate, most of which had to do with volume and crowding of the main platform. Apparently a breeder had received permission to bring two small brass cyber-owls for demonstration purposes; one descended from those brought from Cybertron and another recently created by hand as a test subject for the project.

"It looks physically similar to the other, but that doesn't mean they are of the same species," Thundercracker said, thinking specifically about Seeki compared to Seekers.

"The coding is identical as well," Matorral reminded him. "Though I agree that looks aren't everything."

"Forging a new member of a species we already have is one thing," Dagger said, nodding in agreement with a question from the another part of the room. "Recreating a social species has the additional issue that social skills don't just come from coding; those are reinforced by interaction with others."

"Basic survival skills fall sometimes into those categories as well," Matorral agreed. "Practicing hunting, recognizing danger and evading a hunt are all parts of coding the new animals will have to have reinforced. There's a reason young mechanimals often had such a high fatality rate back on Cybertron."

"It allows the strongest, smartest and most fit to survive to reproduce," Thundercracker added.

"There are very few social species that don't figure it out on their own," Thorn pointed out. "I don't believe any of them are in the first rounds of reintroduction."

"Why start with predators though?" Thundercracker suddenly asked. "They have nothing to hunt yet."

"We already have turbo-rats and other rodents that are bred for feeding pets. Those can be easily released into the wild to feed smaller predators," Matorral pointed out. "There is a balance to predator-prey populations that will need to carefully monitored until the environment stabilizes."

They fell silent for a while before Tailslide spoke. "It makes economic sense to create a preserve. It will take time to pay off though. A very long term investment."

"I know a few mecha have already petitioned to have limited hunting instated once the preserve is stable. They've argued that paying for permits would help mitigate the expenses involved in its
creation and maintenance," Matorral said.

"I'm sure visitor fees would as well. I know preserves before the war did that," Thundercracker offered. "Hunting could also be a good outlet for the few who are still heavy in the oldest coding."

"The science permits would also help with funding," Tailslide agreed with them then looked at Thundercracker. "Those like Photosphere?"

"Yes. They may be rare but the coding for hunters is clearly still in existence," Thundercracker nodded his wings.

"It would also be an interesting outlet for those who are inclined towards stealth like Demeter and Jazz," Dagger offered. "After all, sneaking up close to a golden cock or spotting a starbuck before it detects you and bolts would be something to brag about."

"Indeed," Thundercracker hummed. "It could be a rich training ground for Knights and others and open up a few functions for those inclined towards it," he nodded towards Matorral.

"Yes. They'll need rangers, guards, guides and general staff," she grinned with an eagerness that spoke of hopeful plans.

"It will be interesting to see if some of the wildlife eventually decide to move into the city," Dagger added. "The Peacekeepers may have to add some Mechanimal Control officers."

"The preserve is going to have barriers to keep them in the cavern," Matorral said. "It's much easier to secure a cavern than wilderness on Cybertron."

"Very true but the rangers and guards will want to keep optics open to make certain nothing manages to slip out," Thorn agreed.

"Or that mecha don't try to sneak things out," Thundercracker pointed out quietly as he relaxed, listening to a question regarding starting species for the preserve. "It's entirely possible that someone will think something that starts out small and cute will make a good pet."

"Regrettably," Matorral agreed. "Especially true for the mechlings who haven't learned responsibility or common sense yet."

Dagger let out a soft groan, "All we need is someone deciding a nitrotiger cub or crystal viper hatchling would make a pet."

"I expect that most of the adults will have trackers so they can be monitored. Nests and lairs, especially the ones for the predators, should be counted and checked by rangers so hopefully that won't happen," Matorral assured him while she thought. "Hatchlings can also be tagged quite young. I'm more concerned about that stupid youth getting mauled and a call to kill the mechanimal for defending its creations." She huffed, then forced herself to settle what was a sore enough subject that Dagger reached over to put a soothing hand on her arm so his field could bleed off some of her agitation.

"Is there anyone involved that has been part of a such a park before?" Thundercracker asked quietly.

"Yes, there are a few of us," Matorral answered with a calmer tone. "It's largely breeders, engineers and programmers right now but those who know how to manage a wilderness are part of the planning. I don't spend much as time on the project as I'd like."

"That may change as the project accelerates," Thorn observed. "Especially if the Knights start
petitioning to use it as a training ground for stealth and observation. I don't see any of us using it for hunting."

"Even Deadlock wouldn't want do that," Thundercracker agreed, betting his flock mate would only do such a thing if he was starving. Hunting a mechanimal, even one as dangerous as a nitrotiger, wouldn't be the sort of challenge he'd normally enjoy.

"Not enough challenge or not the right kind of challenge?" Dagger asked with honest curiosity.

"A bit of both," Thundercracker said, trying to think of how to explain this to those who'd never really been in a war the way his gestalt had. "Don't misunderstand me, any of us would kill one to survive, whether it is attacking us or we need it as fuel. Hunting for sport is a different matter entirely and appeals to me as little as it would to him. It's not the same hunting a mechanimal whose only acting on instinct as it would be fighting an enemy who thinks and is after us. It's also dangerous to others for us to hunt; I don't think any of us would hesitate to strike even if it wasn't the mechanimal in front of us."

The Knights went still as they processed that and Tailslide simply stared at him in incomprehension.

"You are speaking of being in the mindset of killing and not being fussy about the target?" Thorn asked carefully.

"Hesitating to shoot or strike on a battlefield is an easy way to get you or your trine offline. Soldiers have to learn to fire first and think later. It's also part of the purpose of katas; you learn to strike without thinking about it," Thundercracker said. "Dai Atlas, Axe or any of the other former soldiers could probably explain it better than I can since I am still so close to it."

"I can understand that," Thorn said thoughtfully. "All but a handful of Knights have seen a real battlefield. We just never fought a war."

"Raiders, the Exodus," Thundercracker nodded his wings. "I don't think I'll mind when my first reflex is no longer to strike. It will simply take time."

"Time you should have now," Tailslide said quietly as he refocused his attention on the debate and away from the disturbing thoughts. He was relieved that both Thundercracker and the Knights seemed inclined to do the same and the conversation drifted back to the subject of the debate. His gaze drifted to the large, powerful Seeker next to him and memories of the two nights they'd spent together. He shivered faintly at those memories and caught Thundercracker looking at him with curious interest.

"Just remembering," Tailslide said with a grin and a small wing flicker. He didn't know whether or not Thundercracker was available or even interested tonight, but it would be fun to spend some more time with him even if they agreed that trining was not right for them.

"Good times it seems," Thundercracker almost purred and leaned a little closer so their fields could mingle easily.

"That would be any that involve you," Tailslide said lightly, ignoring the fond amusement coming from the Knights around them. "Do you have any plans this evening?"

"Not yet," Thundercracker leaned close enough to partially overlap their wings. "I would enjoy company after the debate."

"I happen to be available tonight if you're interested," Tailslide replied. "I'll just let Crimson Sprite know I'll be back later."
"Please do," Thundercracker rumbled softly. He was privately enjoying the casual interfacing that came with his status and already knew he'd miss it after he trined even as he was looking forward to the stability that came with a trine and a lover or two that were steady.

::Crimson Sprite, is everything going well?: he asked, mindful of the audience around him. It had been an interesting and enlightening evening, but it was approaching time for Anvil to close the official debate.

::Yes. This grounder really does know what he's doing. Spending the evening with Thundercracker?: she asked with a teasing harmonic.

::Did you honestly expect any other ending to the evening if he was available?" he teased right back. ::I wish we were better suited for each other as trine, but he is definitely worth keeping as a friend.::

::Nope and glad to hear it. I agree. He's well suited to you on several levels and he'll remain a good contact long after we all trine. Have fun.: She told him.

::You enjoy your evening too.: he said cheerfully before turning his attention back to Thundercracker. "She knows I'll be late tonight."

"Good," Thundercracker slid a hand along the flat of Tailslide's wing while they listened to the debate wrap up.

Although he was eager to get to Master Aurora's eyrie, Tailslide made the expected rounds, thanking Anvil formally for monitoring the debate and speaking quietly to a few friends while the Knights made their own rounds. He made certain to keep Thundercracker close even as they all eventually made their way to the exit. It wasn't lost on him that Thundercracker was doing his level best to interact politely with grounder and flier alike and wasn't half bad at it.

"Ready to go?" Dagger asked with a bit of amusement in his voice and field.

"Definitely," Thundercracker rumbled and launched. He caught himself about not checking his clearance only half a length up and it saved him a reprimand from Thorn.

Tailslide managed not to make the same mistake and quickly joined the pair in the sky as the two grounders headed to the Citadel.
Chapter Summary

Ceremonially promoting Blacktip to be a grandmaster.

Having carefully draped the last of the garments over the crystal sword stand, Prowl straightened and took a klik to look around the dojo making certain everything was in place. He'd dedicated the last part of his current existence to this moment, and it looked like nothing was going to go wrong tonight. To the inexperienced the new dark red cord Blacktip had intertwined around each piece of the rhombus would be almost undetectable, but the framework was strengthened by its addition just as the order would be strengthened by its new grandmaster. He was looking forward to watching Blacktip perform this for the other current masters and his own eventual turns as he was promoted back to grandmaster himself.

The space was simple, serene, everything a temple to the martial art was meant to be at its best and a small smile crept across Prowl's naturally stern features.

Being in this dojo was the closest he'd been to truly being back in Praxus, and the quiet settled his spark and processor in a way few things did anymore. Checking his own regalia one last time, he moved to his place in the circle and waited for the masters and other practitioners to file in. Just like the opening ceremony to the testing as many practitioners who could arrange for the time off would come and a fair number of the district and city's VIMs. He watched with critical optics as the panki directed everyone to their places with the steady, polite firmness he expected of them.

For the moment at least this was his dojo, his order, his to discipline or reward. It didn't matter that he hadn't participated on that level. As the only grandmaster of the dojo this was his to oversee and he approved of what he saw. It made him all the more pleased to leave it in the capable hands that had guided it for so long.

Unlike the beginning of the testing this time everyone waited until all were in place before bowing in unison to the current grandmaster and then seating themselves and waiting in silence. After one klik of silence Blacktip stepped through the doors adorned as a Master of Teris-Spi. When he stood still behind Prowl the current grandmaster began his training lineage in both directions that granted him the right to stand in judgment of the readiness of another to be his equal. It was a bore to the youth, of fascination for many outsiders and a comfort to the higher ranks.

When all was said he picked up the hardform book, a certified copy of one long lost, and turned to the page that contained the grandmasters. In view of everyone Prowl carved Blacktip's formal designation and then his own as the one who tested and passed him.

Once the inscription was completed the hardform book was returned to its resting place, and Prowl bowed deeply to the book honoring those who had built and formed their order. Straightening, he turned to Blacktip and stepped forward to remove the dark blue metalmesh-covered vambraces, then the greaves before returning for the dark blue tippet that draped across Blacktip's neck to fall across his chest and nearly to his knees. It was folded and placed carefully to the side before the gold shield and crossed swords emblem of the order was removed from his left shoulder and then from the right.
It was a vulnerable moment from when the ritual was crafted. It left Blacktip without visible rank or place should an attack occur.

Stepping around the now unmarked mech, Prowl walked over to the crystal sword display. First he picked up the long length of black metalmesh fabric so fine it could pass for an organic import. As he unfolded it the gold scroll work along the edges and the glyphs of the order, Blacktip's designation and rank became visible. While in no visible hurry both Prowl and Blacktip felt the urgency in the moment from nothing more than being trained that the moment between ranks was a dangerous one. When the tippet in place both relaxed internally. It wasn't finished but the critical vulnerability was past as Prowl turned to the sword stand to pick up the emblems that were identical to the ones he'd removed except for these were in the finest clear crystal and cut to reflect and refract light in the full rainbow against the black garment they were next to.

Once he was in front of Blacktip once more Prowl carefully fastened the crystal emblem to Blacktip's right shoulder. Without hesitation he placed the other emblem exactly equidistant from the first. Some observers would consider it an auspicious sign that the ceremony was going flawlessly, but the higher ranking members understood the time and effort that had gone into these preparations. Only one final step remained in the process, and Prowl wasted no time returning to the crystal display and retrieving the pairs of black metalmesh-covered greaves and vambraces. Stepping in front of Blacktip once more he attached the vambraces to each of his forearms, once again working from right to left. Kneeling in front of Blacktip he carefully fastened the greaves to each of the new grandmaster's legs.

Prowl stood and clasped Blacktip's shoulder in welcome before turning to retrieve the last of the items to be given to the new grandmaster: the swords and shield of the dojo.

This time he bowed as he stood before the crystal display, honoring the weapons and the training required to master them. He picked up the shield and returned to Blacktip, placing the protective piece on his arm first as a visual reminder to all that their art had been created by their priests to defend their people. No matter how deadly a grandmaster was, they were a defender first and last.

Next came the pair of heavily detailed swords, identical in design and just as effective at block and parry as they were at piercing armor. Stepping back from the now properly regaled new grandmaster, Prowl gave a respectful bow to his new equal before returning to his place in the circle.

Now that he was properly adorned, Blacktip took his first actions as a new grandmaster. Stepping away from his position in the circle he slowly walked to the corner of the rhombus where the cords representing spark and frame met. Here he made a deep bow as a student would to a grandmaster before backing respectfully away. Returning to the center of the circle, he paused for a long klik, optics offline in silent meditation. He repeated his actions at each of the other three points: spark and processor, processor and tradition, tradition and frame. When he returned to the center with Prowl he saw and teeked the pride the elder mech had in him and the small smile no one else saw.

"Welcome Gransmaster Blacktip. All will now acknowledge you as my equal in the order," Prowl's voice rang out strong in the large space before he gave the small bow to an equal.

Blacktip returned the bow to Prowl, acknowledging and thanking the grandmaster who had served as his tester. Blacktip faced the audience, looking out at those he had trained and would continue to train and those he would protect. To those watching it seemed like he was memorizing their faces and committing them to memory. After four silent kliks of contemplation as he settled his processor into his new role in the Order, Blacktip turned and walked towards the crystal display. Bowing deeply, he carefully returned the swords to their proper homes before removing the shield and placing it back on the stand behind them. Stepping back, he bowed again before returning to his new place beside Prowl in the circle.
Without a sound exchanged Blacktip knelt, bowed forward and held his doorwings wide and perfectly flat. At the moment they were painted with only his priestly red and the handful of glyphs he’d earned there. Prowl stepped away briefly to bring a small mobile crucible and placed a bar of gold inside to melt. Attached near the bottom of the crucible was a tube leading to a pen. For the moment Prowl ignored that pen for another one. A sharp tip designed to cut away paint and sealant in fine patterns. He went to work without a sound to carve out the glyph for Grandmaster of Teris-Spi to the line of Blacktip’s doorwing glyphs.

Blacktip focused on keeping his doorwings perfectly still as the pain lanced through his systems which each cut. These glyphs needed to be perfectly formed and were visible proof he had mastered his art and mastered his frame. He also knew that this pain was nothing compared to the pain having molten gold poured onto the bare metal would be. The hall held silent for the long kliks as Prowl carved through paint to expose bare metal and then took up the stylus attached to the crucible to fill it in, pouring liquid gold directly onto the bare metal and using a combination of precision control and the small rise the paint and sealant gave to keep the image sharp.

It was hard for anyone in the audience with wings or doorwings to keep an impassive face as what had to be pure torture happened in front of them. Only the discipline he’d learned and the sheer determination to hold true to his art and its traditions kept Blacktip from snapping his doorwings away as his sensors flashed filling his processor and frame with agony. Then it was over, the metal cooling and his awareness filled with Prowl’s pride in him.

He focused first on the pride knowing it meant he’d succeeded in holding still so Prowl could create flawless glyphs. Officially and permanently marked, he accepted Prowl’s hands as the grandmaster guided him to his pedes. Blacktip knew he would be the one to perform this rite for those that he tested, and he privately vowed to learn everything about it from Prowl so he would not fail his students, including the grandmaster in front of him with the painted glyphs who would eventually be tested to again achieve this rank.

As they stood side by side to face the gathering Prowl spoke once more.

"May all of Praxus celebrate our new Gransmaster; Blacktip."

Some places might have replied with a clapping or cheering, but this was a solemn as well as important occasion and all of Praxus knew it. All the ranks of Teris-Spi practitioners present stood and gave the deep bow appropriate to the newest senior member of their order. Those present who were not practitioners dipped doorwings, wings and rotors in deference to the occasion or gave their own bows in acknowledgment.

Blacktip tipped his doorwings in acknowledgment of the respect. "Come and enjoy the energon of the dojo."

With Blacktip’s words the ceremony was officially over, and the watchers began to stir. Instead of heading for energon, Red Csillag made a point to head directly over to Prowl and Blacktip to offer her congratulations and was among the first to reach them. After giving another doorwing dip, she said, "It was an honor to witness the ceremony grandmasters, especially given that we feared it would never legitimately happen again. We Praxians will not forget you, Grandmaster Prowl, and this gift you have given us."

"It is my honor to have the gift to give," Prowl replied honestly before she moved away to give others a chance to greet the new grandmaster. It didn’t take much for it to sort out by rank with Sovereign Dai Atlas being given the next opening with his conjunx endura while most of the gathering mingled until it was closer to their turn.
"Congratulations, Grandmaster Blacktip. It was an honor to be here at such an important ceremony for your Order," Dai Atlas said with a wing dip.

"Thank you, Sovereign of Light Dai Atlas." Blacktip replied with a bit more to the acceptance wiggle than was strictly required. "It was only fitting to invite you after all you did to facilitate this orn."

"The rewards of accepting Grandmaster Prowl and his unit have been more surprising than any of us expected, and this is one of the most pleasing results," Dai Atlas said before moving aside to let Axe say his own congratulations. The massive pair then stepped aside to make room so others could give their regards and for the two grandmasters to begin to circulate.

~Is it just me or is there a pattern to this?~ Axe asked after a breem.

~There is and it seems to be one even the students have a basic grasp of,~ Dai Atlas agreed as they continued to watch the seemingly random mingling produce time for everyone there to exchange a few words with a grandmaster. ~It reminds me of nobles in a function. I never worked out that pattern either. Only that it existed.~

"You went through with that gold treatment too, didn't you?" Deadlock said bluntly after Kimark congratulated Prowl on a successful ceremony.

"Yes, when I ascended to the rank of grandmaster in Praxus," Prowl said quietly. "My doorwings were damaged multiple times during the war, and it seemed an inappropriate use of resources to have the symbols properly reapplied only to lose them again the next time my doorwings were injured."

"Kept you safer too, to keep just how good you are a secret," Jazz hummed.

"An incidental advantage," Prowl insisted.

"You'll go through that again?" Wing asked with a quiver in his voice.

"When I earn it once more," Prowl inclined his helm. "Each art makes its mark once fully mastered."

"Not all are that blatant or painful, but I see your point," Wing said but nodded in reluctant understanding.

"I gotta admit I didn't expect to see anything quite like that part of the ceremony today," Deadlock grunted. His tightly controlled field had a bit of humor in it as he added, "The rest of it was what I expected; don't worry I even managed to stay online for all of it."

Prowl actually chuckled lightly. "Your endurance is appreciated."

"Do you know what the other art's ceremonies are?" Wing asked with an optic on not monopolizing too much of Prowl's time. He was all too aware that the connections Prowl made now would be critical to his future in Praxian society.

"Many of them, yes," Prowl nodded.

"We can talk about it later, mechs. After all, we get to monopolize him later," Jazz said with a small grin and a glance at the mecha around them. "There's another grandmaster here that needs some congratulations."

"True," Wing said with a small dip of acknowledgment. "We'll have to talk about things later. Good orn, Grandmaster Prowl."
"Yeah, his flying twin hasn't had a chance to say anything yet. 'Cracker is over there with his chaperons," Deadlock grinned but nodded his head to Prowl almost politely as the group moved on.

Happily leaving the formal garments marking him as a grandmaster back in the dojo with the truthful excuse that he didn't want them damaged or soiled during the outdoor celebrations, Prowl followed a few of the Praxian Knights through the district and its colorfully lit and decorated streets. Taking in his surroundings it reminded him a great deal of a crystal festival and that drew a soft smile to the fore. Even before the war a new grandmaster was a cause for celebration and he fondly remembered the street fair atmosphere that ended with fireworks and local singers.

Subconsciously he was looking for signs of trouble like he would have done back when he was on off-duty patrol with other Enforcers from his original unit and relaxed just a bit more. It felt good to walk with a group of fellows, to be looked at with respect again.

"It feels good to be welcomed," Dagger smiled softly at his charge.

"It does. It's been a long time," Prowl agreed.

"You're always welcome with us," Dagger said as he noticed a brown and red mech approach carrying a small bag. He seemed a bit nervous but not in a way that triggered much worry. It was a relief that Prowl's teek indicated he thought the same.

"Grandmaster," he stammered with a bit of a nervous wing dip and a somewhat awed face and field as he held the bag out to Prowl. "Welcome to New Praxus."

::What's his designation? I don't have access yet.:: Prowl pinged Dagger even as he dipped his doorwings in greetings and thanks as he accepted the small bag.

::Cardan. Works road maintenance here.:: Dagger replied smoothly.

"Thank you Cardan," Prowl spoke smoothly with a warmth in his voice that didn't come easily to him anymore. "Your crew does excellent work in difficult conditions."

"Thank you. We try to keep them in peak condition so everyone can enjoy their trips safely," Cardan almost preened at the attention from their group before shifting back into a slightly more submissive stance. "I hope you like star crunches and mountain drops."

"I do," Prowl's doorwings wiggled in anticipation and earned a couple smiles from the nearby Knights that were all too pleased to see him act so normal after all the stories of how he was before he was booted up. "Thank you. I hope you enjoy the celebration."

"The same to you, sir," Cardan almost bowed as he hurried back over to his friends still looking a bit stunned and pleased.

"He's going to be bragging about that next orn," one of the Knights said with a chuckle.

"If he remembers it," Dagger pointed out agreeably as they watched Cardan's friends hand him another drink before they moved on through the celebration. Most of the Peacekeepers they saw on duty were non-Praxians, and earlier one of them had admitted to the Knights that it was deliberate so their numbers could be involved rather than having to remain apart from the festivities.

"I hope one of them does. It will help remind their group that grandmaster or warframe, we are still mecha," Prowl subspaced the treats for later with every intention of sharing even as a niggling part of him knew he'd ask Jazz to be sure they were safe first. Not even a fellow Praxian was above
suspicion. Not after Barricade.

~Are you okay?~ Dagger's concern was focused and hidden from his frame as their fields linked.

~Yes. Simply the war and Barricade. Memories.~ Prowl assured him while he put more of his processor to ensuring those memories remained locked away for the evening.

~I hope he won't put too much of a damper on your ability to learn to trust the civilian Praxians here,~ Dagger replied, having heard about Barricade from Prowl and the rest of the gestalt. Thundercracker certainly had nothing good to say about that one. Just knowing that a Praxian Enforcer had become a Decepticon was enough of a clue that it was going to be an eternal sour subject for Prowl. ~They're not perfect by any means, but we do try to keep mecha from turning out as twisted as he became.~

~I know. It shouldn't do too much damage. It won't be personal after the reformat,~ Prowl assured him before a bit of music caught his attention. Following it, the group found what looked like a small jam session in front of a housing complex. Three chrys-guitars, a saung gauk and a titanium coronet were not a typical musical group, but the resulting improvisational sound had attracted more than just his attention. Dart was standing slightly off to the side watching Jazz dance in the small crowd clustered around the performers.

It immediately brightened Prowl's field and Dagger felt safe to relax the connection and let Prowl move off a step.

"He does dance well," Dagger smiled at the large warframe moving so elegantly with the shorter, lighter civilians around him.

"He does because he loves it," Prowl said quietly.

"It's rather obvious watching him how much he does enjoy music and movement," Dagger agreed, pleased to see how accepting everyone here seemed to be of Jazz's presence. It seemed to him to be a mix of Jazz's friendly persona, the watching Knight and the relaxed atmosphere, but it was still another good sign for the gestalt's eventual acceptance outside the Citadel. Even moments here and there often were the portent of the future whether good or bad.

A couple of the Knights wandered off and eventually Prowl and Dagger did as well. It didn't take long before they found Deadlock making a careful sampling of street food, all single bite items, with an amused Kimark. Prowl planned to simply give him a nod in passing as he went for a few snacks but paused dead in his tracks at the careful Praxian the mech was using. Just a few glyphs, mostly "what's sweet?" but it was still stunning for Prowl.

Deadlock caught Prowl's stunned look and glared, although those present who knew him well could tell it was to cover how awkward he felt using an imperfect skill, "What? I wanted to know what you kept saying about me."

It was enough time for Prowl to collect himself. "You've learned quickly then. I understand Praxian is a very difficult second language."

"Dagger and Jazz have been helping," Deadlock said gruffly, torn between embarrassment and pride at the acknowledgment of a skill he'd never seen a need to learn until he'd been linked to Prowl.

"Good," Prowl gave a bit of open approval and a pointed public statement that he didn't find Deadlock knowing his language to be a bad thing. He wasn't trying to keep secrets when he thought or even spoke in Praxian. With that he walked on, keeping some sense of decorum as he began to try
a sample from each vendor, often asking what their specialty or favorite was.

Almost everyone seemed eager to talk to him, especially about their favorite flavorings for dishes, and he wound up sampling several different kinds of silica wafers, multiple flavors of crystal patties as well as a number of different varieties of vicrasi. His primary challenge was in keeping to his insistence that he would only try one thing per stand and then moving on. Most proprietors would have happily given him free fuel all orn if he let them. The value of appearing a grandmaster's favorite was well worth anything they lost on supplies.

When one appeared to be particularly difficult for Prowl to extract himself from, and by teek it was clear it was because it really was a favorite, Dagger helpfully pointed out a vendor selling spicy neon noodles wrapped around thin edible copper skewers before suggesting, "How about we split a dazarvi? I like mine with cuprous oxide and aluminum dust."

"That sounds excellent," Prowl gratefully took the help even as all three knew someone would be back to pick up a few extras for him. "I'm glad my full unit has been able to join the festivities. It will be good for them."

"We knew Thundercracker would enjoy it as soon as we found that sparkleberry oil cake vendor," Dagger said with a small chuckle as he guided Prowl towards the other food vendors. "Tailslide, Cavu and Highdive seem to be having fun as well. He had a good idea suggesting they all come to the party with him so there was no favoritism shown."

"Agreed, though I was under the impression that Tailslide was no longer in contention, merely a friend," Prowl said before engaging in his typical chat about what the vendor thought was their best and came away with a skewer of spicy neon noodles.

Dagger shrugged slightly as he placed his own order for some noodles and a dazarvi with cuprous oxide and aluminum dust and paid for it. No one commented that he was only asked for half the list value of his order. "From what I've heard I agree with you on Tailslide's status. Wing said Thundercracker thought Tailslide could help defuse any open competition that might start between Cavu and Highdive. He also invited Detective Ciel who he seems to enjoy being around, but the Peacekeeper had to work to help cover all the Praxians who wanted to attend."

"He's likely correct. Trining is serious for Seekers. It can become quite aggressive," Prowl hummed agreement then continued to chat with the vendor until the noodle skewer was half finished and he could give a suitable response to it.

"It also gives Thundercracker a chance to spend time with the two of them around someone they beat, nevermind that Tailslide and Thundercracker mutually came to the conclusion not to trine," Dagger continued. "I think it'll show him how they react to winning and show another part of their personalities."

"Always a good thing, especially as young as they are. I'm sure he has a good feel for what can be trained out and what is core," Prowl agreed as they walked slowly and snacked.

"He'll be good for whoever he trines with even if it isn't one of them," Dagger agreed as he offered Prowl the dazarvi to try. It was a wonderful street festival and walking through it with Prowl, watching his weary charge drink in the sights and sounds made it even more memorable.

"They will also be good for him. The rest of us will see to it if he can't," Prowl tone hinted at nothing of the highly questionable methods Dagger knew the four of them wouldn't hesitate to use. Well, three of them. Prowl wouldn't be Prowl by the time such a move had to be made. "I'm sure anyone I spend more than a few nights with will face even more scrutiny since I will no longer have a war's
worth of experience in judging ill intent."

"Deadlock's going to enjoy scaring anyone who thinks about it," Dagger said with a nod and a chuckle, understanding the berserker a bit better since he'd spent so much time around the members of the gestalt. "Thundercracker is probably going to be the most overprotective though if his attitudes towards Wing are anything to go by. You might not be a flier, but you're definitely his flock."

"Agreed. It will be interesting how his response to me changes once I am younger than his coding thinks Wing is," Prowl agreed willingly. "Interestingly I believe that Deadlock may well have the second strongest creator coding among us."

"I wouldn't have believed it of Deadlock when I first met him, but he is a bit protective," Dagger agreed after the glanced around to make certain he wasn't in hearing range. "I'm looking forward to seeing his reactions once Thundercracker is trined and they have permission to create. You may not have creator coding, but I imagine you'll be protective of the fledglings as well."

"No doubt. I do have very strong protective coding and the more innocent the subject the more aggressive it is in defending them. That they would be the creations of unit would only heighten that coding's influence," Prowl said.

"Any fledglings he has are going to be very well protected," Dagger agreed as he waved at Wing who was over at a vendor with Atl buying blue fluffs on a stick. The Aerial had three rust sticks in the other hand.

"Hey, you want one?" Wing offered motioning towards the stand with the rust sticks.

"All right," Prowl accepted it willingly to nibble on even if it was sweeter than he generally preferred, especially after the dazarvi. "Are you enjoying the celebration?"

"Yeah," Wing said cheerfully. "There's so much to do and see here tonight before I have to go back on duty. They're painting sparkling faces down the block, and the results are adorable."

"I'm sure they'll do an adult frame if they have an opening," Prowl hoped the teasing came across correctly.

"That sounds like a great idea. Come on, Atl, I want a glitterjay on my cheek," Wing grinned and almost bounced as he waited for Atl to get their order.

"How many sweets has he had tonight?" Dagger asked Atl as he stared at the Aerial.

"Non-stop since we found the vendors," Atl said dryly. "He's buzzed and I'm going to have an upset tank."

"A deionizer will help with both," Prowl suggested with a doorwing motion towards a vendor that had it.

"We'll go grab you two so you can try and feed him one," Dagger offered. "What shift is he scheduled for tonight anyway?"

"Cleaning some of the upper windows. Thank Primus he can't be on monitor duty yet," Atl said. "Whoever was in the room with him tonight would go crazy."

"At least Marwir seems skilled in controlling him," Prowl said while Dagger went off to buy the deionizers.
"I'm right here you know," Wing pouted in an effort to seem insulted that failed utterly as he nearly dove into the large fluff when Atl handed it to him without comment.

"He's going to crash so hard tonight even with the deionizer," Atl said, playfully ignoring the Aerial happily eating beside him.

"Here you go," Dagger offered the dionizers to Atl who gratefully accepted them.

"Not before I put all of it to good use getting my chores done early," Wing grinned at the group. "I've done this before, remember. I know how to work it."

"Except the occasions when you crashed during the shift," Atl teased. "Come on, let's go get those glitterjays done."

"You'd look so much better with a gold and red lightning bug," Wing was saying as they left audial range.

Prowl finally allowed his amusement to flicker through his field. "Perpetual mechling. He'll manage to talk Atl into it I expect."

"It won't be hard to do, and I won't be surprised to see both of them painted up tomorrow," Dagger observed with an open grin as he watched the pair disappear into the crowd. "Atl can act almost as much like a mechling, especially when Wing is around to encourage him."

"Truly? He doesn't seem like the type," Prowl said with a curious look in the direction of the vanished pair.

"He isn't normally, but Wing can coax out the mechling in the oddest Knights," Dagger said with a shrug.

"He is good at drawing out the playfulness in others," Prowl agreed after thinking on it as a flush of amused affection flickered in his field. "His kind are truly rare and a great gift."

"It can be hard to remember that when you're cleaning up after one of his pranks, but it really does help when things are going tough," Dagger agreed as he glanced around at their surroundings. It looked like they'd made it almost to Towodi's neighborhood during their explorations.

"He isn't forced to clean up his own mess?" Prowl asked with a surprised lift of his doorwings.

"Let me correct myself. When you're cleaning up after a prank he somehow talked you into helping play," Dagger said with a hint of embarrassment in his field.

"That makes more sense," Prowl chuckled lightly. "I expect he's quite skilled at that. I admit being the disciplinarian to a base of unsocialized hooligans is not something I will miss. It's nice not to have that duty anymore."

"There are times I'm really glad he's not a politician and doesn't have high social aims, because he can be so charming and convince mecha to do things you'd never expect," Dagger admitted. "I don't think Wing actually has an enemy here; he's friends with almost everyone he meets."

"I don't doubt it, though I do have my doubts he'd do harm in politics. He might not be a great leader but he has a good spark and solid coding overall," Prowl countered lightly.

"He'd get bored with the debates and discussions and try to liven things up," Dagger replied with a grin. Spotting another vendor, he glanced at the offerings before ordering some arsenic laced crustad
jellies in a small container. Pulling a jelly out of the container, he offered it to Prowl, "Would you like one?"

Catching a hint of intent Prowl smiled softly. "I would."

Dagger stepped closer, reached out and delicately placed the jelly directly into Prowl's open mouth, brushing his fingers against the tempting lip plates as he removed them to let Prowl savor the flavor. He shivered faintly when Prowl's glossa slid across one fingertip as it retreated and the flare of enjoyment that came when Prowl sank into relishing the treat. He may have accepted they weren't rare anymore, that good energon was in ready supply, but he'd come nowhere close to becoming blasé about any of it. It made feeding Prowl treats a very sensual experience because he paid so much attention and savored even the simplest of pieces. Dagger waited for Prowl to finish that one before removing another jelly and holding it out to him just in front of Prowl's lips, waiting to see if Prowl wanted to lean closer to take it straight from his fingers or open up so Dagger would move a little closer to place it directly into his mouth.

It sent a rush through Dagger's systems when Prowl shifted slightly to slide his glossa around Dagger's fingers and drew them into his mouth along with the treat. A shiver of delight flickered through Dagger's field as Prowl's glossa danced along the Knight's fingers, cleaning the slickness from the jelly and the little bits of arsenic crust from them. Once every trace was removed, Dagger slowly slipped his fingers out and impulsively leaned forward to kiss Prowl.

When he felt lip plates part under his and the warmth in Prowl's field as the older mech drew him close several parts of Dagger melted in the heat of the public affection that Prowl was definitely not known for. Dagger kept only enough attention of those around them to be able to recognize any trouble that might approach. Most of his attention was focused on the taller, heavier, stronger frame he was now eagerly pressed against, enveloped Prowl's field as it mingled with his own desire. In this moment there was no question what Prowl wanted or how badly. There wasn't a desperate need; nothing that Prowl couldn't drop at a moment's notice. Yet there was also no question that if they were in private Dagger would find himself pinned against a wall at any moment.

Dagger reluctantly pulled away from the kiss to quickly take in their surroundings, looking for somewhere they could quickly reach to have a little more privacy than the open street surrounded by near strangers. He was halfway certain any number of locals would gladly offer their apartments to the grandmaster, but that would be incredibly awkward and would cool Prowl's mood. Standing in the crowd blatantly watching them was Towodi, the hungry look on his face matching Dagger's own lust.

Dagger gave a doorwing flick and Towodi walked up, casually careful to be sure Prowl knew he was there and welcomed him. He ghosted a hand along Prowl's doorwing to get a taste for how deep the arousal ran and gently turned the grounder around for a kiss that Prowl melted into as readily as Dagger had to Prowl. The lick of arousal that flared up in Prowl was one that both his lovers knew well; something in this was a hard kink for Prowl and he felt no shame in it.

Watching Towodi kiss Prowl like that always gave Dagger a thrill and tonight was no exception. Knowing Prowl wasn't nearly as much of an exhibitionist as some of his other lovers, Dagger almost purred as he asked the pair, "Want to continue this somewhere a bit more private?"

Prowl's doorwings gave a solid wiggle of yes as he was unwilling to end the kiss just to answer. Enjoying the enthusiasm even as it made things a bit more complicated, Dagger began guiding the pair towards Towodi's apartment complex. Most of the crowd obliged in getting out of the trio's way although a few were obviously enjoying the show and wanted it to continue in public. Privately Dagger was sure it would help Prowl after his reformatting to have his frame known publicly to have
such an eager civilian lover.

By the time they reached the lift Prowl let go of Towodi and turned to embrace Dagger with a kiss that pushed him against the wall and flattened his doorwings out for Prowl to stroke.

"Beautiful," Towodi murmured, ignoring the exterior view for the more pleasurable show taking place as the lift carried them up to his apartment. As he guiding the pair down the hallway to his door, he almost couldn't resist stepping behind Prowl and helping to press Dagger against the wall. Sandwiching Prowl between them was always a treat especially when he was this wound up. As soon as his door closed and locked behind them he surrendered to the impulse and teeked as well as felt it welcomed by them both. Interface covers slid open and Prowl reached back to stroke and fondle whatever part of Towodi was in reach.

Enjoying the deliberate but slightly clumsy fumbling, Towodi reached down and slid a hand around Prowl's spike stroking it even as he helped guide it towards Dagger's valve. He had enough control still to make certain his lovers were properly joined before he drove his own spike into Prowl and started fragging Dagger through him. Both grinders went largely lax into the direction as Prowl's lust roared outward to envelope them both in his want, pleasure and desire for them.

Waiting was impossible at this point, and Towodi wasted no time driving steadily into Prowl's valve. It wasn't quite the same as fragging Dagger himself; this was better feeling Prowl beneath him while he watched Dagger's face and felt his field. Some would argue Prowl was in the best spot right now, but Towodi liked watching Prowl lose control safely surrounded by his lovers. It was intoxicating to watch, electric to feel and it was quickly becoming difficult to tell whose moans and cries were whose as Prowl began to tremble in the grip of his charge and the feeling of the larger mech between him and the world.

Towodi pressed his frame closer to Prowl even as his own thrusts pressed Prowl firmly into Dagger, who was doing his best to find every hot spot he could on the parts of Towodi's frame he could reach while he was kissing Prowl's frame. It felt amazing.

Prowl's grip abruptly shifted to Dagger's hips, gripping him tightly just before automatic responses took over to drive him deep and hard with only limited coordination with Towodi. Towodi worked to shift his own movements to match Prowl's as much as possible although he was having his own problems keeping coordinated. The hard thrusts Prowl was using meant he was also driving himself back onto Towodi's spike in a way that was stressing the rotor's control.

With a gasp and cry Prowl buried himself deep in Dagger and let the last of his control slip and pumped his first shot of transfluid right into the nodes designed to shunt the charge directly into Dagger's system. Towodi followed him after another couple of thrusts which pressed Prowl's spike against those nodes causing Dagger to cry out and shudder beneath Prowl as his own overload swept through him. Locked together they shivered and ground their arrays together until their charge was spent and only their weight against the wall and each other kept them upright.

"Always so good," Prowl murmured.

"Get's better every time," Towodi admitted. Especially now that he knew almost every hot spot on their frames. The war frame was fascinating with its differences from anything Towodi was used to encountering here, and he enjoyed comparing the two grounder's frames by testing out touches on them at the same time and watching their responses. It hadn't surprised him when Prowl wasn't as sensitive in general as Dagger. As a warframe it made sense that tactile sensors had often been buried or turned off. What had been more of a surprise was when he realized that the spots that Prowl did still have were more sensitive than usual.
"Does," Dagger agreed as he went lax in Prowl's grip and simply enjoyed the two fields meshed with his and the feeling of being full of a lover's spike.

Prowl kissed Dagger softly, then turned his helm to get a kiss from Towodi. "Want to feel you pin me."

"Hmm...you want to put me in the middle this time? Or maybe have Prowl play with your spike and valve while you watch us?" Towodi offered after he reluctantly pulled away from Prowl's kiss and shared one of his own with Dagger.

"Put you in the middle," Dagger rumbled eagerly at the idea and the open approval in Prowl's field for it. "You feel so good around me."

"Unfortunately that means you're going to have to let Dagger go," Towodi pointed out as idly he pondered whether or not to try to make their own way to the berth still joined.

Prowl smiled and gave Dagger a sweet kiss as he pulled out with a slow, teasing slide intended to arouse them both. Once he was done teasing Dagger for the moment, Towodi slowly pulled his own spike out of Prowl trying to drag it across every node along the way. Once they were finally separated, the pair headed for the berth kissing and stroking rotors and doorwings as they went. It was a familiar maneuver by now with Prowl's enjoyment of both wall and berth.

In a move that had taken a couple tries to learn Towodi trip-tossed Prowl onto his back on the berth and pounced, putting his larger frame over the warframe. He caught Prowl's hands and laced their fingers while pinning them near Prowl's helm. The rush of kink-driven arousal that flared up at him was enough to make the rotor groan. This was another thing Prowl loved that Towodi hoped wouldn't change once he was reformatted. Being able to bring arousal and desire so quickly simply by settling over his lover like this was a heady feeling. Impulsively he leaned down and began nibbling on Prowl's shoulder even as he pressed his harden spike against Prowl's hip, then against the mech's spike for a tingle of charge that lifted Prowl's hips into the contact with a hungry moan.

Tempting as it was to drive his spike into Prowl and feel him writhe beneath him, Towodi concentrated on keeping him pinned, putting his larger frame over the warframe. He caught Prowl's hands and laced their fingers while pinning them near Prowl's helm. The rush of kink-driven arousal that flared up at him was enough to make the rotor groan. This was another thing Prowl loved that Towodi hoped wouldn't change once he was reformatted. Being able to bring arousal and desire so quickly simply by settling over his lover like this was a heady feeling. Impulsively he leaned down and began nibbling on Prowl's shoulder even as he pressed his harden spike against Prowl's hip, then against the mech's spike for a tingle of charge that lifted Prowl's hips into the contact with a hungry moan.

Tempting as it was to drive his spike into Prowl and feel him writhe beneath him, Towodi concentrated on keeping him pinned as he continued to tease Prowl's shoulders. He wanted Dagger with them in their pleasure. "You joining us?" He asked almost breathlessly between kisses and nibbles designed to drive Prowl's charge even higher.

"Oh yes," Dagger breathed sharply as he took in the sight of his charge so completely lost in desire of his lover. It was almost enough for him to refuse so he could watch and soak it in. Unlike the showers that were Dagger's first exposure Prowl's bliss this did beg that he join in and heighten the pleasure. He climbed onto the berth and slid his hands along Towodi's hips, then moved his thumbs inward to stroke the edges of Towodi's valve.

Towodi moaned at the touch and leaned into it, rocking his hips to draw the most sensation from spike and valve. Being here between two lovers, surrounded by fields and frames was truly intoxicating in a way no high grade matched. That it was these two seemed to make it even better. He'd never become attached to anyone so fast and cursed his emotional center for becoming attached to a mech he knew wasn't going to last long.

With a rocking of his hips he pushed those thoughts away and focused on what was important: indulging Prowl and relishing the mech's passionate surrender. Never had Towodi encountered a being able to be so naturally commanding and so completely submissive in the same orn.

"Ready?" Dagger moaned to Towodi as he rubbed his spike along the slick opening.
"Always," Towodi answered back, pushing back sharply toward Dagger before shifting his own spike to slide against the outside edges of Prowl's valve. One more thrust back towards Dagger allowed Towodi to line his spike up to drive into Prowl at the same time as Dagger filled him. All three stilled at the end of the joining thrust to simply enjoy the sensation of being filled and surrounded and the pleasure echoing in from other fields.

"Take me," Prowl's gasp was of pure want, a simple directive that embodied the desire making his frame and spark flare in time.

Keeping a firm grip on Prowl's arms, Towodi began to thrust, the dual sensation of filling and being filled drive him wild. Dagger was playing his frame like an instrument while Prowl writhed shamelessly below him. He knew Prowl could throw him off if he truly wanted to and that submission made this even better. There was no question of how much Prowl wanted this, enjoyed it and the sounds the mech made, tiny gasps and pleas for more, for it harder, was unlike anything Towodi'd heard before Prowl.

Despite Towodi being in the middle it was Prowl's charge that peaked first and sent the mech into a keening whiteout. Towodi continued to ride the pleasure coming from both of his lovers. Prowl's field and writhing frame tipped Towodi into a his own overload causing him to collapse on top of Prowl as Dagger continued to draw pleasure out of his frame. In moments they were all slack on each other, frames panting and tiny zaps of electricity dancing between the cooling frames.

When Towodi regained coherency he pinged Dagger two thoughts on what to do next. Dagger thought about it for a moment as he idly stroked Towodi's rotor. He had one fantasy that appealed to him and fit with what Towodi had suggested. ::He's so strong and normally independent. I want to see him bent between us dependent on you to hold him up while we both spike him.::

::Love it,:: Towodi shivered in anticipation while Dagger pulled out and crawled towards the head of the berth.

"Mmmm?" Prowl hummed the question, his frame and field relaxed and trusting of them even as Towodi pulled out.

"Up with you," Towodi grinned and did most of the work of getting Prowl to his knees and facing Dagger while keeping a firm hold on Prowl's wrists as they were shifted behind Prowl's back. There was a moment of tension, a sparkbeat where Towodi was fully aware that Prowl could do him serious harm and was considering it, then the warframe relaxed and allowed the rotor to bear much of his weight as he was bent forward and rendered completely off balance with his knees spread outside Towodi's.

Dagger drank in the sight of Prowl's trust and submission, saving the image in his memory to enjoy later. Shifting forward he moved his spike a bit closer but kept it out of reach unless Prowl bent forward just a bit more, surrendering more control to Towodi. They both saw Prowl calculate what he had to do while Towodi pressed into his already slick and relaxed valve and decide to go for it. With a tiny shift he sought the extra distance and was given it. His glossa slid out to tease the spike that tasted more of the rotor than its owner.

Towodi growled and carefully shifted Prowl's arms just a bit to get a better view of the show as that skilled glossa continued to lick the traces off the offered spike. Dagger was keeping a tight grip on his field and frame as he enjoyed Prowl's efforts. Those efforts became a bit more erratic as Towodi started long and steady thrusts into the slick valve and Prowl's pleasure began to build. Between them Prowl made no effort to control his field or the information it contacted at how erotic it was for him to be under the control of someone he trusted not to abuse him.
"So hot," Dagger breathed in a moan and shifted forward enough for Prowl to capture the tip and ease it into his mouth.

"So delightfully willing," Towodi agreed with a groan as his thrusts shifted Prowl's mouth along Dagger's spike. The illusion that he was completely dominating Prowl was thrilling just on its own, but the reality that this was all happening because Prowl was allowing it made it a gift that touched a part of his spark. Dagger's hands stroked Prowl's face and chevron while Prowl worked him with all the focused adoration he was capable of. Every touch to his frame generated a flare of lust-pleasure in his field and a renewed effort to pleasure his lovers with valve, mouth, glossa and intake.

Towodi used his strength and leverage to keep Prowl as stable as possible even as his lover's frame rocked between both spikes. The pleasure built within him, but it was slower than what Prowl was experiencing. Not a rush that would release in an explosion but a smoldering heat climbing steadily. He was truly enjoying this particular scene Dagger had picked, but there would be no risk of accidentally dropping Prowl, no abusing the trust being gifted tonight by an understandably cautious warrior. Dagger's hands also promised that he wouldn't let Prowl fall if Towodi was overcome. Between them they both reveled in the trust this represented and the intense pleasure Prowl took from the illusion of helplessness.

"Ohh, such a talented mouth," Dagger moaned with a thrust that put his valve platelets in reach of Prowl's glossa and the teasing caress that it earned him.

"He's quite talented," Towodi agreed, enjoying the surge of pleasure their praise drew from Prowl. "Stroke his chevron again; his valve spasms wonderfully when you touch it like that."

Dagger grinned and did so, moaning and dimming his optics when Prowl swallowed around his spike and rippled his valve more strongly around Towodi. The increased pressure allowed Towodi's spike to drag across more of Prowl's nodes, and the increased sensations across nodes already sensitized by his previous overloads made Prowl moan around Dagger's spike. It made the Knight shiver and groan and thrust a little harder, opening himself up for another lick across his front platelets.

Towodi actually wished for four hands right now. The control holding Prowl gave was thrilling, but he wanted to be able to touch and play with the frame in front of him. It did give him an image that he couldn't help voicing, "Maybe next time you should be underneath him while I hold him up like this. You could play with his spike and frame while he pleasures you but can't touch back."

Dagger groaned and shuddered at both the idea and the moan of approval around his spike. He rotated his hips upward. It pressed his spike awkwardly against the roof of Prowl's mouth but it gave Prowl's glossa much better access to his valve rim and he gasped when Prowl took the hint and went to work on what he could reach. The obvious skill and care Prowl was using was driving Dagger's charge higher still. "Incredible," he praised honestly, knowing those genuine words were almost as good if not better for Prowl's charge than the caresses Dagger continued to bestow on his chevron and frame. The mech was a servant to his core no matter the rank he had held.

When Prowl pressed forward just a bit more and swallowed as he hummed Dagger accepted the silent directive to overload first and let go with a shout and burst of charged fluid down Prowl's intake. Towodi moaned at the sight and couldn't help thrusting a bit harder into Prowl's valve even as he adjusted angles to try and cause even more pleasure in the warrior. He was determined not to be the next to overload; he was going to feel and enjoy Prowl losing himself to pleasure first. Looking down at Prowl, whose mouth was still wrapped around Dagger's spike, Towodi murmured, "You like seeing him like that, don't you? Knowing you caused that kind of pleasure? It's a good look for him."
Prowl's doorwings gave a wiggle of confirmation and he squeezed around Towodi before rippling his valve lining.

"Oh, babe, want to watch you next; feel your overload around me," Towodi groaned as he fought to control his charge.

Dagger got back enough presence of mind to stroke Prowl's frame, working his way around Prowl's shoulders to act as a stabilizer for his lovers' overloads while Prowl licked his spike clean. "Let us feel you," he said with a moan as he watched Prowl's and Towodi's faces as they each tried to make the other overload first. Only a few thrusts later Prowl's desire to please broke his control and he keened sharply against Dagger's hip, shaking and completely dependent on the others to hold him.

Even as Towodi locked his arms to keep Prowl secure Dagger's own grip on his charge's shoulders tightened to give more support to the spasming frame. Together they held him through the initial pleasure and into the aftershocks as Towodi's own control finally broke and he thrust frantically before overloading into Prowl's valve. The flood of charge against primed nodes tore a howl from Prowl and he slumped forward, spend and willing to trust the pair to lay him down gently when it was over.

Dagger and Towodi gently guided Prowl to the berth, controlling his descent so he wasn't jarred. Dagger used the opportunity to shift and lay Prowl down against his frame, cradling him to keep the connection and comfort as they both settled and Towodi finally joined them to embrace Prowl from behind. The pair shared a look over their recharging lover and smiled in agreement that Prowl had the right idea.

Cuddled here safe in Towodi's apartment and with no real need to head back to the Citadel any time soon, Dagger took another moment to save this memory to cherish later before he relaxed and allowed himself to slip into recharge.
Chapter by gatekat

Chapter Summary

Prowl has a binding in light blue and is asked if he still wishes to be reformatted.

Prowl deliberately ignored their small audience as he followed Dagger's instructions and settled into the proper position for a Knight's binding. His wrists and forearms were bound with a soft blue cord and the powerful gem was optic level to him. His work was as complete as it would ever be. Grandmaster Blacktip was tested and prepared; he would test the next three grandmasters and allow the continuation of their Order. His unit was as stable and settled here as he could hope for in this short time. As unconventional as this was, the Masters had insisted on the binding before they would grant his request to reformat and begin anew. Wing had offered his Great Sword, Challenger of Ways, and Prowl absently thought how appropriate its designation was to both its bearer and this test. It also granted his unit mate a place in this room with Dagger, Redline and Dai Atlas. Wing had offered to do the binding himself, but Prowl had requested Dagger do the honor. He wanted his fellow Praxian present and this allowed both to legitimately attend the binding.

With a soft x-vent Prowl relaxed, set his frame to take the strain of the unbalanced position as long as possible and did his best to let himself relax and let go. Almost instantly everything in him rebelled. He'd fought too hard to survive to just give up. It didn't matter that he knew that wasn't what was being asked of him. All that mattered to his processors was that 'let go' and 'not think' were codes for extinguishing at a very base level.

He didn't know how to not think. It wasn't part of what he was.

Perhaps he could try another route, just as Deadlock was learning meditation through action instead of contemplation. The idea that Deadlock was willing to learn meditation in any form was proof that this city was changing his gestalt in ways no one would have imagined possible.

The war was over for him; it was time to contemplate how he would handle peace. He turned his thoughts to the current situation here in New Crystal City. There were Praxians thriving here; more than currently existed back on Cybertron by at least a thousand fold.

He knew what he wanted. He wanted to rest, to give up the memories and guilt and pain that had consumed him and worn him down since his city was destroyed. He desperately wanted Prowl to end. Let the frame start again in this new place with new rules and little of the scrambled and shredded code that Prowl had. The truth had long been known: Prowl wasn't fit for peacetime and no longer had the will to reforge himself again. There was no Prime to try to force him to do the impossible; no destroyed cities to contemplate. The frame could safely begin anew here protected by his unit and Lord as he learned and matured. He would have a place and a purpose that Prowl could never properly fulfill with his broken coding.

The knowledge was safe, the mech could go.

Why did his master always make it so difficult for this one thing he wanted for himself?
His Lord claimed this step was to make certain he truly wanted to end before the wish would be granted. After all, his first request had been made before he had spent time with other Praxians, before he had gotten to know Dagger, Blacktip, Towodi and so many others. That reasoning was a little sounder than Prime who had refused him this option for so long and had wanted him to continue after the war was over for no reason that Prowl could ever determine. What Dai Atlas demanded was as reasonable as it was frustrating.

It still always circled around to the same unchanging truth.

Prowl was tired.

Tired of fighting. Tired of constantly fighting his code. Tired of even the good things because they were no more than momentary distractions from the undeniable truth that Prowl had done too much to cope with himself on an orn to orn basis without that order keeping him in place. He knew he would eventually break enough of what remained of his coding to step into a blast, or a sword in this case. His unit mates had no idea just how easy it was to extinguish during sparring with real weapons.

Well, Jazz likely did but it would never occur to him that Prowl would try.

The longer they spent as a unit the more the others would realize how broken he truly was and how much of a risk he was to all of them. It would be better for them to have someone new and undamaged, someone to help Wing counter-balance the hard existence they had endured. Thundercracker's coding would settle on the new mecha and keep him safe. Deadlock would protect the new mech in his own rougher way. Jazz would know to monitor the tac-net and help keep everything balanced. Flightplan would have someone else young to learn with and from, someone less damaged than Prowl. Someone, hopefully, as bright and eager to learn and explore as he had been as a rookie.

It was like recalling another's memory files. That rookie, even the seasoned investigator, simply had nothing in common with the war-battered and broken being recalling that time.

It hurt.

Prowl liked who he had been, professionally and personally. He liked his existence even when it was difficult. He loved his unit, both those sparked before and after him. He adored his function.

He wanted that back so badly he'd do anything for it.

Reformatting was a minuscule price to have that back.

Trying to explain this logic to kindled mecha was so difficult because it was outside their worldview. To most of them it sounded like he was asking for something horrible; a punishment for a terrible crime. They didn't understand that what he was asking was to close this chapter of the frame's existence and start a new chapter. It was probably why Dai Atlas and Axe were so agreeable. Military mecha of their age, kindled or sparked, had existed in a sparked military for long enough to view reformatting as he did. It wasn't deactivation. It wasn't painful. It was a blessed thing for one whose code had broken. A reward when asked for. The reward he asked for.

There was a brief moment when he looked down both paths to the future and actively rejected the tac-net's desire to follow the one where he remained Prowl. It wasn't keen on the concept of training a new host. Neither was the Enforcer AI, though it was far less invested. Like Prowl it felt the distress of damaged code and operating so far outside its intended function.
The reality was that both would be better off in the long run with a new host rather than this damaged one. A new host would be more adaptable in this new environment. He would be trusted with more responsibility and be able to build a better reputation in the Citadel and among the civilian populous. Working in those environments would go much smoother without the damaged code and wartime reputation.

Even more important was that it would go more smoothly for Prowl.

*Where the pit did that thought come from?*

Prowl and tac-net both fixated on that question, tracing it until the source could not be condemned. The spark that powered them wanted this. It was tired as well, but tired of being so at odds with its frame. It wanted the unity they had once had before the war.

The issue was settled. Processor, spark and Enforcer AI all wanted to be reformatted to begin anew, and the tac-net finally agreed it was logical to start over with a new host if it would recreate the unity they had all once shared. It also less reluctantly agreed that it was tactically sound to be reformatted to be a creation of this city in full.

Wing leaned against Dagger, a mech he was sure would be central to his flockmate's existence long after Prowl no longer needed him. It was nice that the Praxian was a Knight and a friendly, medically skilled one to help handle Prowl's touchy hardware. Even nicer that Wing had trained him and trusted him deeply.

"That was rougher than I expected," Wing admitted quietly as Prowl began to truly settle as befitting a binding in light blue.

"Prowl is badly damaged and broken on a number of levels," Dagger said with a sigh as he pressed himself against his Daoshi. "I have tried to help him enjoy his time here, but I do believe him when he says he is ready to rest and start over anew."

"As do I," Dai Atlas said quietly. "but we need to know if all of him are ready for this step."

"I'm sure the answer is yes," Wing murmured, quietly mourning the loss of the mech he barely knew. "Part of him wants it too badly to settle until the other parts agree."

"No doubt. I'm sure the tac-net was the holdout and it is the most vulnerable to the bonuses of being reformatted," Dai Atlas said.

"I never look forward to a reformat, but I understand why he desires it," Redline admitted. He had spent a lot of time listening to Dagger talk about Prowl's viewpoint and actions. The enforcer had spent time with Knights and civilians seeing what the city could offer him. He was just too broken to fit and knew it.

"You're ahead of me then, though I think it's more a matter of my nature than knowledge," Wing said, then stilled and reached his field out to teek Prowl more deeply. Without a sound between them Dagger shifted to support himself fully while Wing stood to cut down his flockmate. Prowl was lax in his arms, his processors fuzzy and frame unwilling to work without a direct order from outside.

Wing carefully lowered Prowl to the floor allowing his joints to relax. Dagger settled next to Prowl's frame and rubbed his wrists to encourage circulation while Wing retrieved Challenger of Ways. He didn't teek any pain in Prowl's field, just the contentment this binding should produce. It was a good thing, easily the most peaceful he'd teeked Prowl other than when he was so deep in recharge that he wasn't even defragging. The idea that this peace could be common was appealing on many levels.
So was the explicit trust expressed when Prowl slid from the meditative state right into light recharge.

Wing quietly settled on Prowl's other side pleased his presence did not disturb Prowl's rest. While Dagger finished rubbing Prowl's wrists Wing checked on his knees and shoulders. They didn't appear strained but a bit of tender care wouldn't hurt. Jazz's magnets might be a good idea tonight, and he had the feeling Jazz wouldn't mind the suggestion even though this binding wouldn't have caused much distress over the bond. The mech was a tactile one with anyone he trusted both as a show of trust and a show of care.

Redline only needed a scan to tell him that Prowl didn't need any medical attention. He stood and motioned Dai Atlas to come with him. "Let him rest as long as he wishes but do get him in a berth soon."

"I'll hear his answer when he boots on his own," Dai Atlas added before the giants left.

Wing was purring, his field bright and warm in his pleasure at having his flock all here and in a good state. Thundercracker was lounging protectively at the head of the berth. Deadlock was pretending to recharge in a sprawl on the door-side. Jazz was relaxing against Prowl's side next to Deadlock and gently petting the relaxed frame with his magnets set at their lowest setting. It left Wing on Prowl's other side with Dagger snuggled against his back.

Even the most prickly of his flock were responding to Prowl's peace by mirroring it.

It was blissful.

Waiting patiently like this for Prowl to online was a pleasant delight for him. Prowl needed the recharge and they all needed this break hanging out together. Honestly, he understood Dai Atlas' reasoning, but it'd be nice to be able to spend more time together as a flock. Thundercracker might actually unwind a bit more once it was just the five of them. He certainly didn't mind cuddling with Jazz when the grounder joined them up in the eyrie.

Though Wing was sure Jazz was the first to notice Prowl's boot sequence nearing the end stage Dagger was the first to indicate he noticed by lifted his frame up slightly and smiling.

"Relax. His boot cycle takes forever," Jazz chuckled. "He's still got a breem or so to go."

"I know," Dagger said quietly as he watched Prowl's face. "It was a really good sign when he finally stopped combat booting while I was close."

"Yeah, I imagine so," Jazz hummed at that revelation.

"This place is making everybody soft," Deadlock grumbled and shifted to sit up. "Won't see me getting that soft."

"Nope," Wing agreed cheerfully. "It's your job to keep an optic on all of us and make certain we're safe."

"And you will definitely make that a full time job," Dagger said with a chuckle remembering some of Wing's antics.

"He does," Thundercracker agreed with a small smile.

"I hope it wasn't that worrisome," Prowl's voice was quiet.
"No, not much screaming at all," Wing said cheerfully. "Everybody just wanted to hear the results from you."

"I want to be reformatted more than ever," Prowl's field was as steady as his voice. "It's long past time for Prowl to rest."

Wing kept his field cheerful even as he wilted a bit inside. It hurt that he hadn't managed to save Prowl. Then he scolded himself fiercely. Over quiet joors of talking with Jazz and Prowl, he had learned that this reformat was something that Prowl had wanted for a very long time, longer than New Crystal City had existed, and he had always been denied by Prime. Wing had saved Prowl from a longer lifespan of torment.

"You're certain," Deadlock said as he watched Prowl's face for any wavering, not that he expected it from the tactician. "Okay, what do we need to do?"

"Try to view it as the long-sought reward it is for me," Prowl began with what he knew would be hardest for them. "When it is over take care of your new unit mate as he works out the basics of existing. He's likely to be extremely annoying and emotionally unstable until he matures and finds the balance with the AIs, his function and his place in the unit."

"He will be a fledgling for us to help raise," Thundercracker said understanding what Prowl as asking.

"Make certain no one beats up on him but us. Got it," Deadlock said with a nod. He could handle that concept.

Prowl chuckled. "Keeping him from accidentally beating someone else up would be appreciated as well. He'll have my reflexes and no idea just how dangerous his frame is when startled or cornered."

"Another plus with being in the Citadel. Everybody here is used to killing reflexes," Wing smiled brightly.

"There are also many here than understand the inherent need for rank and structure I'll have. It will make existing much less stressful in the first few vorns," Prowl agreed. "Are there any questions about the process or what will result?"

"What was it like for you when you first came online?" Wing asked, curious about the differences and similarities between their origins.

Prowl was quiet as he cast his attention to those very first memories and found them archived but intact. "The frame felt good to settle into. What it wanted and what my spark wanted lined up well. Lord of Law Lockcheck was very pleased with how well I settled into my unit and early duties. It was very difficult in the first few vorns though. The tac-net was experimental, the AI that runs it and interacts with me is very aggressive even now. Back then I had almost no control over it and little understanding of myself. It made for a rough first century as I worked out how to control myself and then it. It should be faster this time as the tac-net is accustomed to being dominated and I have all I've learned in notes for the new mech. He will still understand his emotions and control no better than any other new mech."

"We can definitely help with learning control, whether it's over emotions or an argumentative AI," Jazz agreed. "I know a few tricks from working with you."

"He will have the advantage of having a strong flock to help guide him," Thundercracker promised looking pointedly at the others.
"And will have those outside the unit willing to become friends and more if he so desires," Dagger agreed.

"I was quite social. Awkward, but I did like company," Prowl admitted with a kind of bewildered acceptance that he had changed that much. "I'm sure he'll try to make friends with anyone willing to. Enforcers are also very relaxed about interfacing within our caste. I was more open to outsiders than was considered acceptable. It is likely to be an advantage here where such lines do not seem to exist as much."

"The Peacekeepers and the Knights do not tend to limit themselves in such a way so that will be an advantage if he shares your views," Dagger agreed.

"It sounds like he should be able to find a place and fit in here. We will help guide him as well as whoever is to be his mentor," Thundercracker said.

"I have calculated that he is likely to chose to be a Knight of Light. If I am correct then Dai Atlas has already agreed to train him," Prowl said with a flutter of excitement in his field. "There are very few places that exist in this city with the structure and discipline he will need to thrive. Much of my Enforcer coding cannot be wiped, only reset."

"I can think of a lot of reasons why he would," Deadlock said with a bit of a grumble. Controlling the new mech would be an easy way of controlling the rest of them, and it was going to get worse as time went by. He was going to need to keep a close optic on Dai Atlas to watch for trouble, and he wasn't going to be able to do that without committing to this bunch.

"The Peacekeepers here are unused to mecha with his background; it's a career not a lifestyle for most of them. He's going to have a lot more in common with the Knights even if he's not military anymore," Jazz agreed.

"That has been my assessment as well. The Knights also have the advantage of an extended training period where mistakes and growing maturity is the intent. He may take longer than expected to finish training with all the personal maturing that is needed but it will not take so long that it will be abnormal." Prowl added.

"Back to that Enforcer coding. How fast can it update to our laws?" Wing asked.

"Depending on the priority the update is given I would expect it to be complete within a few orns. Well within the ten orns he will expect to be given to settle in. Nothing I have found is opposed to the fundamental morals of Praxus," Prowl assured him. "No matter his path he will always look to the four of you as his core unit. He will expect support, knowledge, help and care. He will want to give it in turn when he can."

"I'll take any cuddles he wants to give and return them anytime he needs them," Wing offered immediately with a smile. "I can help reteach him to fight and to get along here."

"Unit takes care of unit. No matter what we call it," Jazz said with a nod to Thundercracker.

"He's ours," Deadlock said carefully in Praxian.

Wing did his best to keep just how delighted-proud he was from showing too much. Prowl had no such inclination. Doorwings wiggled in delight and Prowl's field flared with pleasure.

"You are his," Prowl replied in the same dialect variant, full of protective ownership that wasn't possessive. For Deadlock it was a difficult thing to understand but he'd been coached to expect it, to understand the meaning it had to Prowl and what Prowl would mean by it.
"We will miss you, but we will have him," Wing said quietly.

"The unit endures," Jazz replied.
Chapter Summary

Thundercracker flight class 31. Flightplan has some time out. Highdive and Cavu meet him.

Thundercracker kept a close optic on Highdive and Cavu as flight class finally ended and the trio headed over to join the waiting adults. The pair of Actions had been doing their best to concentrate during flight time since didn't want to look bad in front of the Order they were courting, but the reality that they were actually leaving the city and going out to meet Flightplan had both a bit antsy. It was another example of the difference between Thundercracker's old and new lives. Given the number of gestalts involved in the war he occasionally had to remind himself that they were not something the average civilian encountered on a regular basis. Especially civilian mechlings living in an isolated city underground that had no gestals. There were no metrotitans or guardians here either, at least not that he'd been allowed to know about. The city was settled enough he'd never know unless told.

"Aurora," Thundercracker greeted her warmly as his Vision-creator, then turned to Highdive's flock Order. "Nighteye," he greeted the ranking Order of the gathering politely. Last were Cavu's creation trine. "Crackleback, Downforce, Joule."

"Is everyone ready?" Aurora looked primarily at the two true mechlings and the flock Order before lifting off and felt more than saw Thundercracker settle on her wing as an Action as they all transformed into alt mode and flew towards the edge of the city's cavern and one of the many hundreds of passageways that lead off it. This one was large and open, easy flying even for first vorn mechlings, and with a floor close enough to the city cavern's that grounders could drive it with limited climbing.

The flight to the cavern was fairly quiet even as it was swift. Thundercracker's attention was focused on the next few joors and what they meant for him. He'd asked Prowl but neither of them could recall another Seeker being a part of a successful gestalt. The adult civilians were doing a decent job concealing their own concerns about this endeavor, but Thundercracker couldn't help wondering if they would be influencing their mechlings away from him after this was over. Despite everything that might go wrong, he'd asked Aurora to arrange this meeting. It wasn't fair to him or the young Actions for them not to be aware of what courting him truly involved. Better to find out they couldn't handle it now than after they were ready to trine.

The three Master Knights and the rest of his gestalt were waiting for them to touch down and at an instinctive glance across his flock Thundercracker couldn't help but feel good at Prowl's state. The mech always took care of himself but he no longer radiated that icy anger. He was at peace and almost excited for the future.

"Nighteye, Crackleback, thank you for allowing your mechlings this opportunity," Dai Atlas spoke. "Are there any questions before they form Flightplan?"

After glancing around at the deserted area and looking over at Nighteye almost for permission,
Crackleback asked, "What is Flightplan's temper like?"

"Please understand that we haven't interacted with him much, but Flightplan seems to be very mellow for a gestalt," Axe replied and glanced over at Wing for confirmation.

"He's a young mechling who wants to please. He doesn't want to hurt anyone," Wing added.

"We did not want him to learn of war or what we have endured any more than being with us did. He's a sweet youth who listens to us," Thundercracker said while the two mechlings peered at the grounders in Thundercracker's flock.

"Praxian, Polyhexian and ... I'm sorry Deadlock, I don't recognize your build," Highdive mustered the courage to speak to them first.

"Don't have an origin," the dark purple mech shrugged.

She glanced at her flock Order, then at Thundercracker.

"He's Deadlock. Former Decepticon, training to be a Knight of Light. Not everyone has ties to the city they were built in," Thundercracker offered and privately preened at the approval of his response from Aurora.

"True, sometimes one finds that home is somewhere far away from where one was originally created," Crackleback agreed cautiously before getting back to his concerns. "So Deadlock is becoming a Knight, and Wing is already a Knight. Do the rest of you intend to join the Knights or are you looking at other paths like Thundercracker?"

"I'm going into entertainment. Dancing, singing, acrobatics, maybe even acting; that kind of thing," Jazz grinned.

"I expect to become a Knight of Light, though I have not begun training yet," Prowl answered smoothly.

"As a gestalt we will always be on call in case of emergency," Thundercracker added. "There is nothing in this city that has the reach or strength of Flightplan."

"That's good to know, especially if there is some sort of cavern collapse," Nighteye said with a wing flick. "I'm assuming based on his designation Flightplan can fly."

"Yes, though not as an airframe does. His flight is largely anti-grav and some thrusters," Thundercracker explained as one airframe to another.

"More stable for someone with that mass in confined locations," Joule observed watching his creation closely. Cavu had been silent so far but was watching the grounders, especially Jazz, intently. He knew his creation enjoyed music and finding another in this strange flock who shared that interest was an encouraging sign.

"It is," Thundercracker agreed, then swept a gaze across his unit and they all moved away before the strange transformation sequence began.

Aurora monitored the reactions of the civilians even as she watched the gestalt form Flightplan. Cavu was actually gaping, but she couldn't blame the youngster because it was an awe inspiring and potentially frightening sight even as a second viewing with her long existence and skills to mute the shock. Dai Atlas and Axe were obviously the least impacted, but they had dealt with gestalts in the past and knew how to contain their responses better than even most Knights.
~Am I needed?~ Flightplan asked as he looked around the cavern.

~This is social time for us and for you to meet my two potential Actions. It would be good to know how well they deal with you before we are trine,~ Thundercracker said and sent the who's who file to the gestalt mind.

"Flightplan, this is a social event. We wish you to meet Thundercracker's potential Actions," Dai Atlas spoke. "Highdive, Cavu, this is Flightplan. All five of his component parts are aware in addition to the gestalt mind that is only aware while they are combined."

"Greetings," Flightplan said looking down at the tiny strangers. With Wing's prompting he carefully knelt down to get closer and try to be less intimidating. Focusing on the two Thundercracker was most interested in, he continued, "You are Highdive and Cavu?"

"Yes," Highdive breathed as she looked up, and up, even at the kneeling giant. Her wings flicked and flared in her shock and effort to control the instinctive fear that came with something new being so able to damage her. She'd thought about how big this merged form might be, even did some research, but nothing prepared her for a being she could easily stand on the hand of. No wonder Thundercracker and his flock were all so large!

Next to her Cavu could only manage a nod of his wings while his processor tried to cope with what he was seeing. He'd seen images of a Seeker flying near a gestalt from well before the exodus but he wasn't nearly ready. It helped that he could still clearly pick out each individual and Thundercracker was the chassis.

~Put your hand out. See if either will climb on,~ Prowl suggested with a supportive pulse that was so very different from his state during any previous merge.

Flightplan extended his right hand and placed it flat on the ground palm up. Both mechlings stared at it for a long klik before Highdive hesitantly stepped forward and placed a hand on Flightplan's extended digits. He felt and teeked like a real mech.

Cavu hesitated and stayed where he was, waiting to see how Flightplan reacted to Highdive's approach.

~Put your hand out. See if either will climb on,~ Prowl suggested with a supportive pulse that was so very different from his state during any previous merge.

~Bit of a coward,~ Deadlock grumbled.

~He hasn't run yet,~ Wing pointed out. ~That's a good sign.~

~Caution isn't necessarily a bad thing, especially when dealing with something as unfamiliar as a gestalt,~ Jazz observed.

~He's also several vorns younger than her. Any younger and he wouldn't have been in this class. I favor her but I do like him,~ Thundercracker commented.

"Stand on my hand and you can see as I do," Flightplan offered.

~She's crazy to agree that quickly,~ Deadlock muttered when she climbed on the flat hand.

~She's a flight frame. Heights and falling don't distress them,~ Prowl reminded him.

Even so Nighteye lifted off as Flightplan stood up and lifted Highdive to his optic level.

"Wow," she said as she looked around and then straight at Flightplan and the optic as large as her wing. She'd been higher than this before of course but that was flying under her own power. "That's
Nighteye, my Flock Order. He's a bit overprotective since this is such an unusual meeting."

"Like Thundercracker," Flightplan said with an understanding nod. "You are as safe with me as you are with him. I would never harm one who matters to my components."

"That's good to have confirmed," Highdive said relaxing a bit more and deciding to just go with the craziness right now. "He's spoken highly of you."

She teeked his surprised and noted the lack of movement in her platform and took it as a good sign overall.

"You're his creation in many ways," she smiled warmly. "I know he wants this meeting to go well. Not just for his sake but so that you can have more time that isn't during an emergency."

~True. There are tentative talks of scheduling time every few orns for you to exist,~ Thundercracker added. ~You deserve to have an existence.~

~Time for training and time to experience the world in something other than a crisis,~ Jazz said.

~Having you around when there isn't danger means that others will be less afraid of what you can do when there is a problem,~ Wing agreed eagerly.

"That would be nice," Flightplan said with an excited smile. ~Do you think they actually mean to do it?~

~Yes.~ Wing said with the firm determination that had earned him so many penances. ~I know my Initiate. He means it.~

~It is likely to be out here for a while, vorns even. In time the city will accept us and look at you as a boon to them,~ Prowl added in his own highly calculated way.

~You feel better than before?~ Flightplan nudged his right leg.

~I begin the reformat in five orns. I'm relaxed and looking forward to it,~ Prowl explained his relief and the near-euphoria it brought in simple terms.

"It will be good for the city to get used to you," Highdive looked down and identified Jazz as the one she was standing on, or at least he was attached to the hand she was standing on. "Do your components feel when you are combined?"

~Only if we try to,~ Jazz answered and picked up Flightplan repeat it.

"I can see where that would be a benefit," Highdive walked over to the edge of his palm and looked down at the other Seekers on the ground below. "I think Cavu is ready to join us now if you don't mind." She was enjoying the time up here by herself that the younger Action's caution -- or courtesy depending upon your viewpoint -- had allowed, but since he hadn't flown away screaming like a coward he did deserve a chance to talk to Flightplan. From what she'd gathered during her time with Thundercracker he would probably respect her willingness to share more than any jealousy she might display around the younger Action. The Order had some definite scars when it came to temperament and what she knew of Starscream she thought they were well deserved.

"Of course," Flightplan agreed with the easy obedience of the very young and knelt to lay his hand flat. She hopped off as her flock Order landed and watched as Cavu took courage from her experience and stepped onto the offered hand.
"Umm, hi Flightplan. What happens to you when they aren't joined up?" Cavu kind of babbled.

"I have no awareness of that time," Flightplan answered honestly.

"Isn't it disorienting to have time and space change so much without warning?" Cavu asked with genuine curiosity.

"I do not think so. It is all I know. It is not without warning. Commands are required to separate and to combine," Flightplan attempted to explain.

"So it's sort of like coming out of recharge?" Cavu asked trying to follow Flightplan's description. "It must be nice to having a built in flock to help support you."

Flightplan paused to consult before he nodded. "We believe that is an accurate description. It is nice. My components are very strong together. I like how we are. I like how they feel here."

"Hopefully you will have as good an existent here," Cavu glanced down at his creation trine hovering just off to the side. "Have you heard much music? I have a copy of Dark Chanteuse's Fifth Cantata if you're interested in hearing it. She was a Tiger Paxian composer back in the Golden Age. She wrote it about the construction crews working to rebuild part of the city after a large explosion in a plant. It's also called *The Glory of the Gestalts*."

"I hear from Jazz, though never with my audials," Flightplan answered. "I would like to hear it when there is time."

"We could listen to it next time your gestalt forms, or I could give a copy to Jazz for you to listen to later if you like," Cavu offered.

"I would like that, to listen with you," Flightplan said and warmed at the approval from several components at his independent choice. "What else do you like to do?"

"I'm learning to compose music and enjoy racing. Thundercracker and I have gone on several flights, and I'm learning some new maneuvers from him," Cavu said relaxing a bit with the positive attention.

"Perhaps we can fly together sometime. Once I am allowed to fly," Flightplan said and lowered Cavu to the ground after he had spent the exact about of time that Highdive had. "I like how Thundercracker thinks of you both."

"We're glad to hear that," Cavu and Highdive both agreed as they looked up at him. "He speaks very highly of you as well."

~That went better than I thought it would,~ Deadlock admitted.

~Offering music was a nice touch,~ Jazz agreed.

~It was,~ Prowl agreed.

"Flightplan, why don't you take the opportunity to do a little flying," Dai Atlas suggested and noted that there was no hesitation before Flightplan lifted off but he didn't go more than his own height. "Cavu, Highdive, why don't you come join us. It's interesting to watch a gestalt fly."

Aurora waited until the mechlings were back with them before asking, "What is your impression of him?"
"He's a lot bigger than I expected," Cavu admitted.

"He teeks so young. It's strange to teek Jazz and Flightplan at the same time in the same frame," Highdive said. "He's huge too. Knowing is so different from seeing. From being in his hand and looking into an optic nearly as big as your wing."

"It is a bit nerve-wracking watching someone that big hold your creation in his hand so casually," Joule said.

"Agreed," Nighteye admitted with a glance at the carefully hovering being and the two Knights hovering with him. "I never had cause to get close to a gestalt until just now, and I can truly appreciate how dangerous one could be on a battlefield."

"He was very gentle and careful with us though," Cavu protested slightly. "He could do so much good here."

"He will, as will his components," Aurora agreed. "They have much potential when they have settled in."

"It explains a lot of his attitude towards his flock as well," Highdive said. "I'd probably be very different if I was that close to four other mecha."

"Especially four non-Seekers," Downforce said, speaking for the first time. The Action looked up at Flightplan flying above them before elaborating. "I'd wondered why a trinemate of the Winglord was so friendly towards grounders. This explains a great deal of his behavior."

"Coding can do many things, including causing him to see his gestalt mates as Seekers socially," Aurora said softly. "In time he is likely to be spark bonded to them. It seems to happen to all gestalts."

All the adult civilians flinched at that idea. "I wouldn't want my coding tampered with to that extreme," Nighteye said. "He truly has no choice in the matter?"

"I doubt anyone would. It's a cruelty at best, though one they are coping with remarkably well," Aurora said with an optic on the flight. "He has no choice and we don't know enough to undo the gestalt creation even if they were capable of wanting it undone."

"Is that why we didn't bring any gestalts?" Crackleback asked.

"No, there were none who wished to come. Like the law keepers they were all loyal to their homes," Aurora answered.

"Hopefully they will grow to be as loyal to this city as the others were to their home," Joule said watching both mechlings closely as they processed what this would mean for them if they trined with Thundercracker. It was one thing to trine with a Seeker who tolerated grounders, even one who went so far as to call them flock; it was another entirely to trine with a Seeker who would be spark bonded to three of them.

It was something that was clearly weighing on both mechlings even if it didn't immediately scare either of them off.

"We can fly with him for a bit if you like, or you are free to do when you wish," Aurora told them all. "Flightplan will have a joor or two before we ask them to separate."

"I'd...no we'd like to join them," Highdive said immediately as Cavu dipped his wings briefly.
"Then come," Aurora smiled and launched into the air. "Simply take care around him as you would a first vorn mechling."

"He probably just needs practice like anyone starting out," Highdive said cheerfully as she launched.

"We'll be careful," Cavu promised Aurora and his creators as he joined her and easily fell into the larger formation of adults as they flew with and around the giant combined form. It was so strange to see Seeker wings, Thundercracker's wings, but not have them large enough to do more than minor maneuvering aid.

"I haven't flown with anyone before. This is fun," Flightplan said after a few breem of flight as he cautiously maneuvered his thrusters while the Seekers flew around him.

"It is good you feel that way," Dai Atlas rumbled with approval. "When you and the city are ready most of your time will be around many others. You will fly with many Knights of different frametypes in the coming vorns."

~He means that,~ Wing promised when he noticed the hope growing in Flightplan's field. ~You won't be kept away from others for long. I promise.~

~Right now you need the flight practice out here where it's not crowded,~ Thundercracker agreed. ~With and without company.~

"We will work on getting the Peacekeepers included in training with you as well," Aurora promised the large mechling. "Anyone who would be involved in a rescue operation where you are needed should be introduced."

"That would be a good thing," Flightplan said.

~Okay, we've had practice. Can we set down now?~ Deadlock snarled at them all to cover his growing anxiety.

~Sorry, Deadlock,~ Wing said impressed that Deadlock had stayed up here this long before complaining. ~You've done really well so far, Flightplan.~

"I'm going to land now," Flightplan said to Dai Atlas before he circled back to where they had initially started. The other fliers hung back until he had successfully landed and watched as he broke apart in a strangely smooth motion for how few times they'd done it. Both fliers remained in the air and flexed their wings while the grounders settled on their pedes.

"Much better," Deadlock grunted as he felt the solid ground beneath him before he looked up to watch Highdive and Cavu join the pair above them.

"Flightplan had fun," Jazz said with a small nod to Axe as the large triplechanger joined them.

"You three did very well to tolerate flying so long," Axe praised Deadlock without singling him, and his vulnerability, out. "A little practice every decaorn and he will fly much better by the time he walks the city."

"Flightplan is gaining confidence every time we merge," Prowl agreed looking at the civilian Seekers around him.

"Such is true with most youths. Experience brings both skill and confidence. By the time Deadlock is a Knight I expect Flightplan will be as mature as a mechling," Axe nodded and watched the Seekers fly off while his mate landed and transformed for the grounders to get on board.
"Can't I just drive back," Deadlock grumbled, staring at Axe for a moment before reluctantly following Jazz and Prowl into the transport.

"In time," Axe told him before Dai Atlas closed up and they took off towards home.
Orn 332

Chapter by gatekat

Chapter Summary

Prowl's last night with his gestalt.

Meley unplugged from her newest and most unusual patient with a smile and doorwing wiggle to tell him and his four gestalt mates overseeing this that all was well. From the coding that directed them to her pale, cool colors to her nearly priest white optics to the fact that she looked Praxian instead of Iaconian had all been carefully selected to put those of her current home city at ease. It definitely worked on her Praxian patient and seemed to work well enough on the unit mates that were less happy about her function to keep her safe.

Though she hadn't been told she had no doubt that the four non-Knights were extremely dangerous beings. Her first scan through Prowl's code confirmed that and also confirmed that these four could keep her busy for centuries if they let her and that they wouldn't let her. It was pushing limits for the other three to let her get close to Prowl and she knew to her core than only his insistence on what was happening kept them in check.

He wanted this reformat so badly it made her spark ache when it sank in that it was needed as well. The only truly good news in her opinion was that he was here now and that a clean copy of his core coding still existed. It had taken some nudging but his tac-net had given it up and she agreed it was usable with limited tweaks to shift it from Praxus Enforcer to New Crystal City Knight of Light.

"Have you finished looking over the coding changes?" she asked focusing on Prowl but keeping the others in view. She had no illusions that Jazz hadn't been over it as well. "While I can still take a few suggestions into consideration, we have worked to keep this as clean and true to the base as possible."

"We found nothing to change," Prowl assured her as he stood. "It looks good."

"I look forward to easing your pain soon," Melay said as she rose as well and felt warmth at his flash of thanks across their fields. "We should have your coding and spark back in agreement once we're finished."

"I look forward to entrusting my frame to another," Prowl said honestly before his gestalt encircled him and they left with a single tiny Knight following on four padded paws.

Making their way through the corridors and hallways they headed for the lower level washrack they had claimed after Thundercracker's mourning flight. It was large enough to handle them all while still small enough that no one would think of coming in. The few passing Knights conveyed greetings but didn't stop to intrude. Everyone knew what was going to happen tomorrow and that the gestalt didn't want company tonight.

It was Jazz who gave a small nod of thanks to Demeter when she remained outside and locked the door. He understood she'd hear everything. It didn't make the apparent independence any less appreciated tonight. The sound of falling solvent and the heat of raising steam drew sounds and teeks
of appreciation from them all. Wing and Thundercracker each took a doorway, concentrating on cleaning them thoroughly. Leaving the doorwings to the experts for now, Jazz started on Prowl's left arm while Deadlock took care of the right one. Everything tonight was going to be for Prowl and from the way he relaxed into the attention he was inclined to be indulged.

Fields spooled outward, caressing and entwining in a move that they recognized as a reinforcement of the gestalt code's effort to get them to like each other and bond socially.

Just because the coding was doing it didn't mean they couldn't work with it and enjoy the ride tonight. Especially since they were never going to break apart this flock. A member might change like Prowl was going to do but they would always be connected. They would remember and cherish Prowl even as they would accept and care for his replacement. Jazz, at least, was grateful that this replacement was under the best conditions possible and Prowl's final orn would be one of social cuddling, indulgence and the best faking of an Enforcer unit as they could manage. Greeting the new mech would be much the same, only with more talking and checking each other out.

::Wing, just how much time were you cleared when he boots up a new mech?:: Jazz pinged the Aerial, ready to take on Dai Atlas if it wasn't long enough.

::Eleven orns. Prowl said the new mech will expect ten to lock in his unit and socialize through the worst effects of not having a clue. I'm being punished but not to the point where it harms another. How long I'm going to do punishment shifts took the unit's social needs into account.:: Wing assured him.

::So how long if you didn't need to socialize with us?:: Jazz was just curious now and relaxing, humming happily in the full envelope of Prowl's pleasure-saturated field.

::Probably only a vorn or two less. I'm not getting that much time off.:: Wing answered.

::Good to know in case anything else comes up.:: Jazz said as he finished scrubbing down Prowl's shoulder and soaking in the peaceful happy his unit mate was radiating with a deep engine purr and utterly without shame.

Thundercracker was taking a great deal of time with Prowl's doorwing, meticulously cleaning every segment and joint. Deadlock had moved to kneel in front of Prowl in the spray focusing on his hip and leg.

Absently Jazz noted how much the coding had changed this aspect. He could see it in himself here and there but it was Thundercracker where he could really catalog the progress best. From barely able to tolerate Wing's touch to actively protecting Wing and snuggling him. The time it took the Seeker's socially tactile nature to show even with grounders to now when he'd even 'face them if he had enough of a charge going. He gave the code another vorn to break the last of any of their barriers towards each other and he was sure he knew how and why gestals bonded fully. Every mecha wanted companionship. Even Deadlock wanted to be desired and desirable. The code just kept chipping away at the barriers to calling a gestalt mate a mate and then more. It had nothing but time to do it.

"You're thinking." Thundercracker's quiet rumble interrupted Jazz's thoughts.

"Always," he grinned at the bigger mech but focused on the next twenty joors. If he understood this Prowl it was going to involve a bit of talking, a lot of touching, several overloads and recharging in a pile. All things that appealed to him right now, whether it was coding driven or not was really almost irrelevant at this stage.
"Stop thinking and just enjoy," Deadlock grunted as he worked on scrubbing Prowl's leg clean. Despite the gruff tone he couldn't hide how mellow his field was, caught in the grip of Prowl's emotional state and how it echoed and reinforced the more cheerful of the unit.

Jazz chuckled and let it go even more. The road was set. What came next wouldn't come for orns yet. When he shifted to work on Prowl's hand he found himself drawn forward for the first soft kiss of the evening. Prowl's lips parting slightly to let his glossa tickle against Jazz's mouth. Yes, there was desire there, but beyond that there was a fondness for the saboteur that was more than simply being a part of the same unit. Jazz had been safe the longest. A known allied variable in a dangerous field of known hostiles and the unknown.

Silently Jazz accepted that he'd miss that status when Prowl was gone and felt a small pang at it. Just as quickly that was suppressed and he turned his attention to what Prowl wanted and read a field that wasn't that aroused. It just wanted a bit more touching. It was a wish that was easily granted as Jazz pressed his hands against Prowl's chestplate and continued the kiss as they lightly tangled glossae together and took turns exploring each other's mouth. The solvent raining down on them made the armor feel different under Jazz's hands, and he explored those differences as his fingers played with seams and plating in turn while the others continued to clean around them.

Wing was giggling silently and was utterly on board with the show while he added affectionate touching and caresses to his cleaning work. By the time Thundercracker declared Prowl clean the Praxian had already overloaded once, a soft, quiet event in Jazz's arms.

"Berth. High grade," Thundercracker insisted, his fans already audible. "I need a couple hard cubes."

"Never going to turn that down," Deadlock grinned eagerly.

"Come on then, I know where we're going. There's a convoy-sized quarters nobody's using we get to have until new Prowl's settled," Wing chirped after they dried off.

"Big berth and lots of space. Good choice," Deadlock agreed as he followed Wing out of the washracks keeping Prowl in the center of the group as Demeter trailed behind them. He didn't grumble at her for staying so close; she'd proven she wasn't a threat to their unit and hadn't tattled on Jazz during his little explorations. That had earned her more tolerance than any of them fully grasped. She was good at being unobtrusive in ways that a full sized mech just couldn't. Curled up in her alt she simply didn't register as anything more than decoration if she didn't draw attention to herself.

When they entered they all noted where Demeter settled down on a shelf that conveniently had stuff on it to make her stand out less. There were a couple paintings, a shelf of bookfiles, things from Wing's quarters and in the center of the living room was a pillow-berth larger than Aurora's trine had.

Wing nearly vibrated in his pleasure at how his flock relaxed in it. Prowl went right for the pillow-berth with Jazz and Wing followed while Deadlock did a stalk-through all the rooms as Thundercracker brought the high and mid-grade cubes for everyone over and scattered them around the rim of the berth. Then he went to do the same with the plates of confections and finger foods so everyone could grab what they liked easily.

Deadlock stopped briefly during his investigation to grab a nebula swirl off one of the trays and sample it before the others could. "Not bad," he admitted as he finally settled down with the others. Reaching out, he grabbed another and offered it to Prowl who accepted with a warm brush of fields and his pleasure at being in the middle of his unit during down time. Thundercracker was well into his first cube of high grade while the others took a bit more care with their imbibing.

"Is there anything that will make meeting the new mech easier?" Prowl asked them all.
"What do we need to say or do to put him at ease with us?" Wing asked as he sampled a light spiral and then offered one to Deadlock.

Prowl thought back, working out what rituals of the first orns were important and what belonged to the culture rather than the coding and realized one very serious item had never been brought up before. He queued up an event list of his first orns and sent it to each of them.

"He'll be expecting something like that. It is a period of intense socialization, function lessons, personal exploration and unit bonding that is intended to last a lifetime. He'll push limits and needs to be pushed back when it's not acceptable. It's how I internalized how far I could go. Knowing the law and internalizing it do not happen at the same rate. You are his seniors. He will look to all of you as a guide to what his place is and what the unwritten rules are," Prowl warned them. "I never have done well with unwritten rules."

"So if we don't want to do something he tries we need to tell him and not budge about it. Is this on the level of Photosphere-type behavior or going to be more like watching me around civilians?" Deadlock asked, making certain he was following Prowl's reasoning. He'd seen the fledgling act up once or twice although he hadn't had to personally deal with her yet.

"It is closer to you around civilians," Prowl said with certainty. "Photosphere has malfunctioning code issues. She can't always control herself. I simply push, and I'll push hard, to make sure the rule is real and stable then never cross it again without information that it has changed."

"We can work with that," Jazz said, relieved they wouldn't have those problems in someone with that tac-net. That wasn't a situation he wanted to be responsible for containing here among the civilians and Knights.

"Good. He should not be difficult to handle after the first few orns. He's inexperienced and with a lot of frame knowledge he doesn't understand, but not overtly aggressive. What on the list caught your attention?" Prowl asked. His focus was on Deadlock but he included them all.

"Is he going to want to share sparks with us?" Deadlock asked, since it was something he didn't voluntarily do but Prowl seemed to enjoy. "I'm not interested in doing that even with the gestalt coding's tinkering."

"He'll want to. He'll be very confused by any refusal, but if he does anything that qualifies for coercion get him to Redline quickly," Prowl was abruptly deadly serious. "There is testing limits and there is illegal. If he ever crosses that line something has gone critically wrong in his coding. It should be physically impossible for him to do something illegal for a very, very long time. The slave code you had has nothing on Enforcer code to keep us in line."

Deadlock growled at the reminder even as Wing spoke up, "We won't be the only ones keeping an optic on him. Redline will want to do check-ups for a while to make certain everything is in order."

It was a reminder than soothed Prowl, a reminder that his unit were not the only ones who could and would watch the results of his reformat. He reached for a cube of strong grounder high grade and put a fair amount of gold in it to dissolve and sweeten it. "If he's like I was he'll be rather sweet and helpful but utterly hopeless on figuring out the shades of gray in existence."

"So a lot like Wing," Deadlock said bluntly, ignoring the chuckles around him. "We'll try to keep him that way."

Prowl had to think about then before he nodded and downed a long drink of his cube. "A little more annoying about following the rules but yes. There are a lot of similarities. The hardest lesson for me"
to learn was that there are good reasons to look the other way for minor infractions on occasion. I was all affection and care for my unit, but outside it I was quite a...."

"A jerk?" Jazz suggested.

"On a good orn," Prowl agreed.

"We'll help him understand," Thundercracker said firmly. "He'll know that I am a former Air Martial. I will do my best to explain the logic behind it."

"I think we all get why and when using discretion written into the law is useful," Jazz agreed with a nod and lifted his cube to Prowl. "I've taught many a mecha how to see all those shades of gray. May not have the credibility Thundercracker has but I know how to teach the black and white views all the shades of gray."

"He will be well cared for," Wing said as he leaned in and kissed Prowl gently on the cheek. "Just as we intend to take care of you in the time you have left."

"Indulging in my unit is the best final night I can imagine," Prowl purred and turned his helm to claim a real kiss. "Knowing he will have a unit to care for him is a wonderful thing."

Wing readily fell into the kiss and let his hands start exploring to memorize Prowl's frame and field. It wasn't hard to get in the mood for more given how receptive Prowl was being and the quickly building arousal from Jazz and Deadlock nearby. Even Thundercracker remained close while Prowl and Wing rubbed against each other, kiss, touched and warmed up to the click of chest armor unlocking. It had been a while since Thundercracker even thought to grumble about his fledgling interfacing with the grounders in the flock. Right now he and the pair of Actions in grounder form focused on watching and guarding the only pair currently willing to share this most intimate of acts.

Near white and golden light flooded the room and the pillow berth, reaching out to the other and connecting eagerly. The light twined and flashed while the mechs moaned.

~Love this,~ Prowl's thought was more emotion than glyphs as he welcomed Wing fully into his spark without reservation.

~Love you,~ Wing returned. He knew his mixed feelings about this coming loss and gain were on display for Prowl and the spark. He would miss Prowl, but he understood that it was cruel to try to keep him here.

~I will remain. He was a happy mecha before the war. He will be again,~ the spark tried to sooth him as it embraced him.

~I know and look forward to his happiness,~ Wing agreed, accepting the comfort from one of the calmest sparks he'd ever encountered. ~A question for all of you,~ he asked addressing the spark and processors. ~You know we have decided on a gestalt symbol. Mine will include the designations of my gestalt mates. Would you mind if I list Prowl as a deactivated member of our gestalt as I have listed my deactivated Initiates?~

~I do not mind,~ the spark answered first.

~I can think of no objection,~ the processors chimed in a moment later.

~Thank you. Do you wish to be a Knight of Light?~ Wing asked suddenly, the thought that such a spark must have been meant for the priesthood flickering across the connection.
-I could be. We will discover what he needs to be,- Prowl's spark trilled as the processors it powered gave a twitch of intense thought at this idea.

-He will have options, I promise,- Wing said, his own protectiveness of his flock on display for the spark and the processors. The spark wrapped further around him, happy for the emotion. The processors took a bit longer to catch on but were soon right there as well with silent thanks to Wing for his care of the innocent that would soon be his unit mate.

They settled, deeply blended and enjoying the mingling of such different energy and a gift Wing was still ignorant of: a chance at balance.

-We will take care of him and help him find happiness in whatever occupation he picks,- Wing repeated, enjoying all of the attention while he reinforced that the four older members of the flock would be involved in protecting and teaching the new mecha. It lasted until the energy building between them and sent them both spiraling into an overload that was much stronger for Wing's smaller spark. The Aerial came back to reality with his armor closed and sprawled on top of Prowl who teeked very content to have him there.

"Well that was smoldering hot to watch," Jazz said once he determined that Wing was actually functional again. "Now how about the rest of us getting to have some fun with you?"

"I like watching," Prowl rumbled with honest desire. "Perhaps both of you enjoy him at once."

"I can get behind that," Deadlock agreed with a hard rumble of his engine at the idea of spiking Wing. Reaching over, he pulled Wing gently off Prowl and up against his own chestplate. "You want his mouth or his spike, Jazz?"

Thundercracker helped shift Prowl closer to his own frame, offering him a light spiral off a tray. "We need to keep your energy up."

The Seeker was rewarded by a caress of thanks and the Praxian snuggling closer while the other three made short work of sorting out who was where and soon Deadlock was thrusting against Wing's aft while Jazz moved much more slowly in and out of Wing's mouth.

"He does enjoy pleasing them," Thundercracker observed even as he kept his focus on Prowl. Knowing Prowl needed more energy than most grounders, Thundercracker offered a cube of high grade, willing to feed Prowl or allow him to take the offered drink whatever his preferences might be right now.

"He does," Prowl purred and accepted the cube with thanks in his field. "He needs something to do with wild abandon and that is one of his very few outlets."

"Better this than drugs or fighting," Thundercracker agreed. "You three can certainly keep him happily busy."

"Both of those would get him kicked out of the Order," Prowl said softly. "He has this and flying, really. At least it's enough for him. How is your search for an Action?"

"I'm thinking Highdive is better suited to me and the flock," Thundercracker admitted as he stroked Prowl's doorwing. "I find Cavu's quieter nature soothing after Starscream, but I am concerned that he won't be able to stand up to me regarding the choice of a Vision. Highdive is determined enough to try to make me listen to her."

"I must agree with you there from what I have learned. She is smart and assertive but she is nothing like Starscream in temperament," Prowl smiled at the Seeker's mild startlement. "Just because it's no
longer my duty doesn't make the tac-net any less data-hungry or my drive to protect my own any less."

"I appreciated his thought in bringing a gift for Flightplan despite how intimidated he was by our gestalt, but I think Cauv's flock will be happier if he trines with a different Order," Thundercracker admitted. "Highdive might drive him away once she's certain I favor her, or perhaps someone will introduce him to another Order looking for an Action. I know Crimson Sprite hasn't found an Action yet."

"They might not appreciate a composer," Prowl warned gently. "Lawyers and artistic types rarely get along well."

"Haji and Cheoseo must be an exception," Thundercracker said, knowing that his own knowledge of civilian life was flawed and severely outdated even as he suspected that Prowl's knowledge was little better. "Still, there are a couple of other Orders still available besides her."

"They are the exception in many ways, given who their Vision is. It's always possible a personal connection will happen if he meets Crimson Sprite and the next class are still all possibilities. He did barely make the cutoff," Prowl hummed as he tried to shield Thundercracker from the arousal building in him from the show the others were putting on.

Thundercracker finished the last of his current cube of high grade and placed an arm around Prowl. "You don't need to hide from me. I know you're enjoying watching them."

Relief flickered through Prowl's field before the arousal bloomed in it, flooding Thundercracker with the desire to interface or even just for physical affection that was simmering in Prowl.

Thundercracker didn't think as he pulled and almost lifted Prowl, settling the Praxian across his lap facing towards their flockmates and began to stroke him. "Enjoy watching them," he encouraged as the high grade and the arousal in the room worked on him.

On reflex Prowl obeyed and relaxed into his place. He snuggled into the large frame and gradually began to stroke his own plating. By the time Deadlock overloaded Prowl had given in and was stroking his spike.

"I could hold you like this while Deadlock spikes you. Or would you rather Jazz ride you while you're on my lap?" Thundercracker asked as he rested his head against Prowl's shoulder. The spike of arousal was sharp and flared enough to catch Deadlock's attention over the deep moan and feedback of Jazz and Wing overloading together.

"Deadlock," Prowl breathed, calling the very willing mech over to the spread legs and glistening valve between them.

"He wants you to spike him right here," Thundercracker said almost unnecessarily as he settled a firm grip on Prowl's waist holding the Praxian securely against his frame.

"That's an offer I'll accept," Deadlock almost growled as he stepped between Thundercracker's legs and slid his spike straight into Prowl's valve. He groaned with the pleasure of the slickness, that it was for him because Prowl chose him and then again as Prowl's valve rippled and cycled around him in encouragement.

Thundercracker kept Prowl in place as he writhed against the Seeker's frame. The lust and pleasure in both mechs' fields pressed against his own, but the Seeker forcibly kept his spike sheathed for now and just enjoyed the feel of their pleasure. His turn would come soon enough. Even with one
overload already Deadlock wasn't much on denying himself or teasing a lover.

It really was fairly hot to watch and even hotter to teek as Prowl responded as eagerly to Deadlock's aggression as he did to Wing's tenderness and matched the desires of his partner.

Prowl really would make an amazing Vision.

Oh he knew from past conversations that Praxian Enforcers didn't have creator coding, but he also knew this city required its citizens to add to the population. Perhaps the new member of their flock wouldn't mind helping to raise fledglings whether his own or from Thundercracker's trinestate. Likely among the reformatting edits would be the software to create, or at least to sire and raise creations. It would be the best time to add them; the new mech would mature with them and not face the trauma of such massive edits as an adult.

Doorwings wiggled frantically against him as Prowl arched and keened with the crackle of overload surging into Thundercracker and Deadlock.

Deadlock let out a roar as his own overload hit and collapsed on top of Prowl pinning him against Thundercracker's frame. It was too much for Thundercracker. "Want you," he growled to the grounder that should be a Vision. He felt the others startle as Deadlock willingly pulled out and moved away. Then Prowl's field went molten and his entire frame went lax in submission. It made it easy for Thundercracker to shift them so Prowl was on his back, legs spread eagerly and hips up as his hands were pinned over his helm and the far larger mech loomed over him.

Thundercracker didn't bother prepping Prowl, he already knew the Praxian was more than ready and willing. Instead he took a moment to savor the willing frame beneath him before guiding his spike into the waiting valve and gasped at the tightness despite how slick and recently used it was. Even so Prowl's field was rich with desire, with how intensely good this felt, and not a hint of pain or any desire to go slow. In fact Prowl was bordering on deliriously aroused on a deep kink fully fulfilled.

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Thundercracker could tell that the others were watching them right now, and he waited just a moment letting them and Prowl savor the moment before carefully thrusting into the tight valve, increasing speed and power with each thrust when it continued to go well. The tiny part of him that wasn't focused on his flockmate's field and the hints there as to what worked best or the intense pleasure that came from being inside such a tight slick space wondered how close this was to taking two grounder spikes at once for Prowl.

Thundercracker leaned forward looming over Prowl even as he kept the Praxian's arms pinned above his head. Wings and doorwings were as close to aligned as they could be with their height difference. It was all Prowl could take and his keen turned into a searing whiteout that dropped him into a hard shutdown.

Thundercracker managed one more thrust into the unconscious frame beneath him before overloading and falling forward. He didn't crush Prowl beneath him, but he knew the Praxian would be thrilled to online to his weight.

"Pit damn that was smokin'," Jazz said with awe.

"Very," Wing agreed from his spot sprawled next to Deadlock.

"How is it I never knew that about him," Jazz hummed thoughtfully.

"Nothing was directed at you of that," Wing actually chirped, happy to know that one. "Thundercracker's the only one those thoughts would have been directed towards."
"He's the only one of us big enough to fill Prowl like that,” Deadlock pointed out. "And it's not like 'Cracker would have willingly done that back on Kessai.”

"Definitely not," Jazz agreed as Prowl began to show signs of awareness. The Praxian squirmed a bit but was still pinned in place by Thundercracker. The rumble of his engine and the small moan indicated he definitely enjoying the experience. So was the still-intoxicated state of his field.

"So ya still got another round in ya?" Jazz cooed as he crawled close.

"Definitely," Prowl rumbled and turned his face towards Jazz. He made no effort to get Thundercracker to move though.

Jazz kissed Thundercracker before saying, "Let him up so we can play too. You can have him back when Wing and I are done."

The Seeker nodded his agreement, his only reluctance in how slowly he pulled out and lay on his side to watch as Jazz kissed Prowl and ran his fingers across Prowl's valve testing it for any damage. Jazz nodded towards Wing and said, "Neither of us are as big as Thundercracker so we should both fit if you want us at the same time, Prowl."

"I'm built for two," Prowl shivered in anticipation and claimed a more heated kiss.

Wing crawled across the pillows and eagerly joined in, the three of them trading kisses until Jazz shifted around so he was behind Prowl. With Wing thoroughly occupying Prowl's mouth, Jazz ran his glossa along Prowl's doorwings as he slipped his spike into Prowl's valve. He felt it adjust quickly to his size despite what had just been in it. Calipers closed and rotated, the lining rippled and squeezed and Prowl moaned and leaned into Jazz's attention.

Jazz kept kissing and nibbling on Prowl's doorwings while Wing focused his attention on Prowl's chevron and mouth. Jazz kept his thrusts shallow for now, stimulating nodes to keep their charge up, and waited for Wing to be ready. Wing reached down and ran his fingers around the Prowl's valve and Jazz's spike. With each thrust of Jazz's spike Wing's fingers slipped deeper stroking both of his lovers at the same time. He continued to tease with his fingers before he kissed Prowl's spike cover causing it to snap open.

"I'll give this a good suck and ride when Jazz is sated," Wing purred at the spike of approval at his words. A few more thrusts and Wing pressed his spike against the opening and felt it relax for him to give an easy if tight entrance. It took a bit for Wing and Jazz to sync their thrusts properly, but they quickly found a rhythm that had all three moaning in pleasure. Jazz bit the back of Prowl's neck lightly as he managed to tangle all three sets of hands up around Prowl's waist. As they rocked together Jazz was willing to admit he was grateful for Prowl's experience in the middle. It made it so much easier when the pleasure began to rob them of finer motor controls.

"Primus you feel good," Wing moaned deeply.

"So good," Jazz managed to mutter as he began to lose himself in the intense pleasure building in their fields and frames. Just because this was for Prowl didn't mean he wasn't going to enjoy it to the fullest.

"Overload for me," Prowl gasped between them and rippled his valve to encourage their charge to build just a tiny bit faster than his.

It was a request that Jazz was more than willing to grant as his overload hit hard. He was followed almost immediately by Wing who cried out as his own overload was triggered by Jazz. They were
both marginally aware of Prowl letting go with a roaring keen as the first rush of transfluid hit the top of his valve.

"Hot," Deadlock admitted as he vented heavily, neglecting the midnight star in his hand for the moment in favor of watching the three of them collapse together.

"They are," Thundercracker agreed with a rumble of his own. His focus was on Wing as the Aerial recovered and wiggled backwards until he could kiss the tip of Prowl's pressurized spike as Prowl began to rouse.

Prowl let out a faint moan as Wing kissed and licked his spike acting like it was a rare treat to be savored. By the time Prowl was fully aware his moans were mostly from Wing's attentions as soft lip plates and a skilled glossa teased him towards Wing's intake. Some was for Jazz though, the spike still inside him and the hands that were stroking him. The optics of the three watching the scene added a bit to the charge just by being there.

Deadlock got up and settled next to Prowl's left side, placing a hand on the Praxian's doorwing and stroking it while he continued to watch Wing tease Prowl's spike. "Better view here," he said after catching Jazz's amused but heated gaze.

"I bet it is," Jazz grinned and nibbled on Prowl's neck. He tightened his grip on Prowl's hips to hold them still when Wing swallowed the spike he was enjoying in a single motion. The sudden surge of pleasure from Prowl hit everyone around him. Jazz couldn't help thrusting into Prowl's valve even as he tried to keep his grip on the Praxian and let Prowl focus on his spike. A bit of hardware that Jazz absently realized had been completely ignored during the orgy before now.

By the time Prowl was gasping and thrusting into Wing's intake against all efforts to make it last his helm was lolling on Jazz's shoulder and Deadlock was stroking himself as he watched Prowl come undone without shame or fear at being surrounded.

Deadlock looked back at Thundercracker with his heated gaze focused on all of them. Almost quietly he asked, "You up to spiking him while Wing rides his spike or do you think he's had enough for now?"

"I think he's had enough," Thundercracker said after assessing Prowl's flagging energy levels. "Let Wing wear him out."

"He's had a lot of fun tonight," Deadlock agreed as he stroked a hand fondly across Prowl's doorwing. Even Wing with all his enthusiasm was keeping his focus on Prowl. He was drawing out the overload but monitoring to make certain not to tip it from pleasure to pain.
Prowl is reformatted.

Deadlock booted first, or at least he was fairly sure he had. It was hard to tell with Jazz around. He knew for sure that the other three were still out cold and Jazz was just as snuggled into the pile around Prowl as the rest of them. He was just grateful that Thundercracker had been willing to lay on the other side. He'd never have recharged with the Seeker over him. He wasn't that comfortable recharging around the Seeker just yet but having him on the other side wasn't too bad. Feeling the relaxed and happy fields around him, he half-wished they could stay like this forever. He knew from experience that the good times wouldn't last, especially since Prowl was going to be reformatted today. It felt like a coward's way out, a form of suicide, but Deadlock knew what suicidal teeked like and whatever Deadlock thought of it Prowl didn't see it the same way. This teeked like nothing else Deadlock knew.

It was frustrating to just watch it happen, but everyone else seemed to understand why Prowl was doing this so he'd just been going along with pretending everything was fine.

"You're thoughtful," Wing's low voice was still recharge-heavy as he tried to snuggle closer to everyone.

"Just thinking about everything that's going to happen today," Deadlock admitted as he draped an arm across the Aerial. "It's weird knowing Prowl is going to cease to be soon."

"And he's so weirdly happy about it," Wing nodded and pressed closer. "He teeks like a creator-to-be."

"Is that what creators act like before the sparkling shows up?" Deadlock asked, all but admitting that he'd never really been around one before.

"A lot of the time. Some are more excited and some already exhausted. The teek's about right though. He's about to create. That's it's using his frame doesn't matter so much," Wing sighed. "It's a bit weird even to me."

"And they're going to expect me to create? Without giving it my frame," Deadlock asked, still dealing with the idea that they were going to eventually expect him to help make a sparkling. No one on Cybertron would have ever let him near a sparkling.

"When they do we will help you raise it," Thundercracker rumbled sleepily from his spot beside Prowl.

"And you won't have to carry it as long as your mate is willing to," Wing added with a reassuring stroke along Deadlock's arm. "That won't be for a long time though. Not until you've been a citizen for centuries."

"The idea of anyone willingly leaving anything small and vulnerable with me seems crazy. I might
break it by looking at it wrong," Deadlock grumbled.

"You do better dealing with Photosphere than most others," Thundercracker pointed out as he stretched lazily. "Admittedly she is not the typical fledgling, but, even during one of her episodes, you haven't harmed her."

"She makes sense," Deadlock grunted dismissively.

"True, she does in her own way," Thundercracker chuckled. "The point is that with sparkling protocols in place you'll be safe enough. It's not like any of us are going to have truly civilian creations."

"Does that mean we won't have to create?" Deadlock perked up.

"No, it means we will need to guide them to roles that will suit them well," Wing chastised lightly, kissing Deadlock's hand.

Deadlock huffed without much feeling behind it.

"You'll have practice before it's your turn," Jazz said as Prowl finished his boot cycle at a lazy pace. "I'm sure Thundercracker'll be the first of us unless Wing finds himself a mate."

"Not likely to happen on my part. I haven't found one yet," Wing said as he gently stroked Prowl's helm in greeting.

"You will have plenty of time to adjust to the idea of creating a sparkling before any of us will have that privilege and responsibility given to us. We won't be alone either when it does occur. I will be trined and be part of an established Seeker flock before they will allow me to create," Thundercracker said calmly as he turned the last member of their flock to online. "Good morning, Prowl."

"Good morning all," Prowl purred and snuggled into the pillow berth even as he stretched. His field was alive with anticipation and good feelings when it reached out to touch each of theirs to check on them. "Shower and energon before we snuggle until it is time?" he suggested.

"I'm game for that suggestion," Jazz agreed, perking up at the mention of a shower even as Deadlock grunted and pulled himself up off the berth.

Wing waited until Thundercracker tugged him up to rise to join the others for the walk to the closest small washrack, the same one they'd used the night before. It wasn't quite the fetish for him that it was for the rest of the unit, but he did appreciate the relaxed mood that usually came afterwards.

As before Demeter followed them and remained outside, trusting them to behave like civilized beings while under the shower and caring for each other.

Deadlock was the first to move when someone knocked on the door a couple joors later but all he did was glare when he saw Dagger on the other side.

"Good morning Deadlock," the Praxian Knight smiled at him while the others roused themselves from where they'd been lounging on the pillow berth. "Prowl, are you ready?"

"Yes," Prowl said serenely as he stretched and settled his armor while the door closed behind Dagger.
"Are you sure you wish to do this?" Dagger asked quietly when he was in easy teeking range.

"Very sure. It is time for another to take my place," Prowl's answer was relaxed, content and more than a bit excited.

"All right. Everything's ready then," Dagger nodded and turned to lead them to the psych ward of the medbay.

Jazz followed right behind the Knight. Wing and Deadlock fell into step with Prowl in between while Thundercracker brought up the rear. Prowl was completely protected as they headed into the medbay.

No one who passed tried to talk to them; there were only polite nods and wing dips. Every Knight knew what was going to happen to Prowl today, and everyone understood that this was a tense time for the other four members of his unit.

Once they were inside the psych ward, Dagger led them directly to Melay and Redline. Everyone in medical had agreed that it would be best to have these two be the first the gestalt saw once they were inside.

"Greetings," Melay said, giving the appropriate wing dip and keeping her field and voice as soothing as possible.

"Greetings Melay," Prowl's reply was rich with anticipation, hard-won trust and honest respect. "I am ready."

"All the preparations are ready for the reformat," Melay replied. "We will begin the process shortly."

"This is going to take several orns, so no barging in and disrupting us during the process," Redline said pointedly to Jazz and Deadlock, knowing those two were the most likely to be a problem if they thought there was trouble. "This is delicate work that takes a lot of concentration and time, and we don't need interruptions causing any potential problems for the new mech later on."

"We'll behave," Jazz replied while looking at Prowl. "This a 42/32 thing til it's done?"

"Yes and it is critical that he not come in contact with anyone not transmitting a medic ident once he goes into stasis," Melay said seriously. "While unlikely he could imprint on such a field or voice and we would have to begin again."

"We'll keep everyone else out," Deadlock said with a grim look over at Thundercracker. He didn't want this to take any longer than necessary, and the idea of someone other than a medic messing with one of his unit mate's processors was not something he was going to tolerate. Bad enough these medics were having to do it. He only tolerated that because Prowl wanted it so badly.

"Thank you," Melay relaxed. "Please say any goodbyes and leave," she told the group before motioning Redline and her assistants to give them as much privacy as was feasible in the room.

"Be well and take care of yourselves. The last thing he needs is to meet his unit and have any of them without full fuel and recharge," Prowl spoke as he reached out to Wing and offered a warrior's greeting.

Wing took the offered forearm and gripped it firmly. "We'll take turns standing guard so we will be well rested when we meet him."

"Thank you," Prowl smiled and gripped Wing's forearm and blended their fields to push all Prowl
felt about this and his hope for the future into it.

Each of them accepted Prowl's goodbye in turn with a firm, steady grip. They kept things short and simple as any sparkfelt feelings had been said in the near privacy of their shared quarters. The group left quietly and without protest, leaving Prowl alone in the room with Redline and Melay.

"Now that they are no longer here I must ask a final time. Are you sure this is what you want?"
Melay spoke calmly, her field twined deeply with his.

"Absolutely sure. The last metacycle has become ever more pleasant but it is only a thin coating holding back the pain. It is time for the fresh start I have been denied for so long," Prowl let her in as deep as she wanted. Even with all the assurances he'd seen that it would be allowed it was a relief when she withdrew and smiled at him.

"Then lay down and we will begin."
Prowl's frame booting up as a new mech; all white, no markings, designation: Pantera. Quality time with Redline, then with Dai Atlas and Axe before going home with Dagger to the gestalt.

Redline did a final check of the door lock, comms block and that every possible place Wing or Jazz could hide in was clear before he turned to Dai Atlas. "Have you been present for the first boot of a pre-prog before?"

"More than I care to count, though none at his level of predetermination," the giant answered. "I've read and understand all you've given me on what to do. I won't make a mistake."

"I know," the senior medic huffed a sigh and turned to the equipment still hooked up to Prowl's all white frame. "I've never had to do this much work on someone's processors before and I didn't even do most of it. It's possible that he won't become conscious for several joors. I'm still not sure how much control the tac-net has before he's fully aware. It might insist on inspecting the new hardware I instilled. Several of his memory cores had significant physical damage. With the reformat I took the opportunity to replace them."

"Will that cause him any potential issues?" Dai Atlas asked.

"It depends on how thoroughly the tac-net insists on checking them out and all the changes we made. It should accept the new parts and reformat but anything that independent that I can't access has the potential to cause problems. Worse case it could undo the reformat. Fixable but we'll have to start over again and this time go after that black box," Redline explained. "I really don't want to try and hack that thing. Either way it won't be a problem once the reformat's been accepted."

"From what I've been told by you, Meley and Jazz I agree it would be better if it accepts the reformat," Dai Atlas watched the offline frame closely, waiting patiently to meet the new mech who would soon become his next Initiate. He knew the boot cycle should take a full joor if it went well but Prowl could also boot in nanokliks under command of an AI. So his hope was a very full joor or more.

So far they'd avoided the instant boot of a threatened AI and Redline relaxed fractionally.

"Axe has watchers on all of them. They won't intrude and disrupt everything," Dai Atlas said softly as the kliks passed quietly, each one giving hope that this would work as intended. It turned to breems, then groons and finally passed the joor mark.

"No signs of overwriting the changes," Redline answered the look. "The new hardware is being examined carefully. Nothing I didn't expect. It's a good sign."

One thing that no one ever mentioned about being at the first boot of a pre-prog was how it could become boring waiting for the mech to finally boot. There was nothing Dai Atlas could do to speed
things up and he didn't want it to go quickly given that meant problems that Redline and Meley would have to handle. His thoughts were eventually interrupted by the shift in the sounds of Prowl's frame and the background sounds of the monitoring equipment picking up to indicate increasing activity and awareness.

Ice blue optics power on and looked around, focusing on everything in the relatively small enclosed room.

"Greetings. What is your designation?" Redline asked in Praxian as he stepped into the optic feed.

"Pantera," he answered in formal Praxian.

It was the same vocalizer Prowl had used, but the difference in tone and inflection made it clear this was a different mech. Prowl had finally gotten his greatest desire. Now it was a question of whether the repairs and reformat has left this youth untraumatized enough to escape the pain that had driven Prowl to his end.

"Pantera, this is Dai Atlas, the Lord of Law of New Crystal City," Redline introduced the giant and Dai Atlas immediately had Pantera's full attention.

"Lord Dai Atlas," the newly created mech greeted his master.

"Greetings, Pantera," Dai Atlas said also in formal Praxian. "What is your function?"

"Enforcer," he answered only to frown with a slightly confused look. "What does 'open' mean, sir?"

"It means that what branch of law enforcement you train for is open to your choice. A list of acceptable choices should be among your orientation files. You have until your ten orn adjustment period is complete before you give me your answer," Dai Atlas answered with private relief that Pantera didn't freaking out at the unknown.

"Understood, Lord Dai Atlas," Pantera said still looking a bit confused but more confident since his superior had explained this new concept to him and he had orders on how to deal with it. "Where is my gestalt?" He wasn't sure why he expected to see them, only that he did.

"You will meet them tonight. Redline must confirm that everything is functioning correctly and then I will escort you to your current quarters. Once you are settled Dagger will show you to where your gestalt is staying during your orientation," Dai Atlas answered evenly.

"Is your tac-net fully booted yet?" Redline asked as he moved to Pantera's side.

"Yes, it is fully operational, Chief Medic," Pantera answered.

"Ask it if it will let me scan your systems," Redline requested.

Pantera paused as he navigated the request and complied. Both Knights teeked how startled he was as he interacted with the potent AI for the first time.

"As long as you remain out of the locked areas, sir," Pantera passed on the reply.

"I planned to," Redline said before plugging in and beginning the same complex dance that was gaining access to a cooperative Prowl. ~Prowl said he left you as much information as he could on dealing with it.~

~That one, sir,~ Pantera pointed to one of the huge stack of files still in his pending-to-read list.
Good. We're just going to go through a standard mental function test to make sure all the work we did settled correctly. You've had some massive changes to both hardware and software, Redline explained before beginning the extensive series of tests that took the better part of a groon.

"Do you have any questions yet from your read me first files?" Dai Atlas asked to pass the time.

"Lord Dai Atlas, this is an isolated city which does not allow contact with the outside world. Why was this gestalt allowed to come here and stay in violation of those rules?" Pantera asked.

"Because one of your member, Wing, was a resident of the city vouched for the rest. It is a rarely used rule as very few stumble into the city on their own and fewer are brought here by a citizen," Dai Atlas gave the basics. "By vouching for you he has agreed to be held accountable for any misdeeds."

"Wing has been punished for leaving the city without permission," It was a statement, not a question as Pantera accessed all the rules Dai Atlas was discussing and carefully sorted through them in relation to his gestalt and their arrival.

"Yes," Dai Atlas answered anyway while Pantera processed.

"Why has this frame's status been changed, sir?" Pantera asked after nearly a breem.

"Prowl was an outsider brought to this city by Wing. Pantera," Dai Atlas stressed the difference in designations. "is a voluntary reformat which has occurred inside this city. There have been a few other reformatted mecha here although they were not pre-progs, and the correct local status for one in your position is that of a mechling citizen on probation until you complete the coursework to prove you understand the local laws, customs and economy."

"I believe I understand. Do I have a specific chaperone for outside the Citadel?" Pantera asked after reading the relevant file.

"While Dagger is your primary contact and chaperone any Knight other than Wing is acceptable," Dai Atlas explained.

"Because he is in my gestalt?" Pantera asked to be sure he understood the logic.

"That and because he is on probation himself. While he is on probation he cannot take responsibility for another's safety," Dai Atlas said. "While he would be allowed to once he is no longer on probation I would be genuinely surprised if you still required a chaperone in the fifty vorns he has on probation."

"Logically a mecha cannot be a valid chaperone if that mecha requires a chaperone," Pantera agreed after scanning the relevant rules and descriptions of probationary status for a Knight. "I must agree based on what data I have. It would be extraordinary if I could not learn what is expected of an independent mechling by then."

"Everything seems to have installed correctly," Redline said as he backed out and unplugged. "Try to sit up, then stand and walk around."

"Yes, sir," Pantera responded and sat up with the care of one who hadn't done so yet. His frame understood and he quickly relaxed into watching how the commands flowed rather than directing them.

Redline and Dai Atlas were both pleased to see that Pantera had no issues standing next to the berth. Glitches and issues at this point might be signs of major problems that would require a reformat, and the tac-net might not be so accommodating if they had to start over. Neither were under any illusions
that it had been Prowl that had brow-beaten the AI into cooperating and this mech had no
desperation as motive to do it. Once in easy teeking range Dai Atlas had to hide his surprise at the
friendly, open, happy-to-exist feel he got from the same frame that's teek only orns ago as painfully
happy to be ending.

::I'm not surprised. His spark is strong, his frame is strong, it was just emotional trauma that buried
this being. He's likely to be like this for as long as he isn't subject to major loss or command again:::
Redline told him. "Does anything feel unbalanced or difficult?"

"No, sir," Pantera responded easily with the kind of open wing-language common among Knights.

"You are free for the night. I will see you for a checkup at jor ten," Redline nodded.

::He won't face that sort of trauma again:: Dai Atlas promised Redline. It had taken the destruction
of Praxus to traumatize Prowl to that degree; there was no way Dai Atlas was going to lose this city.
Directing his attention completely to Pantera, he said, "Follow me."

Doorwings nodded and Pantera walked behind him without hesitation or any hint of the learned
wariness of others. As much as the big mech regretted the loss of such an experienced tactician he
was sure the loyalty and happiness he now commanded in this youth was well worth it. Experience
could be rebuilt. Loyalty and natural happiness were far more difficult to built from where Prowl had
been.

"Do you have any questions before I introduce you to your temporary guardian?"

"Where does he fit in my command structure?" Pantera asked.

"Unit medic and sergeant," Dai Atlas answered smoothly, having prepared for the question. "While
he is not of your unit overseeing it is his primary duty."

"Understood," Pantera answered. "Is he our unit's primary contact?"

"Yes. Marwir, Aurora, Dart and Kimark are also involved as guardians for other members of your
unit. While Marwir and Aurora outrank Dagger they are not the unit's primary medic," Dai Atlas
explained the complex situation as simply as he could. "Your guardian may change based on what
specialty you choose but Dagger will always be your medic."

Pantera spent a little time as they walked sorting through the list of guardians and the notes Prowl
had left for him about each of them. Overall the mech had been impressed with guardian selection
and how well they matched the needs, temperament and issues each member had. It did leave a
question that Pantera couldn't answer.

"Why was Prowl so distrusting, sir? You gave him no reason to be."

Dai Atlas almost sighed although he'd expected the question. "Prowl's issues developed long before
he arrived here. The destruction of his home city caused severe emotional trauma for him, and his
experiences during the war with the Autobots did not help him recover."

"So it was not distrusting you or the Knights of Light but in distrusting everyone?" Pantera asked to
be sure he understood such a foreign concept. It went against his coding and his expectations but also
his logic.

Dai Atlas agreed. "The new coding helped him learn to work with his gestalt, although I know he
was relieved when I agreed that he could reformat."
"I do not doubt it. The level of code corruption in his last status report is ... it's frightening to think he had to endure that," Pantera murmured and went still as a the door they were walking up to opened to reveal a white Praxian with black and red markings and the ID ping of a medic.

"Dagger, this is Pantera. He is your charge until his orientation period is over," Dai Atlas made the transfer of responsibility formal for the youth's sake. It was strange to speak in Praxian to a being he didn't normally do so to but it was a small thing to do to keep Pantera comfortable. The youth would be up to speed in Imperial by the time Dai Atlas saw him again.

"Greetings, Pantera," Dagger said in formal Praxian as he ran a quick scan over the new mech even though he knew Redline wouldn't have released him if there were any issues present. Pantera already appeared more settled than Prowl normally appeared unless it was after an intense interfacing session and he was barely conscious.

"Greetings, Unit Medic Dagger," Pantera's reply was in the same dialect he was addressed in. Despite the formally of the words and tone his doorwings gave a much more open and relaxed greeting before he followed Dagger's motion and stepped inside the living room of a more complex dwelling than he expected for reasons he had difficulty pinning down. Furniture marked out a dining area for two, a living space with an entertainment center and four additional doors.

"Welcome to your new home," Dagger allowed Pantera to study his quarters. Mindful of the formalities he turned his attention back to Dai Atlas and said, "Thank you for delivering my charge, Sovereign."

The giant nodded and turned as the door slid closed.

"I am not housed with my unit," Pantera said it as a statement even as his frame and field was full of confusion and mild distress at the concept he was struggling with.

Dagger thought about how to explain the politically and socially complex situation before plunging in with the reminder to himself that this being was no normal mechling. "You will be spending a lot of time with them and can even recharge with them fairly regularly, but you will not be living with them on a regular basis. You are a mechling citizen on probation; Wing is a Knight on probation. Deadlock is currently planning to join the Knights but has not found a Daoshi; Jazz and Thundercracker intend to be civilians. Housing you separately allows each guardian to focus on helping their charge adjust to this new environment and their own specific circumstances. For the next ten orns all have been excused from punishments and duties to ensure your orientation is successful."

"Where will I recharge, sir?" Pantera asked while he processed the complex situation.

"You have a room of your own," Dagger showed him to the door on the far side of the balcony from the other two. "If you prefer to recharge with company you are welcome to join me. You are welcome to call me Dagger."

Pantera looked a bit disturbed by the idea of recharging alone even as he assessed the small, simple room with a berth, window, shelf structure that was part open and part with drawers. "I would prefer to join you."

"I welcome your company anytime, but your room is available if you decide to try it," Dagger answered as he showed Pantera the door to his personal quarters. "I do not lock it during recharge so you can decide to join me during the night if you wish."

"Thank you," Pantera relaxed as he assessed the larger, far more personalized and lived in space.
"While your status is that of a mechling you are free to go anywhere that will open for you here in the Citadel. When you wish to visit the city beyond our walls you will require a chaperone until your guardian is confident that you can handle yourself among civilians."

"The Lord of Law told me that you are my current guardian and my unit's medic and sergeant," Pantera said. "Will you be the one making that decision?"

"Whether I will remain your guardian is up to Dai Atlas. Either way I will be involved in the discussion regarding your status as a mechling since I am your medic," Dagger stressed, wanting to give Pantera stability at this early point. He also understood that reinforcing what Dai Atlas had said earlier demonstrated that the chain of command over Pantera was unlikely to contradict each other and the inherently rule-bound mech needed that stability even more. "The final door is to my private meditation room. It is private because no one else normally uses it, not because no one else should enter," he opened the door to a small room with a sword hook on one wall just below helm level and a small sliding cabinet door on the far wall.

"Understood," Pantera looked around the almost empty room. He had files from Prowl which were notated as involving meditation and discipline, but they were slightly lower on the priority tree for assimilation.

"Would you like a cube in the common room or to meet your unit next?" Dagger asked.

"My unit," Pantera answered immediately, focusing on the higher priority at the moment. His spark and processor wanted to meet his unit mates while his systems were not demanding fuel.

Dagger smiled and motioned him to follow with a doorwing. "I am here to answer your questions, now and in the future. Even after I am no longer your guardian I will still be your medic and part of your extended unit."

"Thank you, Dagger," Pantera answered with a polite doorwing dip as he followed Dagger down the hall. The passed a few Knights who greeted Dagger in what Pantera recognized as an old variant Imperial Standard that had been loaded as his primary language right next to Praxian. "What dialects does everyone understand?"

"Everyone understands standard and everyone I know of understands their frametype dialect and that's to be expected in the city. Most Knights understand three to five other dialects well enough to manage. Medics and Masters understand all major dialects and several minor ones, even if they can't speak them well," he wiggled a doorwing in reminder of frame limitations many had.

"What dialects do my unit prefer?" Pantera asked as he shifted his language priority over to standard.

"The all understand standard and default to it. They are trying to update but they haven't used the variant you know for an age so don't be surprised by strange or mangled words or glyphs. Just ask what they mean if you can't work it out. Thundercracker is familiarizing himself with the local version of Vosian but doesn't use it around non-Seekers. Jazz seems to know everything fluently. Wing sticks to standard but he knows Praxian, Vosian, Crystal City and I think several more. Deadlock usually sticks to standard. I'm honestly not sure you can call his default a dialect. It's a cross between Simfurian, street thug, standard and Decepticon by his description." Dagger said as they passed another trio of Knights that greeted them and looked at Pantera just a touch longer than was strictly polite.

"Then Imperial standard is highly formal to them but understandable," Pantera surmised.

"Definitely," Dagger nodded his doorwings and stopped in front of a door meant for much larger
mecha. "For unit gatherings that aren't in Aurora's eyrie we commandeered an unused convoy class quarters and piled the living room with berth pads and pillows."

"That sounds like a logical meeting place for a unit this size," Pantera almost quivered with anticipations as he waited the brief klik for the door to open. He was finally going to get to meet and spend time with his unit. Hopefully they wouldn't be disappointed with the new replacement. He knew he had a huge presence to fill.

Stubby black horns were the first movement that caught his attention. They were attached to a black and white Polynesian frame that answered to Jazz. He was about to greet the mech when rich, dark blue wings spread wide and snapped his attention to a gorgeous Seeker heavy warframe and it remained there.

It was almost comical to Dagger that Pantera was staring so blatantly at Thundercracker. He'd known Prowl found Seeker frames highly attractive, but apparently that attraction to Seeker wings hadn't just been from Prowl's personality and experiences and it definitely went well beyond the Praxian norm. Or perhaps Pantera simply didn't know how to be polite about it.

"Pantera!" Wing broke the moment with a rush forward to hug his gestalt mate with all his natural enthusiasm. "So good to finally see you," he trilled and stepped back, his hands still on the slightly baffled Praxian as he gave a thorough inspection while Jazz snickered and Thundercracker regarded the white mech with a bit of bemusement.

"Hello, Knight Wing," Pantera collected himself to greet the excited Aerial.

"You look good," Wing said as he finished looking the Praxian over.

"Greetings, Pantera," Deadlock said from his spot in the corner watching them. Unlike the others, he greeted their new unit mate in formal Praxian.

White doorwings lifted in delight as Pantera focused on the dark purple warrior. "Greetings, Deadlock," he trilled back in Praxian.

"You look and sound a lot different from Prowl," he said picking his words carefully in Praxian. "We will keep an optic on you and make sure no trouble happens."

"Thank you," Pantera responded with honest sincerity in Praxian.

"So, Pantera, how do you feel?" Jazz asked in standard and did a respectable job of keeping the pronunciation correct.

The white Praxian smiled at him warmly and stepped forward to offer his hand in a warrior's grip. "I feel good. My frame is in excellent condition and my coding is clean. The strangest thing is the deep sense of relief echoing forward from Prowl."

"He hurt for a very long time before he found relief from his damage," Jazz accepted the handshake and tried his best not to show his surprised at the open warmth and the strong sense of self in this youth. The frame might look like a paint-stripped Prowl but the mecha inside was nothing like the Prowl Jazz had known.

"He wanted you to be happy almost as much as he wanted to finally be at rest," Wing said with a bit of regret for the loss while still welcoming the newest member of the unit. He vowed that he was not going to fail Pantera.

"He did and I intend to be," Pantera nodded his doorwings before looking towards the Seeker and
offered his free arm to him. "Thundercracker?"

"Greetings," Thundercracker said in careful standard as he took the offered arm and felt fingers close around his forearm. The blatant attraction from a grounder might have once been disconcerting, but the young mechling was so open and honest in his reactions to everything right now that it had been both flattering and amusing. It was a reminder as well that Prowl's attraction had come from a very base level that not even the war could dampen much.

When Wing made a point of stepping back and looking around Deadlock finally stood and came in teeking range of this open, honest and completely unscathed by existence being. It triggered every protective urge in him and firmly locked Pantera in that status that he'd destroy worlds to protect. When ice blue optics focused on him they reached out for the welcoming grip at the same time and met between them with the smoothness of practice they didn't have.

Wing watched the pair closely as they seemed to settle so smoothly together. It was oddly appropriate how Prowl and Deadlock had started with so much hostility and now as Pantera and Deadlock met all of it seemed to be gone.

"Do you wish to sit and talk or cuddle and talk?" Thundercracker asked fully expecting Pantera to take up the offer of field and frame contact with his unit. He wasn't disappointed as doorwings perked up in an answer before the youth spoke.

"Cuddle and talk, sir," Pantera answered those who couldn't read his doorwings as well. It was a matter of a klik to settle with the all-white mech in the middle snuggled happily between Jazz and Deadlock and in Wing's lap while Thundercracker took the post with the two outside doors in view while still in easily field range. Pantera had initially seemed slightly put out he wasn't going to get to sit on Thundercracker's lap immediately, but Wing happiness at their position was more than making up for the minor bit of disappointment.

"How are you feeling about everything?" Thundercracker asked.

"Did they try to pull anything shady on you?" Deadlock interjected with a growl, falling back to standard and mangling the pronunciation a bit. He was close enough that Pantera didn't have any trouble with it though.

"No one tried anything shady. It went exactly as memory and protocol said it should. Chief Medic Redline and Lord of Law Dai Atlas are what I expected," Pantera assured Deadlock first before looking up at Thundercracker and working to temper his reaction. "I feel good. Being with you feels right," he snuggled into Wing's lap and purred at the doorwing petting that followed. "There are many exabytes of important data still to process however I am confident in saying that the reformat went well and I am stable."

"Good," Thundercracker said relaxing now that he had received Pantera's reassurances. It had been hard for him to allow such an extreme action as reformatting to occur on one of his flock, and it was something he'd tolerated only because Prowl had truly needed and wanted it. "Do you have any questions for us?"

"Do we have a plan for habitation once everyone is a citizen?" Pantera went for the item that disturbed him the most.

"We're still working on that," Thundercracker said. He thought he understood some of Pantera's concerns because he really didn't want to live apart from his flock. "Jazz and I still intend to become civilians; it is better suited for us and will help the gestalt in the long term since Flightplan will be less likely to be viewed solely as a weapon."
"You can share quarters with me here in the Citadel," Deadlock offered immediately.

"And me," Wing added. "Given we're a gestalt we can have it configured to frequently house all five of us of in pile whether or not Thundercracker and Jazz live in it. Bonded pairs and trines get such quarters all the time. We've never had a gestalt before but the theory's the same."

"We also talked about having a place in the city that's central for all of us," Jazz added in. "Though if we do have three members in the Knights it makes sense to take advantage of free housing. Thundercracker's got his flock's eyrie and if I'm by myself I don't need much space at all. A big advantage when I'm starting out."

"It's not free," Dagger warned them from where he was lounging. "Like energon and the facilities it's part of our compensation as Knights. The civilians that live here do pay a fee in shanix and duties. When the situation gets closer to mattering I'm sure you'll all sit down with Master Aurora to sort it out."

"Why Aurora?" Thundercracker asked.

"She's the quartermaster of the Citadel. Managing our population, supplies and funding is the core of her duties," Dagger smiled at the Seeker. "She does a lot here."

"Even more so now that she has taken on myself and Photosphere," Thundercracker admitted. "I am fortunate that she was willing to help me; the process of integrating would have been much harder in a different flock."

"That was a large part of why she was chosen and agreed. For all it was done quickly we used everything Wing knew of each of you to select a guardian that would be well suited to your present and future," Dagger admitted to something they all had decided had happened but hadn't demanded to know.

"You were chosen for Prowl because you were Praxian?" Pantera looked over at his guardian.

"And I'd be the gestalt's primary medic," Dagger nodded. "I argued for it as well."

"Why?" Pantera asked in mild curiosity.

"Wing is my Daoshi. I wanted to be close if he needed help," Dagger hoped it was enough for them.

"Having a Praxian medic around that Wing trusted for Prowl was probably a good idea. Helped him handle the idea there were so many of you here," Deadlock grudgingly admitted as he picked up a tray and thrust it towards Pantera. "Here, have some snacks."

"Thank you," Pantera willingly took a sample of the three types nearest him without apparent care for former preferences. The rich chocotar sphere went down with a hum that was less than sure he liked it. A ball of fluffy aragonite crystals stuck together with powdered rust didn't even get past the first bite. Without a word Wing snagged it when Pantera's field flinched unhappily. The mountain drop was regarded a bit more warily but he only paused briefly before trying it. Doorwings flicked up and his field suffused with enjoyment.

Standing in the corner of the room as far from the gestalt as he could Dagger watched Pantera's reaction to the treats closely. The avoidance of the fluffy crystals matched with Prowl's preferences and made sense with his high energy requirements. He'd never seen Prowl eat anything with chocotar in it and was curious to see what Pantera thought of them.

It didn't surprise anyone present that Pantera really liked the nebula swirl, but he didn't seem to mind
the star crunch he sampled after a careful examination. The small sparkleberry tart was greeted with the same optic-dimmed enjoyment as the nebular swirl. With a pause Pantera snagged a second nebular swirl and a mountain drop.

"I don't believe my tank will accept any more solids for a while," Pantera apologized for leaving half the offerings untried. "The tac-net seems come with a ratio of treats to real fuel I'm allowed."

"That's some advice you should definitely follow," Jazz said as he offered Pantera a cube of magma mid-grade. "That tac-net can draw a lot of power, so you need to keep an optic on your energy levels until you're used to it."

"Thank you," Pantera said politely as he accepted the cube and took a drink. When it dimmed the fuel warning he sighed in contentment and relaxed. "Are there any good tracks here?"

"There are some decent tracks over in the Praxian district that we've been to a few times," Deadlock admitted. "They've got enough space that we can stretch out and run although I can't keep up with you two in a race."

"Some of those have drive parks that are a lot of fun; big, varied and fun to run," Jazz added.

"Any that have an Enforcer status?" Pantera glanced around before looking at Dagger.

"Sorry, but that code doesn't really exist anymore. Several are willing to be rented after closing for any rules you want as long as you don't damage the infrastructure," Dagger explained. "We didn't need to arrange it for Prowl but I'm sure we can for you. How often do you think you might want to?"

"Mmm, perhaps once or twice a vorn according to my files. It seems likely to be something to do with unit or an established lover as it involves interfacing at the end," Pantera said as he delved into the specifics left to him by Prowl. "Depending on laws and who is involved it could also be outside the city limits."

"Sounds like it could be fun," Deadlock said with a small smirk.

"They won't let us race like that outside the city limits until we're further along the citizenship paths," Jazz pointed out. "The tracks are probably the best bet."

"This century, I am sure," Pantera agreed readily as he reached out to stroke Deadlock's cheek guard. "In three, five or ten centuries I am sure we will be free to go where we will. What is socially acceptable will still matter."

"No doubt," Dagger agreed firmly. Personally he doubted any of them would take a century given the most difficult case would be taking the shortcut of becoming a Knight Initiate. Jazz and Thundercracker were both far closer than any of their previous arrivals after less than a metacycle and a half. "Honestly I'm not sure what restrictions the Sovereign would put on it. I doubt it'll be much given the flight frames are allowed to interface in the upper third of the cavern."

"We'll have to ask about it," Thundercracker said, wanting to see his flock happy and enjoying time together. He took note of something he was peripherally aware of in the airborne interfacing of and marked it as fact.

"Once we are citizens," Pantera agreed, then lost track of his thoughts as Jazz and Wing began to rub his doorwings. His field filled with the pleasure of it and the warmth it created to have the attention.

"Speaking of outside the city, when are we going to introduce Flightplan to Pantera?" Deadlock
asked as he basked in the warmth of such happy companions.

"After the ten orn mark has passed we will talk to Dai Atlas about making arrangements for Flightplan to meet Pantera," Dagger said, stating the obvious for Pantera's benefit as he still wanted to stress the chain of command for him. He could see that it settled well with Pantera and felt himself relax a bit more. This literally couldn't go better than it was. There was only one hurdle left; interfacing.

"I look forward to it," Pantera purred deeply. "What is important to know about each of you?"

"I'm a berserker; try not to slag me off and get away quickly if I do lose it. Last thing I want to do is rip one of you apart, and we don't know if the gestalt code will protect you," Deadlock said bluntly. He wanted to get the urgent matter out of the way first.

"I understand," Pantera promised forcefully. "How easy it is to trigger?"

"When I'm not trying, pretty hard," Deadlock admitted. "Flying is the most likely trigger. Serious damage is the other."

Pantera processed that before nodding his understanding.

"Yeah. If he does actually lose it the best thing is to not give him any targets. He calms down when there's nothing around to slag," Jazz added. "I'm the entertainer. Sing, dance, instruments, acting, whatever. I'm really good at playing a part."

Wing offered up the information that he expected Pantera to have issues with given his current coding, "I hold the position as the Voice of Dissent among the Knights here in the Citadel. As part of my duties I openly question some of the decisions made by the Masters."

Pantera stilled, digging into files marked with that tag for nearly a full half klik. When he spoke his field was clear that his resources had not settled him. "How do you decide when to question and when to obey?"

Wing took only a brief moment to collect his thoughts; he'd been pondering how to explain this aspect of his role as a Knight for some time now. "That is a complicated process, and it is not something I do lightly no matter what some others think. Sometimes I speak out when it is clear to me that other Knights do not understand why the Masters made a particular choice and are displeased by it. By voicing the unasked questions and receiving answers, I help show that our leaders do not make decisions without considering alternatives. It is also my duty to speak up if the orders we Knights are given are against the Order's Code. No leadership is infallible, and someone must be willing to stand up to point out poor decisions or potential corruption. Hopefully I will never have to do this, but I must be willing to do so if necessary. My Great Sword Challenger of Ways helps guide me and makes certain I am not straying from my role."

Venting briefly, Wing brought up the most recent event. "As an example, I looked at what was happening to the tradition of the walkabout. On Cybertron, Knights would go out into the city-states and encounter different viewpoints as they traveled through what were often unfamiliar territories. No one came back with the exact same experience because we all wound up in different places at different times. Here, the walkabout is almost pointless; New Crystal City is so small and close that we can visit whenever we want. The new Knights are not getting the same experience, but more importantly the Citadel isn't learning anything new. I needed to know what was happening outside of the safe area around the Citadel so we would know what threats lurked. That's one of the reasons I left on what I considered a true walkabout; Challenger of Ways did not object to that decision. I accept the punishments for my actions, but I cannot regret them. That's how I found the four of you."
"How often will you go on these true walkabouts?" Pantera asked uneasily even as it was clear he accepted much of the reasoning as sound. "Do you expect us to follow you? Are you punished for speaking out?"

"Back on Cybertron those in the Citadel were isolated from everyone else. Normally Knights would only go on a walkabout once they complete their time as an Initiate to make certain they truly wanted to be a Knight. Here the Knights and Initiates all come from or have access to the same society. We don't learn anything new going out into the world because it's right on our doorstep. The best they manage is to pick up a trade or three," Wing said. "I don't expect to go on anymore walkabouts because I proved my point. I am punished for my pranks and actions just as anyone else would be but not for speaking out."

Despite it being Pantera's question all around the room the gestalt relaxed slightly at hearing it wouldn't happen again.

"Good. We wouldn't leave you to go on your own," Thundercracker rumbled.

"Even if I was offered the chance to do it again, I wouldn't unless all of you were already going too as well. I've gone on my walkabouts; it would be time for someone else to do it," Wing said as he gave Pantera a small hug and felt the mech melt into it.

"What is everyone's function in the unit?" Pantera asked when the snuggling settled.

"Thundercracker makes certain the rest of us are fueled and taking care of ourselves," Wing said with a chuckle.

"We don't have functions like you're thinking," Jazz said carefully. "No one's the racer, heavy hitter, pack hunters, sniper or the like. Closest we come is Deadlock's the protector, Thundercracker's the caretaker, Wing's the humor and balance, I'm the security expert and socializer, and you're the law."

Pantera took that in and what had begun as a sharp tension nearing panic gradually relaxed into a thoughtful struggle to work that into the social order he'd come on-line to fit into.

"You've got time to figure out your place with us and in this world," Wing promised as he pressed a light kiss to the back of Pantera's helm. "As for more of our functions outside the unit, Deadlock is planning to join the Knights; he fits in well with the former military mecha and gladiators here. Thundercracker is going to be a civilian and is looking at possibly becoming a teacher as well as considering joining search and rescue. Emergencies are times when war training and a gestalt like us could be very useful."

"I can understand that," Pantera almost trilled into the relaxed state that having order and titles he could assign others gave him. "The tac-net would also be very useful during emergencies. Do Knights help then?"

"Yes, especially if it is a natural disaster or something large scale like a foundry fire," Wing ticked off a few things he remembered from past experience. "We don't tend to get involved with things of a criminal nature unless someone from the Citadel is somehow involved."

"Understandable in both," Pantera relaxed fully as he settled into a place he could accept for himself and his unit.

"That reminds me, avoid a Seeker called Gloaming and his trine," Deadlock grunted. "Mech's got a grudge against 'Cracker because his sibling fancies our Seeker as a trine mate."

Pantera looked at him, his mouth partway open before cycling his optics a couple times. His field
spoke what he couldn't quite find the words for.

"Mechs can be stupid," Deadlock said giving as much of an explanation as he could.

"They chose a very poor way of trying to protect her from what they viewed was a dangerous suitor. Just as unit protects their own so do flocks," Thundercracker gave a much more charitable variant. "However Deadlock is correct in a basic way. Trying to provoke a warframe into attacking is a stupid thing for a civilian to do."

"Most definitely. Has his flock leader spoken to him?" Pantera asked and received wing-assurance first.

"Yes. The situation is very unlikely to happen again. That does not mean he is safe to socialize with," Thundercracker agreed.

"Are there any others I should be aware of?" Pantera glanced around to include Dagger in the question.

"We haven't had anyone else openly threaten or harass any of the gestalt members, although there are mecha who are not happy to have warriors here given we left Cybertron because of the war," Dagger said after some consideration.

"You might want to avoid a Seeker Knight called Flashfire," Jazz added, ignoring Dagger and Wings brief dismay at the mention of the designation. "He doesn't like non-Seekers much right now although he's not outright hostile. The Knights are aware of his attitude and are working to correct it."

Pantera gave a doorwing wiggle in understanding. "It's good to have so few enemies. Are there any who are too friendly for my good?"

"Not that we've run into so far," Jazz said. "There are a few mecha that like to hang around on a the few occasions where we've left the Citadel, but the Knights have done a good job keeping them away for now. We'll see if it stays that way as we get more freedom to explore."

"It's likely they're attracted to the new rather than anything untoward," Wing suggested. "New is a rare thing here."

"Doesn't mean they're not creepy," Deadlock pointed out. "I'll take care of it if they start bugging you too badly."

"I will keep that in mind," Pantera promised. "It doesn't sound like they are a likely issue. So what important things have happened you each of you that I should know of?"

"My wings say it all," Thundercracker flared them out in a display of their markings.

Pantera took a few kliks to study the markings, taking in all they represented, both in terms of achievements and the sacrifices that Thundercracker had endured. "My condolences to you for your losses."

"Thank you," Thundercracker inclined his wings.

"I'm a street thug that fought my way out rather than just offline," Deadlock said with a shrug. "My left arm say it all," he shifted to show it off

Pantera studied those as well and immediately appreciated what they said about the mech. Loyalty
for loyalty was a concept that resonated strongly with him and berzerker was a term that came with a wealth of files that largely summed up to 'leave to specialists.' He had no doubt he'd become a specialist before long.

"I was sparked a stunt flier but found my way to the Knights within a vorns. Back then such groups were far more common and easy to find out about. With the exception of a handful of walkabouts I've been with them my entire existence. I've fought to protect and rarely needed to kill."

"An honorable choice," Pantera said even as he recognized that Wing would have had great difficulty keeping to that code if he had remained on Cybertron.

"I'm ISO and SpecOps by training," Jazz offered, reluctant to share much more than that.

Pantera accessed another group of files that indicated that Jazz could have legally functioned as information gatherer, hacker or infiltrator for sting operations if the unit had required those functions back on Cybertron. Here he could still gather intel and provide one of the social fronts for the unit.

"What did you learn from Prowl that might be useful for me to know?" Pantera asked them all.
"What will others expect when they see me?"

"Most here in the Citadel will not expect you to act like he did," Wing said firmly, wanting Pantera to be his own mech but realizing that some things were going to be required to relearn. "Those outside the Citadel mostly knew of him as the Teris-Spi grand master who came from Cybertron. It's expected that you'll be retrained in that art no matter what path you choose to take, mostly because you already have the frame memory for it."

"Thus I am a danger to others until I know enough to control it and when it activates," Pantera responded with a solid understanding and agreement. "What civilians did I have enough contact with that they might be disturbed?"

"Blacktip probably had the most contact with you. Not much seemed to be personal though and he's a priest," Wing said.

"Towodi had the most personal contact of civilians," Dagger offered. "He knew you were going to be reformatted early on. I don't know how he'll react to meeting you. Knowing isn't the same as experiencing."

"I'll be keeping an optic on him," Deadlock grumbled. "That testing kept you busy so you spent most of the time with the Knights or us."

"Just try not to terrorize him if he doesn't need it," Pantera smiled at him with an affectionate stroke to a cheek guard.

"Most of the rest of Prowl's contact with civilians was deliberately scattered through a wide assortment of martial practitioners during Blacktip's testing. We used the fact that everyone wanted to be involved to limit the number of mecha who could claim actual time talking to him," Dagger admitted.

"So while many may have met him very few exchanged more than a few glyphs in passing," Wing nuzzled Pantera as he processed the strange sensation of speaking of Prowl in the past tense while talking to his frame under the control of another. He was thinking a binding might be in order to understand once he had a grip on what aspect of the complex relationship he wanted to settle.

"You've spoken of what road I'll take. What does the unit think?" Pantera asked them in all seriousness.
"I know that tac-net will want as much information as possible," Jazz said bluntly. "The Knights or the Peacekeepers would keep it busy planning strategies for emergencies or invasions."

"You would do amazingly well for the city as a planner, high-level manager of any sort or a ER doctor," Thundercracker offered. "That said I would be very surprised if any choice other than the Knights would be accepted."

"Why?" Pantera asked, openly curious.

"If I may," Dagger spoke up and was given a doorwing nod from Pantera. "Your coding needs a strong rank structure and stable culture to remain settled. The Knights and the priesthood are the two roads we know would serve you well in that regard. The Peacekeeper may, though by my understanding from Prowl they are far more lax in many ways than the Enforcers you are coded for. Whatever catches your attention will be studied to ensure your long-term comparability before you enter training."

"I would not say you are incorrect," Pantera spoke carefully as he thought. "I do not know if you are correct yet."

"You've got time; that's something that we've all got here," Deadlock said with a shrug. "You might get bored and decide to do all of them."

Pantera snickered at the idea, his field rich with mirth. "Perhaps I will. What would the unit have me be?" He asked more seriously.

"Happy," Wing said as he hugged Pantera, thinking about things the Praxian would enjoy. "Seriously, we want you to find a role where you can thrive. Jazz wants a racing partner on the tracks. Deadlock and I would like another sparring partner. Thundercracker wouldn't mind having another sane spark once Jazz and I start the prank wars up again."

"Who says I won't join you?" Pantera teased, yet he was honest. He didn't know but the idea didn't bother him. Pranks by definition were harmless.

"Primus help me," Thundercracker groaned theatrically.

"No one would see you coming," Deadlock said with a chuckle, enjoying Thundercracker's theatrics. "Especially if you three work together." Wing and Jazz shared a grin at the idea as Thundercracker let out another groan.

"Most likely," Pantera purred. "On a related count, how can the city survive without regulations on the vices?"

"Which ones?" Wing asked. He'd been expecting this topic to come up since the idea of a reformat became reality. "Most cities had legal, regulated prostitution at one level or another, although it seemed to be a privilege reserved for the upper classes some places. Most of the places where it was illegal penalized the mecha offering the service more than the ones using it; that's counterproductive because a service only exists if there is a demand. We decided it didn't make sense to penalize someone for trying to support themselves or doing something they enjoy for a profit."

"But viruses, gangs, those forced into it..." Pantera attempted to express what his base programming said were the dangers.

"Virus are easy to keep under control with health check-ups; there are enough medics that everyone can have reasonable basic coverage at an affordable level. Dagger could explain more about that," Wing said with a nod towards his former Initiate.
"One of the lessons learned that we really listened to was that if a population has shelter, fuel and maintenance they rarely become rebellious. So in the city's charter we included that every citizen is entitled to those basics. It may be a miserable, tiny existence to most of us but they do not starve or deactivate for lack of basic care. For now there are only a handful taking such public assistance. All of them are either very old or permanently damaged. Most who use it temporarily that I've seen are young are looking for work or using their funds for education rather than the basics of survival. Of that group every one of them has paid in taxes what they've used in assistance in a century or three," Dagger didn't hide that he was very proud of his city for this. "Since the Knights don't truly need as many medics as we have most orns many of us volunteer at the low-income clinics around the city for some of our duty shifts."

"That is ... truly amazing," Pantera worked to process the concept and that it was used so little. "But how can there be so few in need?"

"It's a very young city and we pay careful attention to how fast it's growing. Citizens are expected to petition for a creation and prove they are capable of raising it if it is not requested by the government that they have one. In that we also make sure that in any given vorn there are not too many new youths that there will not be functions or jobs for them when they are grown. There are grumbles about it, about how strict it is, but it keeps the city strong and stable," Dagger explained as best he could.

Wing nodded and focused on another aspect he figured Pantera would appreciate, "Those limits along with the initial restrictions on who came here have also kept the development of gangs in check. We don't tend to have a lot of bored mechlings or adults with nothing to do and no prospects. We also have a low crime rate. The city is still so small that most mecha in a given district know each other, so it's hard to remain anonymous when causing problems. There isn't much to smuggle either since intoxicants are legal and there are no outside sources for anything resembling contraband."

"Keeping intoxicants legal means that we can monitor the quality of the substances mecha are ingesting into their systems. Quality controls help cut down on dangerous contaminants," Dagger added. "Knights don't tend to use intoxicants because we try to control our bad habits, but we do see them at some of the clinics."

"Legal doesn't mean there aren't additional punishments if someone breaks the law while intoxicated," Thundercracker added. "It was one of the things I asked about when I learned about these laws."

"So being intoxicated is not a crime but driving reckless while intoxicated is more serious than driving reckless while sober," Pantera ventured to see if he understood.

"Yes, exactly," Thundercracker smiled at the quick uptake. "Honestly it seems like a very viable system. The guiding philosophy seems to be that if you do not harm or endanger another it is legal."

Pantera hummed and really thought about that for a long half klik.

"I believe I agree that it is a good foundation for crafting laws," he decided.

"It works for us," Dagger agreed. "Hopefully as the city grows we will be able to keep things going as smoothly. We do not want to see the problems that occurred on Cybertron repeat here."

"I will do all I can to ensure this city remains peaceful," Pantera promised with a shadow of Prowl's fierce, almost amoral fire flaring ever so briefly. It made his teek distinctly different and more than one of his unit suspected that it was the tac-net more than the mech. Getting the tac-net's agreement with all this was a very good sign. The last thing anyone in the gestalt wanted to have to fight it for
control of Pantera.

"That is a goal we can all agree to and work towards," Dagger trilled encouragement.

"Very much so," Wing purred and tipped Pantera's face up for a kiss that swiftly deepened before Pantera's field flared with shock-confusion and he tried to pull away.

"What is permissible? I can't find the contracts," he stammered.

"We don't have written contracts in the gestalt," Wing said still not quite certain about the need for these contacts. "I'm up for almost anything that does hurt anyone involved."

Pantera looked around the group, seeking any expression with a clue but not even Thundercracker could.

"How does anyone know what is allowed and when?" he looked around the group again, including at Dagger.

"We talk about it and pay attention to what we teek from our partner," Wing answered. The sharp uptick in distress from Pantera did not make him feel better about it.

"I'll ... just watch then," Pantera shifted away from them and the nest as he struggled with the lack of rules where he expected them. "I'm not ready to write that much code."

"Then hang out and watch," Jazz trilled before tugging Wing into a molten kiss while Pantera settled about an arm's length from Thundercracker on the edge of the nest. Even this early in the arousal was clear in Pantera's frame and field. With the situation over the distress smoothed out so he could enjoy the watching he had direct permission for.
Chapter Summary

Booting up with the unit. Sparring with Wing and unit socializing Thundercracker doesn't go to flight class 32.

Pantera reached full awareness and frame control long before he was fully booted according to the system readout. It was more than a little strange to be himself and completely alone inside his processors while the AIs booted along with their hardware. It really was rather unnerving to have so much empty space in his thoughts, so little order compared to the previous orn. The Enforcer AI booted shortly after that and they both relaxed into the mutual space that was no longer as empty and unsettling.

Around him his strange unit were in various states of awareness. Wing and Thundercracker were both in recharge though the Seeker was gradually coming up. Jazz and Deadlock were fully aware and looking around.

Finally the tac-net AI reported online as Pantera's powerful processors were filled with the order and massive calculations that he didn't need to pay attention to.

"Good orn, Pantera," Jazz said as he saw the mechling was fully aware and moved a bit. He hadn't spoken up earlier because it was the first real boot-up for the Praxian and it seemed important to let it run without disruptions.

"You onlined quickly," Deadlock observed.

"Clean code," Pantera snuggled against whichever frame was closest before placing that as Jazz against his back. "I understand Prowl had a lot of corrupted code and damage to deal with. Good orn, Jazz. Are there any plans for the orn?"

"Sparring and spending some time together in the showers," Jazz said with a grin at the wanton quiver that brought. "We want to see how much you recall, and Wing is a good instructor. Then we'll all spend some time cleaning each other up."

"And we're claiming the one with a hot oil pool," Deadlock rumbled at the spike of want he got out of Pantera for it.

Pantera pushed thoughts of liquid heat away and dug into his files on Wing and how well he knew how Enforcers sparred. By the time the Aerial's hand began lazily petting a doorwing Pantera nodded agreement to the plan. "Wing is the only one authorized to spar with me?"

"Yes, Wing is a full Knight even with his current disciplinary status. He's trained several Initiates and knows how to handle a new student in situations like this," Jazz said.

"More to the point, I've proven that I'm better than Prowl was when sparring and we're using practice blades," Wing chimed in lazily. "You won't hurt me. You couldn't with those weapons. They're weighted perfectly but they're soft metal. Hits are marked with paint."
Pantera relaxed fully with the assurances that his lack of self-knowledge wouldn't be dangerous. "So fuel, washrack, sparring, washrack and the oil pool?"

"And another fueling in there," Thundercracker insisted. "Three cubes and orn, more if you need it. The energon is good and plentiful here."

"We could bring the energon to the oil pool and enjoy it there during the soak," Deadlock suggested.

"That sounds wonderful," Pantera purred unabashedly at the idea.

"As for breakfast, it's stored in the room. Something about you not being ready for the common room yet," Jazz squirmed to get up to get it.

"I'm likely not," Pantera admitted without shame. "Extended unit socialization doesn't normally begin until after the unit bond is solid."

"I'm enjoying this bonding time so far," Wing admitted. "It's good to have a chance to get to know you without distractions."

Thundercracker gave a hum of thanks for his energon and was privately grateful that none of the others recognized it as a flock tone. He knew they were flock to his code. It didn't mean he was completely okay with that and he certainly wasn't ready to be faced with questions, even silent ones, about it.

"Thank you," Pantera accepted his cube but waited to drink until he'd watched Wing and Deadlock take a couple first. Once again his frame knew far more than he did and the movement was smooth, timed and angled to go down easily despite the speed.

"You enjoying the magma-solar energon mix?" Jazz asked.

"Mm, yes," Pantera trilled with a wiggle of his doorwings before he looked at the empty cube. "I think Prowl went hungry more than he let me know," he said softly. "My frame is well trained to drink fast."

"We all are, except Wing of course," Deadlock said bluntly. "Cybertron's been running short of resources for a long time, and we learned to cope. It's nicer here since we have all the fuel we need."

"Yeah, I'm not surprised. His rank and specialty may have protected him from the worst of it but we all went hungry and drank whatever we got fast before a battle or someone tougher could interrupt," Jazz agreed, then paused. "I can teach you how to go slower and enjoy it. It's not hard. It's just a matter of interrupting the reflex with a new default."

Pantera smiled brightly at him and leaned closer so their fields nuzzled. "I'd like that."

"We'll have fun working on it as a unit," Jazz promised as he affectionately stroked Pantera's shoulder.

"So who's ready for the washrack?" Wing suggested when he noted they'd all fuelled.

"I am," Pantera perked up at the suggestion of getting cleaned up with his unit.

Dagger appeared silently as the group headed down to the wash racks, a casual observer more than a watcher to be slipped away from. It wasn't the same one Pantera and Dagger had used the night before. It was taller, built for mecha Thundercracker's height, though it did have some considerations for those shorter.
Just the smell of warm solvent in the air from the last users made Pantera quiver openly with want as intense as it had been in Prowl, only Pantera didn't know how to shield his reactions yet.

Deadlock headed over and turned the solvent on at a mid-range heat from what Prowl had normally used when they were in the racks together. "How's the temp for you? Hotter or colder?"

With a shiver as he focused on the question Pantera stepped up and put his hand under the spray. "It feels great," he answered with another shiver before getting under the spray. It was a bit rude in an over-eager way but far from anything the group honestly considered uncivilized.

"We're going to take care of you," Thundercracker said without having to trade a glance or comm with the others to know their agreement. The youngster need to be pampered right now and shown the best way to clean someone else at the same time. Wing and Thundercracker started to scrub Pantera's chestplate and shoulders while Jazz and Deadlock started on his hips and legs. All of them were pleased at how readily he relaxed into the care, moving smoothly and usually correctly to small directions with his field open, relaxed and saturated with pleasure. Even so every one of them was sure he was paying attention enough to record it for later review when he wasn't in the grip of the pleasure that made his very protoform quiver.

In Pantera's field there was the sensation the warriors knew well: recognition that this was a mark of safe and civilization even if the mech didn't recognize why it made him feel safe enough to relax and extend his armor for them and the warm solvent rain.

"Being clean feels wonderful, doesn't it?" Jazz hummed with social pleasure, the enjoyment of bringing another pleasure, deep in his field.

"It does," Pantera moaned softly. It wasn't just the heat of the solvent and the joy at being clean that was making Pantera feel so good, though there was no question that it was deeply ingrained in the response. It was also the attention and care coming from his unit. Mutual frame maintenance was a core way of supporting each other and strengthening the ties between them. This was everything a unit should be and did much to soothe the distress of the previous night.

"Who is next?" Pantera asked happily when he felt he was both clean and settled.

"Wing, you want to go next?" Deadlock asked. He wanted to give Pantera an opportunity to start his cleaning lessons on the least aggressive member of the unit. That Wing was also the most expressive and excited by the whole social grooming thing was a bonus.

The room was rather full of freshly cleaned mecha with Pantera laying on the medberth for his first post-format checkup and for once Redline wasn't threatening anyone about it. Annoying as the crowd was it was a good thing that they insisted on watching. With the physical done he plugged into Pantera and begin the code-scanning process. Halfway through it he looked up with a deadly glare that made Dagger and Wing both shift backwards.

"Just who gave him the idea to edit his code?" The CMO snarled.

"Nobody," Deadlock grunted. "He did."

"We talked about his need for interfacing contracts and the fact that we don't use them," Wing replied.

"Editing is easier than insisting the unit change for my needs," Pantera insisted.

"Hush you," Redline snapped but softened slightly when Pantera cringed. His glare turned on the
unit. "And it didn't occur to any of you that self-editing his base code is what got Prowl reformatted in the first place?"

"He said he wasn't going to do it yet. There was time to sort it out," Dagger defended his inaction. "Point of fact that you saw the note and not an edit."

Redline growled low in his chest at his SIC but Dagger stood firm.

"Alright. What did you plan?" Redline demanded.

"It depends on how Prowl fixed it," Dagger drugged a doorwing. "I expect we'd make the edit once we knew what it was."

"We're all going to look at this thoroughly before anything is done by anyone to Pantera's code," Redline grumbled. "Meley and I will be doing any changes that need to be done."

"Yes sir," Pantera agreed meekly.

"Then since that's settled, you may all go," Redline said and stepped back from the medbath.

"Thank you," Pantera said politely as he rose from the berth to join his unit.

"Thanks," Deadlock said as they headed out. He didn't want to antagonize Redline anymore than they already had. He was Dagger's boss after all.

Pantera knew he was stalling as he inspected the black-edged practice blade for sharpness -- there was none -- hardness -- it was soft steal just as Wing promised -- and balance -- it felt like a perfect extension of his arm. He knew he shouldn't feel this way but he didn't want to look poorly in front of his unit. He was sure he would eventually trace it back to something from Prowl. The mech had been a horrible mess socially and there was no correcting all the reflexes while leaving any hint of him in the frame. What he knew and what his frame reflexes were made that inadvisable at best and Pantera agreed that this was the better choice. He rather like knowing about his frame's prior existence and he'd sort out the lingering issues in time.

Wing waited patiently for Pantera to finish checking out the blade as they both stood just inside the sparring ring. He knew what the youth was feeling and had a good idea of why. "Are you ready to start?"

With a settling ventilation cycle Pantera nodded his doorwings while Wing settled into his own stance and waited to see if Pantera would start the spar in a defensive or offensive mode.

A look at Wing's neutral stance and Pantera ordered his frame to a ready pose just to see what it would do. A quick check indicated it was from Teris-Spi though it was also strongly associated with Enforcer basic training.

As Wing expected given his Enforcer coding, Pantera settled in a defensive stance and waited for Wing to strike. The Aerial obliged by starting with a basic lunge and swing. He teeked how startled Pantera was when the black edged blade came up with a reflexive block that pushed Wing's weapon to the side while Pantera's free hand aimed a hard punch for Wing's throat. It was a good beginning move to counter Wing's actions and put him on the defensive. Throwing up his own arm to knock the punch aside, Wing shifted slightly to his side and threw a kick at Pantera and watched with a trainer's processor set as Pantera proved that a Praxian Enforcer was trained for aggression when instead of dodging or blocking the training sword came down hard enough to visibly dent the edge on Wing's leg and left a thick line of black there.
"Good strike," Wing said as he took a quick swing at Pantera's sword arm in return. This one was parried again. So far he was pleased by what he was seeing out of his unit mate despite the repetition. Pantera was definitely going to need to be retrained, but the basics were still there within the frame. It was both good and bad that Pantera was willing to let the frame do what it wanted. It increased the odds of a surprise move but it also meant that connecting and learning from the frame memory would be easier.

Once more Pantera obeyed his frame and processor's seeming instincts, really just well-ingrained training, and tried to close with Wing while their blades were pushed to the side. Greater mass, heavier armor and a frame mean to grapple and pin tried to grab onto Wing's off arm to twist him off balance.

"He's not too bad but he's got a long ways to go," Deadlock observed as he watched Wing easily twist out of Pantera's grapple and pull away. It was obvious that while some of Prowl's skills were still there Pantera didn't know how to access them.

"Still for an orn old adult frame he fights very well," Dagger hummed thoughtfully. "He did come with a remarkable amount of combat coding given his function was law enforcement. I didn't expect that, honestly. Praxus never seemed to need it."

"The war needed it," Deadlock said bluntly unimpressed by Dagger confusion about Pantera's skill levels. "He would have been offline if he hadn't learned how to handle combat."

"Those are skills. I'm talking about the code he came on line with," Dagger attempted to explain. "He was coded to fight well."

"Enforcers have to deal with mecha like me," Deadlock said after thinking that difference over. "You have to have at least one Enforcer capable of taking us out."

"There's also the tac-net to consider," Jazz added quietly. "I don't think it was necessarily designed solely for law enforcement."

Dagger cycled his optics as his attention shifted to Jazz. "What would it have been created for if not law enforcement? Prowl was law enforcement from before his spark was put in his frame."

"Just because it was created by Praxian Enforcers doesn't mean that someone else didn't have additional plans for that frame," Jazz explained. "How critical it's been during the war is a perfect example of what it could have been used for if Cybertron had gone for further military expansion instead of collapsing like it did."

Dagger fell silence and thoughtful as he watched the freeform match between a completely outclass Pantera and Wing where both knew it was about letting Pantera learn.

The washrack after sparring had taken forever to everyone except Pantera but none of them really objected. As inexperienced as he was their new unit mate was a fast learner and as tactile as Wing without the intense interface drive. Even so they were all happy when everyone was deemed clean and they were on their way to the hot oil pool. It was a treat that every single one of them willingly admitted to loving. The heat when they stepped into the room caused Pantera's doorwings to quiver and a low sound to escape his engine. Only the strength of freshly installed social protocols kept him from getting in first.

Thundercracker looked over at him with tolerant amusement before settling into the oil, letting out a soft moan of pleasure as the heat permeated his frame. It was terribly cute.
That was the nanoklik he realized that his creator protocols had latched onto this true youth as his fledgling. It wasn't as intense as with Wing though he wasn't sure if it was frame or being second that made it so. He kept the groan at those thoughts silent and beckoned towards Pantera. "Come sit by me."

With the invitation he didn't wait for the rest of his seniors to settle before claiming the seat. The heat seeping towards his protoform left him vibrating in pleasure as his higher functions began to shut down and left much of his energy untapped.

Wing placed two different energon cubes next to Thundercracker. "One for you; one for Pantera," he said cheerfully before placing two next to where Deadlock and Jazz were getting settled. Leaving his own on the side Wing lowered himself in to the pool next to Thundercracker and snuggled against his side. He watched as Pantera's focus on his energon smoothed out with a quarter of the cube gone and made note that while the frame knew how to handle energy management extremely well the mech did not yet.

"This feels amazing," Pantera managed to say he got his energy distribution under control. "How often do we get to enjoy it?"

"As a complete unit not quite as often as we'd like since our schedules do not always line up," Thundercracker admitted, glossing over the reality that Wing's punishment duties often kept him too busy for this sort of pleasure. "Currently we try to meet at least once a decaorn. We'll have several more opportunities like this during this initial bonding period."

"There's almost always a pool open when you have time for it if you don't mind random company," Dagger added. "Washrack time is much the same. This group is large enough to reserve a smaller room like this one. It's not very common to reserve space though."

"I could become spoiled with such luxury," Pantera purred as he thought about his schedule to be and how much of his free time would be devoted to this wonderful state.

"Random company isn't the best for the three of us most orns, but you should be fine enjoying it and meeting new mecha. The Knights have proven overall to be trustworthy," Jazz said, admitting that the three soldiers were still rather paranoid if they were in a potentially vulnerable spot with a stranger.

"Has it gotten any better since you came here?" Pantera asked.

"I'm still a bit paranoid by normal standards," Deadlock admitted. "But I'm not going to rip someone open just for sitting down next to me without permission."

"If it's improved at all it means it can improve more with time and exposure," Pantera smiled at him before a current in the oil stole his ability to think when it pushed hotter oil into his seams. Without even thinking he unlatched his chest plate to take it off. Jazz and Deadlock both reflexively tensed at the unfamiliar and trusting action from the youth while Wing smiled encouragingly as he relaxed his own armor although he didn't remove it just yet. As safe as he felt here that still seemed extreme to him.

Silvery gray protoform quivered where it was exposed through the inner armor that protected the most important vitals and Pantera let an indulgent sigh of bliss escape.

Deadlock glanced over at Jazz and Thundercracker almost in disbelief at this display from their newest member. He privately vowed to have a word with the others about how much protection Pantera was going to need if they were going to help him keep some of his trusting nature once he
met the real world. Not even Wing was that oblivious to danger.

"What did I do wrong?" Pantera's optics went from one to another as he sat up to look at them directly.

"Not necessarily wrong when you're in here with your unit, but removing your armor around others can be very risky," Thundercracker said carefully. He didn't want to push too much of the rest of the unit's paranoia on the younger mech, but he did need to learn to be more cautious.

"I would only do this with unit or a well-vetted lover," Pantera relaxed as he assured them. "I take it that is not a default rule outside the Enforcers?"

"Nah, mech, not even close. Plenty go their entire existence without removing their armor," Jazz summed it up.

Pantera hummed and nodded slightly. "I will keep that in mind."

"We're going to be involved in vetting any lovers before you do something like that," Deadlock said, a tiny bit flattered that Pantera considered them trustworthy this quickly even though he figured it was probably the Enforcer and gestalt coding at work.

"At least until you are much older," Thundercracker agreed. "We'd rather you didn't have to learn to distrust everyone again."

"Expected and appreciated," Pantera turned a warm, almost adoring look on the pair that lingered on Thundercracker longer.

Given the mechling's blatant behavior earlier and even Prowl's admittance that he found the Seeker the most attractive of them Deadlock wasn't the list bit surprised by Pantara's favoritism towards Thundercracker. It was kind of amusing how the Seeker was trying to divert that attention.

"Are you looking forward to your training?" Thundercracker asked.

"Very much," Pantera perked up and willingly took the distraction. "It will be a long time before I've caught up to my frame even without the enforced restrictions the various arts have in place. I'm looking forward to the Showcase as well. Prowl has so many good memories of them."

"That is something we are all looking forward to as well. It's been a long time since one has taken place on Cybertron," Thundercracker agreed with a nod.

"I'm in mixed group of grounders and fliers from here in the Citadel that's planning to be a part of it," Jazz said with a grin, pleased with how things were going so far at practices. "Talon's been working on the choreography."

Deadlock shrugged neutrally at the idea. He wasn't certain the Showcase was worth all the fuss the others seemed to be making, although anything that made members of his unit happy was probably a good thing and a city-wide party was likely to be fun. He wouldn't mind seeing Jazz's performance provided he got to keep his own pedes on the ground.

"We'll make sure you have a good time and get to see everything you want to," Wing added. "I can't imagine you'd have any restrictions that company can't get around."

"Restrictions?" Pantera looked at him.

"Well, until your training catches up with your frame I expect there will be some restrictions about
going into the city. Right now if you're startled you might not be able to control your reaction," Wing explained gently.

"Ah, yes, that is reasonable," Pantera relaxed. "Today was a good example. That was almost all letting my frame do what it wanted with just basic directives."

"That will change as you relearn those skills," Wing agreed, pleased he'd previously approached Axe who had explained the realities of retraining a reformat ted warrior.

"We're all under restrictions for pretty much the same reason. Reflexes we can't control," Deadlock said with another shrug. He was almost resigned to being stuck here in the Citadel. He wanted to get out and explore so he could find the wilder parts of the city, but he didn't want to cause Wing to have to endure more punishments. If he was taking them himself, he'd have been already gone. It was a cause of a grudging bit of respect for this system that accomplished what no other had.

"We've been promised that those restrictions will ease as yours will. As we gain control and settle into peacetime we'll be given more freedoms until we are citizens. Prowl estimated a couple centuries at most." Thundercracker offered.

"So we get to spend our time before we're marked as safe to be around civilians here in a building with comfy rooms, lots of energon and company that doesn't stare at us like we're turbo-rats," Deadlock said bluntly. "I've been in a lot worse spots than this."

Pantera regarded him for a moment. "Have you been in better?"

Deadlock took the question seriously and thought for a long moment before answering. "I've been in places where I was respected for my fighting skills and could go wherever I wanted. I've also been places where I was mistreated according to Wing although I never saw it as being as bad as he thinks. Engineer and Megatron both treated me well when I was with them. Then there were slagers like Turmoil, but those I just had to put up with for a while. Being stuck here is annoying, but it beats starving. I've done that far too often."

Pantera processed that for a long half klik, frowning. "So ... yes?"

Deadlock gave another shrug. "More freedom there; better energon here. Which one is better depends on how hungry I am."

"Here's going to be a lot better in a couple centuries. Probation always sucks. The end result of being good here is well worth it," Jazz gave the youth the answer in a way he could understand easier. "They're even trying to give us extra freedoms when we need it, like racing and flying for TC."

"Don't call me that," Thundercracker huffed. He knew it wouldn't work on Jazz but Pantera was still in the learning phase and might not pick up the bad habit.

"Right, sorry," Jazz said reflexively even as he noted that the reaction wasn't his usual one from the war.

"Racing?" Pantera perked up, the oil's heat forgotten for the moment.

"There are tracks we can go to after hours with the Knights so you can chase them down," Deadlock said, still pondering whether the energon and safety was better than the freedom he'd once enjoyed even though it was kind of a moot point since his unit was here and he wasn't leaving. "Dagger will let us know when you're ready to go out on one."

"After you pass the driving test. I can take you out with just the two of us but a unit outing has to
wait until your orientation is over," Dagger explained at Pantera's look.

"When may I begin to take these tests?" Pantera asked.

"As soon as you believe you are ready," Dagger smiled and pinged him both the listing that included descriptions and links to study material and the public one that allowed anyone to check on his status. "Some you can take when you wish on line. Others you'll have to have me administer."

"I see the marks for how each test is conducted," Pantera nodded his doorwings and sank into the oil again. A few background threads began working on the best testing order both in regards to how long it would take to learn and how important each was to becoming functional.

"Speaking of classes, are you going to flight class, Thundercracker?" Jazz asked casually even as he stressed the correct designation.

"Not today," the Seeker relaxed. "Given my standing in the skill rankings Pantera's orientation was deemed more important than a single class. My next one is in nine orns. I'll go to that one," he elaborated for their mechling.

"You're missing training for unit time?" Pantera asked looking both pleased and torn.

"Not training, socializing," Wing said with a snicker and affectionate hug. "Thundercracker is looking for new trine mates, and the best place to do that is flight class with the mechlings since there aren't any un-trined adults."

"I'm a better flier than all but a handful in the city. Though I am finding the class a good refresher in how to fly as a civilian," Thundercracker admitted. "It's been a long time since I couldn't fly where I wished and how I wished."

"The war?" Pantera asked as he snuggled into the hug with a happy sound.

"That and before the war I was an Air Martial; Vosian law enforcement. I had authority over almost everyone and few to answer to," Thundercracker nodded his wings.

"Like a Praxian Enforcer or a New Crystal City Peacekeeper," Pantera said, pleased to have someone in his unit who had a better understanding of his Enforcer coding. That it was the unit commander was even better. Yes, there were going to be adjustments to this abnormal unit. Yes, some of them were distressing. Even so he was now sure he could adjust quickly to this group and the larger society of Knights he expected to join.
Chapter Summary

Pantera's orientation. Deadlock gets blunt about Pantera's odd behavior. Pantera's seals are broken.

Deadlock almost growled in frustration and as he stared at the rest of his unit. Something was wrong, but he wasn't certain what just yet. Wing was happily straddling Jazz's lap and kissing the Polyhexian while they rubbed their spikes together. Thundercracker wasn't the issue; the Seeker was sitting next to Pantera going over the Citadel's fuel allocation rules compared to frame size and type. After a few kliks he figured it out. Pantera was running so hot he could teek it from a seat over. Still the Praxian wasn't doing anything about it. After a breem he couldn't take it anymore and blurted out, "If you're that hot why don't you ask to join them? Wing and Jazz like multiple partners."

The youth ducked his helm and doorwings down, openly flustered as he struggled to word the answer. He eventually managed "I can't."

"Can't?" Thundercracker asked as he focused on Pantera's words even as Wing and Jazz paused when they registered what was said. "Why can't you ask?"

It earned the Seeker a scowl but the reply was directed at those who might 'face him. "Without a contract all permissions much be explicitly given beforehand, including asking to join in."

"Can I give you permission to do any act involving kissing or rubbing spikes that doesn't involve pain for either of us? Or is more needed than that?" Wing asked.

Pantera rubbed his chevron shield in a move Deadlock and Jazz recognized from other Praxians as an expression of deep frustration or a bad processor ache.

"Yes you can. It's too awkward to be worth joining in," he tried to explain. "It is only allowed if covered under a contract or explicitly stated at the time."

Deadlock took in what Pantera had said and moved closer to the mechling. "Okay, no touching my valve or trying to touch my spark. Ever. Lean over here right now and kiss me if you want. Lips touch currently fine and glossae are allowed if you and I both open our mouths. That what you mean by consent given at the time?"

Pantera leaned over and caught Deadlock's mouth in a kiss that offered to go deeper and a teek that was fine with just this for now. Deadlock took the offering and reached out to stroke Pantera's arm and could teek the welcome of the contact.

"Mmm, what I am allowed to do must be detailed before any encounter if there is not a contract covering the individual," Pantera hoped this variant made more sense to them.

"So every time is like the first time with a new lover," Thundercracker said thoughtfully. He didn't intend to join in with his newest fledgling, but it was good to have a frame of reference so he could make certain Pantera wasn't mistreated or misunderstood.
"Is the same thing going to be true for what we are allowed to do to you each time?" Wing asked as Deadlock allowed the second kiss to intensify until Deadlock finally broke it for Pantera to answer.

"I've already put my contracts up on the unit's board," Pantera looked at him in bewilderment. "You have all permissions under the unit contract."

Jazz managed to stifle a groan as he accessed the contract and began reading. There was so much about new pre-progs they didn't know even with Prowl's explanations. By the time he reached the end of the very short form he could sum it up in a single glyph: all permissions. Pantera didn't have anything he didn't like so he allowed them to do anything to him. No doubt with some caveats only Pantera knew. "Have you experimented with pleasuring your own frame much yet?"

"No," Pantera answered without shame.

"Really?" Deadlock asked as he reached down and pressed a hand against Pantera's spike cover. It was hot enough to almost burn; a full match for his field. That much trust being given to mechs the Praxian really didn't know was disturbing and tempting. It would have been more tempting to exploit the situation if it had happened before their crazy gestalt formed. But then before they were a gestalt it wouldn't have been given to them. "You haven't stroked yourself into a spike overload?"

"No," Pantera moaned, his optics at half power as the cover snapped open.

Deadlock was seriously tempted to keep this bit of pleasure all for himself but sharing the mechling with the other two would be fun. Looking over at Wing, he asked, "Wing, you think you can tease his spike out without your hands?"

"Oh, definitely," the aerial rumbled eagerly and readily abandoned Jazz to kneel between Pantera's spread legs when Deadlock vacated the spot to him. He leaned in for a kiss. "Any touch that doesn't cause pain, okay?"

"I can do that," Pantera shivered and completed the kiss. His hands explored Wing's chest, his touch and shaky as his field in how much he'd hurt in denying himself the contact he craved.

"You can approach me when I'm off duty if you desire company or pleasure," Wing said after they broke apart briefly from the kiss when he teeked Pantera needing a moment to work out just what that meant internally. "I might not always be available immediately, but I will make time for my unit. Ask for what you desire. I might say no. I'll probably say yes."

There was a lingering moment of consternation on Pantera's features before he seemed to settle and pinged a small file to Wing.

Since this seemed so important to Pantera, Wing took the time to scan the file now instead of waiting for later like he normally would. Everything seemed in order with what he'd just told Pantera. After he attached it to the unit's board tagged with all four designations, he said a bit formally, "Deadlock wants me to introduce you to oral spike pleasure. What do you want, Pantera?"

"To try everything. To learn what I like. That sounds like a very good start," the youth shivered as Jazz scooted up to rest against his back and support him.

"Any touch that doesn't hurt is good with me. I'll put a contract up shortly," Jazz purred against the youth's audial and felt him relax, fully trusting in the way only the very young or very simple could.

Thundercracker was pleased Jazz wasn't going to be introducing Pantera to pain in interfacing any time soon. Although he'd be happier if Deadlock made the same promise, it was incredible that he was handling this so well and with so much thoughtfulness for Pantera being displayed for them to
all see. It definitely didn't come naturally to the warrior, no more naturally than it was for Thundercracker to call this lot flock, but it was a good thing overall. Important in ways even he was still processing.

Wing began to kiss his way down Pantera's pure white frame to soft sounds and exploratory touches, bathed in a field that expected only pleasure and knew only trust.

Keeping his own field under control, Jazz settled comfortably supporting Pantera's frame, allowing the youngster to focus completely on the pleasure he was feeling. They'd all accidentally failed Pantera by not understanding his coding, and they were going to make it up to him. Besides, the view he was getting more than made up for his own aborted playtime with Wing. Odds were good he'd get a lot more than a view when Deadlock was done. Prowl had amazing stamina for multiple overloads. He was sure Pantera did too.

::Wing, remind him of the ointment in his subspace. Rub it on the seal. It'll make it break easier with heat and oral lubricants:: Dagger pinged his friend in the first explicit reminder they'd gotten that alone didn't mean unwatched.

After a kiss to the tip of a spike just beginning to poke at the seal holding it back Wing lifted his face. "You have some ointment for this."

Pantera started at him blankly for a moment then blinked in surprise as it registered. "Oh, right," he fished in his almost empty subspace before producing a small tube and handed it over. "Do you know how to use it?"

"Yap, and it has directions on it," Wing grinned and aligned the tube to read just to be sure he used it right. A first time only happened once and it was going to be good.

Pantera watched patiently, unhurried despite his arousal. He was too focused on learning to give in to his frame more when Wing applied a good amount of ointment with his fingers, making certain to thoroughly coat the seal even as he played with the visible nodes under the seal. It was more than enough to fritz Pantera's vision and draw a sharp intake than turned into a moan as white fingers continued to rub in slow circles around the tip pressing at the seal.

The moan intensified as Wing applied his glossa to the rim while his fingers continued to rub the ointment into the central seal. Pantera's field flared bright and hot, completely uncontrolled as all his effort focused on holding reasonably still for the lesson and remembering anything past the intense pleasure. It bathed Wing in all the good sensations he was causing beyond the physical and carried the reminder that this mech was open to everything because he trusted rather than knowing.

Under Wing's fingers the tip poked out a little further and began to strain the seal's weakening glue.

"I've got you," Jazz murmured against Pantera's helm as he shifted his grip on the younger mech's frame making certain he was in a secure position. "Just relax and enjoy. We'll teach you later."

With a gasp and shiver that reached to the edge of his field Pantera obeyed. His optics dimmed to focus on touch and the bliss Wing was drawing from him. With the first hint of pain messages flashed on his internal HUD that said it was expected when the seal began to tear. Even so the dislike-discomfort reached his field.

Teeking the discomfort, Deadlock reached over and lightly stroked Pantera's helm and chevron with one hand letting the other mech feel everything he felt watching the pair. "You look hot like this," Deadlock said and leaned in to kiss. It was quite enough to distract Pantera while Wing applied his lips, glossa and suction to the spike straining to extend.
When the first tear happened the sharp cry, more startled than true pain, was swallowed by Deadlock while Wing focused everything on lavishing attention to the freshly exposed spike. Pantera could do nothing but submit, his hips bucking into that slick heat as much as they could and relishing in the fields surrounding him. Even Thundercracker was there. He didn't touch but he did extend his field in a statement of solidarity and unit. All of them were united in enjoying Pantera's first overload. Wing swallowed around Pantera's spike, tasting the crackling transfluid and ointment traces as it filled his mouth.

Pantera reflexively grabbed what was near his hands, Jazz's hips in this case, and keened in a mix of pleasure and confusion at the intense sensations surging through him.

Deadlock hummed as Pantera's pleasure washed through his field and frame. "We've gotcha, pretty. Just enjoy it."

It was advice apparently taken as Pantera's frame gradually relaxed in Jazz's grip, field entwined with his entire unit and panting to cool off.

"Did you enjoy your new experience?" Jazz asked, his own desire in his field even as he held Pantera securely.

"Yes. It felt amazing," he tipped his helm back to kiss Jazz while he reached with a slightly shaky hand to caress Wing's finials. "Even better than I expected."

"Glad to be of service," Wing said as he pulled away. He reached up and lightly stroked the spike as he talked. Despite the resent overload it twitched, causing Pantera's hips to rock up as he moaned with optics at half power and field rich with trust and desire. The trust and desire were intoxicating for Wing who kept stroking the spike, alternating his rhythm and pace trying to see what pleased Pantera best. The hardest part of that was how easy he seemed to be to pleasure but gradually as white hips began to jerk and white hands gripped Jazz tighter he had worked it out well enough to drag a screaming overload from Pantera that flashed high enough to even give Thundercracker a buzz.

Wing pulled back, panting as he stroked his own spike which had fully emerged during Pantera's second overload. He wanted the mechling to know just how good he was making the rest of them feel. This wasn't any kind of burden; this was pure pleasure for everyone.

"You did that to him just by letting him feel your pleasure," Jazz purred into Pantera's audial as the Praxian managed to focus again and looked at what Wing was doing.

"And you?" Pantera wiggled his aft against Jazz's prominent hard on.

"I'd love to lick you into another overload while we break that seal and then show you what a spike feels like in a valve," Jazz admitted candidly through his own arousal. "Deadlock, you want to give Wing a spike to play with while you watch Pantera overload for me?"

There was a definite sense of an argument coming before Deadlock shrugged and all but pounced on Wing, dragging him from between Pantera's legs before driving into him with abandon that earned a hard engine rev and shameless stare from Pantera.

Jazz relaxed now that the most aggressive member of their unit was preoccupied. He wasn't going to keep Pantera away from Deadlock forever; that'd be unnecessarily cruel given Deadlock had pointed out this problem. He just didn't trust the rougher mech to be as careful as this situation truly deserved. Breaking seals was careful work and needed time and attention that Deadlock had no willingness for.

"Thundercracker, you want to hold him for me?"
"All right," The Seeker agreed and shifted forward to give Pantera's back some support while Jazz slipped between the youth's spread legs to tease the valve cover open with light fingers and his glossa. Despite Thundercracker's solid intent not to be involved he slid his hands along Pantera's sides, then up to his doorwings.

Jazz watched Pantera quiver with excitement as he sprawled back against the larger frame and teeked of intense pleasure as those fingers stroked his sensitive doorwings. Pleased he'd gotten Thundercracker to do this much given his obvious reluctance, Jazz turned his attention to the nodes on the rim of Prowl's valve. Each one was given careful individual attention as he licked and fondled each in turn through the heavy rubber seal that protected the entire array. Despite the barrier the newness of the stimulation and Pantera's heavily aroused state was quick to draw moans and flares of hot pleasure that pulsed against Jazz's circuits.

Pantera was affecting Thundercracker as well. The Seeker was trying to remain collected, but he couldn't help increasing the gentle pressure on the doorwings as the Praxian's arousal level climbed and pressed against both their fields.

With two overloads in as many groons working him up to his third took longer and allowed Pantera enough focus to think to reach forward to touch Jazz's helm, then circle a sensory horn in exploration and an effort to return some of what he got. Even so it didn't take long before the hand fell away and found Thundercracker's thigh to grip when the waves of charge rippled faster and higher with each circle of Jazz's glossa and fingers. Jazz made certain to show his appreciation for Pantera's efforts however brief they might have been. The show he was giving right now made up for the lack of contact and the intensity of a mechling's field, unconstrained by training or experience, was utterly intoxicating.

The heat of the lubricant trapped behind the seal radiated against Jazz's glossa and even oozed out of a handful of spots where the sealant had broken down. By the time Pantera's frame bowed with a roar he'd squirmed almost flat with only his helm and hands against Thundercracker. Jazz could feel the arousal and appreciation in the pair of intertwined fields behind him swell as Pantera's overloaded. At the peak of Pantera's overload Jazz slipped his fingers around to rub more ointment on the seal to increase the natural breakage.

That attention dragged a ragged moan from Pantera as he mindlessly rolled his hips into the contact and shivered with each shift of the lubricant pooled behind his seal. Jazz continued to stroke and nibble, slowly but steadily driving Pantera's charge back up towards a fourth overload where he wouldn't feel much of the sting as the seal broke. The ointment had done as much as it could thinning the seal and breaking down the sealant and the mechling was definitely slick enough for Jazz's spike. In fact, he seemed desperate for it if the clenching visible in the lubricant was anything to go by.

"Jazz...." Pantera gasped as he shook, his entire frame panting.

If Jazz's spike hadn't already been fully extended it would have done so just from that lovely voice begging for him. Keeping one hand on the edge of Pantera's valve, he rose and positioned himself. Everything was going to go smoothly for Pantera; Jazz owed Prowl a wonderful new existence for this mechling and he was going to get it. He shuddered as Pantera's next roll of his hips pressed the tip of his spike against the pliant seal and that field begged desperately to be filled. Jazz ran one last finger over a concealed node, drawing another gasp from the mech below him before bracing and sliding his spike straight into the waiting valve.

He felt the seal's resistance for a few nanokliks, then it gave with a wave of lubricant rushing out to soak his entire spike and the pillows under them. Calipers closed around him despite the thick lubricant coating and Pantera's thrust took him in until their arrays met. Jazz held there just a moment,
allowing Pantera to feel that connection between them and really feel the sensation of being filled with another. Then he drew back smoothly and thrust forward steadily, keeping part of his attention on Pantera's field, teeking for any sign of distress. Jazz knew Thundercracker would be monitoring as well; that was another reason he'd wanted the Seeker even partially involved in this experience.

He had nothing to worry about and the next thrust was met by Pantera's far more smoothly than he expected. As good as it felt it was Pantera's field and garbled gasping pleas that spiked Jazz's charge the most. It made him all the more grateful that his lover was almost to overload when he'd begun. He'd never last otherwise. Jazz kept his control and increased the pace, matching Pantera's slightly uncoordinated movements as best he could so that their arrays met at the peak of each thrust. He could feel Pantera's overload growing even closer with each thrust. It felt crazy good despite the unskilled movements. Sure, the frame remembered some tricks but Jazz knew what was skill and what was reflex and this was all reflex. It was that field; open, honest and wanting to share. Jazz was an addict on just one hit.

Pantera's next moan and thrust stole even that much thought as a fourth overload surged through the youth and left him offline before the crackling charge allowed his frame to relax. Jazz felt the crackle of Pantera's charge as he overloaded into the mechling's valve and reveled in the field surging into him. Once he recovered, he carefully pulled out and checked Pantera's valve for any tears or damage. He didn't think there had been any trouble, but it paid to be cautious with a new lover.

By the time Jazz looked up Thundercracker was trembling in his effort to contain the effects of two overloads against his plating and Pantera's addicting field.

Jazz shifted the already-booting Pantera off of Thundercracker's frame and into Wing's arms and gauged the Seeker's state as fairly serious. "Do you want some help from any of us?"

Wide wings quivered a yes even as he shook his helm.

"I can help," Pantera offered softly. "Not interfacing," he added as he shifted and found enough coordination to stand so he could walk behind Thundercracker, broadcasting every move like the well-trained martial arts teacher the frame was. "Just dealing with your charge."

Thundercracker gave him a wary look but allowed the youth to kneel behind him. The first touch of hands on wings brought a gasp and shiver from the Seeker and within a klik his optics were off.

Wing, Deadlock and Jazz watched as the youngest member of their unit ran his hands along Thundercracker's wings, finding sensitive spots along the edges and sensors. Jazz wasn't certain if Pantera's frame or his AIs were making his movements so smooth despite the unfamiliar wings and what they all knew was the after effects of being knocked off line from an overload. No matter what was causing it Thundercracker accepted it and moaned with a soft pleasure. Wings relaxed even as they pressed into the touch and Thundercracker's field smoothed from the stress of trying to contain the charge to one of accepting it and the pleasurable overload that was building.

Pantera kept all his touches to the wings, followed the request his unit commander had made not to interface. His unit seemed to be finally understanding how important his need for consent and contracts really was. At the very least they were humoring him and he was getting better at writing verbal consent into a valid format. He smiled when he felt the charge zap to his fingers and palms. It felt so good to comfort his unit.

Relaxing and letting Pantera worship his wings was a form of intimate contact Thundercracker seemed to be truly enjoying with his grounder flock mate. The connection to his flock was being built but not in a way that directly challenged his old taboos. Wing touching, even to overload, was intimate but it was flock-level intimate. It was perfect for this and this youngest flock mate was so
warm and honest in his touch.

The next moan was deeper and came with a flash of charge over Thundercracker's plating that sent a rumble through the room that was his undirected spark gift without enhancement. Pantera seemed a bit surprised by the intensity of the rumble but not the actual effect itself. It was obvious that he had studied the files Prowl had left him on each member of the unit.

"Thank you," Thundercracker said as he x-vented deeply and relaxed further.

"You are welcome," Pantera smiled brightly, his field warm with pleasure at having helped.

"Show off. The rest of us managed to not shake the room," Deadlock grumbled as he settled next to Pantera, enough traces of humor in his field to make certain the others knew he was teasing.

"Maybe you should try harder," Thundercracker teased back lazily, his field relaxed and echoing the humor.

"We don't need to turn this into a contest," Jazz said cheerfully as he settled next to Deadlock and raked in the food teek all around him. "I think the neighbors might start complaining if we shake the walls."

"Or want to get involved," Wing pointed out with a grin as he snuggled up against Thundercracker and was welcomed with an arm around him.

Pantera shifted a bit to look at Deadlock and briefly debated something before extending a hands towards him. "Could I try to give you spike oral?"

"Sure," Deadlock said as he leaned back, figuring Pantera wasn't likely to do any permanent damage that Redline couldn't fix if necessary. At least the mechling was finally asking for something he wanted.

It was enough encouragement for Pantera to crawl over and settle between his legs, fearless in his curiosity. His glossa made a circle around Deadlock's spike cover, mimicking what he could recall of what Wing had done to him. The enthusiasm was more enjoyable than the actual technique being used, but Deadlock wasn't going to complain, especially since Pantera's actions had drawn Jazz and Wing's attention.

"You might want to start out by focusing on the edges of the panel," Wing suggested from his spot against Thundercracker and watched as Pantera readily went with the suggestion. When the panel slapped open he paused to really look at the array, locking the specifics in his memory to go along with the generic schematic he already had. Then he leaned in and tasted the spike housing's rim. Without a pause he contemplated that it reminded him more of Wing than Deadlock at first.

Pantera's intense focus was as flattering as it was unfamiliar, and Deadlock encouraged the interest with a small moan as the glossa traced over his spike tip. Pantera was going to be an expert at this if he kept this level of focus.

Physical skills always came easy.

That's what Prowl had said. Deadlock was already a believer when his spike slid from the housing to be kissed and licked like it was a sweet treat.

"You're going to taste whoever he's been interfacing with until those fluids are removed either by clean-up or your glossa," Jazz said as he watched Pantera clean the traces of transfluid off the slightly quivering spike. "It gets really interesting flavorwise when there are several partners involved."
"Mmm, no doubt," Pantera purred, causing Deadlock to shiver. "I'm starting to taste Deadlock."

"You're doing a good job arousing him. Try looking up at him while you suck on his spike," Wing suggested as Thundercracker tried to ignore what was going on around him without actually ignoring Pantera. No matter what his new coding said he was old and well-set in his preferences.

The idea flashed arousal across Deadlock's field that Pantera responded to by lowering his lip plates around the fully extended spike. They could see him try to work out how to look up while his mouth faced down. After a few attempts at cranial and lip positions that made Deadlock groan and tremble, Pantera tipped his head so his lower jaw was extended further along Deadlock's spike. The changed angle meant they could make optic contact. It wasn't something he could manage for long but it definitely gave Deadlock a jolt of arousal before Pantera shifted his focus on how to swallow the spike, something he intake wasn't terribly happy about.

"Relax, try to let the frame do what it wants with the act," Jazz suggested as he rubbed Pantera's lower back. "It knows what to do. Just like sparring."

Doorwings wiggled in understanding and Pantera let his optics click off and shutter to focus on what he'd done during combat by letting his frame do what it knew how to. Within a few moments the thick, solid mass slid into his intake as everything relaxed around it.

That act caused Deadlock to plant both hands firmly on Pantera's shoulders. Jazz kept a close optic on things to make certain there was no force or trouble, but Deadlock didn't do anything other than center himself with the contact. "You're so hot like this," the berserker managed to gasp out.

It earned him a hum of pleasure from Pantera, the youth's field open and happy to cause pleasure for a unit mate. The way Deadlock's frame jerked from the hum made Pantera repeat it and add his engine to it so his entire throat and mouth vibrated.

His frame and processor having already been aroused by Pantera's experiences with Jazz and not at all sated by Wing's valve, that extra vibration was all it took to knock Deadlock into a quick overload which flooded Pantera's throat and mouth with transfluid. Even intellectually ready for it Pantera still jerked back at the crackling charge that hit his entire intake and caused it to spasm slightly. The third burst of transfluid hit him square in the face for it.

"That happens sometimes, especially when an overload hits unexpectedly," Jazz said as he rubbed Pantera's back, enjoying the sated rumble from Deadlock. "You did a great job pleasing him to have caused that reaction. Do you want a cloth to clean up or should I help out?"

"A cloth please," Pantera said and accepted the offering to wipe his face off with far more care than most would.

"You did good," Deadlock remembered to be encouraging by the time Pantera deemed himself presentable.

"Thank you," Pantera smiled, his field warmed by the praise.

Deadlock took the cloth from Pantera and got rid of it so it wouldn't bother the more fastidious Praxian. Settling down next to Wing he looked the group over as they all relaxed. He and Jazz were on the outside where they could protect the others with Wing and Pantera happily snuggled up securely against Thundercracker. It was a strangely domestic scene for four military frames and despite the implication it made them all feel good.
Chapter Summary

Pantera's orientation: an orn in the life of a Knight.

Pantera followed Dagger down the open hallway towards the commons where they would share breakfast with the Talon and Demeter. The pair would be showing him some of what to expect from life in the Citadel if he chose to become a Knight. Pantera had been thoroughly briefed on the pair by his unit and they had made it clear they were willing to trust these two Knights with their youngest member even though they weren't among the unit's sponsors. It felt odd being out in public without the rest of his unit's visible support, but everyone had agreed he needed to be exposed to both of his possible futures before he could be reasonably expected to make a choice.

Seeing an orn in the existence of a Knight made sense to do first to his unit because they were far better known than the priests who would surround him soon. Pantera had his doubts on the wisdom; he had protocols that covered priests. With Knights he had to remind himself that they fell under extended unit defaults.

Even though he couldn't detect him he had no doubt that Jazz would shadow him all orn both times and smiled privately at the safety that made him feel.

When they entered the common room was empty and Pantera looked around.

"This late in the joor most who are fueling during it have already come and gone. Many do not wash up before their first shift unless they need to," Dagger explained as he guided Pantera to the multi-station dispenser and showed him how to select his ration and additives of choice.

Cubes in hand they turned to one of the few occupied tables and Pantera couldn't help but stare at the very short minibot, he finally decided ... that was all rich brown fluff except for her face and hands. Such a tiny being. No doubt the alt was an organic of some kind. Nothing Cybertronian that he had files on was fluffy like that.

"Greetings, Talon, Demeter," Dagger said as the pair approached the table. The blatant confusion Pantera was demonstrating at Demeter's unusual appearance was an open reminder to all present that this really was a new mech who hadn't completely understood what the others had meant when they described her alt mode or size.

"Hello Pantera," Demeter yipped a greeting with a grin and saw him not quite flinch when it registered how rude he was being. "It's okay. I get that a lot from new faces. Scout beast-formers are rare."

"Greetings Knight Demeter," Pantera said and wiggled his doorwings in thanks for her tolerance of his youth.

"Pantera," Talon tipped his flight-wings in greeting before the pair sat down. "How much do you know of the orn's plan?"
"I have been briefed by my unit about the Knights. Wing has explained a typical orn and the Knight's code. Thundercracker said I would be dividing my time between both of you to maximize exposure to the Knight's different activities," Pantera answered.

"That's a solid outline. You'll spend the first thirteen joors with Demeter with five joors of duties to the Order and seven joors of duties to the Citadel with a one joor break between them. You'll have a joor to yourself and then I'll pick you up for the same categories of duties, though they will be different ones. We'll also be showing you as much of the Citadel and notable Knights as we can," Talon detailed it.

"Not just the leaders. Knights such as Deco, who does our paint when we need more than minor touch ups, and Shogun, who was law enforcement in Altihex too," Demeter offered.

"It sounds like it will be enlightening," Pantera agreed before turning to Dagger. "Will I be rejoining my unit during my breaks or doing something else during those times?"

"That is up to you. It is free time, though one is expected to fuel, clean up and any other personal care things to be ready for the next duty during it," Dagger explained.

"I understand," Pantera answered, thinking about how strange it felt to be spending this much time away from his unit. Still, they seemed to think this would be a valuable experience for him and he couldn't argue that it wasn't a good idea for him to know. "I would spend it with my unit."

"We'll take you to them for breaks then," Demeter promised.

"Now, do you have any questions for us before you and Demeter begin your day?" Dagger said as he watched Pantera finish his breakfast in time with the Knight's relaxed pace. It was another small reminder that Prowl was gone and that this youngster had not known the deprivations the others had faced.

There was a pause, then a doorwing nod and Pantera pinged him a small file. "Will this cover all probable situations this orn?"

Dagger read the simple contract-like file and nodded his doorwings. "I'm sure that covers everything that might happen. If in doubt ask your guide."

"I will," Pantera promised as he would to any normal superior.

"Well, we can get started now that we're both finished with breakfast," Demeter said cheerfully.

Pantera stood smoothly and dissipated his cube with the ease of more practice than he had and smiled at her before she walked for the main door with as much speed as she could manage on two pedes without running. For his part Pantera matched his stride to what she did and never got ahead of her.

Demeter lead him down another hallway and around a corner towards another hallway. "That hallway leads towards some of the Knights' quarters."

"What duties to the Order do you intend to show me?" he asked deferentially, treating her as he would any instructor.

"I will introduce you to Dancer in the Sun, show you how to care for both our kinds of blades and a bit of formal sparring with practice weapons. The Sovereign will watch as per the agreement he made with Prowl," she gave the basic outline. "No one is expecting trouble, though having watched Prowl when he is fighting for real I appreciate the backup if your frame decides it's in danger."
"I understand the possible concern with sparring, and I appreciate the protective measures," Pantera said, pleased that the Lord of Law was showing such concern for both of them and was honoring the contract with a mech now gone.

They were silent until they reached a unique looking door. There was a standard sized one but inlaid in it was the outline for one that was Demeter's size.

"You'll need to palm the control panel at your level," she told him. "My quarters are customized for me but I made sure the entry room remained viable for most."

Pantera waited until Demeter had entered her quarters before opening the standard door and joining her inside. He was curious to see this Knight's quarters and how it compared to the convoy quarters his unit were using. Right away he could see the basic layout was for a smaller, shorter space, likely it originated with the quarters for a standard-frame Knight. The three internal doors all showed the same modification as the main door and like the quarters he knew already there was no way to tell from here what was behind each one. He expected they were far more personalized and purposeful than the empty rooms his unit currently shared. What was truly different were the walkways that were clearly designed for her alt mode to move along near the ceiling, intersecting with shelving in places and connected to the floor in two places by ramps.

The shelves held things he couldn't even describe in many cases, or could only describe in the vaguest of terms as probably organic and likely a trophy. After the first look around he focused on the furniture suitable for him and then on Demeter.

"I was a military scout for a long time. I managed to keep many of the trinkets I collected when I left," she gave him the basics. "We can talk about any that you wish when there is time."

"I would be interesting in learning more about them later," Pantera agreed eagerly. The accommodations that had been made to these quarters lead to a very good impression of the Order's willingness to make the members comfortable. That boded well for their unit given there was a strong potential for three of the unit to eventually be full Knights.

"Now, make yourself comfortable," she motioned to some pillows to the side of a sitting rug before she settled on one side of it and drew her Great Sword from its brackets on her back.

Pantera settled himself to watch and listen to her. He'd seen Wing's Great Sword, even touched it a few times while interfacing or snuggling, but for some reason this felt different. The description settled in his awareness; he was to be introduced using the same glyph framework used for a conjunx endura. Briefly he wondered why Wing had not introduced his Great Sword, then his focus was on Demeter and the glowing emerald green gem at the center of the large, octagon guard.

"This is Dancer in the Sun, my Great Sword," Demeter introduced it with much the same fond tone he expected of conjunx endura's designation.

"Greetings, Dancer in the Sun," Pantera said politely as he would a conjunx endura of a member of another unit. He teeked the edge of a field he didn't know at the edge of his. It was fierce, wild and everything he was not. Yet it wasn't angry either. It felt familiar in a way and he assumed that Prowl had known mecha like that. It reminded him a little bit of some of his unit, mostly Deadlock and Jazz although they often felt angry as well. "How long have you and Dancer in the Sun been connected?"

"Since late in Nova's rule. I actually left on my walkabout a few vorns before Dai Atlas and Axe arrived at the Citadel," she smiled at fond memories. "It was quite a surprise to return and find them Initiates of the Order. Now caring for a Great Sword is unlike caring for any other kind of weapon. One does not sharpen it, only clean and oil it gently. They are not used for normal combat."
"So it is a true ritual weapon," Pantera said with an understanding wing dip. He knew of ritual weapons from scanning the files Prowl had left him.

"Ritual and of last resort," she agreed and took out a perfectly clean cloth and a fine crystal bottle without a label. "They are the foundation of the Order, the keepers of our path. The writing and oaths are for processors. The Great Swords guide our sparks. More is for your Daoshi and experience to teach you. Dancer has agreed to allow you to wipe her down if you wish." She said as she set the blade flat on the rug between them.

"I am honored," Pantera said with a respectful doorwing dip to both Great Sword and Knight. After a quick scan of Prowl's files to find out anything special that he might be need to know about weapon care, Pantera picked up the cloth and the crystal bottle and poured just enough oil onto the cloth to coat it and carefully slid the fine cleaning cloth along the blade to pick up and remove any dust of the orn. He kept a careful teek on the weapon and an optic on Demeter to see if he was about to make any mistakes. He did not want to offend the Great Sword she was bonded to especially since she had become such a strong ally for his unit. He was no more ignorant than Jazz about how much trouble she could have caused them over Jazz's early morning explorations if she'd wanted to.

He pushed those thoughts from his mind and sank into the welcome state of pleased and platonically pleasure-filled fields were.

"Leave the gem untouched," Demeter said as he paused once all the metal had been cleaned. She accepted the tools back and brought out a new set. They looked the same though he was sure the liquid she dipped the cloth into was different.

Pantera watched closely as she carefully wiped down both sides of the gem inset in the sword, spending as much time on it as he had spent on the sword itself. In many ways it felt like watching a long established member of a unit taking care of another, cherished member. It was a level of connection and closeness he dearly wanted with his own unit and could only hope for because they were still struggling with the idea of being a unit.

"How does one choose a Great Sword?" he asked politely, his gaze never leaving what she was doing.

"That is only to be learned just before you prepare to select one," she explained smoothly. "How has your orientation time gone so far?"

"We have had to overcome a few challenges since our backgrounds are so different, but I believe we will be stronger for them. The others are understanding of my position and have been welcoming, although I do sometimes detect that they are missing Prowl. It is understandable given he was a part of them before I was," Pantera answered, acknowledging that he would get no further information from her on the subject of acquiring a Great Sword. There were undoubtedly traditions and knowledge that priests kept to higher ranks as well. It was a common theme with many occupations and traditions.

"They are still grieving the loss of one of their own," she agreed softly before putting Dancer in the Sun onto her back once more and drawing out both short sword from her hip sheaths. "How much experience do you have handling a sharp blade?"

"None," Pantera admitted. "I have done some sparring with the others, but it was mostly unarmed combat and a time or two with practice blades since we are on weapon restrictions. Though I'm less sure why I am."

"Because no civilian has weapons here and an Initiate must earn the right to carry real swords by
proving they are responsible and knowledgeable enough for it," she explained the basics and set her shorts swords down; one in front of herself and the other in front of Pantera.

"That makes sense in this society, although I am curious why the other martial orders do not have the same right to earn weapons since they also require discipline," Pantera agreed after some thought about the differences in this society and the laws of Praxus. "Is it because the Order is the equivalent of the military here?"

She paused thoughtfully, then nodded. "We are, though the lack of civilian weapons was decided before we left. If we do our job there is no need for them to fight."

"What if an enemy breaches the city?" Pantera couldn't completely quell the half-memory, half tac-net reaction that was an undefended populous under military attack. "The Knights are not capable of taking out a large military force."

"Perhaps, perhaps not. Dai Atlas is a formidable force when pressed," she hedged around the truth she'd seen of just what the giant could do. "The intent is to be gone long before such an army could arrive. There is nothing native to this system that could raise an army. We are all that is here."

"It is still possible if unlikely that such a situation could occur," Pantera said carefully as he picked up the short sword and supplies to begin sharpening it. "Although the odds in the city's favor during such a combat have been improved with the arrival of my unit. Their experience would be valuable in such a scenario as well as the powerful advantage a gestalt brings."

"True, and there are plans. Exactly what I do not know, only that they exist. Dai Atlas knows far too much of war not to have a solid plan should it find us again," she said as she watched him while working on the other blade. "He may be willing to tell you more if you ask. I still agree that under normal conditions the population does not need weapons."

"Are the Peacekeepers limited to nonlethal force as well?" Pantera asked still trying to figure out all the full ramifications of that decisions to settle the AIs and his own concerns. "What happens to someone who is created with a Sigma ability that could be used as a weapon? Something like what Thundercracker has for example."

"The Peacekeepers do not have lethal arms," she explained patiently, privately as pleased with his curiosity as she was disturbed that he was already focused on conflict. "Anything that exceeds their ability to contain falls to the Knights to deal with. Whether it is an outsider, an army, a weapon that shouldn't exist, a sigma ability, training of the like your unit-mates have or anything else."

"A logical division of labor," Pantera said filing this information away for later contemplation even as he switched to polishing the sword, taking extra care with the shallow engraved glyphs and designs along the center. "The lack of consistent outside contact would make it easier to maintain this level of peacefulness."

"It is why we have chosen isolation," she smiled faintly. "I'm sure it helps that most of our population volunteered to come with full knowledge of the basics of the society we intended to build. That they built this city with their own hands does as well. The first generations after a successful revolution tend to go well."

"It's the later generations where problems begin to develop," Pantera said carefully. "Thundercracker says that the restrictions on creating should help minimize the development of the sorts of social disorder that Deadlock endured."

"That is the reason for it," she smiled gently. "While everyone is expected to create we intend to
keep every creation wanted by both its creators and needed by the city. That all must be kindled is also a help. There is no way to spark mecha here, no way to create masses of cheap beings with no connection to society and there is accountability. The temple takes in the few that lose creators young if close kin do not want them."

"Or cannot handle them, such as Photosphere?" Pantera asked.

"Her case is very special, though yes," she checked her blade and sheathed it. "The CPS is small but vital."

"I understand that Deadlock suffered greatly when he was newly created; it is good to see that it should not happen here," Pantera agreed. He left unspoken that Prowl had not viewed his own existence as being unconnected to society. He could not deny that Deadlock had been.

"It looks good," Demeter smiled and extended her hand for the blade which was quickly turned over. "Do you feel like sparring with me? You may also watch. The duty is for me to perform; you must only understand it would exist if you join us."

"I would like to spar with you, although I do not know how much of a challenge I will be," Pantera admitted, knowing intellectually that fighting someone so much smaller than himself would be more challenging than sparring with his unit.

"You do not need to be," Demeter promised and stood smoothly. "The duty is as much about training each other as keeping our skills sharp. It has been a long time since I have sparred with anyone not a Knight. It will be good for me," she extended her field so he could teek that she meant it. "How is your energy level?"

"My energy levels are sufficient for a spar," Pantera said as he followed her lead. "I will do my best to be an interesting opponent."

Dagger was on the sparring room floor with a warm smile and two dull metal swords when Pantera and Demeter arrived. He handed one the size of his short swords to Pantera and one sized similarly for Demeter to her. While Pantera tested the balance, apparently untrusting of prior experience with it, Dagger put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed lightly."

"Don't worry about winning or losing. Just like with Wing. It's about learning," Dagger encouraged him before walking out to join those watching.

"It's impossible to damage anyone with a practice blade," Demeter countered his unease before he was even fully aware of the cause.

"Impossible? Improbable, certainly...."

"Impossible. Your hands are more capable of damaging me than that blade," she shifted to stand exposed, intentionally allowing her armor to relax instead of protecting her. "Try. Redline is right here."

Pantera glanced at the medic, noted that Redline wasn't the only one who could undo anything he did, and faced Demeter with a simple command to tac-net and frame: damage her with the blade; and he let go. He watched without influencing, making note of the commands, what they did and the results of putting all his strength behind a slicing strike across her neck and down into her frame. Absently he knew a real weapon would have sliced her in two and gone through her spark chamber. While he wasn't surprised the dull weapon in his hands broke long before that he couldn't help but be surprised that she really was completely unharmed.
Even when he knelt and touched careful fingers to where her neck cabling hand taken the full impact there was nothing more than some scrapes of the practice blade and wet black paint on what he considered delicate components. He could teek the truth of what his fingers and optics told him and tension began to unspool inside him.

Demeter waited for Dagger to bring another practice sword to Pantera. Once the medic had returned to his position on the sidelines she smiled at him, "Ready to spar?"

"Yes, ma'am," Pantera stood and ordered the frame into a ready stance that came more naturally now after several rounds with Wing and Jazz.

Demeter started by briefly circling Pantera and then darting forward with a strike towards his knee. It was a basic opening move that would help her gauge his skill level in defense, both reflexive and thinking. The block that came was as good as she expected from Prowl and backed up what Dagger had told her of his sparring so far. He let his frame and tac-net do what it wanted.

Two more strikes at knees and hips met with similar responses from Pantera. It was time to try something different. Demeter darted around Pantera's arm and headed towards his back, circling to where she could climb the larger mech. She felt his focus shift, the very teek of him going active and aggressive as he kept her in sight and continued to step into her space close enough to strike, though he only tried to twice and both were very close calls in her opinion.

She continued to provoke him, darting back and forth and trying to draw him out and make him try something different. A quick slash at the back of his knees led to a thrust towards his hip joint. She'd only scored a couple hits but he hadn't scored any. Her next move stalled before it began as it registered that he'd been moving her around with intent to push her into a corner and he'd almost succeeded before she noticed. Wanting to see how he'd respond she moved right instead of left like she'd originally intended as he'd set her up to do.

His blade came down fast, aimed at blocking her movement and driving her back. In it she saw a tiny bit of hesitation in it she was sure was from not having the shield he was used to.

Instead of diving back Demeter jumped over his arm using that hesitation and off balance from the missing shield to her advantage. It got her out of the corner but left her briefly exposed as she recovered from the sudden leap. In a mark of just how fast he could be Pantera twisted and left a line of black across her back and she knew just from the feel of wet paint that it would have been a serious impediment if they'd agreed to spar as if damage was real. Yet in doing that he also left himself open and for far longer than she had.

She could tell she had kill options available but went for the disarm instead. For training purposes she wanted to know if he would immediately go for his lost weapon or shift to unarmed combat until he could safely retrieve the sword. The twisting of the two blades showed more clearly than their spar so far who had the experience and it soon clattered away.

Pantera immediately stepped back and to the side to give himself that fraction of a klik to process and readjust the balance in his helm to lean more heavily on Enforcer than warrior. Demeter gave him that brief moment to recover before starting back on the attack; she had nothing to prove in this fight against a young mechling who wasn't even an Initiate yet. This fight was to see what he was capable of doing without training.

This time she recognized it far more quickly when he worked to move her around so he had a clear opening to retrieve his weapon. Even so there was a stance and teek to him that she recognized all too well: full willingness to take damage if it brought victory. She had the advantage of a weapon; he had the advantage of reach and coding in a no-kill environment.
Dagger watched Pantera try to once again shift Demeter around to his advantage. "I know she almost fell for that the first time but I'm surprised he's trying it again." "It's not a tactic you would expect someone so young to pull off so well. He did almost trap her," Talon pointed out.

"He's going for his weapon," Deadlock shrugged. "Not many options right now."

"I've seen that before, when the point's to get between the enemy and an ally. Which is basically what he's doing," Jazz pointed out.

"I'm seeing some moves Prowl used successfully being performed well, but you can tell if you watch closely that they're frame memory in Pantera," Talon observed with a small nod to Jazz and Deadlock at the truth of their observations. "He will be formidable when he's retrained in his arts."

"Frame memory and probably some coding and AI directive," Jazz agreed, then grinned when Pantera made a sideways lunge with very little warning and came up with blade in hand. He didn't care that Demeter had fundamentally let him do it. It was a well-executed move and once armed he went back at her with slightly fluffed armor. That shifted his expression to a frown. "And that says he's losing his cool."

"Agreed," Thundercracker said from behind them. "As much as I do not want to see him lose his temper, it is important for us to know how well the frame and processor will work together if something like that happens." "That's one of the main reasons Dai Atlas and Redline are watching this spar," Talon agreed. "Dai Atlas is more than capable of taking him down without serious injuries."

"We saw," Deadlock grunted. "Pretty sure she's fast enough to get away too."

"Definitely," Jazz agreed and watched carefully as Pantera began testing Demeter and ways to get in grabbing range; never using the same tactic twice.

"Interesting choice of tactics," Dagger said as he watched Pantera's actions intently. "It is a valid way to take someone that much smaller than you out of combat, but it will expose him to attacks." "It's a tactic that works better if you have a partner," Deadlock agreed.

"It's also very Enforcer," Jazz hummed. "They're brawlers at close range. It's why he has such a heavy protoform. I wouldn't be surprised if he could win if he can get a hand on her."

"Usually if someone can grab Demeter they can end the fight," Dagger agreed. "The problem is actually getting a hold of her. She knows that's her weakest point."

"And she's crazy fast," Dagger snickered. "She can make Dart look slow. Just how many ways could he know to try and grab her?"

"Prowl knew all the standard Praxian Enforcer tactics for taking down frames of different size categories. I'm fairly certain he would have picked up other city's tactics when he trained with other surviving law enforcement officers in the Autobots," Jazz said thoughtfully. "What all those are I don't know."

The silence spread for several kliks before Pantera's tactics shifted again and seemed to flow into more traditional sparring moves.

"That's a Knight's move," Talon said quietly despite his surprise when Pantera nearly disarmed Demeter. "Prowl never used it."

"But Demeter has today," Jazz smiled a bit. "Prowl did say he learns anything physics based fast."
I've known mecha who can learn from just watching. Never thought he was one."

"He does have the processors to manage. It's still amazing," Dagger said.

"I think you'll have your hands full keeping him entertained long enough to become a Knight," Axe chuckled softly to his mate.

"Indeed," Dai Atlas hummed as he began to edit that already unusual Initiate plan and made a note to keep Talon's Daoshi involved.

"He's going to be picking things up from all sorts of different styles," Thundercracker said quietly as he watched Demeter dodge another attack.

"Good. It's smart to have surprises in a fight," Deadlock grunted. He was glad he was going to be fighting beside Pantera not against him.

"Agreed. Though I have to wonder how much he remembers when he's fighting hard," Thundercracker hummed while Demeter put Pantera on the defensive once more. "Knowing and using in battle are very different things."

"Like she just proved," Jazz said as Demeter managed to trip Pantera dropping him to his knees as she drove the sword up into his neck. "It was a good fight considering his age and experience."

"He did better than many young Knights," Dagger informed them and smiled as Pantera relaxed almost instantly. "He surrenders more gracefully as well."

"All of it is a good sign that he will do well in training," Talon agreed as Demeter stepped back and allowed him up. "I hope he decides to become a Knight. He will be a good addition to our ranks."

"I think he will. We'll know a lot more when he comes back from the temple," Jazz said.

Pantera bowed to Demeter smoothly, a mark of relying on frame memory and knowing no shame in learning from that. "If there is time, would you show me how you disarmed me slowly?"

"Certainly," Demeter agreed and fell back into the stance she'd been in just before starting the maneuver. She kept the motions fluid but slowed them so Pantera could see how her arms shifted and she stabilized her footing to give her the leverage to twist the blade from his stronger grip. Then she watched as he repeated the movement and offered a correction that was welcomed before Pantera tried again.

"He really does learn fast," Dagger murmured.

"He's learning this much as I do. He'll be hungry soon with how heavily he's using his processor," Talon suggested. "They're quite energy hungry."

"We'll make sure he fuels on his break," Jazz promised and knew he spoke for them all.

Listening to Talon's observations Dai Atlas made a mental note to pay close attention to Pantera's fuel levels while he was an Initiate. He would need to talk to the tactician about other unusual needs Pantera might have that would have to be addressed. Then talk to Redline about just how much to up those numbers to account for the difference in their processor power.

"What is your perception of the spar?" Demeter asked conversationally as she walked him along a winding path that would take a full four joors to finish. It was technically a patrol though everyone
knew it was really about giving Pantera a solid tour of the Citadel and as many of its residents as they could come across while respecting the security limits of his status.

"It was very different from sparring with my unit, and I thank you for the opportunity. I am not used to such a small and agile opponent, but I believe I picked up a few tactics that will be useful against Jazz," Pantera said as he studied area around them. He had located a few of the cameras Jazz had mentioned, and he expected that there were many he couldn't see. In time he would become much better at spotting such hidden things.

"I look forward to sparring with you often then. It has been a very long time since I have sparred against someone not trained as a Knight," Demeter agreed readily. "If you choose to join us it would be good to keep your processors open to skills and hobbies that may not have an obvious application." She motioned around them, pointing out the carved scroll work and painting.

"Everything within the Citadel a Knight does. From the practical skills of Deco and Redline to those that enhance our experience such as Windsinger's trine and Aurora. Our skills do not require an obvious benefit to the Order to be valued."

Pantera studied the scroll work for a short klik and pondered Demeter's words. "I do not think I have the processor for this sort of work, but I think I understand the value placed on it. It sounds similar to the way the tac-net can take unusual information and apply it to situations and plans to make them more efficient."

She paused and cocked her helm, her tail swishing lightly as she contemplated a description that was far from anything she could honestly relate it to. "Perhaps," she gave up after a brief moment. "I tend to think of it like I do pillows or a nice berth ... or a hot oil pool. It's not needed to function but they make existing far more enjoyable."

"Those things do make physical life more enjoyable," Pantera agreed. Although he had no personal experience without them, Prowl's memories made it clear this was a preferable existence to what was possible on Cybertron in many ways. The torrent of such comparisons between this city and Cybertron made Pantera waver slightly in the importance the query was given.

"What is in this area?" he asked when the disorientation passed.

"The entry hall. That is the front door of the Citadel," she motioned to the great double doors. "Beyond it are the front garden, entry drive and the main gate."

Pantera couldn't help but make a quick analysis of the durability of the double doors and surrounding area. It looked like it could withstand part of a siege, but he would need a better analysis before he would consider it secure.

Demeter gave him a knowing look. "Do you want to patrol the outer grounds or interior first?"

"The outer grounds if you don't mind," Pantera said with a nod, very pleased that she understood and accepted his desire to learn about the Citadel's defenses. With a nod she walked to the doors and to his undisguised amazement pushed one open with little effort.

"Balance and good maintenance means little strength is required to move them when unlocked," she explained and showed him his first good look at the lush, ordered front garden full of Cybertronian flora that hadn't been seen on its home world for millennia or more.

Even though he'd never seen any of it before the readouts of how long these things had been thought extinct by Prowl was enough to make his spark ache. The care that was taken bringing this flora with them highlighted to Pantera just how much planning had gone into the Exodus. A group in a
"How much fauna was brought?" He asked quietly as he got over his shock and began to work on both the cultural aspects visible in the garden along with the value and issues it brought to defense. The way it would force an assault to slow and disperse to get around or through it.

"All domestics are well represented, the smaller ones more plentifully than the larger. I believe every common breed of feline, canine and pet avian came. Livestock like horses and sheep came though I can't say how varied they are. I have seen both light riding and heavy draft horses. Rodents and domestic insects probably survived in full, though most were intentional. The wild critters mostly didn't make it."

"It is logical that domestics would make up the majority of the transplants," Pantera agreed, pleased by the list of survivors even as he felt saddened at the loss of so many wild creatures.

"So true. If it is something that holds your attention there is a project to recreate many of them and establish a wildlife preserve," she said as they walked to the heavy main gate in a very tall and solid wall.

"That could be an interesting project," Pantera said as he took a moment to examine the wall, testing its density and material structure. It was far more solid and practical than he expected for a city that had never seen conflict. He contemplated the permutations involved in creating a wildlife preserve with recreated species of flora and fauna could keep the tac-net busy for a while. Just that made it a worthy project as far as Pantera and the tac-net AI were concerned.

"I may look into the wildlife preserve as a possible activity," Pantera continued, looking around at the garden. If this was what the city could do with the flora they'd brought with them, then the recreated fauna would be spectacular.

"I know many of the mecha involved, though it is only a passing interest of mine. I'll look forward to using it, willingly pay a fee, just not enough to get heavily involved myself," Demeter said as they continued along the inside of the wall and Pantera made a point of IDing every being he saw just to be sure he had them logged correctly. "How much of the public datanet and Prowl's files have you read so far?"

"I have accessed all of the public information regarding the Knights, Peacekeepers and priesthood," Pantera admitted. "They were the most logical occupations for me."

"Agreed. I think you'd do well in anything you decide. Did you come across anything that you have questions about?" she asked to keep him talking and learn as much as she could as well as teach.

"How are the Knights ranks structured once someone is past Initiate?" he asked. "Will I be integrated into an existing unit with Wing?"

Demeter gave a hum as she thought. "Your unit is your gestalt regardless of what each of you become here. Most don't have a unit beyond the entire Order. We are simply Knights of Light.

"Once trained an Initiate completes training and is bonded to their Great Sword they become a Junior Knight. They are not yet ready to train; that comes after a walkabout and further testing. A Knight is ready to train and may select an Initiate if they wish. While no Knight is strictly required to do so I have never met one who has not. Some take many centuries. It is a very personal and intimate thing to become Daoshi and Initiate. It is not to be rushed," she stressed.

"I understand," he promised even as he logged that tidbit. He did not expect it to be an issue though
it was nice to know it was so important that she emphasized it.

"Good. Once your first Initiate is a full Knight you are promoted to Senior Knight. There are no special responsibilities that come with the rank; it is merely a notation that you have successfully passed on your training. Only a handful ever advance past Senior Knight and become part of the political class; the Masters and Sovereign. Becoming a Master requires millennia of additional exhaustive training based on what Dai Atlas and Axe went through. I admit I don't know what is required fully. It is not a path I have any interest in. I only know as much as I do because of Wing and watching it happen. A new Sovereign is chosen from among the Masters when needed."

Pantera contemplated the rankings of Knights she had listed and compared them to his own coding's unit structures. Demeter's descriptions of the rankings was more vague than what Sovereign Dai Atlas had told him earlier when he had introduced Dagger and explained his rank over the gestalt unit. That kept him occupied long enough for them to enter the central building of the Citadel and he spotted once more camera with a tiny flare of victory.

"Mmm?" Demeter hummed her curiosity.

"I found a camera I missed the first time we came through," he pointed it out. It wasn't a hidden one, simply high up and unobtrusive from the ground.

"Ah, yes. Jazz's planning. I'm told that I still haven't found one. He's very good at security. Even now he's earning good shanix at it, here and in the city," she said with pride for his accomplishment in adapting his skills.

Pantera felt a small bit of pleasure hearing this praise for one of the elders in his unit who was offering a service to the city and Citadel. It was another sign of how useful they could be to those who offered them sanctuary here. As they started down a hallway, he asked, "Did you enjoy helping with the set-up and installation?"

"That part is just a duty when it happens. What I enjoy is trying to find them all. I'm a military scout by creation, much as you are law enforcement. Finding hidden things, tracking and exploring are what I was sparked to do so I find great enjoyment in using those skills," she explained. "Jazz happens to enjoy the challenge I represent enough that I'm rarely asked to help install."

"I am pleased he found a way to make your time helping enjoyable and useful," Pantera said with a small nod as he filed away the information about the Knight and military scouts. Demeter's skills sounded highly compatible with a law enforcement career and complimented his own unit. He understood why they spoke so highly of her.

"Hands!" Demeter yipped, causing a solid grounder frame of swirling creams to turn and lock onto them with warm amber optics unhidden by a clear visor.

"Hands?" Pantera glanced down even as he greeted the approaching Knight with his doorwings.

"Ah, her nic. Zarvae is the masseuse of the Citadel," Demeter explained quickly.

"It's good to finally see you out and about, Pantera," Zarvae extended a hand in offer.

"Good orn, Knight Zarvae. I am pleased to make your acquaintance," Pantera said as he matched her grip in the handshake. It was steady and firm and reminded him a bit of Dagger despite her larger frame. He believed it that her hands were as skilled as reputed and she had the strength for it.

"When your frame aches but not enough not bother a medic, you can ping me," Zarae told him before nodding to Demeter and turning to go back to her duties.
"Thank you," Pantera said politely as he filed away her stipulations with the rest of his contracts. Recalling some of his aches after their sparring session, he added to Demeter, "That sounds like a good option after a workout."

"It often is, especially early on or when you've had a rough orn," she agreed readily and walked on. "You'll find as you gain experience that your frame adjusts to what you demand of it and you won't ache as much. You probably won't have it as bad as most Initiates given your frame's history, but I'm sure there will be orns her touch will be most welcome."

"Are there others who offer similar services or is there not enough patrons for more than one masseuse?" Pantera asked as he took note of another Knight flying by overhead. Demeter did not seem concerned so the Aerial was obviously obeying the Citadel's altitude and speed restrictions, such as they were.

"Not as she does, which is as part of her duties to the Citadel. Like when Deco paints us, so long as they only charges for supplies the time can be listed under duty to the Citadel. If they charge for their time then it doesn't. However just about anyone you're friends with, your unit, Dagger, myself and others in time, can be asked or might offer to if they see you need it."

Pantera nodded in understanding; detailing or massage was something he would gladly learn to do for his unit. Looking around, he took note of another camera up next to the edge of a rafter. "Do many of the Knights have careers like Deco and Zarae? Wing has not mentioned one?"

"Not many. We all have skills that are useful on occasion. Wing is an architect. He helped plan and build the city. While he was working it was counted as duty to the Citadel but most of us simply use our skills as needed without counting it as a duty. When a project runs a long time, like planning and building the new Citadel, it can be requested to be counted. Or in the case of those who simply labored, it is stated by the leadership that such activities count."

"I can understand why projects like building the Citadel or enhancing its security as well as services to the individual Knights would be counted as service to the Order," Pantera agreed, pleased to hear that the Knights supported each other in a way similar to what his coding said Enforcers properly did.

"Good. Does it make sense that it only sometimes counts, depending on the circumstances?" she asked as they walked.

"Not really," Pantera admitted.

Demeter nodded. "A duty must be done for any Knight who asks and logged in the system as such. Appointments and schedules are made. Like a business you do not have the right to turn away customers because you might not like them. When it is not a duty you are free to choose to help or not and if you do help you may charge for your time if you wish. It may not be common in such a small group but it happens. A Knight you are not close to cannot expect your time at their demand if it is not your duty to do something. Does that make more sense?"

"Yes," Pantera said slowly as he compared Demeter's descriptions to his own coding's expectations. He would always do whatever he could for his own unit willingly, but it sounded almost appropriate based on interactions with other units.

"Good. I expect it will become more clear as experience gives you examples. As an Initiate and young Knight you can expect that all duties will be clearly listed on the board," she pinged him a location he was already familiar with from Wing and Dagger. This time he looked more closely to see if he could grasp further understanding.
"And my designation," she gave him a link to the place that listed her duties of the orn and decaorn. "Yesterday was a normal duty orn for me. This orn is not, as you are rarely in my charge."

"Jazz is listed on your duty roster," Pantera said after scrolling back several more orns. "Is that the patrol he does to test security?"

"Likely," she nodded. "I often shadow him. A few times we've played hide and seek for his health. A couple times I've been in his escort out in town."

"I'm glad you are helping take care of him. He speaks highly of you and your skills," Pantera said matter-of-factly.

Demeter smiled warmly at that, honestly flattered that such a skilled saboteur thought highly of her skill. "I like him. It's nice to have someone else who understands sneaking around the way I do. I hope to be good friends in time."

"I believe all of them are looking forward to making friends," Pantera said having heard from the others about certain individuals they were fond of here. Even Deadlock talked about Kimark and a few of the other Knights with a fondness that was more than most got.

"I'm glad. Friends are important. This is one of the few doors that won't open for you; the council room. Meetings of the Circle of Light are inside. Unlike the monitor room and vaults this restriction is less about security and more tradition. It is a place for Knights."

"Understood," Pantera replied as he stared up at the enormous double doors. A quick check of Prowl's files indicated that such traditions were normal for martial orders and would probably be normal for the priests as well. Every organization with a spiritual aspect seemed to have places that were restricted to those of a certain rank for no other reason than tradition or to protect secrets that were of questionable strategic value. Prowl listed it under 'things that are simply to be accepted' with a note that processor aches resulted when trying to apply logic to it.

"Good," she smiled and they walked on and then to a lift. "Next section is the store rooms and workshops of the lower levels."

Pantera followed Demeter obediently as they entered the lower levels and continued their patrol. He could hear echoes of activity coming from some of the branching corridors and assumed those were the workshops. After a while he picked out a pattern of sorts. Between workshops there would be several storerooms, or at least rooms without noise. He was less sure why it would be so.

"Among the other things down here are Deco's workshop where we all go when we want a better than usual finish or major changes, several inventor's workshops, laboratories for the various sciences and scientists, crystal forges and a couple of crystal groves. The metal forges and a glass works are on the bottom level where they can draw the most power from the planet's molten layers. Last time I went there I singed my fur enough to need to see Redline. Doing the patrol of the metal forges is only given to those with the heavy armor to take it." Looking at Demeter's frame Pantera wondered if his own armor was sufficient for that task. That thought prompted him to ask, "Would Deadlock be able to handle it down there or does it require stronger armor than he has?"

"Mmm, I'm not sure. Likely you both have enough armor. Wing doesn't. Very few fliers do. My frame can survive it but my fur doesn't do so well. So I'd inspect the area if there was need, such as if we suspected an intruder or knew someone was injured and couldn't be found, but orn to orn it's not worth the cost to replace my fur. We have enough Knights where we simply do not need everyone to do every task. Much like how Deadlock will not be asked to wash the higher windows except as a punishment and fliers are not asked to do sewer duty except as punishment."
Pantera frowned as a flag from Prowl's files lit at her words. "Deadlock is trying to fix his fear of heights."

"Yes; it's a good thing and such an effort will be encouraged and supported. It does not change that he is a grounder to the very core of his being and will never be comfortable with heights any more than fliers are comfortable in sewers. I can't imagine that he'd be punished with heights while he's still working to control it. After he can though it's a suitable punishment because he won't like it but it won't hurt him," she attempted to explain. "Just like Wing doing monitor duty. He hates it, he'll trade almost any duty to get out of it when he can, but it won't actually harm him."

Pantera relaxed again as he processed Demeter's explanation and accepted the logic behind it. No, Wing wouldn't enjoy monitor duty; it would be a logical punishment for the active Aerial.

"What are you punished with?" he asked after inspecting yet another storeroom, this one full of scientific disposables.

"It's been centuries since I earned a penalty, but monitor duty is one. I dislike it for much the same reason as Wing; I was built to be active; to patrol, stalk and hunt. I can be still much better than he can but I don't like it when it's not part of stalking. Sometimes I'll be assigned to assist someone with a skill I have little taste for, particularly Deco. Little hands are great for detail work but it's not something I'm good at or interested in so it's hard. Most penalties are selected to teach a lesson when possible, whether it's patience in general or related in some way to the infraction that earned it. Wing's penalties may look like random chores but they are selected both as ones he dislikes and those that are intrinsic to the care of the Citadel and Order; the thing he is being punished for leaving."

"Meaning that the punishment is designed to remind him of his failure to follow his duty according to the Masters," Pantera said with a nod of understanding. Tailoring punishments like this was an unusual but often effective way of change behavior according to the AIs.

"What does Master Aurora do here?" he asked as they passed a door with her designation on it.

"She was a scientist before she came to the Citadel. It is still a love of hers that she indulges when she can," Demeter smiled softly at good memories. "She's quite brilliant."

"It must be challenging to balance her duties to the Order and her trine and her love of science," Pantera said thoughtfully. Pursuit of science, a field that he understood required dedication, was acceptable for a Master of the Order. It was a balance he did not completely understand but thought Thundercracker might be able to explain.

"I expect it is," Demeter agreed. "I never asked. I don't think I've asked how anyone balances it. I haven't thought about how I balance my interests in a long time."

"I suppose after so long it becomes second nature until something happens like a gestalt arriving," Pantera said with a small doorwing shrug.

"Definitely," she agreed easily as they entered yet another storeroom. "Taking on an Initiate, or any serious relationship, is probably the most common reason to think of it. It's not something I've done since before we left Cybertron. I'm sure you'll work out a balance for yourself. If trines can manage I'm sure the gestalt well as well."

"Yes, we will find that balance," Pantera gave another doorwing dip in agreement. Wing and Deadlock both had strong incentives to make this arrangement work. He thought about those balances as he followed Demeter out of the building and towards a smaller structure situated away
from the others. The walkways and small gardens made it less obvious than it would otherwise be that it was kept well apart and the walls facing it from other buildings were a bit thicker with fewer windows. Pantera took note that this particular building with its lack of windows looked more like a fortress than most of the other buildings here, though there had been some obvious effort to still make it look attractive and in harmony with the rest of the Citadel. "This is where we process our energon," Demeter said as they approached the entrance. Pantera gave an understanding nod. Prowl's files and the AIs all noted energon as being a potentially volatile substance in large quantities. It was logical to store it as one would explosives. Those same AIs were surprised that Pantera was allowed into what they, and Prowl, considered a critical and high security space. It was enough to bring him to speak.

"Energon is not secured as well as weapons or monitors?"

"The doors are secured with locks although most of the security is to prevent accidents. Energon is not as rare here as it became on Cybertron. We make certain no one goes without so the desire to steal it does not exist," Demeter replied. "Jazz expressed similar concerns when he learned what this building was for." Pantera thought carefully about Demeter's words even as the AIs evaluated the logic behind this reasoning. This building and what it represented were solid proof that no one on this planet expected any of the shortages Cybertron had experienced to occur. If those in power expected such a thing, this building would be on higher lockdown. There was a certain logic to displaying such confidence and the fact that there was a lock meant that it could be secured far more easily than the other buildings here. The Citadel definitely was not designed for unrest within its walls only for assault from outside.

As he followed Demeter inside he was hit by warmth, the scent of energon thick in the air and very little light in the huge open space that didn't come from the energon in large tanks.

"Good orn, Demeter," a light green Polyhexian Knight called out from over by one of the tanks. "You're just in time to try a sample."

"He's always offering samples. Tell him what you honestly think of it," she told Pantera softly. "Good orn, Pivo," she called back and happily walked further in for the sample cubes perpetually ready to be filled.

"Thank you, Knight Pivo," Pantera accepted the small cube and sipped it. In all it was only a couple mouthfuls but that was more than enough to give him a good taste. "I like this. It seems ... hotter than what I've had so far."

Pivo beamed at the statement. "That's what I was trying for. It's only an extra 1.3% more magma with a touch of jasper."

"Like mountain drops," Pantera brightened with a bit of a smile as he reminded himself that this mech was extended unit and not outsider.

"Yes, exactly. I wanted to bring some of that popular experience to this batch," Pivo said with a delighted smile.

"You did a good job hinting at the flavor without overwhelming anyone," Demeter agreed after a careful taste. "I think it'll be a good celebratory drink." "Wonderful," Pivo made a quick notation on a datapad resting on the table before picking up another pair of sample cubes and filling them from a different batch. "So far everyone seems to like or at least tolerate that batch. Now, this is something a bit more exotic Saraba has been working on. It's an extra 2.1% solar blend with a hint of chromium." Pantera picked up the offered sample and took a sip. It reminded him a bit of pyrite-copper mix Deadlock had offered him a few orn earlier. Sweet with a tart and sour edge that he knew he was
predisposed to like from Prowl's fondness for the mix. Even so he wasn't a fan before or now.

"It's not bad," he hesitated at being more blunt until Demeter nudged him with her field. "The mixture of sweet and sour isn't something I have developed a taste for yet though Thundercracker is extremely fond of it and Prowl was. It seems likely to be popular among both Praxians and Seekers."

"I'll make a note for Saraba," Pivo added some more information to the datapad. "Thank you for the honest feedback. It helps us to do better at our craft more than when mecha try not to hurt our feelings."

"I understand, Pivo," Pantera said as he reinforced that in his contract for Pivo. Strange as it was to write them all himself it did work and he silently thanked Prowl for that method no matter how uncomfortable it still was. In time it would become an invisible process.

"I rather like it. It's not something I'd drink regularly but it seems like a nicely balanced flavor. I think it's better suited to a gel or jelly than drinking," Demeter added thoughtfully.

"I'll make a note of that suggestion," Pivo said with a pleased smile. "We don't make a wide variety of confections in house right now, but I suppose it's something we could start doing more of if there is interest." "Wing would approve," Pantera pointed out.

"Wing is a hedonist," Pivo chuckled with affection. "If he was better at mathematics I'd have conscripted his time long ago. He is one of my best test subjects though."

"He does enjoy his sweets," Demeter readily agreed. "We'll welcome your company as long as you don't mind being a tester when we have something new to try," Pivo said looking over at Pantera. "We keep lists of everyone's preferences so we know how to interpret different opinions of a new batch."

"A good system. I'm sure I'll be back," Pantera remembered to nod and hesitated. "Why do different energons taste different? It's all liquefied energy."

"There's several reasons depending upon the type of energon in question," Pivo said with a flicker of warmth in his field for this youngster who actually paid some thought to his fuel. "Some of the flavor comes from impurities present during processing; that's particularly true of thermal and some of the crystal energons. It's sort of like unintentionally putting in additives. Praxian crystal energon in particular owes its refreshing taste to the crystals used and is why it is so difficult to come by outside of the Praxian district. Solar energon's flavors mostly come from the spectrum of light gathered for production. How we process the gathered energy also impacts the flavor."

Pantera nodded his doorwings thoughtfully, then remembered to nod his helm. "Does any of it help or hinder how well energon fuels us?"

"Minor impurities don't impact us negatively; they're not really any different from flavor additives. Major impurities can impact our systems particularly our fuel tanks. That's why we are so careful to keep the processing equipment clean," Pivo said with a gesture towards the equipment around them.

A brief pause and Demeter moved off, drawing Pantera obediently along without a sound or motion needed. Neither saw it but Pivo's smile was one of honest hope as they went on their tour/patrol.

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A klik before Talon was expected at the door Pantera reluctantly roused himself from the file with Thundercracker, Jazz and Deadlock to double-check his finish and settle his processors for another extended trek among his extended unit that didn't understand him any better than his unit had at first. With how few pre-progs had joined the Exodus he wasn't hopeful to find anyone here who truly
understood him. At least his unit was making an effort to work with his programming and figure out how he could best fit in this odd world. Between them, Dagger, and Prowl's notes he was confident he'd manage. That didn't make the adaption phase where he was writing a dozen contracts a jooor any more pleasant.

The door pinged to be opened and Deadlock placed himself between the mechling and the door. He waited until the door opened and Talon became visible before saying, "You're going to watch over him for now. Don't let us down."

"I will not," Talon responded in all seriousness, his wings speaking the same to Thundercracker, then focused on Pantera. "Are you ready for the afternoon?"

"Yes, sir," Pantera responded with a nod and doorwings. He gave his unit a small doorwing dip before he joined Talon outside the door and began following the Knight down the hall. It felt good that Deadlock was so protective of him even though none of the senior members of the unit actually expected any trouble here in the Citadel. It made him feel warm.

"Do you have a preference between cleaning duty or study first?" Talon asked.

Pantera hadn't been expecting to be asked much about his preferences this orn so he had to give the idea some thought. He made up his mind when he thought about his finish and the work his unit had put into it. That he would be dirty for less time played a role as well even if he was less inclined to admit it. "Is studying first and then doing cleaning duty acceptable?"

"Yes. I would not have offered you an option that was unacceptable," Talon promised and lead them down a path that Pantera quickly identified as leading to the library.

Doorwings quivered briefly before Pantera got them back under control. He'd been interested in learning more about the contents of the library ever since his unit had described it to him. Even though he was no longer on patrol Pantera still kept an optic out for hidden security cameras as he followed Talon through the Citadel. The Praxian jet talked about the origins of various decorations they passed, who had created them and in some cases what significance they held. The Citadel really was ornate despite the practical nature the Order seemed to encourage.

When they reached the library it was no less awe inspiring than the first time. Levels upon levels of book files, a swath of real hardform crafted books and a dozen work stations they would tie into the digital databases. Pantera had no doubt he could lose himself for orns in here and enjoy every moment.

"Regrettably there is only time for a single subject and even that will not be in depth," Talon said as he motioned Pantera to sit on a low pillow lounge so they could be close while Pantera studied. "The Knight's Creed as it is the core of our existence here, the guiding principles we exist under."

Pantera focused intently on Talon's words even as he pondered the foundation of his Enforcer coding. It was very important to learn to differences between his coding and the Knight's code especially if he was to be a functional member of the larger whole. The thoughts caused a note from Prowl to ping for attention and it was a simple one: the Knights fought to defend their city and people. It would not be difficult. At the bottom were links to a handful of files with code in it that Prowl had written in anticipation of issues he was aware might come up with a note to be careful about installing any of them.

As grateful as he was for the code and the warning Pantera had no intention of editing his own code. He would not anger the medics by doing more than asking them to install it if he felt he needed it.
His musings were brought to a halt when he realized that Talon was settling with a real hardform object, a cylinder of thin metal of a kind he hadn't seen before. It wasn't a book and it took a new nanokliks for him to find the correct designation for the truly ancient concept.

A scroll.

"This is the Code of Light," Talon told him as he sat down next to Pantera and gently began to unroll it. "It is read from right to left and bottom to top."

Although he was very curious about this unusual item, Pantera didn't even try to reach out and touch the scroll. Having never handled something like this he had no desire to cause accidental damage to something the Knights obviously considered a very important object. Leaning slightly towards Talon looked at the bottom of the scroll and began to read the Code of Light. It was very strange to read glyphs in the opposite direction but he could understand the reason for it here. You read what appeared first which meant you read the bottom of the scroll first.

"How much of the glyphs do you understand?" Talon asked as Pantera worked through the introduction.

"I understand many, although there are a few I am working out through context," Pantera admitted. Prowl's databases and the AIs were of limited help in this situation; ancient terms had fallen by the wayside compared to survival related knowledge and despite that the scroll had likely been updated as language changed some terms simply didn't have a more modern variant and were left. No doubt part of Knight training was to learn the original language to read it in the original form, or at least the exact meaning of the glyphs that hadn't evolved. Despite that limitation what he could understand about the foundation of the Knights of Light was fascinating. Windsong and the others had set out to create a Martial Order with a philosophy different from the others of their age.

A force of defense that was not attached to a lord or territory but centered around the Great Swords they all bore.

Just as fascinating was seeing the foundation principles that had lead to the ban on blasters and ranged weapons in general. The actual code had no such ban. It only expected combat to be about skill. He knew that Thundercracker would argue that ranged weapons took skill, but it was a different kind of skill that was not considered a part of this kind of martial fighting. He could even follow the logic processes that would make practitioners consider ranged combat dishonorable.

"How old is the Order?" Pantera asked abruptly.

"Windsong functioned while Vector Prime ruled," Talon answered. "At the time nearly all weapons were accepted. It was a time before the crossbow. The blaster wasn't developed as a hand weapon until Nova Prime."

Pantera thought for a long klik about how much change would have happened in the rest of Cybertron during the same time that the Order built upon the foundation laid out in this document. That basic difference explained some of the differences he had noticed between Wing and the rest of the unit. It was a time gap he had difficulty grasping. By his understanding anything before Nova Prime was mythology more than records and Prowl doubted much of the public records before Sentinel Prime. It was a discrepancy that nagged at him, at the AIs, though he couldn't get define it.

The answers might be partially here in this library and the records kept by the Knights. From what Wing and Dagger had said they had always been isolationists, but that didn't mean they hadn't learned about events outside their own realm. At the least they should know of major time-markers such as the change of Primes. It was a line of reasoning the AIs seemed to approve of following.
"How much of the library is restricted?" Pantera asked cautiously while he went back to the slow process of reading the Code of Light.

"This one..." Talon looked around, then simply pinged Marwir.

::Yes Talon?:: the very bored Master of Light responded, honestly grateful for any distraction.

::How much of the main library is off limits to Pantera?::

::Nothing I can think of. What little restricted material we have is not there,:: she replied after a moment.

::Thank you, Master.:: Talon closed the comm. "It is all available to you, as is the contents of the city's public library."

Pantera and the AIs almost locked up in surprise. So much information and it was all freely available for him to explore? He hadn't even seen the public library yet, but if this was any indication he was going to be busy for quite a while exploring the contents. The way his tac-net jacked up made him whine and press his chevron center to try and focus the way Prowl's notes said could make the very assertive AI settle down.

Talon kept silent even as he closely monitored the other mech, looking for any sign that Thundercracker or Redline needed to be called. The Seeker's behavior over the past few orns had made it clear to the Knights that he not only considered Pantera to be a part of his flock but also that his coding considered the Praxian one of his fledglings.

While it was a struggle it was over in less than a klik with a visible sagging of relief before Pantera returned to the scroll and scanned to find his place.

Talon still intended to warn Thundercracker and Redline about the incident. Having learned to handle his own tac-net as a mechling meant he had a better grasp than most of the task Pantera was facing. This merited very close watch especially considering that Pantera's tac-net was far more advanced and aggressive than his own.

"Was honor a rare trait in their time?" Pantera asked after a moment as he neared the end of the scroll. "The first five edicts are about honor."

"It was not rare. In fact it was critically important to almost everyone. From Prime to peasant everyone eventually survived or not on their honor. Its importance in that time was why it was so important to Windsong and the others of the first Circle," Talon explained.

"Everyone had the same code of honor?" Pantera asked, fascinated by the idea that it was such a stable concept.

"Unfortunately not. It varied wildly. In some cultures honor came from following your creators' role in society. If your creator was a merchant, you would become a merchant and bond with a merchant even if your spark called you to music. Some of those who lived in areas prone to extremes of climate considered it honorable for an elder to starve themselves during lean times so the stronger mecha of the group would survive. ISO dealt with a world where the Knight's code would be challenging and possibly lethal to follow."

Pantera frowned, his very core balking at the idea of knowledge being less valuable than strength or youth and the AIs not much calmer about it. "If there are so many definitions of honor, why would the Code not define such an important concept?"
"The Code of Light is the framework of our society, not the full extent of the law. Rather like the Charter of Praxus was the framework for how the city functioned and the final arbiter of whether a law was legitimate. We have the Code of Light, bylaws and laws."

Pantera nodded his doorwings slowly as he processed just how similar that was to what he'd been coded with. Prowl was correct. This was a society he could be comfortable in so far. "Where is honor defined for the Order?"

"The way you mean it it is in the bylaws of the Order and has changed subtly over time as both society in general and technology has changed. We will get to those later," Talon explained.

Pantera gave a doorwing dip of understanding at the polite ending to the discussion. Discussing bylaws of the Order could take up many decaorns and would logically be reserved for an Initiate who would have to follow them. "The primary weapon restrictions in the Code are because it was founded upon a version of Metallikato. Was that variation created by Windsong?"

"Surprisingly to most Initiates, it was not. According to Windsong it was developed by his teacher's teacher. What distinguished Windsong's followers, the original Knights of Light, from others that knew the same variant are the Great Swords. They are the central feature that makes Knights of Light different from all others, even those who fight with the same style. I could train someone to fight as I do but if they do not bond to a Great Sword they are not a Knight."

"Where did the Great Swords come from? Did Windsong create them?" Pantera asked even more curious about the origin of the unusual Swords that the Knights treasured so much. Wing even wore the glyph for his Great Sword like he did the glyphs for their unit and his Initiates.

"I do not know where the first ones came from only that they were old even then. I do know he had gathered thirty at the time he founded the Circle. Where the additional ones came from is known, though a secret of the Order. Only the Masters know," Talon said seriously.

"Understood," Pantera said politely, accepting that his inquiries into this topic were over unless he joined the Order and advanced in rank. He was still very interested in the origin of the Great Swords. "Are there any other principles I should be aware of before I make my decision?"

"Know that your choice of Daoshi is completely up to you. A Knight may offer. A Knight may court you to become their Initiate. A Knight may not threaten, coarse or make you believe they are your only choice. I know there are at least four who will court you if given the opportunity," he said seriously. "You are not obligated to keep to any agreement Prowl made or to the first to offer."

Pondering Talon's words, Pantera quickly accessed Prowl's files about the Knights and scanned the notes regarding Dai Atlas' offer again. According to what Talon was saying, he didn't have to accept Dai Atlas as his Daoshi despite Prowl having indicated that Dai Atlas would be his instructor in the Knights. The reasons listed were logical, but a deeper perusal indicated that Prowl had not questioned the idea or truly thought he had a choice. The contradiction between the different expectations was making his processor ache. It was as frustrating as the contracts he was having to write for his unit.

Talon allowed him the silent time and simply watched, teeked and waited for a question. He wasn't sure which one it would be only that even his tac-net would be demanding a few answers and Pantera's was far more demanding.

"Who else has admitted interest?" Pantera eventually asked.

"That I'm aware of Dagger, Blueflash and myself. I calculate that Wing would, though his offer
likely depends on who Deadlock chooses. I expect there are others I haven't heard of. Shogun seems likely, though he has not said anything." Talon elaborated.

Although the concept of picking his own instructor was almost processor-splitting, the idea of having one of his unit as his mentor was tempting. The tac-net spent an instant weighing all the listed options. It still gave tactical advantage to the idea of having Dai Atlas as his Daoshi; the connection to the leader would be useful and very tactically sound. It had also been viewed favorably by Prowl for several reasons.

"All indicators say that Dai Atlas is the best choice. I will keep my options in mind until it is time to choose," he promised.

"I cannot argue that you would not receive instruction from of the finest of us. The Sovereign has trained many fine Knights," Talon said. "Is there anything in the Code that you wish to know more about?"

"Most of those questions will take longer than we have allotted," Pantera admitted. "How does the Order's prohibition against ranged weapons work when your attackers are primarily using them?"

"Based on the battles I've seen it works against us, though it has never caused significant losses. Raiders, even the early Decepticon army, were little better than civilians in training and didn't have quality equipment. They had range but they had little skill to hit a fast moving target," Talon explained. "Now once the charge has been made and we're in close range the advantage shifts to us as they are now shooting into their own forces and blasters are ill-suited to being aimed within sword range."

Pantera filed that information away for the tac-net to readily pursue. "I know Prowl and Thundercracker were concerned about that disadvantage against a force such as Vosians who do not normally come within melee combat range."

"Ah, but they do for much of the Order. Just because we train primarily on the ground doesn't mean those who can fly don't train in the air," Talon chuckled softly. "Once Dai Atlas was a Knight he made a point that it was important to do. I have little doubt that Thundercracker will be hired to train us in the modern styles."

"Members of his flock will be Knights; he will be willing to teach you how the Decepticons fight in the air," Pantera agreed.

Talon nodded his wings and carefully rolled the scroll before standing to put it away. "Come," he motioned with a wing when he returned. Pantera obeyed without hesitation and followed Talon to the Aerial's quarters. "The remainder of the time before your break will be finding out how well you take to simple meditation."

Pantera looked around the quarters quickly as he followed Talon into his mediation room. It was similar to Dagger's quarters although some obvious differences such as the open balcony and significantly higher ceiling were easily noted. Once again as with Demeter he took note of the accommodations made for frame types while still keeping a similar feel. The meditation room seemed the most similar between them as they were all the same blank walls with a double hook to hold a sword point down and the barely visible outline of a cabinet in the far corner.

"I will have a minor binding after our chores so you can see what that type of meditation is like. For now settle into a comfortable posture," Talon instructed as he knelt and relaxed his frame as he achieved that perfect balance.
Pantera allowed his frame to settle itself into a comfortable position next to the Aerial, trusting that the same frame-memory that guided him in combat would help with this task. Hands resting on his knees and doorwings level, he waited for further instructions. Instead of words the next thing Talon did was to firmly lock their field together in a move Pantera belatedly identified as a monitoring technique. It would tell the Knight if his charge was in trouble or doing well.

"The goal of meditation is to clear the conscious processors both to free up the space and energy for background ones and to listen to those unconscious reactions better. At its best it brings clarity, relaxation and rest. It can often take vorns of struggling through the motions before it finally clicks how to do so successfully." Talon explained and warned gently. "You've already accomplished more than many Initiates do in their first vorn."

"Does this technique help bring balance with the AIs I carry? How much dominance should I allow them during this time or should I try to suppress them?" Pantera asked, mindful of the delicate balance he was trying to maintain with the two demanding presences in his frame and processor. He knew Talon also housed an advanced tac-net and would have an understanding of how this form of meditation would affect the balance in his systems.

"For me it works best when I put it on standby and allow it to give a report about what I learned or thought of after it is over. The less they interact with you during the meditation the more effective it is," Talon said and felt the tension shoot up only to settle as the two AIs got past the glyph for standby and understood what he meant by it in context.

Pantera waited for the pair of AIs to finish settling before even attempting to follow Talon's instructions. Neither was pleased with the idea of backing off especially in such unfamiliar surroundings without his unit around as back-up. Prowl's flag of Talon as trustworthy was the only thing making this seem possible. He knew the tac-net AI was sitting right on top of the controls to his frame and he didn't object. If that brought compliance in a situation he was sure it was not needed it was an easy thing to ignore. It took more attention to keep his balance perfect once he got used to the sensation.

"Now that you are settled try to not think," Talon gave the simplest version of the instructions to give Pantera the most freedom to find a way to make it work.

How did one try not to think? Pantera debated briefly about accessing Prowl's files to see if there was anything additional flagged on meditation, but that was the opposite of Talon's instructions. Studying Talon's field or frame also seemed counter-productive. He felt the frustration build at the seemingly impossible task.

"Try this. Select two harmonic notes. Hum them silently. Focus your active thoughts on that," Talen suggested.

Pantera followed his advice and focused on the first two notes of one of Jazz's songs he'd heard last orn. Letting those two notes play in his processor he focused on how the chord worked. There was a small bit of dissonance but the notes overall seemed to complement each other. As he continued to focus he'd studied everything he could about the two notes and resisted the urge to expand to more. Talon had said two note, a very specific thing, for a reason. So Pantera continued to focus on those two notes as they played over and over in his processor despite how his attention wanted to wonder.

"Pantera, come back to your frame," Talon's voice was mellow and a bit warm.

The Aerial's calm field helped Pantera retake control of his frame back from the tac-net. Withdrawing from his study actually took a klik, but he eventually shifted his attention to Talon. "Yes, Talon?"
"It seems that method worked reasonably well for a starting point. You calmed down," Talon told him.

"I don't know if I learned anything from the attempt though," Pantera admitted. "I couldn't stop my processor from trying to work on the notes."

Talon brushed their fields together and stood. "It's all right not to have learned something. Sometimes it takes vorns to understand what your subconscious has been working on. Sometimes it happens in a single meditation. How do you feel?"

"Confused and a bit frustrated at having failed," Pantera admitted, remembering that Wing had stressed to be open with Demeter and Talon during this orn.

"Confused and frustrated is not unusual. Wing and Deadlock can both share stories of their efforts. You did not fail," Talon told him firmly.

"I may not have failed but I did not succeed," Pantera said quietly, still trying to understand this method of meditation and how he could achieve the stillness that Talon said it required.

"Pantera," Talon knelt to be optic level with the grounder and put a hand on his shoulder. "All I asked of you this orn was to experience a first attempt at meditative stillness. You succeeded quite well. Even those who achieve it the easiest take vorns to master the technique."

"I understand now," Pantera straightened up and settled his frame and field. He still wasn't pleased at having failed, but this was an important reminder that not everything would come easily.

"Good. Now for the least enjoyable part of most orns: chores," Talon wiggled his wings in a purposeful attempt at humor and stood. "Have you been shown where duties are listed?"

"Demeter pointed it out to me but I have not thoroughly examined the list," Pantera admitted. "Is there something in particular you wish to show me?" He wasn't keen on getting dirty on sewer duty, but it was a part of being in the Knights. He understood the need. He just didn't like it. Though he suspected no one did.

"Good, it's important to keep an optic on it to know what one's duties are. If you move to the base folder of 'Duties to the Citadel' you'll see three folders: by designation, by duty and unassigned. You can look up who has what duties either by looking up their designation and checking what it in it or by looking up a duty and seeing who has it. Unassigned means it is available to claim to earn a few extra shanix," Talon motioned him to follow. "You won't have duties just yet so we'll be doing mine to give you some experience with cleaning and manual labor. Why don't you look up what we're doing?"

Pantera obediently pulled up Talon's folder and inspected the duty list which included cleaning the fish ponds, sparring room three, the washrack that his unit liked to use and raking the south sand garden. Accessing the sand garden duty he quickly learned that raking each of the four small sand gardens was assigned to a different Knight. Silently he followed Talon and gave a small thanks for less messy tasks and followed Talon outside to the small shed and helped gather supplies. Picking up a bucket with several different sized meshnets in it, he asked, "Are these for the fish ponds?" "Yes, they pick up the debris that accumulates on the bottom of the pond," Talon answered as he also collected a few strainers. "If we don't remove it the pond will eventually become filthy and harm the mecha-koi. We also wipe down the plants, benches, clean up the walkways and ensure that nothing needs repair, including the mecha-koi. It's far more work here than on Cybertron because of the organic debris and sand. It gets everywhere and into everything."
Pantera couldn't help but approve of the care the Knights were showing towards something as simple as the mecha-koi. After all, these were helpless animals placed here which required protection. A half-buried memory caught his attention. "Are there any feral cyber-cats roaming the city that might eat them?"

Talon's field expressed the pause to think that his frame did not while they walked into the space designed for no more than a dozen with only three benches a single path around the pond and out in three directions.

"While I cannot give a guarantee there are none in the city it is not a problem we have had," Talon eventually said as he ignited his thrusters to reach the tops of the plants and began to wipe them clean with slow, careful strokes. "Start wiping down the benches. Top, sides, underside and connection points. I expect if ferals ever become an issue they'll be fed a mix that inhibits reproduction."

Pantera nodded, satisfied by the logic behind the explanation. He started meticulously wiping the top of a bench, focusing on getting all the grit and debris off the seat. This was a quiet place that he could see himself enjoying seated next to Thundercracker. Movement inside the thin, transparent oil of the pond snagged much of his conscious attention without disrupting his cleaning and he realized between moments of admiring the glittering multi-colored shapes swimming about that another reason ferals might not be an issue here was the size of the mecha-koi. The large ones were the length of his arm but even the small ones were longer than his hand. They'd be very large prey for a stray felinoid.

It was a sign to any visitor that the fish were healthy and well cared for here in the Citadel. He knew from a bit of curious reading mecha-koi could live a long time for a fish and even develop basic personalities. "Do you know if any of them have been given designations?"

"I believe most of them have one by the regular viewers. I'm not sure if they're official designations, though they are easy to pick out which fish goes with which designation. Knight Cladin does the breeding and repair on them. He'd know," Talon answered back with a fond look at the scene below him.

"I'll have to ask him at some point," Pantera said as he scrubbed down the right side of the bench. There was the beginnings of a cyber-wasp nest on the inner side of the leg, and he made certain to check for any inhabitants before cleaning it off. That was another advantage to cleaning regularly. Such unwanted pests would be quick to move on if their nest was disrupted often.

Once he was satisfied with the condition of this bench, he turned his attention to the next one around the pond. As he cleaned he noted a chip on the front of the left leg of the bench. Not certain if it was significant enough to report, he asked, "Is this chip new?"

Talon landed swiftly and neatly with a light touchdown to give it and look. "It's on the list for repair. Here," he pinged a couple links to Pantera in a different spot of the Citadel's public internal board. There was no missing that he was pleased at the question. "This is where issues beyond your skills or duty are reported. Most of us will do a small repair if it is a quick thing for us to repair, whether it is part of our duty that or not. It is still important to report such things so both supplies and the repairs done are kept track of. Something that needs repairs too often can be a sign of it weakening or of a larger underlying issue."

"Is that ultimately part of Master Aurora's duties as quartermaster or does the decision to replace rather than repair fall into a different department?" Pantera asked, a bit of pleasure tinting his field. It felt good to prove useful to the larger unit even if it was something that someone else had already cataloged. With two Knights in his gestalt unit he would always have some ties to the Knights even if he decided to become a priest.
Talon paused. "I believe it is hers, though it may depend on how significant the replacement is. Replacement of stock items in personal quarters do go through her."

"It could logically be a part of her duties although it may also fall under the groundskeeper," Pantera said idly pondering potential structures for the Citadel's hierarchy as he continued to clean the bench.

"It could," Talon agreed despite his personal doubt. "I cannot say it is something I ever concerned myself with."

Pantera shrugged neutrally as he finished cleaning that bench and started working on the last one while Talon went back to the plants. Learning about the Knight's basic structure had gotten him curious about how such things functioned during both regular ornly activities and crises, but it obviously wasn't something to pursue just now. "Once I am finished with this bench what do you want me to do next?"

"Begin collecting the large debris in the pond and try to get a good look at each fish for damage," Talon said from where he'd begun to sweep the paths.

After Pantera finished cleaning the last bench he put aside those supplies and picked up one of the mesh nets. Approaching the edge of the pond he settled and began removing the leaves and bits of debris he could reach. He couldn't help smiling as the fish lightly bumped their heads against the net as he worked. A flashy silver and gold one twice as big as his hand briefly mouthed the pole before circling off.

"They're hoping you're here to feed them. I don't think they ever get full and they're always checking new things out," Talon smiled at the scene while he worked. "They're amazingly friendly things."

"They've remained so because they have been well cared for," Pantera agreed as he watched the fish swim around in front of him. Scooping out the larger clumps of residue didn't take long so he shifted down the edge. He couldn't help chuckling as they fish followed him obviously still hoping he was going to present food.

Talon kept an optic and his field on Pantera as they cleaned up from the minor mess their cleaning duties had created. For all the new Praxian was eager to please and help out he was also squeamish about his finish and unsettled easily by being even mildly dirty. The moment Talon realized Pantera would take more effort to do something and remain clean than to simply do it he knew it was an issue to deal with. That was going to be Dai Atlas's problem though, not his.

"Ready?" Talon asked when he teeked Pantera as content and level once more.

"I am," Pantera said although his field had a bit of reluctance. This was something different from simply trying to meditate on nothing; this was watching someone directly influenced by an outside party. It went against his basic sense of right and wrong. Even as he found why he was uneasy both his AIs pointed out all the ways the law and logic allowed for it. In every case consent was a key factor and it was difficult to argue that this would not be consensual.

The walk to Talon's quarters was short and quiet, both willing to remain with their own thoughts.

"Dagger," Talon nodded his wings to the grounder Praxian.

Pantera couldn't help a flicker of relief at the sight of his unit medic. It was still going to be uncomfortable to watch the proceedings, but the medic's willingness to participate in these events was helping his processor absorb the AIs' arguments and lessen his stress with the proceedings.
"Talon, Pantera," Dagger greeted them with a smile and doorwing dip before they entered Talon's quarters. "Do you have any questions while we set up?" he asked Pantera.

"How does a binding influence a Knight's behavior?" Pantera asked quietly as he watched Talon place his Great Sword on the mount. "Is it like how Jazz has described the gestalt coding?"

"Nothing like that. The relationship with a Great Sword is more like one has with a mate or long-term lover. All a binding does is focus one's thoughts and make understanding easier. The only influence is the Knight's desire to better themselves," Dagger explained as he took out a coil of light blue cord and approached Talon's relaxed arms, held together from wrist to elbow.

Pantera watched noting how the cord wasn't strong enough to actually hold Talon in place against his will. Although this seemed to be a legal process he still wasn't certain if it was something he was willing to do. This was one of the few things he'd seen that had given him pause about the Knights, and he would have to overcome this reluctance about bindings if he decided to join. He didn't resist the pointed prods by the tac-net for more information. He just wasn't going to speak quite yet. There were things to learn by watching and what Dagger was doing with the light blue cord in wrapping it around Talon's wrists and forearms was interesting. It was a far more complex pattern than could possibly be necessary.

It must be another ritual he wasn't ranked enough to understand yet. The position that Talon was in was looked awkward but also reassuring. He'd heard mention that a binding could be painful, and those comments made more sense now that he could see how Talon was situated. Some joint strain would definitely occur if the binding lasted any length of time. It was a basic pain though; the kind he was already well-equipped to handle and thus not of much concern.

As Talon relaxed into this form of meditation his Great Sword's rich blue gem began to glow softly.

Pantera kept a close optic on the Great Sword and Talon but kept his silence even though Dagger seemed to be open to questions. The glowing gem was disturbing and reminded him that he wasn't allowed to know where these Great Swords came from until he a point when he much higher ranked in the Knights. Talon seemed comfortingly calm and settled which continued to ease his processor. It was a good sign that the other Praxian could handle the binding even with a tac-net. Finally he quietly asked Dagger, "Is this how a normal binding goes? One that does not involve punishment?"

"It's the calmest of them," Dagger answered willingly. "It depends on the intent of the binding. When one has a serious issue to deal with a meditative binding can be long and difficult. Often they are between the two."

"So are the colors an indication for the mech or the Great Sword as to the kind of binding being done?" Pantera asked as he continued to try to learn exactly how sentient these swords actually were.

Dagger had to pause and really think about that question. Then nudged Ghost of the Future.

"Both, I think," he eventually answered. "I never thought to ask if it means anything to the Great Sword before. The color does tell the Knight what the binding is about."

"Which would guide the Knight's thoughts at the start of the binding," Pantera said thoughtfully. "How often does a Knight do bindings?"

"It varies greatly once one has settled with their past and choices. As most bindings do not require medical attention I only have a partial sample," Dagger warned the tac-net. "Once or twice a vorn is the norm among those I know of. Sometimes I go vorns between bindings. Some vorns I feel a need for several. If something serious happens, such as Wing leaving and returning, I would expect he'd
need a dozen or more to sort himself out fully whether or not they were ordered. Those big events are rare, especially once we left Cybertron. Meditative bindings are like regular meditation that way. We do it when we feel a need for it. In this case he is treating it as a Daoshi would; a demonstration of what to expect before asking an Initiate to undergo one. You are not expected to have a binding this orn. Only to experience watching one."

Pantera gave a doorwing dip, acknowledging Dagger's reassuring words even as he contemplated Talon's continued binding. He was still a bit concerned about throwing off his own processor's balance, but Dagger's words and Talon's continued ease was helping him settle those issues. "How long should we expect this binding to last?"

"Given what I know, only a few breems, a groon at most. When a binding is like this a Knight will be coordinated enough to lift themselves off the Great Sword. Much of the time, even for a good binding, we need help to get off, untie and recover. I'm sure you can already calculate how difficult it can become to move after holding that position for a time. That is partly why I am here. The other reason is to answer questions," Dagger explained. "Can you teek him?"

Pantera took a hesitant step closer and examined Talon's field to see how he was doing internally. "He seems calm and relatively unstressed," he said after a moment.

"Yes," Dagger smiled. "He is. Keep a teek on him. The feel of it will change when he's done."

Pantera continued to monitor Talon as the binding progressed. A bit more stress entered Talon's field but nothing near what Pantera had sensed in his own unit. Near the end of the third breem he could teek the physical discomfort and was just as sure that Talon couldn't feel it. He just wasn't sure enough to say anything. After that it remained stable.

"Can you teek the difference between last klik and this one?" Dagger asked softly and stepped close.

"No, other than his physical discomfort is increasing," Pantera said as he focused more intently on Talon's frame and field.

"It often takes centuries to learn," Dagger said as he lifted Talon's taller frame from where it hung and laid him on the floor before going to work carefully undo the binding cord.

"Should I help?" Pantera offered, uncertain what was exactly necessary other than removing the cording.

"You are welcome to," Dagger beamed at him and Talon struggled to focus on him with some success. "Rub his shoulders. They'll be sore from taking the weight. I'm going to rub his hands and wrists back to good color."

Pantera eagerly set to work massaging Talon's shoulders. The cables were indeed stiff from the strain but began to yield to his inexperienced but willing hands. They hadn't been strained long.

"How long does a long binding last?" he asked of either Knight while he focused on Talon's teek as he relaxed further.

"The record is just under three hundred orns. Though long in normal context is eight to ten orns," Dagger answered.

Never mind the baffling idea of spending dozens or hundreds of orns like that, Pantera tried to envision the results of spending orns kneeling like that. "It's not surprising someone would need help after being still for so long. I now understand why observers are so important."
"Yes, and while this binding had an infinitesimal chance of going badly and keeping me in it longer than expected it is always possible," Talon spoke calmly, then sighed softly as his frame relaxed further. "The longest bindings require medical supervision, a drip and often a stay in medical afterwards."

"It's a one in a billion chance," Dagger added. "Long bindings happen. They are exceptionally rare to be a surprise."

The AIs agreed with Dagger that those were almost insignificant odds, but both were paying attention to the results of the binding. "Did the binding help?" Pantera asked.

"Yes. I feel very settled; more than usual," Talon answered as he tested his hands for coordination. "Do you have any questions for me before you return to your unit?"

"Do bindings work because of the Great Swords or do they just enhance this form of mediation?" Pantera asked. "If the bindings require the Great Swords how did they develop?"

"While saying 'a binding' to a Knight brings the assumption it is with a Great Sword it is not strictly required once you understand what each of the cords means," Talon explained while carefully leaving out what he was not allowed to teach. "How they developed is likely in the library somewhere."

"I would be interested in learning more about it," Pantera replied. "The development of something like this would be interesting to study."

"You'll have plenty of opportunities and time if you join us," Dagger smiled and stood so Talon could. "Wing could probably tell you a lot too. He's been around for much of the Order's history."

"I'll ask him about it," Pantera agreed, accepting that this was a topic he would need to wait to explore until after he'd made his decision. At least it wasn't one of those secrets he needed significant rank for. Just time and access.

"For a single orn I believe that was a reasonable example of what a Knight's existence is," Talon said as they approached the large door to the room the gestalt had been given.

"Thank you for the opportunity to observe how the Knights function," Pantera said dipping his doorwings in respect. "You and Demeter have given me an enlightening experience today."

"You are most welcome," Talon palmed the door and remained to the side so Pantera could enter.

"So how'd your orn go?" Jazz was the first to demand as the door closed.

"Long and full of information," Pantera replied as he accepted Deadlock's quick scan of his frame and field for any damage. "I have learned a lot about the Citadel and the requirements involved in being a Knight. Demeter and Talon were most helpful."

"Good," Thundercracker rumbled. "What didn't you like?"

"I am concerned about the bindings and Great Swords," Pantera said looking directly at Wing as he spoke. "My internal processor balance is precarious at times, and I am concerned about adding a potentially destabilizing force."

Wing opened his mouth, then closed it and really thought carefully about what to say, what he could say. All of them already knew more than most Initiates at the beginning of their final trials about the
Great Swords but that didn't mean he was authorized to say everything. He thought about his own Initiates, about Talon's time and the Sovereign he'd trained and would soon train Pantera if all went well.

Eventually he settled on "You shouldn't be asked to have a binding until you are well settled with them. A significant part of training isn't about the skills we need but to settle our past and ourselves. It's a large part of why training has no set schedule or deadline. It takes as long as it takes."

"I've heard three hundred vorns?" Pantera questioned.

"As the average, yes. Of the thousands of Knights that have been trained that's the average. I've personally witnessed Initiates ready in under two hundred and one that took nearly six. As long as Initiate and Daoshi still believe in continuing the training goes on until it's done," Wing attempted to emphasize that this wasn't a race or being up against a clock.

"I will keep that in mind," Pantera said teeking a bit relieved at the information Wing had provided. He continued after a small pause, "Meditation in general seems to be something I do not have an affinity for if my attempt was any indication. How does one empty one's mind?" "Not by staring at a blank wall, that's for certain," Deadlock agreed with a huff. If he couldn't sit still he couldn't imagine how hard it would be for someone with that active a processor. "The katas Kimark's been showing me might make more sense."

"That's how Prowl often meditated. There are many methods. Sitting still, staring at a foci, listening to a rhythm or sound, katas and focusing on a single sense are just a few. Part of being an Initiate is finding at least one that works well for you. Part of being a Knight is exploring more of them and mastering methods that don't come as easily. As old and well-trained as I am there still things I have yet to master. There is always something for a Knight to learn," Wing smiled.

"What I saw of the Citadel was impressive," Pantera said as he finished settling next to Deadlock. He paused again for a moment before continuing, "I do have one other question. How would my picking a Daoshi impact our unit's relationship with the rest of the ranks?"

Wing looked blank, uncertain how to even process the question. He looked around the others to see if they were as clueless.

"You're thinking of more than one option?" Jazz asked.

Pantera tried to put his concerns into terms the others would comprehend. Once again he wished at least one of his unit was an Enforcer who would understand his concerns. "Talon said that there were several Knights interesting in offering to be my Daoshi including the Sovereign. With this additional information I have been trying to parse out how the command structure would work if I was a member of this unit which is subordinate to Dagger but reported directly to the Sovereign who is the highest ranked Knight."

"As far as the Knights go, there is no difference," Wing could only offer.

Thundercracker cocked a wing thoughtfully but it was Deadlock that put it in terms Wing understood.

"Think he's wondering if it cuts Dagger out of the chain of command for him." Even so Deadlock gave Pantera a glance to see if he's understood correctly.

"It would depend on the subject. As a medic Dagger has the authority to override anyone for medical reasons," Wing explained even as he struggled with the concepts. "Once you're an Initiate, anyone's
Initiate, he's not going to be any more important than another Knight-medic."

Pantera pressed fingers against his chevron shield while he worked to process that hundred-odd variants of the question the tac-net helpfully offered. Instead he asked one of his own.

"So it does not matter politically what rank my Daoshi is?"

Wing shook his head firmly. "The connection is most important. It's an extremely intimate relationship that last for life and often beyond. Dai Atlas knows more than even I do about the Knights and Great Swords. I don't think he knows more than any of the other Masters though."

Pantera teeked even more confused and rubbed his fingers on his chevron shield. "Sovereign Dai Atlas, the Lord of Law, told me that Knight Dagger was both unit medic and sergeant over this unit. You are telling me that Knight Dagger will not have authority over me once I have a Daoshi yet I will still be a part of this unit."

Thundercracker understood first. "This isn't about the Knights. This is internal. How Enforcer coding handles things."

"I don't know how to answer that," Wind admitted uneasily. "I know how it works among Knights. If this is about Dagger's rank in your coding I'm not sure."

"Who should I ask?" Pantera still focused on Wing.

"Dai Atlas. Or Dagger. I'd start with them," Wing suggested. "I'm sure it was discussed."

"I will start by asking Dagger," Pantera said, relaxing a bit since that decision followed the chain of command he'd been given and fit with what his unit was telling him. Deadlock shifted Pantera a bit so that the Praxian would be more comfortable as Jazz settled with them. "So the Knights aren't looking like a bad option for you, but you get to check out the priests next. They might be worth more here than they were back where I'm from."

"I'm sure they carry their weight. No one was allowed to come that didn't," Wing pointed out. "They all would have done the hard labor to build the city with us."

"Well, Pantera will get to decide once he tries them out," Deadlock said after debating starting an argument about it. It wasn't worth it given the pair snuggled up next to him seemed so relaxed.
Orn 347

Chapter Summary

Pantera's orientation: an orn in the life of a priest. Thundercracker's flight class 33.

Pantera roused to an internal alarm that went off entirely too early for his taste. It was only half past four. He’d had enough recharge but it was early and still solidly in the city's dark cycle. He carefully extracted himself from his unit and lightly touched and told Thundercracker to recharge more when the Seeker began to stir.

He had to clean up and get ready for the orn at the temple and on several levels he was not looking forward to it. He’d be alone. On his own and without his unit or extended unit nearby. At the same time it was a comfort to have protocols in place that dealt with priests that weren’t cobbled together half-accurate ones only he understood. Priests were priests. He’d have to get used to being away from his unit soon enough. Truly ancient memories indicated his apprehension of the change were not uncommon. The tac-net suggested that the heightened anxiety was a combination of that natural dislike of the unknown and the gestalt code that wanted him to stay close to his unit. Neither were reason to not do this as best he could.

So with his unit settled once more he left the room and realized it was the first time he’d walked anywhere alone. He made his way to the washrack making certain to give a polite doorwing dip to acknowledge a passing pair of Knights. Neither asked any questions regarding his being on his own or turned to follow him which confirmed what Dai Atlas had said about his status in the Citadel. He was allowed to be on his own. He was just as sure he’d have an escort to the temple and back and fully expected Jazz to be watching him, not that he’d ever catch sight of his gestalt mate. It would take centuries to become that good.

He stepped into the washrack, made note that Dagger was there and about halfway finished.

"Do you want some assistance getting cleaned up for today?" the Praxian Knight offered, fielding indicating no pressure either way. "Yes, please," Pantera replied with a grateful doorwing dip to his unit's sergeant.

"What do you expect of this orn?" Dagger moved over when Pantera got his shower set up. It was hot but not painfully so.

Pantera paused trying to work out how to explain how confusing this first part of his existence had been without sounding ungrateful for what everyone had done for him, "I'm expecting to be introduced to the basics of another more regimented existence as a counterpoint to the Knights. This will also give me an introduction to part of civilian life in the city. I have a basic understanding of the priest's functions and protocols for dealing with them so it should not be too stressful for me."

Dagger hummed and went to work on the top of Pantera's helm. "That is accurate. Presul Blackip will be your guide. He's the priest who will teach you Teris-Spi when you are ready."

Pantera's interest perked at that admission. Getting to meet a future instructor made this orn a productive use of time even if he did not decide to become a priest, "I hope I prove to be a good student. I am looking forward to relearning all of my fighting skills."
"I cannot imagine you would be a poor student. It's not in your coding or your spark," Dagger smiled as he worked down to doorwing joints. "Even if you do not become a priest knowing them and more of their ways will not be a bad thing. They are a major player in the social cohesion of the city. Whether you believe in Primus or not it is useful to understand the basics of the belief and their place in society."

The AIs agreed with Dagger's comment that understanding social cohesion here would be useful in the long run and seemed content with this orn's activities. Pantera relaxed more under Dagger's talented hands; the medic was very talented at easing tension without causing arousal; an inappropriate thing at this time even if it were normally welcomed. "Are you my escort to the temple?"

"Given you aren't authorized to drive yet Aurora agreed to fly you there and back when it's time," Dagger explained.

"I appreciate her taking the time out of her busy schedule," Pantera said with a small nod as he finished scrubbing his own chest plate and moved on to his legs while Dagger worked on his doorwings. Normally having someone of Master Aurora's rank escort a new member of a unit like him would have been unusual in Enforcer ranks, but Aurora was Thundercracker's guardian which altered Pantera's relationship with her. He was still sorting out all the ties their unit had to different Knights. She was the largest flight frame with a close link to him; unless he accepted Dai Atlas as his Doashi the giant didn't have much of an official link. Marwir no doubt could carry him but the Seeker would find it much easier. It may have some political meaning between the orders that he'd never know for sure.

He would thank her for her time and let others worry about politics for now. Such things were not meant for his concern. His priority was to represent his unit in an honorable manner. Finally they were done cleaning his frame; now to polish to an acceptable level for this visit. He would not shame his unit by appearing ungrateful for this opportunity. This was also an opportunity to learn more about his unit sergeant. "If you do not mind my asking, what is your belief about Primus?"

"I don't mind," Dagger smiled with a warm field as they went to work on polishing Pantera's frame to the shine the youth wanted. "I believe he is real, he is the source of all sparks and he is aware of us to some degree. I believe he sends sparks back on occasion. I'm less sure about the belief that he's in the center of Cybertron."

Pantera thought about Dagger's views as he worked on his finish. His own opinion of Primus wasn't fully developed yet, but the idea of Primus being at the center of what his unit said was a dying planet was disturbing. "Where your doubts about Primus being at the center due to the damage from the war?"

"No, I always thought it was improbable that with all the digging, tunneling, scanning, building and knowledge we have of Cybertron that such a large spark and its support systems couldn't hide," he explained. "I certainly suppose it's possible for such a powerful being to hide from us. I just don't really believe it when so much science says it's not there. Plus if Primus is physical and Cybertron is his body, if he's that much like us, how does he get energon to power himself? How could he not realize the amount of damage being done to his frame? Sparks come from somewhere. That somewhere doesn't have to be physical in the same way we are to me."

Pantera pondered Dagger's words as they finish the final touches on his frame. The AIs agreed with Dagger's assessment that it was improbable for Primus to have a physical form like a standard Cybertronian, especially if that form was Cybertron itself. There were too many inconsistencies to make that a logical line of reasoning. However, Pantera was uncertain what Primus could be if not a
physical being. Perhaps an energy being? He filed that question away for a discussion later with the priests. Looking over his frame critically, Pantera also made a last check of his protocols for this orn. "Are there any additional protocols specific to New Crystal City I should be aware of before I depart?"

"No. Be yourself, listen as you always do, be polite and curious as you naturally are and it will go well," Dagger met his optics and smiled. "I wouldn't let you go if you weren't well and able to handle it."

Pantera vented briefly and straightened, as settled as he was going to get until this was over. "I will not bring any shame on my unit," he promised.

"I know. It's not in you," Dagger stepped back and gave Pantera a good look over. "Aurora is ready."

Pantera followed Dagger to the roof where Aurora was patiently waiting in the night-time darkness that was only partially offset by the Citadel and city lights. "Good orn, Master Aurora," he said with a respectful doorwing dip to one of the highest-ranked of all the unit's guardians; the one who had taken Thundercracker under her wing and accepted him as her creation.

"Good orn, Pantera," she greeted in return and half-knelt. "Wrap your arms around my neck. I'll hold most of your weight."

With a bit of hidden internal discomfort at the idea of flying, Pantera followed orders and wrapped his arms around her neck, trusting that she would not let him fall. It wasn't the most comfortable position Pantera could imagine, but it would keep most of his frame out of her way for the journey. It wasn't long after liftoff before he picked out their destination. The five spires of the grand central temple of the city glowed in the artificial night of the cavern. Absently he wondered if four corners and a taller central tower was a new design, some rejection of what had been on Cybertron, only to be informed that it was the classic design.

"What are you surprised by?" Aurora asked.

"For some reason I expected a Matrix layout with six outer towers and a central one, Master Aurora," he didn't shrug physically though his field conveyed it. Her teek was curious. "Perhaps something to ask. I always accepted it."

"If the opportunity arises I will, Master Aurora," Pantera agreed, made a note to also check through Prowl's files for anything on the temple layout of Praxus. It wasn't a query he wanted to start just now given how quickly they were coming in for a landing and how buried any such records would probably be given their age. Prowl didn't like to remember most things about Praxus. Pantera already knew that much.

He watched the ground come close faster than he like but Aurora's teek and having watched Thundercracker land told him it wasn't actually that fast. A Praxian frame in priest red had white optics lifted to face him. Red doorwings were decorated with the gold glyph Prowl had poured there and several more in both gold and silver along the edges.

Once Aurora settled on her pedes and knelt to put his on solid ground Pantera released most of his hold and steadied himself before finally letting completely go of the Seeker. Flying had been an unusual experience, and he wasn't certain how much of his unsteadiness was due to inexperience with the altitude changes. From Deadlock's grumblings at the announcement of this form of travel he'd expected to be more unsettled by the experience. Perhaps the gestalt coding and Flightplan's
existence were partially the cause of his enjoyment of the experience. As he settled his processor and field he waited for the senior pair to complete their greetings.

"Welcome to the temple, Pantera," Blacktip turned to greet his charge for the orn with a welcoming doorwing dip. "Come, it is time for morning prayers."

"Thank you for escorting me here, Master Aurora," Pantera said as he gave the Seeker a respectful bow before falling into place beside Blacktip. He heard her take off and kept his field tightly controlled to conceal his nervousness at being alone with outsiders. The AIs attentiveness to his surroundings was a small comfort; they would alert him to any perceived dangers long before he recognized them as such.

"Do you have any questions yet?" Blacktip solicited as he led Pantera into the already busy central tower of the temple and into the flow of priests of every frametype flowing towards a central lift. It didn't take long to pick out that if all white stood out in normal company he was a neon light here in a place where it seemed that everything moving was in priest red with white optics.

Most were not blatantly staring but the attention he was getting was a bit disconcerting. Rallying himself, Pantera said, "The schedule I received from you was concise and thorough, Presul Blacktip. I have a few questions regarding the temple's layout if there is time. For some reason I wasn't expecting this design."

"What where you expecting, if you know?" Blacktip asked with open curiosity.

"I expected seven towers although I do not know why, Presul Blacktip," he admitted. "Master Aurora explained to me that this is the normal design for a temple."

"It is. The only temple I'm aware of that had seven towers was part of the royal palace in Iacon," Blacktip said as they waited their turn to enter the large lift. All around them priests waited, none uneasy by the wait.

"Then Prowl's exposure to it during his time in Iacon would account for the residual memory, Presul Blacktip," Pantera replied, satisfied with the explanation although he was still going to check through Prowl's files to confirm it. The calm surrounding him was comforting despite the loneliness he felt without his unit or even extended unit there.

"Likely," he agreed and stepped into the lift with two dozen others. "We will be standing with Archipresul Allegro and the other first vorn clericus in back. Please use this for any questions," he pinged Pantera a short range com frequency and how much power to use. "Listen to it as well. Others may ask questions that you might find useful."

Pantera followed Blacktip out of the lift and into the back of the room which was filled with red frames. Something about the solid mass of color and orderly manner gave him a bit of a melancholy feeling, like he was missing something he'd never actually experienced. As unfamiliar as the temple and its inhabitants were, it seemed to be stirring up Prowl's remnants. He remained quiet, pondering the sensation until Barasi Lelku came out to stand in the slightly raised dais in front and everyone quieted.

He made note that the more decorated the frame the further back a priest seemed to stand though it didn't matter enough to him to ask why.

The speech caught some of his attention away from pondering those around him. Barasi Lelku was telling an old story about a traveling femme who encountered four mecha from different classes during her journey. As he listened he realized it was a lecture about not judging mecha by their
frame. He wasn't entirely certain why the original lecture was drawn out with four stories but reasoned that less-logical mecha might require more examples. Prowl had warned him that he wouldn't learn or think the same way most mecha did. He'd either pick things up much faster or much, much slower, depending on how easy logic and pattern fit into it.

The second sermon didn't sound like a sermon at all. It was a clearly abbreviated story of how the priesthood was founded. That the reason seemed founded in the sharing of knowledge between those with a special gift so they could help those than came to them for advice with less effort. It was a logical if simplified reason for the creation of the priesthood, but Pantera was certain this wasn't the entire story. Altruism might be the motivation for some, but few things remained that simple especially when a group reached the power that the priests had held on Cybertron. Their monopoly on calling sparks like himself explained some of the power they had once enjoyed politically, but it did not explain their continued power here given no such ability existed on this planet.

::You can ask,:: Blacktip said quietly.

::Am I correct that this is a simplified explanation for the creation of the priesthood? Just wanting to help by giving advise does not explain the power the priesthood has gained over the centuries, Presul Blacktip,:: Pantera asked, testing to see the response he would get.

::Simplified, yes, and also simply the first part of the story. How we gained so much power is not unlike how every other institution gained power. Do something useful, be needed by the community, have wealth or a resource to barter with and keep it up for a long time. The first priests only had the authority their experience gave them. As society became more specialized they gained the power that came with their specialized knowledge being so important. Politics and ambition by some leaders added to the priesthood's standing:: he explained further without going into details.

::What is the priesthood's role in politics here in New Crystal City? Especially since they cannot call new sparks to fill specific roles, Presul Blacktip:: Pantera asked.

::That is the only thing that has changed. We still teach skills to anyone to come to class, tend to creations when creators are at work or damaged, run the pre-schooling for most youths, offer advice and sanctuary to those in need, fund many public arts, provide support in the event of a disaster, offer comfort to those facing a deactivation and assist with rehabilitating those who have committed crimes,:: Blacktip listed off many of the duties of the priesthood. ::Our primary duty to record history and retell it also remains intact.::

::Community support is an important function, Presul Blacktip,:: Pantera agreed. ::It is logical for those in power to consult those who interact with the citizens on a ornly basis.::

::Being the primary source of education and history is also a source of significant authority,:: Blacktip added before he hummed on the line for silence and his voice joined those of almost every priest in singing something in a language not even the tac-net recognized, much to its great irritation.

Pantera concentrated on the singers and the emotions that were conveyed despite the lack of comprehension of the words. He made certain to record the song since comparing the emotion given with what the words actually said would allow for a more in depth analysis. Once they were done singing he would ask Blacktip which dialect was being used, and he intended to research it once he had access to a library. Two more songs in what Pantera presumed to be the same dialect followed, and he gave each the same attention.

When the third song ended Blacktip hummed that he could talk again just before Barasi Lelku began a short list of things happening that orn, including a separation he would be off-site for and a blessing that would use a specific chapel.
What language were the songs sung in? I did not recognize it and could not determine a similar dialect, Presul Blacktip. Pantera asked as he pondered the announcements. If this was typical for the number of separations in an orn he doubted the sparkling care area would be very full.

Primal Vernacular. The oldest of the known languages. Prima's writings are in it, Blacktip answered easily. It is the base language for all known modern dialects but it has changed so much over the generations that they don't have much in common anymore.

Are there translations available to any modern dialects, Presul Blacktip? Pantera asked.

All modern dialects and most older ones, Blacktip smiled faintly and pinged a set of links in the city's public library to each song and to the other hymns in modern Praxian and in Imperial Standard.

Thank you, Presul Blacktip, Pantera said has he made note to follow up on those links. Learning Primal Vernacular would take time, something he had plenty of here, but it would be fascinating to trace the divergence into of so many Cybertronian languages. He thought on that as the last of the announcements were made and noted that they were all business of the orn. Then the room filed out in the same calm order that it had filled. The youngest full members leaving first from where they were in front and proceeded through the room until Blacktip motioned him to move with his field and they left with the rest of the first vorn clericus with Archipresul Allegro the very last.

The Enforcer in Pantera noted the room was not locked and the rest of him promptly pointed out that this deep inside the temple theft was unlikely a concern.

Pantera took note of the tac-net's approval of the discipline that the priests were showing in their ordered behavior even as he followed Blacktip down a hall. He listened intently as Blacktip pointed out several study rooms and meditation chambers they passed. Pantera couldn't help noting that the internal corridors were at least wide as the ones in the Citadel and many were wider. Yet the Citadel seemed more haphazard in design; added to and changed over the generations with only an occasional complete rebuild to smooth it out. This place was designed on math. Everywhere he looked he saw the same ratios for height and width and not a single odd intersection.

"How old is this design, Presul Blacktip?" Pantera asked as he was shown a large hall with no clear purpose.

"It depends on what part of the design you mean. This," he motioned to the building around them, "was hashed out as a compromise between all the various city aesthetics on the trip here. The foundation of the layout and the math of it is nearly as old the priesthood."

"Do the ratios used in building the temple serve a purpose beyond aesthetics and structural integrity, Presul Blacktip?" Pantera asked, approving of the rationale behind blending different city styles in the design. This level of compromise showed a willingness to work together and united purpose despite the different origin cities, and the AIs seemed to approve of that unity of purpose.

"It depends on who you ask. Most accept that it might have meant something when it was first settled on but now it's simply what a temple looks like to look like a proper temple. Those who are heavy into philosophy and theory, most of the Pelamun and quite a few Artisia think there are lessons in it. Pelamun are seers. Artisia are our artisans," Blacktip explained.

Pantera filed away the terms for reference although neither sounded like paths he would wish to follow in the priesthood. As they continued down the corridor and entered another hall he took note of a mural on one of the walls depicting a Helexian priest standing among four Kalisite laborers. The style wasn't one he was familiar with, but it was appealing to his optics. Still looking at the realistically done forms, he asked, "Is that a scene replicated from Cybertron or an original created
here, Presul Blacktip?"

"It is from the Psalm of the Sparks. A lesson on how all sparks are equal to Primus no matter the frame or function they wear in this existence," Blacktip's doorwings wiggled a little in pleasure. "It was carefully written so that the frames of those involved were never described. It is for the listener to choose. In Praxus it was of a Praxian priest among Kaonites. There are several variants in the temple and about the city."

"A viewpoint useful to encourage in a city this diverse," Pantera said after a bit of contemplation. The image and its implications were a bit comforting given his own unit's unusual make-up. A small twinge inside made him ask, "Are there many mixed-frame sparklings created here, Presul Blacktip?"

"A few, though not many. As I understand it we are comparable to Iacon and the other immigrant-heavy cities before the war. Though what qualifies as mixed frame depends on who you ask. To most who aren't Praxian Jazz would look like our frametype if he unfolded his doors. To most grounders there are only three flying frametypes; Seekers, Shuttles and Rotors. Ask a flier and there are at least a dozen and they don't always break down the same. Ask some of the grounder mechlings here and they say only three or four in the entire city. Fliers, ones too small to comfortably 'face, ones to large to comfortably 'face and those their size."

Pantera gave a small dip of comprehension as he pondered Blacktip's analysis and what he'd learned from his own flock, "That is a logical result of the restrictions on creation that have been put in place. From listening to Thundercracker talk about the Seeker mechlings in his flight class I thought that the younger generations might be chipping away at those distinctions brought from Cybertron. It is a reasonable reaction to the small population and mixed communities developing here."

"It is, and despite many efforts to keep the city cultures alive and separate it is becoming more common among many groups. The rest give it lip service and keep their grumblings quiet," Blacktip sighed and glanced at the mural. "Sometimes I wonder how the insular cultures developed with strong priesthoods there. I lived in it and it made no sense."

"The priests may have kept it from worsening, Presul Blacktip," Pantera offered, uncertain despite being in a flock with a Seeker, a frame type known for such attitudes. Thundercracker didn't show such behavior towards his unit. Both his AIs were quick to point out that he and Blacktip were a frametype well-known for it was well.

"Oh, don't worry. I don't expect you to," Blacktip reached out to rest a hand on Pantera's shoulder and enveloped the youth in his field. "I was simply musing out loud. I relax in these restricted spaces where I don't have to be a priest for the general populous. I can have questions and doubts here that I can't have out there."

"Citizens expect certain behaviors from a priest," Pantera said as much as asked, thinking about the Enforcer protocols he had for dealing with citizens. He also remembered a few comments from some of the Knights about how to behave around civilians. Apparently any choice of position he made would shape civilian expectations and interactions with him. It was a comforting thought.

"Yes. They also expect a level of self-assurance and apparent knowledge from us as community leaders. They trust us with guiding them. It is very important that they believe we are worthy of that trust. A priest, no matter their rank, does not leave the restricted areas unless they are prepared to put on that display for their people. To wear the red is to be a leader, a source of succor and protection. We have weaknesses as all mecha do. It is important that those weaknesses are not displayed in a way that harms our ability to do what is needed," Blacktip explained. "You are in an unusual position to learn many things about us without committing to us."
"I appreciate the honor being given and will do my best to prove worthy of that gift regardless of my decision, Presul Blacktip," Pantera replied. "I do not intend to use my gift of knowledge of the Knights and the priests in any way that will discredit either group in the optics of civilians. Both roles are important for the long term stability of New Crystal City."

Blacktip smiled and began walking. "I believe you and both leaders trust you. Your spark is that of a protector and builder. I know that from Prowl. It is not in you to harm outside of protecting our people."

Pantera couldn't help preening a bit at the compliment before settling down and following Blacktip down another corridor and to another intersection. As was habit from his Citadel explorations, Pantera noted five red crystals hung high overhead. They appeared to be part of the lighting here and issued a soft glow mostly overwhelmed by the brighter lights. "What is their purpose, Presul Blacktip?" "They are a visible reminder that the temple has influence even when the outside world seems overwhelming," Blacktip replied.

Pantera hummed thoughtfully. "A good thing to remember when culture does not seem overtly religious. Does it help that the temple does more than sermons, Presul Blacktip?"

Blacktip gave a firm nod, "With a few exceptions like some of the Pelamun, we have focused on keeping the temple involved in the city rather than apart from it. I know some civilians refer to us as the first and last seen, and we are proud that we are entrusted with caring for sparklings as well as those soon to depart for the Well."

"What do you do, primarily, Presul Blacktip?" Pantera asked as they moved on, walking by a small room meant for no more than a dozen average frames with a pure white crystal carving of Primus in the center. In the very dim lighting that the room had the statue's glow was impossible to miss.

"I am training several panki in Teris-Spi and will soon begin the process of testing Master Smokeswitch as Grand Master Prowl tested me," Blacktip said with a bit of pride. "I also counsel those troubled by loss whether it is a broken relationship or loss of a loved one."

"A balanced existence then; training as a comfort against the pain you deal with in others, Presul Blacktip," Pantera asked.

"It is a balance I find comforting, especially when it has been a particularly rough orn," Blacktip agreed. "Although it is rewarding when someone finally moves on from needing my help."

As they made their way through several more corridors Pantera took note that the rooms they passed seemed to be getting bigger. Eventually Blacktip led him into a large room. Three parallel room-length tables were being filled by seated priests, although Pantera noted no one was actually consuming their meals yet. He waited in line patiently behind Blacktip, who filled two cubes from a simple dispenser before handing the right one to Pantera. "We were informed of your dietary needs before your arrival."

"Thank you, Presul Blacktip," Pantera accepted the cube and relaxed inside at not having the threat of having to make a fuss or go hungry before him. "I was briefed on the basics of fueling manners."

"Good, that will make things easier for you, although most are aware of some of your circumstances," Blacktip glanced back at Pantera for a long moment as they approached the table. "When we reach the table and sit down, please follow my lead until prayers are finished. Depending upon your current fuel levels we will be able to get you a second serving if you are still hungry once this cube is finished."
"I will," Pantera promised very seriously. "One cube should be sufficient unless you expect me to spar heavily all orn, Presul Blacktip."

"Although some light sparring may occur we will not be pushing you that hard. No one goes hungry here," Blacktip promised with a small smile. He was interested in seeing how much of Prowl's training remained in this new mecha but realized that today might not be the appropriate time to test him. He'd been warned about that too. At a minimum a medic had to be on scene and Sovereign Dai Atlas on alert for any sparring with Pantera until he was completely retrained in his arts. He even agreed with the reasoning. The last thing any of them needed was for a frame reflex, AI takeover or flashback to traumatize anyone.

Pantera's doorwings gave a wiggle of understanding as they sat. It wasn't lost on the young Praxian that wings were given space here. It made the seating less uniform while it made those with them more comfortable. While the rest of the order got their energon and sat down he made note that while the lower ranks were in groups the higher ranks seemed spread out among them. Whether it was control, an example to watch, to answer questions or something else it was an interesting difference from prayers.

The only exception to that was the shorter table perpendicular to the three large ones at the end of the room. No one was seated there and the tac-net produced a 99.9994% probability that the Barasi and Archipresul would be there. It was an assessment proven true as the Barasi and Archipresul entered as a group once everyone else was seated. A respectful silence filled the room as everyone waited for them to gather their energon and take their places.

Barasi Lelku remained standing as the Archipresul seated themselves. When the room had stilled completely he reached for an elegant carafe of nearly white energon. He poured a portion into a strange round object and nodded faintly. It was the cue the higher ranked mecha scattered about to pour from the carafes spaced periodically along the center of the tables into matching round objects that Pantera finally placed as a drinking vessel specific to this ritual.

When all the spheres were half full the room stilled again and Lelku lifted the sphere.

"The first of our kind took nourishment directly from Primus, the energon pooling on the surface for them to gather. As we grew in number, he sent us sparks that learned how to harvest energon from other sources, preserving our creator's fuel for nourishing the world we lived on and allowing us to expand to the stars. In time, most forgot that energon, in its purest form, is the life energy of our lifegiver, that which sustains the spark of Cybertron itself and the physical frame of Primus. Let no one forget that we come from Primus, took our first nourishment from Primus, and in time return to Primus."

He moved from his central position to the end and offered the small sphere to the Archipresul there.

"Let no one forget that we come from Primus and return to Primus," Lelku said.

In the pause after the Archipresul accepted the sphere each higher ranked priest offered the sphere they were holding to the mecha on their right or left. Pantera couldn't pick out the pattern despite being sure there was one. Of more note to him was the small relief that he calculated that he was seated in the middle of a group and would not have to determine which direction to pass it.

In a ritualized cadence each mecha who received a sphere took a small sip and passed it along, three of the lower ranks for each Archipresul. It meant that when the final Archipresul stood to return the still mostly full sphere to the Barasi the final handoff was also being done at the long tables with spheres that were less full but still with more than a third left.
As Lelku carefully poured the remainder into the half-full container it had come from he spoke. "Energon, when used as needed, is an endless supply, as is the love of our creator. Primus ensures that his creations are never without. It is our duty to ensure that bounty is not lost and his creations do not extinguish for lack of what we have in plenty."

Among the long tables the ranking priests did the same. When all the near-white energon was returned to the carafes Leklu swept his gaze around the room.

"Enjoy, indulge, and share when you are no longer in need. It is the will of Primus, as it is from every creator to their creations. We give thanks to the bounty and wisdom that has allowed this city to prosper."

"Comecro."

The room hummed in unison.

Blacktip waited until everyone had begun drinking the simple, plain energon before asking quietly, "Was that what you expected?"

"Yes, Presul Blacktip," Pantera nodded slightly and began to drink, timing himself to those around him. The energon was simple, far less flavorful than what he'd had up to now. It was suitably energy dense and that was all he cared about for now. "Do all priests fuel here, Presul Blacktip?"

"Normally we all fuel here together unless our duties take us outside the temple," Blacktip said. "If you join the priests you would have scheduled times to fuel with your gestalt. It may be here, at the Citadel or elsewhere as the situation warrants. You will not be shorted needed time with them."

"That is good to know. I must take such things into account," Pantera relaxed at the assurance that unit needs were going to be honored.

"The needs of your gestalt are similar to the needs of a trine or triad, or even of a mate," Blacktip pointed out. "All such connections are to be cherished. They are a foundation of society."

"Priests have mates, Presul Blacktip?" Pantera focused on the statement that stirred surprise even though he could think of no reason it should.

"Some. If the connection is strong enough to warrant such a title we do not reject it," Blacktip smiled softly. "Primus created the spark. He sent us to a frame. To reject the needs of frame or spark is to reject the gift our creator gave us."

"It doesn't interfere with your duties, Presul Blacktip?" Pantera asked between calculated sips.

"No. Our orns are structured and full. They are not without personal time. That is needed for long-term health," Blacktip said seriously. "Mecha are not machines, not even those called perfectly to their function."

"That makes sense, Presul Blacktip," Pantera said slowly about what he'd seen of Prowl's memories of his time in the Enforcers. He knew that the Enforcer had loved his work, but even he had spent time away from working with his unit. He intended to devote much of his time to his function, but his unit too important to neglect. He also guessed they wouldn't allow it.

When the last of the energon was consumed Blacktip dispersed his cube and checked to see that Pantera knew how and was done before he stood. "There is a groon before you will sit in with a class covering the duties of the temple, the purpose we serve in existing and being supported by the citizens."

"Is there anything we should do before the class, Presul Blacktip?" Pantera asked. He was curious to
learn more about the basics of being a priest since what he did understand did appeal to his nature.

"I want to show you around the public gardens," Blacktip guided him towards the main entrance and into the artificial daylight.

Pantera looked around at the structured symmetrical garden around him. It was a different feel from the Citadel's central garden yet it had a harmony all its own that appealed deeply to the tac-net and Enforcer AIs. This had easier pursuit lines and fewer hiding places with largely low-lying vegetation. He could teek Blacktip's pleasure at his reaction and allowed himself to sink into it a bit more as they began to walk into the carefully pruned landscape.

He took note of the flow of colors as they advanced further into the garden and towards the city that surrounded the temple. They passed several benches positioned around crystal statues. One of the statues was a formations of multi-colored crystals standing in cluster; another was of a femme standing with a pigeonoid resting on her hand. Like the temple it didn't seem to be of a single style despite how it harmonized.

"There are individual gardens that hold to a single style and territory inside. As the public garden and how we greet visitors this one was designed with the nature of the city in mind," Blacktip said.

"It is an interesting contrast and flow, Presul Blacktip," Pantera agreed as they explored the changing sections. Despite the differences there was a definite pattern to everything and he knew he would be able to find a particular section if asked later.

"Do you ever miss the social nature of Praxian meals, Presul Blacktip?" Pantera asked as they began to walk towards the central tower.

"Sometimes. Once a decaorn the evening meal is more elaborate with finger fuel on central platters. I can usually get my fill of social fueling then," Blacktip answered. "It's not the same but it's enough. I knew when I agreed to come that there would only be a handful of Praxian priests and many of the social norms would no longer be norms."

Pantera thought about that as they continued through the gardens. He would have his time with his gestalt, but it sounded like the dining he just did would be the most common experience. This wouldn't be the ideal experience, but he could learn to fuel like that. "Why did you decide to come, Presul Blacktip?"

"I thought long and hard about my duties to Praxus and my duties to Primus," Blacktip said as they walked. The style of the hallway was a little different from the tower they had left, but the architecture and decorations flowed together much as the gardens had during their walk. The careful blend of styles appealed to the AIs. Unlike the Citadel there were few hiding places in the corridors or anywhere else here.

"The Praxians who decided to join the Exodus would need someone to help support them and help them adjust to the exposure to other cities and cultures. As a Praxian priest my actions and words would be taken seriously. It also meant I could help keep alive the good traditions from Praxus. With no noble of any rank coming our people needed me to come, needed to see the red on Praxian wings. I've never doubted that choice, even in the moments when I doubted we would ever find a new world."

"Because of your faith, Presul Blacktip?" Pantera asked as he struggled with the idea of never doubting. Even choices that turned out well were examined for how to do better and how they could have gone wrong. "What is faith, Presul Blacktip?"
"My faith is complete trust in Primus, and I willingly serve our creator. In this case, the path to serve here was placed before me, and I follow it." Blacktip glanced down at a crystal mosaic around one of the seating arrangements before continuing through on the path.

::Public or private here, Presul Blacktip?:: Pantera asked by ultra short range comm.

::Public. Ask here.:: Blacktip didn't give any hint they were talking silently.

Pantera hesitated for a long moment, organizing his thoughts before speaking. ::How do you know Primus is real, Presul Blacktip?::

::Perhaps that is on faith of a sort. I trust those who would know that they speak the truth. The Barasi and Archipresuls could call forth sparks. No one I know of questioned they could. Those sparks must be called from somewhere and it is accepted that all sparks are from Primus. So when they say that they are calling on Primus to grant a spark and a spark appears, I accept that Primus must be real.:: Blacktip attempted to explain something he'd honestly never faced himself. He had counseled those with doubts. Just never in this context. ::Do you doubt?::

::I ... simply do not know enough to have a valid opinion yet.:: Pantera struggled to explain. ::I am trying to gather enough to decide if dedicating myself to his service is the form of service I wish to perform, Presul Blacktip.::

::You are very young to be making such a life-affecting decision, and your desire to learn more is commendable,:: Blacktip replied. ::As you codify your views on Primus' existence and relevance to this city, there is a relevant piece of information for you to consider. As a reformatted pre-programmed mecha you are in a rare position here in New Crystal City. Your spark was originally called into that frame by the Barasi or an Archipresul. There are those here who would consider your existence to be physical proof that Primus exists.::

::There are many sparked mecha among the Knights, Presul Blacktip,:: Pantera replied while he struggled with the concept that his mere existence was somehow special to strangers. ::Surely they are not that rare, Presul Blacktip?::

::Outside the Knights, yes they are very rare here, and most civilians do not interact with Knights on a regular basis,:: Blacktip said. ::Sparked mecha were often called to occupations such as law enforcement and the military. Very few mecha from those functions chose to come with us unless they had become Knights or otherwise left their function. The loyalty they felt to their calling and duty kept most of them on Cybertron when we left.::

::Felt and coded,:: Pantera said with dark certainty. ::I did not realize so few civilians chose kindling over sparking, Presul Blacktip.::

::It was never a common method for the common mecha. It was far more expensive than kindling for them,:: Blacktip explained what he believed was the core cause of the difference. ::Those who relied on sparking for creating new mecha realized from our prior experiences with off-world colonies that we would be unable to continue the practice so they have adjusted accordingly.:: He agreed with Pantera's assessment that coding had been a major factor; Prowl had proven that when he arrived. He wasn't going to encourage any upset over it though. It would not do this youth any favors.

"Greetings Presul Wysiwyg," Blacktip spoke as he entered a room suited for perhaps three dozen with chairs, benches and cushions on the floor for seating. It was currently empty except for the tall, slender mech with classically elegant features intended for beauty in another city.

"Greetings Presul Blacktip," Wysiwyg looked up from where he was checking something on the
control terminal in the front of the room. "And Pantera. I'm glad you decided to come."

"Knowledge is always welcome, Presul Wysiwyg," Pantera dipped his doorwings in a purely reflexive movement of respect. "This class should be most informative. Am I early?"

"Only a few kliks. The others will be along shortly. Make yourself comfortable. There will be both civilians and the very new priests here today," Wysiwyg said warmly and motioned to all the seating options.

Pantera took a seat on one of the benches and waited for the rest of the class to arrive. Maybe this class would resolve some of his uncertainties regarding the existence of Primus. "Are you going to stay for the class, Presul Blacktip?" he asked.

"Unless you'd rather I didn't," Blacktip offered.

"Please stay unless you have other duties to perform, Presul Blacktip," Pantera said promptly. Being left alone with strangers who did not have established contracts was a bit of an uncomfortable thought.

"My duty this orn is to see to you," Blacktip promised as the first four students, all wearing priestly red, came in as a group. ::If you wish to ask any questions without speaking up, this comm is suitable.::

Pantera gave the four a small doorwing dip in greeting. Their frames were as diverse as what he had seen in the Knights although there tended to be more fliers. They were polite in their greetings to Blacktip, and they didn't stare too much at Pantera's bright white frame. The pair of Aerials who came in after them stared a bit more at him and it was his first real look at what he'd heard about civilians. Flight frames tended to be built lithe but he was reasonably sure his protoform weighed more than either one fully armored and it almost hurt to call what they were covered in armor. They were so skinny. He'd never think Master Aurora looked too light to be healthy again. A more thoughtful look and he realized that most of the priests were just as lightly built yet that didn't even register and nudged at that thought while the others settled.

Perhaps he simply expected priests to be different and didn't think on the differences? It seemed a reasonable answer at least.

"Greetings all. I am Presul Wysiwyg. This orn we will be discussing the purpose of the priesthood as expressed in its credo: Remember, Record, Respect, Retell," he opened the class.

Pantera kept track of the others in the class even as he focused most of his attention on Presul Wysiwyg's words. This was information he and the AIs wanted before he made his decision on which track he was going to follow. Although the Peacekeepers might have seemed like a good fit to an outsider; the Enforcer AI agreed with Sovereign Dai Atlas that they were not a good fit for him. He could perform the function but he wouldn't be very content with the loose social structure and lack of sparked mecha there.

Based on the glyphs the contents of the class were much what he expected.

Remember what has been learned, seen and what society and the universe is like. Keep track of things all around so to better understand them.

Record what has been learned so it is not lost with the frames that knew it and so it can be disseminated quickly. While Pantera believed that record belonged before remember that was a side note. He was sure there was some motivation that didn't apply to him that put them in the order they
Respect yourself and the frame Primus gave you. Respect knowledge and those with it. Respect the beauty Primus and his creations have made.

::Why would respecting beauty be so important that it is here, Presul Blacktip?:: Pantera asked.

::Because it means that we should take care of all of Primus' gifts. Every spark is beautiful and should not be neglected but instead allowed to grow and flourish. The flora and fauna of Cybertron should not be callously destroyed but instead be properly maintained so all can enjoy them. If that part of Respect had been properly followed the conditions that cause the War would never have been allowed to occur.:: Blacktip explained.

::No, they would not have, Presul Blacktip.:: Pantera fell silent and did his best not to scowl at the last part of respect; respect those weaker than you, for if you make them strong they will strengthen you in turn.

It sounded good but both AIs were screeching about how that didn't work in the real world.

::The AIs?:: Blacktip focused on his charge as Pantera's field flickered sharply.

::Yes, Presul Blacktip. Objection to the last part in the real world.::

::It actually does work, but like so much of respect those lessons were not taken well by those in power and once broken respect is much like trust; it is very difficult to rebuild.:: Blacktip explained.

Pantera thought about the point Blacktip was trying to make but the AIs still disagreed with it. The only counterpoint he could make against them was Deadlock. Deadlock was a valuable part of their unit, but he became that once he was treated well and shown that he was valued. Was that what Blacktip meant?

::How does an institution, a government, rebuild trust, Presul Blacktip?:: Pantera asked while he listed to the fairly simple but locally pervasive credo of Retell and noted that it was what he expected: tell what you know to those who would listen and that for the priesthood that meant to do so without fees.

::It is a very hard thing to do and often requires a major change to command or the very structure of the institution.:: Blacktip admitted. ::It starts by doing what you say you are going to do and serving who you claim you serve. Apply the rules and laws to everyone; do not give exceptions based upon wealth or privilege. Hold accountable those who have violated the rules and broken that trust in the past. Accept that mecha are going to be angry and distrusting for a long time. Look for good, reliable mecha that will not abuse their power and positions.::

::Is that part of what this city is about, Presul Blacktip? Making that massive change and limiting those who came to those who were at least willing to give it a chance?:: Pantera asked.

::While not the main purpose, yes, I would say it was definitely a factor. We did make major changes to government and law to address what brought Cybertron down.::

::That would help, Presul Blacktip.:: Pantera admitted although the AIs were still doubtful about the success of the long term efforts to prevent corruption in the government. They also, grudgingly, agreed that it was not their place to cause a fuss about it yet. Not for centuries at least.

Pantera was already feeling slightly glazed over as he contemplating three more prayer times, six
every single orn. They were interesting for now because it was new but he already knew he'd be bored out of his sanity by it once he knew the hymns, sermons and events. Even Blacktip already knew them all and he wasn't all that old. They were good lessons; Pantera just didn't need to hear them more than once.

"While I don't expect you to be a primary caregiver in the creche it is something that most of us do from time to time and one of our more valuable contributions to the working mecha," Blacktip said as they neared a room with large double doors that didn't open automatically; rather they were pulled outward to open.

Looking at the doors and calculating their weight as Blacktip opened them he realized this must be a very good way to keep the sparklings inside since they probably wouldn't be strong enough to open them. This was actually the part of the orn he had been a bit nervous about as he hadn't actually seen any sparklings or fledglings let alone interacted with them. He'd been told that what he knew about Photosphere didn't really count since she was close to upgrading and was not a typical civilian to such an extent that she couldn't be allowed among them. "How many sparklings will be here today, Presul Blacktip?"

"I expect nine sparklings and twenty-three younglings while we are here. There is normally one priest for every three youths during the lighted joors," Blacktip explained and Pantera watched the careful move that put the priest's frame in the opening well before it was large enough to get through.

"You're clear!" a cheerful voice called from inside and Blacktip relaxed slightly as he stepped inside and moved forward for Pantera to quickly follow closed the door behind him.

It was the strangest entrance he'd made into a room yet, but it was a logical way to prevent escape attempts. He'd been warned by Wing that this would probably be a much more casual environment than the rest of the temple, and it appeared that his unitmate was correct. Looking around he spotted a small cluster of grounder younglings playing with some toy ironphants in a corner. Another group was playing with blocks and others played with games. Even having downloaded the growth and maturity chart so he'd have some idea what to expect beyond his protocols it was unsettling how small and skinny they all looked. The smallest didn't even look proportioned correctly.

As he took in the scene and watched one of the adults come up to them Pantera felt a set of protocols labeled for sparklings and younglings activate. The alien directives and forced changes to his frame language and even his field was nearly enough to cause him to panic and bolt right there. He felt nothing like himself.

"Pantera, this is Clef, the head of our creche," Blacktip introduced them.

"Greetings, Presul Clef," Pantera said with as close to a polite doorwing dip as he could manage while trying to rein in his internal panic. It was unnerving how calm his field remained. The Iaconian mech looked him over and with a bit of understanding in his field asked, "You've never been around sparklings before, have you?" "No Presul Clef," Pantera admitted. "The Citadel does not currently have many younglings of any age category."

With a glance and nod towards another priest there Clef guided Pantera away from the activity a bit more. "Is it the youths or your coding disturbing you?" he asked gently.

"C-coding. How?" Pantera tried to organize a processor that did not want to be organized and get two AIs were were in various states of freaked out to settle down.

"I have to be skilled at picking up subtle clues to care for my charges. Many of them only have limited linguistic skills," Clef's field and touch was gentle and calming. "Though I had the advantage
of having seen that look on another before. A very young Enforcer in Iacon. His partner explained that it was the first time protocols turned on."

The Enforcer AI agreed that information meant Clef would have reason to know how to recognize their symptoms and help them settle. Pantera looked at him and quietly asked, "How long will this take, Presul Clef?"

"It depends on how quickly you can accept the protocol's directives. They should be relatively benign and mostly in the background. They only exist so you can be around the very young and not accidentally hurt or frighten them," Clef assured him. "Are they asking you to do anything you object to?"

Having Clef's soothing field close by helped as Pantera sorted through all the changes the coding was causing and looked everything over. Finally, he said, "I believe my primary issue is that I've never had coding change my behavior that radically. It reminded me of my unit's description of the gestalt coding and what it altered for them, Presul Clef."

"If this is disturbing you we can do something else," Blacktip offered with quiet concern. "You don't have to work through a major coding event now."

"Better to do so now in a controlled setting with those who know what is happening than at a later event when it might cause problems for those around me, Presul Blacktip," Pantera replied with a small shudder. "I should be settled soon. Presul Clef is correct. It is not doing anything I object to. It is simply unsettling."

"All right," Blacktip extended his field in support.

"It is currently play time. Soon they will have a snack. Then the sparklings will have a nap while the younglings have lessons," Clef explained.

"What am I expected to help with today, Presul Clef?" Pantera asked, wanting a task to focus on while he finished settling his processor. Knowing what to expect should make things easier.

Clef gave Blacktip a quick glance, then nodded and focused on Pantera. "I expect you to follow myself or Blacktip. If you wish to do something helping hand out the snacks and getting the sparklings to settle for their nap would be very helpful. The lessons may be as useful to you as them. Talking with the younglings about it would be welcome if you wish. We are predominantly here to ensure no one is bullied and everyone gets their fuel and lessons done."

Preventing bullying was something the Enforcer AI approved of, and Pantera was curious what the lessons would involve if Clef thought he could learn from them. Looking at Clef, he said, "I will join you in helping to fuel the sparklings, Presul Clef. I do not know how much assistance I will be in helping them to recharge but I am willing to try."

"Fortunately that is fairly simple for you. Ensure they are in the correct crib, that each has what comfort item they need," he pinged the details to both Praxians, "and make sure they stay in their crib. Some sing or rock those that need it to settle. I won't ask you to attempt such things."

"Why do most grounders recharge separately except for the one pair, Presul Clef?" Pantera asked and moved into the room with the priests close by.

"They are split-spark twins. They are not yet old enough to be separated for recharge," Clef explained gently while Pantera processed the small mountain of information 'split spark' kicked into his awareness. Prowl had many notes and more personal information regarding coping with such
"Are there many split-spark twins here in New Crystal City, Presul Clef?" Pantera asked as he matched each sparkling with their crib number. Prowl's files and all the information contained there led him to approach the pair of twins first. If he focused on them that would allow the priests to handle the others.

"No, they are as rare here as on Cybertron. I've never seen more than one set in a generation," Clef said and smiled softly with an encouraging field when Pantera's destination became apparent.

"I have a lot of information on split-spark twins from Prowl if you or their creators would like copies, Presul Clef. A large portion of it involves military situations but it might be useful," Pantera offered. After all, he agreed with the concept of sharing knowledge and this was something that might be useful and relevant.

"Anything you care to share with us, about twins or anything else would be most welcome," Clef perked up considerably. "I'm sure a Srila will find time to talk to you this orn about arranging for it."

"Srila are the recorders of life. Their function is to collect the knowledge we record," Blacktip added.

"I will ask the others if they have any additional information about twins that should be included. I'm glad the knowledge will be useful here, Presuls," Pantera said as he focused on the twins who were both staring up at him. "Who you?" the dark green one asked while the golden brown one clutched a bronze mesh hippopotadron and sucked on her fingers.

"Seraphinite, Cassiterite, this is Pantera. He's going to help out this orn," Clef introduced them.

"What are you playing?" Pantera asked.

"Hippies," Seraphinite said holding up her own purple mesh hippopotadron before bouncing it along next to her. After a moment Cassiterite mimicked her twin's actions.

Pantera looked briefly confused before he sat down to be near the young sparkling's level. "What are the hippopotadrons doing?"

"They were fighting," Seraphinite said. "Adu was bad so she was in time out. "Be good," Cassiterite scolded her hippopotadron before bouncing it over to her sister. "He's sorry and wants to play again."

Pantera smiled, his doorwings and field expressing his innate pleasure at their grasp of behavior and repercussions at such a young age. The twins picked it up and smiled as they made their toys romp about a bit more while Pantera watched in the silence that young twins tended to exist in.

When Clef walked away Seraphinite looked up at Pantera's face. "There's another Hippie if you want to play."

"I would," Pantera willingly took the opening. Deep inside he was dangerously bored but while the caretaker coding was active it was kept completely in check and locked away.

"Eri is in there," Seraphinite said pointing at a drawer set in the wall. "Shhh, Odr. We're gonna go get Eri," Cassiterite said as the pair crawled over keeping low to the ground.

It was the most obvious sneaking Pantera had ever witnessed. The tac-net pointedly informed him that it was the most painfully obvious sneaking even Prowl had witnessed. The Enforcer AI suggested it was appropriate for such young mecha even as all of his coding twitched at not helping
them get better at it. As the pair made their way back with a green mesh hippopotadron the tac-net lost its grip with being idle and diverted most of Pantera's processors to processing anything it could download.

"Eri, this is Pantera," Seraphinite said as she handed the toy over. "Now be good for him."

"Thank you," Pantera accepted the soft toy. "Odr likes to climb," Cassiterite explained as she bounced Odr along Pantera's arm. "He's not afraid of heights."

"A brave being," Pantera held still for them, the coding making him a willing object in the game. Seraphinite settled next to Pantera's leg, pointed at an empty box against the wall and said, "Does Eri want a drink? There's food over there in the cube."

"I believe he does," Pantera allowed his frame to move with the grace Prowl had trained into it in a far more adult variant of the sparkling's sneaking crawl. Coding hid his bewilderment as he fake-fed the stuffed object in his hand with a believable amount of realism.

The twins took turns play feeding their own toys from the cube. Cassiterite made certain to wipe all three hippopotadron's faces with a small mesh blanket before declaring them all clean. Seraphinite let out a small yawn, before announcing, "Eri says he wants to take a nap with you."

"Then he may," Pantera said even as he was working out how to avoid young sparklings from now on. "Come to your crib," he encouraged the pair to take a finger each to walk towards the room he saw priests carrying or leading other sparklings into.

Firmly clutching a toy in one hand each of the pair slowly walked beside him. They were a bit unsteady on their pedes but moved well enough that Pantera didn't need to carry them. "You have to kiss Adu and Odr before they rest," Cassiterite said solemnly as she offered the toy up to Pantera. "Creator says it's a rule."

"Then it is a rule. I will when you are in your crib," he insisted as he lifted Seraphinite then Cassiterite up onto it. They promptly offered their toys and Pantera's doorwings wiggled with a happiness he definitely didn't feel for real as he gave each mesh hippopotadron a kiss on the head.

The twins kissed each mesh toy and then settled down cuddled together. It didn't take very long for them to slip into recharge. "You did very well with them," Blacktip observed quietly as Pantera joined the priests outside the recharge room.

"Thank you, Presul Blacktip. Will we be here when they wake?" Pantera asked. The praise soothed some of his disquiet about the caretaker coding though hardly all of it.

"Unlikely. The sparklings are used to having caretakers come and go while they recharge," Blacktip said as they walked over to the drawer to return the mesh toy to its proper place. "Would you like to spend some time with the younglings or would you prefer some time away so your coding can settle?"

"Something else, please, Presul Blacktip," Pantera couldn't hide his relief at the option as the coding loosened its grip on him.

"Let's go down to the library so you can relax," Blacktip suggested, wanting to give Pantera somewhere relatively quiet that would have an option to rest or read, whichever would help settle him. Once they left the creche he caught the full impact of how unpleasant the experience had been. It didn't take long for that to clear and Pantera to settle into excitement for the library and Blacktip made a note to pass on that Pantera definitely didn't do well around sparklings yet. He accepted
coding directives well but it was far too difficult on him to be healthy. He was just as sure that knowledge and careful experience would smooth that over. Pantera would hardly be the first mecha to cope with the known better than the unknown. "We can remain here until prayers."

Four prayer cycles down, two more to go and Pantera was already looking forward to heading home to his unit and the Knights. Perhaps in time when he'd developed a sense of faith or need to believe in a guiding power he'd find refuge here. He was sure that's what it was to many of them. Others were definitely here because this was their purpose in the same way service in the enforcement of law and order was his. Of his choices in this city the Knights were without question a better fit for him now and in the near future.

In an odd way it made him look forward to the remaining time a bit more. He could focus on learning in a pure manner rather than trying to understand his place in such an institution.

The time in the library exploring what was available had definitely been worth the visit to the temple. He'd found several texts that explained some of the prayers and hymns as well as a number of histories of the Cybertronian cities. Even better Blacktip had assured him that it was all in the public library. Now he was following Blacktip into another new experience that would hopefully go better than the creche. The kitchens were larger than he'd initially expected although the AIs pointed out that they would have been created with the city's expansion in mind and its subsequent expansion in the temple. All throughout the space priests were working, doing things with energon, powders and flakes that Pantera only partially recognized.

"Greetings, Enamel," Blacktip said as they approached a priest pouring metal flakes into a bowl. "This is Pantera; he's here to help tonight." "Good orn, Pantera," Enamel said as he looked up at the Praxian. "Do you have any previous experience cooking?"

"No, Lapresul Enamel," Pantera responded and noted a comm between the pair but left it at that. "I likely know less than your youngest recruit."

"We'll get you started with something easy then," Enamel handed the jar of metal flakes to Pantera and nodded towards the counter. "Finish filling this bowl halfway with the iron flakes and then add the energon in the cube to the bowl. Stir the mixture with the spoon until the metal is fairly evenly distributed throughout the energon. I have images of the final product I can give you if you are uncertain or you can ask me if it is ready."

"I will, Lapresul Enamel," Pantera promised and went to work with intent focus to fill the bowl exactly half way full. There was no interruption as he worked although he could hear the priests moving around in the kitchen. Once he was satisfied with the level of flakes he added the energon to the bowl and began to stir as instructed. The flakes clumped together in places and did not want to integrate into the energon so he stirred harder, then tried another method of stirring.

After a bit of frustration, Pantera turned to Enamel who was working at the counter further down from him. "It is not integrating properly, Lapresul Enamel," he admitted.

"Let me take a look at it," the priest said as he approached and examined the contents of the bowl. "You've done a good job mixing for a beginner. This consistency will work for our purposes, but I can show you a technique for better distribution if you are interested."

"I am, Lapresul Enamel," Pantera was quick to claim the offered information.

"Watch and then repeat what I do," Enamel said as he took the spoon and began lifting the mixture from the bottom of the bowl up towards the surface as he made his way slowly around the sides of
the bowl with the spoon. "Iron is a metal that likes to remain connected together. Lifting it like this separates the flakes and allows for better distribution. Here, you try."

Pantera nodded his doorwings and copied the movements with absolute precision except for moving at half the speed for the first cycle. Then he picked up speed to what Enamel had used.

The mixing went smoother this way and eventually Enamel spoke up. "Thank you, that mix is satisfactory for our purposes. Now, I've got some pans over here; you need to spread the mixture out in these two pans. There is a chiller underneath the cabinet on the wall. Once you're done take out the two pans already inside and put the new ones in the chiller. When you do, set the timer for two groons."

"Yes, Lapresul Enamel," Pantera accepted and went to work as directed. Before he put the new pans into the chiller he found the timer and made sure he understood how to operate it.

Pleased with Pantera's willingness to follow instructions, Enamel waited for him to finish before coming over to the chiller. Picking up one of the pans, the priest inspected it briefly before shaking the pan lightly side to side. "Do you see how the energon doesn't move when the pan is lightly shaken? That means everything has set properly and will remain stable when it comes time for service. Now, we need to move the pans back to our work station so we can begin cutting them into servings."

Pantera immediately picked up the second pan and followed him. "How many servings are in a tray, Lapresul Enamel?"

"Twenty-eight pieces cut in four rows of seven is standard," Enamel replied as he set the pan down and got two knives from the rack under the counter. Offering one to Pantera, he said, "Many restaurants have custom slicers designed to fit precisely in the pans, but we don't cook enough here to need more than knives."

Once again Pantera's rather obsessive precision was on display though this time he worked more quickly with a task that calculations made short work of.

"You would do well if you're interested in learning more about cooking," Enamel observed as he set to work removing the pieces from his pan and putting them on a tray he'd pulled out that was already halfway full. "There are many recipes that require precise measurements and timing. Those are things you seem to be very good at doing."

"Thank you Lapresul Enamel," his doorwings gave a brief happy wiggle and mirrored the actions until both trays were empty.

Enamel put the tray back in storage and looked over everything waiting for service. "Would you like to continue with the same recipe or would you rather learn how to make gel granite sandwiches?"

"I would like to learn about the gel granite sandwiches, Lapresul Enamel," he said eagerly.

"Come with me," Enamel said with a smile as he called another priest to take over before leading Pantera off to another station.

Pantera followed Blacktip down on the hallway and into a small study he'd passed earlier this morning. The presence of two chairs suitable for Praxian frames indicated that it had been prepared for the two of them earlier. Blacktip motioned for Pantera to take a seat while he settled himself into one of the chairs. "Normally this is a study period for us, and I thought this would be a good time to ask if you have any questions for me?" Remembering that he'd been encouraged to ask the presul
questions, Pantera brought up one of the things that had been on his processor ever since he started exploring Prowl's files and listening to his unit. "How did the Primes come to be so significant on Cybertron? Did they start as religious or political figures, Presul Blacktip?"

"By our records they have always been very important. From Prima, the first of our kind, there has always been a Prime; even if they were not acknowledged as such outside the temples. She was both, though I would argue that even near her deactivation the population was small enough that such distinctions are questionable. By the time it did matter the Prime was officially a religious figure, the highest of high priests. Some Primes wished more political power and claimed it. Others lost political power to things such as the Senate."

"So religious power became political power. Why did the Primes tend to become so unstable over time when other mecha did not, Presul Blacktip?"

Blacktip's doorwings flicked in surprise, then he went silent as he thought for a long klik. Eventually he shifted his doorwings in a shrug. "I don't know."

Pantera filed away that admission of a lack of information to talk to Jazz about later since the speculations about the Primes' stability had come from him. "Why didn't the priests and Primes step in and help correct the problems that have been growing for generations, Presul Blacktip? Anyone looking at Kaon or Tesarus and comparing it to Praxus should have noticed the developing problems and realized the dissension such inequalities would create."

"Yes, and many of us did. I cannot speak for the Prime though I can tell you what was known in Praxus. Just as each city was largely independent, most with their own royalty, so it was true with their priesthood. The Barasi of Praxus had no authority in another city that their Barasi did not grant. The cities with a strong priesthood that remained active in civilian and political spheres without becoming corrupt did well. Cities with weak or corrupt Barasi did not." He paused and saw the next question coming. "Some became weak because the royals or military or another faction persecuted them for being active. Others became corrupt when the members they drew in thought corruption was normal because it was normal in the city. I don't know of any single major event that caused it. Like so much, decay and breakdowns tend to be caused by little things that are ignored too long."

"Even with Nova Prime, Presul Blacktip?" Pantera asked cautiously from a tac-net prompt and watched in fascination as his mentor here cringed.

"Nova was ... Yes, he caused a great deal of damage. It was primarily focused in Iacon however; focused on those who came in contact with him regularly. The weakness in the capitol's temple could be largely attributed to him. At the same time when Sentinel Prime came they could have recovered while he was young and eager to learn his place in the priesthood."

"But they did not, whether it was because they had become corrupt or were too proud to ask for assistance is unknown," Pantera added with a small doorwing dip, making a note to sort through Prowl's files and see if an explanation was stored there. "My unit says Optimus Prime would be a good peacetime Prime, Presul Blacktip."

"Assistance?" Blacktip cocked a doorwing in curiosity. "What help could they have asked for?"

Pantera looked at Blacktip for a long moment, confused by the question, "If Nova Prime caused damage to the priesthood in Iacon as you said, then there should have been some priests who recognized the damage. If a military base is weakened by an attack reinforcements are sent to help secure and refortify it so that it does not fall. Are you stating that other temples on Cybertron would not have sent priests to Iacon to help if asked, Presul Blacktip?"
"We would have. I expect we did. I do not understand what help you believe they could have given that wasn't given. What help would you have had them ask for?" he attempted to explain.

The tac-net made a suggestion, and Pantera expanded further on his question, "If there was known weakness and corruption in any temple, let alone the temple that would train the Prime, why weren't the problem individuals replaced with competent priests from other temples, Presul Blacktip?"

Comprehension flashed across Blacktip's frame with shock right behind it. "Because temples are independent just as cities are. If the local Barasi does not want help to force the issue would bring a war between their cities and quite possibly turn every other temple against the one trying to help. A Barasi is the equivalent of the ruling lord of a city; they just have different duties. An outside force does not try to remove one without risking everyone turning on them for the threat it poses."

"So the Barasi of the temples could not get together as a council and replace a corrupt Barasi at one temple without potentially triggering war between cities. I misunderstood the temples' relationships with each other. Thank you for the clarification, Presul Blacktip," Pantera filed that information away. The autonomy of the temples made certain logistical sense to a point, but he could also see how this contributed to the collapse of Cybertron.

"If all Barasi were involved it might happen. That is a level of politics well above me, and above my ambitions. I'm sure Barasi Lelku would make time for you if you wish to discuss this further." Blacktip offered.

"I'm not certain if it is relevant at this point since there is only one city and it should be that way for quite some time," Pantera admitted even though the tac-net was interested in learning about the possibilities. "On to a different question, how were sparks like me called on Cybertron, Presul Blacktip?"

"In general or the exact ceremony?" Blacktip counter-questioned. "I know the basics. I don't know how to actually do it. That is something only Barasi and Archupesuls did."

"In general. Mostly I would like to know why they can't be called here, Presul Blacktip," Pantera elaborated.

"Ah, that I know," Blacktip relaxed with a soft smile. "A spark can only exist without a frame for a brief moment. It can't survive the distance. It is something we learned when we began to colonize other worlds. All sparks do come from Cybertron. The chamber where they are summoned is as deep as a given city can make it to lessen the journey. They can't even reach the moons."

"How did New Crystal City adjust to having kindled mecha doing the jobs they used to consider unacceptable like waste disposal and power plant maintenance? I understand that many colonies would import sparked mecha for those occupations. I know the Knights and priests require their members to partake in cleaning duties, but those used to be positions filed by mecha like me," Pantera asked.

"I do not have detailed answers; it's is outside what I handle. I know the two primary methods are better pay and automation. Most duties reserved for sparked mecha were because it was cheaper than it was to train and retain a kindled one, and far easier to replace those lost to the dangers. So we eliminated the jobs we could and paid better when we couldn't. Some things, like smart targets, we simply do not need. Others, like working inside the radiation field of a power plant are paid very well and require major upgrades. I believe the current crew are all retired military and thus already had hardened systems and most of the needed armor. They also have drones and automation for the most dangerous duties. For law enforcement there is training and some coding to make it difficult for them to accept a bribe or other overt signs of corruption. And they are watched. It's not perfect but it seems
Pantera nodded in acceptance as this fit with what he’d been told at the Citadel. "Are kindled mecha created with the white spark of a priest? If so, are they required to join the temple, Presul Blacktip?"

"Yes, a white spark can be kindled. To my knowledge even sparked mecha were not required to join, though those sparked under contract were usually brought by the temple. Like the red we wear and the white optics a white spark is more about what society thinks of for its religious leaders. The Barasi could be painted any colors and he would still be the Barasi. Not because of his spark's color but because of his training and what is does," Blacktip hoped it was explanation enough. "Is it a concern for you? All spark colors are among the priesthood."

Pantera almost sighed in frustration as he said, "I am confused about my status here. As a sparked mecha I was created and my spark was called for the purpose of being an Enforcer. My coding is that of an Enforcer. Here I am being told that I have to chose between being a priest and a Knight. How can I be created for a purpose and yet expected to have the free-will of a kindled mecha, Presul Blacktip?"

"You don't have free will the way a kindled mecha would understand it. I wouldn't call what you are being asked to do a choice of free will," Blacktip said gently and extended his field to get a better feel for the mech across from him. "You are being asked to choose which option suits you better; not what option of everything in the city you want to try. Even at my level of involvement it is understood that neither choice is what you would choose if you could be anything here. Free will is something that only exists outside of compliance coding. It's given a lot of talk. It's less real than most want to believe by the time one is an adult."

Pantera nodded slowly, as he followed what Blacktip was saying, "So you're saying my unit doesn't have free will due in part to the gestalt coding, Presul Blacktip?"

"No, I do not believe they do. Not total free will at least. Some likely have more than you do because they have less coding intended to influence them. I do not know them well," Blacktip admitted.

"So my choices are limited due in part to my coding, but I am being expected to make a choice to the best of my abilities, Presul Blacktip?" Pantera said carefully, having already decided that the Knights were the best fit for him and for his position in the unit.

"Yes. Make the best choice for you for now by whatever criteria you use," Blacktip nodded his doorwings. "That means listen to your code, your AIs, your intellect and your spark. Between them there is an answer."

"I will do so, Presul Blacktip," Pantera said, keeping his relief that Presul Blacktip didn't sound like he would be upset if Pantera became a Knight out of his field. He didn't want to cause problems for his unit further down the road.

Thundercracker watched from the ground as Saamanjasy put three more of his classmates through their paces for assessment. Cavu was currently doing well and had obviously taken the tricks he'd been shown to spark. The older Seeker had already done his own demonstration and was patiently waiting until everyone was finished so they could be dismissed. He was a bit more restless than normal today, but Saamanjasy had been informed that the mechling in his flock was at the temple. Even when that was good news it was a stressful event. "Is everything okay?" Highdive asked from his side.

"Yes. Pantera is at the central temple to learn about being a priest," Thundercracker smiled down at
her. "He's far too young to decide such a thing."

"From your description he sounds very mature for his age. Sparked mecha must be very different if he is being required to chose now," Highdive said with a small wing flutter. "It's hard enough for me to figure out what I want to do in life; I can't imagine having to make that choice so young."

"Neither can I. He is very mature for so little experience. It doesn't make it any less disturbing to think about what's being demanded of him before he is even allowed to drive in public," Thundercracker almost muttered. "His choice will make a difference to the flock as well."

"You said he's at the temple right now? If he chooses to become a priest that will take a great deal of his time. How close is Nightwind's eyrie to the temple and Citadel? Is it a good midway point?" Highdive said thoughtfully.

"By the wing it's not far, though I would say nothing in this city is far by wing. Since Pantera doesn't mind flying it is less of an issue than if he was a more typical grounder. It is an advantage most Praxians have over other types. They have enough flight code that the fear has to be learned," Thundercracker hummed. "Fortunately his existence is likely to be highly structured either place so it will be easier to have time for him when he has free time."

"I didn't know that about Praxians," Highdive said with a bit of a bemused look.

"They are an odd type," he chuckled slightly. "I have a selfish hope he becomes a Knight. Then the ideal eyrie location may well be the Citadel. If so I intend to broach the idea with Aurora. They have a system for dependents to live there with their Knight. The fees for staying there may well be reasonable enough with three Knights among us and Jazz likely living closer to his work. Aurora hinted at it a couple orns ago. As a Master and their quartermaster she would know better than anyone what was allowable."

"What's a quartermaster?" she was briefly distracted.

Thundercracker paused to organize a simple explanation without going into details she didn't need.

"The mecha responsible for housing and supplies for a unit or facility," he said. "She's the quartermaster of the Citadel and by extension the Knights."

"She'd definitely know what's available then," Highdive agreed as she processed the idea of living among the Knights and so many grounders full time instead of just visiting with them.

Seizing what felt like a partially familiar option, she asked, "Would you expect to live near Master Aurora in that case?"

"Yes, as close as we could," his wings emphasized how important that was no matter how he might doubt he could really manage it. "Wing has enough rank and standing to get a fairly good location for us."

"The Citadel would be a safe place to raise a fledgling," Highdive said finally, not certain about this but trusting that Thundercracker would figure it out. After all, he was older and more importantly an Order. Working this kind of thing out was his duty in the trine.

"If Pantera chooses to become a Knight I would like you to spend more time in the Citadel; in Aurora's eyrie, with my flock and among the Knights," Thundercracker said and offered.

"I need to know if I can handle living in those conditions before we think seriously about trining," Highdive agreed, understanding that this would be critical with multiple Knights in Thundercracker's
close-knit flock. "How certain are you that Pantera is going to become a Knight?"

He shifted, wary of predicting and knowing he shouldn't be. "Almost positive. He would need to find something very compelling this orn to turn down Dai Atlas."

"It will probably be easier on the flock to have three Knights instead of two Knights and a priest," Highdive agreed. "Are you happy with the idea of him joining?"

"More than I am with a priest," he admitted. "The Knights are respected law enforcement even if they don't use the title."

"Which is something that would appeal to a former Air Martial," Highdive agreed with a small wing flip. "I hope he finds a place here that will give him a satisfactory existence."

"As am I," Thundercracker agreed.

Pantera knelt silently as Presul Blacktip closed the door to the small prayer room, leaving him alone in what looked a lot like a Knight's meditation room, although there was no rack for a Great Sword on the wall and it was barely large enough for him to stand and not touch a wall or ceiling. The far more noticeable difference was the crystal paneling on the walls and ceiling with a dim, defused glow behind it. It was rather beautiful to look at. Being *alone* after so many joors around outsiders was even more soothing.

Kneeling in the silence, he contemplated the presul's instructions for the coming joor. Private prayer time to a god he wasn't even certain actually existed let alone paid attention to what one small mecha was doing here so far away from Cybertron. He could accept, did accept with little doubt, that there was *something* inside Cybertron that was worthy of respect and a title of 'the source of all sparks'. He was far less certain that that source was a god by any definition he could find. Other than responding to some kind of specific ceremony - a trigger - to release a spark it didn't seem to be interactive. It didn't seem to care about what went on around it. If the ravages of the war that Prowl knew couldn't elicit a direct response from it he strongly doubted it could be sentient much less sapient.

Yet this temple did a great deal of good. Trappings aside he could definitely enjoy all the community service being a priest created. He appreciated the structure here especially since it was so much like his contracts. It would be easy to know his place and what everyone was supposed to do. Yet could he really ignore the trappings for long with how often they had prayers and how often Primus was spoken of here? It would be easier to ignore Great Swords in the Citadel than Primus here.

Perhaps if he had even a passing belief in Primus as presented he could settle here. The truth was he didn't have that. He had no problem with Primus being the source of sparks. He could admit that the trouble colonies had in sparking mecha strongly suggested that the source of those sparks was linked to Cybertron. Linked did not mean attached however and Dagger's issue with what science knew of Cybertron nagged at him.

He knew he could settle well among the Knights of Light. He didn't know if he could settle here.

Thundercracker followed Aurora as he carried Pantera towards the Citadel and the gestalt's quarters where everyone else was waiting with Dagger. It was reassuring to see and teek for himself how much the mechling enjoyed flight for only being his second time up. It bode well for when the gestalt merged and continued practicing flight in the caverns. It also bode that he'd be asked to take Pantera flying on occasion if he didn't pick back up with that Praxian Rotor.
Their flight paths shifted as Thundercracker came in for a landing on the unit's balcony and Aurora only circled long enough to see them walk inside before heading to her berth.

"Sure looks like flight settles well," Jazz grinned at the pair.

"I am enjoying the view of the city from that perspective and look forward to when I can drive through it on my own," Pantera admitted.

"Crazy," Deadlock muttered without any bite to the glyph.

"You'll be able to start on the practice track tomorrow afternoon, once you've told Dai Atlas what you will be," Dagger assured him. "I doubt you'll need a decaorn to match your processors to your frame's reflexes."

"I'm looking forward to it," Pantera said with a visible smile and flick of his doorwings.

"So how did your orn go?" Wing asked, hiding his concern that Pantera might choose to become a priest as they settled in the pillow nest and began passing around some treats. "How do they get enough recharge? You were gone from joor five to joor forty."

"The priests are well structured and organized. What they do for the community is admirable," Pantera admitted as he picked up a midnight star and nibbled on it. "I also found it interesting working in the kitchen preparing fuel for everyone. They have a mid-orn nap, or my nap was mid-orn. Different priests get a nap at different times."

"What do they cook?" Dagger perked up.

"I learned to make two kinds of gel granite sandwiches and a form of iron mineral treat. Most of the fuel is plain liquid energon like here, but they do share a few meals of other dishes. The head of the kitchen said that I show promise," Pantera admitted, pleased to share the compliment.

"No surprise. You're good at following directions and you're precise," Jazz grinned. "I doubt there's much you wouldn't be good at if you focused on it."

"True," Thundercracker agreed with a wing-wiggle in support.

"If it keeps your interest I think it'd be a great skill to pick up," Wing grinned shamelessly at the prospect of not having to buy all his treats.

"So priest or Knight?" Deadlock grunted.

"Knight," Pantera said without hesitation and teeked his unit relaxed all around him. "I have enough trouble with the concept of meditation; I do not need to try to sit silently and pray for joors on end."

"It can take a long time for meditation to start making sense," Wing assured him it was okay. "Even I still don't always settle into it easily."

"I think that settles where central command is for us," Jazz popped a mountain drop into his mouth and relaxed back. "Three Knights makes the Citadel the prime spot."

"It will be easier for us to socialize here," Pantera admitted. "The priests have much less flexible schedules than Knights especially in regards to leaving the grounds. That was not one of my primary considerations although it was a small factor in my decision."

"If it was a calling we would have found a way," Thundercracker said firmly even as he was openly
relieved they wouldn't need to. "Was there anything else of interest?"

"My sparkling protocols activated while were in the creche," Pantera admitted with a small frame shudder. He didn't really want to remember it, but since the unit commander had asked it was something to address. "I also found out that I may have more knowledge of spark-splint twins than is currently available here. One of their Srila will interview me about it in a few orns. She wants to talk to all who fought on Cybertron as well."

"I wouldn't be surprised," Jazz admitted. "We probably all know a lot of things that aren't common here, same as they know a lot we don't. I'll chat with her."

"What happened? I didn't get the impression that Blacktip was disturbed," Thundercracker's focused sharpened as did Dagger's.

"Presul Blacktip was not concerned most likely because Presul Clef said that it was a normal response to first activation of law enforcement protocols. The tac-net did not like the intense focus on the sparklings and diverted itself and part of my processor to more productive tasks. The twins themselves were easy to manage although parts of their behavior were baffling," Pantera explained.

"That's true of all sparklings. They're still learning to distinguish reality from their imagination and storytelling from reality," Jazz suggested.

"How distressing was it?" Thundercracker focused on what concerned him the most.

"The tac-net had the most issue with the limitations placed upon me by the programming although I also found the experience restricting and could not function at my full capacity while the protocols were engaged. In time I should be able to handle limited exposure if it is required although I will avoid young sparklings if at all possible," Pantera admitted.

"We will keep that in mind when it is time for creations," Thundercracker promised. "You should try to be the sire when it is asked of you. If that level of restriction is distressing what happens to a carrier is going to be extremely distressing."

"Yeah, definitely keep it all in mind," Jazz nodded and Deadlock grunted.

"Maybe a little exposure at a time would help. Like how Deadlock's learning to fly," Wing suggested.

"And how Thundercracker is learning to relax and enjoy himself." Jazz said with a mischievous grin.

"I always knew how," Thundercracker huffed playfully at him. "It is fun to date again."

"I'm looking forward to also being able to date outside the Citadel," Jazz admitted. "The Knights are fun but I'm looking forward to some variety."

"What frametype isn't here?" Pantera asked curiously.

"Well, different frametypes are fun but I'm thinking more about different personalities," Jazz explained. "Mecha who don't have a military processor. Even the ones who used to be civilians aren't any more."

Pantera simply nodded his doorwings in acceptance. He would understand in time. It was definitely one of those subjects were experience would help.

"Lay down," Deadlock suddenly insisted. "You're making me tired."
Wing giggled at the rough way of displaying care and crawled close to snuggle in for the night.

Pantera gladly joined them on the berth as he lay down next to Wing, happy to be back with his unit. He shifted a bit as Thundercracker and Jazz also settled in for the night to be in the middle. Not just as the most protected place suitable for the youngest but because he'd had a long, troubling orn and very much needed the overlapping fields.
Pantera's orientation ends and he begins 14 vorns of 'mechling' training under the guise of being an Initiate.

Dagger walked next to him on the way to the Sovereign's office. Even though he could have easily made his way there on his own Pantera was grateful for the company. This was a pivotal moment and even if Dagger wouldn't be coming in having his sergeant there when he emerged, choices given and orders obtained would be a comfort. His acclimation time may well be over but that didn't make him any less young and still learning than he'd been yesterorn.

Once they reached the Sovereign's office Dagger gave him a comforting doorwing dip before moving off to the side to wait. Pantera gave his frame a brief check-over even though he knew his unit had made certain he looked presentable before he headed out. ::Sovereign Dai Atlas, I am here,:: Pantera commed.

The door slid open. "Come in Pantera," Dai Atlas rumbled in welcome from inside the blue-tinted crystal cross of a room.

"Thank you for seeing me, Sovereign," Pantera said once the doors closed behind him. It wasn't just his size or rank that inspired a bit of intimidation; Pantera had carefully searched through Prowl's files to learn everything he could about the former general who had offered to be his Daoshi. The mech was impressive in every way; from his military record of success to his reputation for making good soldiers from the uncontrollable to the loyalty his soldiers had for him to simply surviving centuries of being hunted by Nova Prime's forces and the incredible odds of succeeding in founding this city.

"Have you decided what path you will follow?" the Sovereign asked from where he sat behind the large desk

"Having given the choice careful consideration, I have decided to join the Knights," Pantera said, keeping his doorwings still and stance rigid as if under inspection. They relaxed fractionally at the welcome and happiness in the field that briefly reached out to caress him.

"Then welcome to the Citadel as a Supplicant. Know that there are several who would train you," Dai Atlas said with a hint of formality and a sense that he needed to say it for himself. "Are you aware that it is fully your choice who will become your Daoshi of those who offer?"

"Knight Dagger, Knight Wing and Master Aurora have all made certain I am aware that the choice of Daoshi is mine," Pantera replied. He understood on one level that even the illusion of a choice was important here, although there had been no doubt in his mind who he would have as a Daoshi since the options were explained to him.

"Good. Also know that as a Supplicant you are not required or expected to choose immediately. You may take any time you wish to get to know those who have offered. Do you wish to spend time to get to know us?" Dai Atlas asked.
Despite a bit of internal unease he recognized the same tone as before. This was a social dance to them and as the highest ranked the Sovereign had to uphold the social standard to the letter. It was in no way a demand he take time, simply a reiteration that he could.

"No, my AIs and I have spent the past few orns analyzing the situation and all offers, and I have reached a decision. Further analysis will not alter my decision," Pantera said, rejecting the uncertainty that waiting would bring.

"Then who will be your Daoshi?" Dai Atlas asked formally.

"I would have you as my Daoshi, Sovereign Dai Atlas, if you will accept me as your student," Pantera gave a formal bow as he spoke.

Dai Atlas stood and gave Pantera a slight bow. "I would be honored to teach you the ways of the Light. Come. I will show you to the quarters you will live in while you are an Initiate."

"Thank you, Sovereign," Pantera said he waited to follow Dai Atlas. Although he concealed it, Pantera was a little distressed at the reminder that he would be separated from his unit. He reminded himself that the Citadel was much closer than the temple so it would be easier to spend time with the others.

"I'm am your Daoshi now. I prefer that or Dai Atlas until you are a Knight," he told Pantera with a more relaxed manner before the door slid open and they stepped into the hall.

"Yes, Daoshi," Pantera couldn't imagine addressing someone this important by their designation. He looked quickly over at Dagger to see if his sergeant responded to his choice. The smile and happy doorwings were deeply reassuring.

"Comm me when he turns you loose for the orn," Dagger called to him.

"I will, Knight Dagger," Pantera promised as he followed Dai Atlas down the hall trailing three steps behind him. He noted that the giant was taking slow, easy steps so Pantera could walk and it was still a fast walk. If Dai Atlas ever needed to walk fast Pantera would have to run to keep up.

When they entered a different tower than the unit and Aurora lived in Pantera made note that it still seemed to be residential. He was sure that the ranking couple he was now bound to lived at the top. He followed Dai Atlas into a large elevator, waiting patiently as they climbed towards the top of the building. He had no expectations about these quarters other than what he had seen in Dagger's room and the room the gestalt was using for his first few orns. If it followed that pattern then he would have a wonderfully tall ceiling, a window and very little furniture, though the berth was nice and soft and there was a simple entertainment center.

At the door Dai Atlas paused and showed him the controls at his level before palming the one at his own and Pantera abruptly realized that every door was likely like this. How much of the door opened likely depended on either what control was used or a sensor. Otherwise how would a large Knight enter a smaller one's space? The entry room that opened before them had a ceiling as tall as the hallway outside and Pantera wondered what was done with all the space between the ceiling of a smaller Knight's quarters and what had to be the floor far above.

It was furnished with well-used furniture for the giants and it wasn't hard to pick out which pieces were for which giant. Between the size difference and Dai Atlas's wings they had different needs.

"We'll be moving a chair designed for you in here permanently," Dai Atlas said as Pantera took in the surroundings and processed the down side to living among those so much larger than himself.
"Thank you, Daoshi," Pantera replied.

"There are two Initiate quarters here. As you are our only Initiate you may choose which you prefer," Dai Atlas strode to a set of doors across from the entrance. "The contents are identical, the layouts mirrored. While the door does not lock we will respect a closed door most of the time."

"Most of the time, Daoshi?" Pantera asked as he looked in the room on the right. A simple berth close enough to his size to be comfortable and basic furnishings that reminded him of the room his unit was currently using. A glance up and he was reminded of the unknown space above most quarters. This ceiling had been lowered as well.

"Initiates do not have a right to privacy or secrets from their Daoshi. As such I am expected to occasionally disrupt any illusion of it you may have developed," Dai Atlas explained while Pantera checked out the view from the window larger than the Praxian.

"Understood, Daoshi," Pantera said. He didn't really understanding why other mecha valued privacy so much but accepted it as a quirk found in kindled mecha. He didn't really understand what he was supposed to judge the rooms on either. Even so he would make a choice since it was clear he was expected to. The only difference he could tell was a fractional one in the angle of the view.

"I will take the one on the right, Daoshi," he said, picking the one with a slightly better view of one of the gardens. "Will my unit be allowed to visit me here or should I expect to go visit them in their quarters?"

"Both, though you should expect to visit them more often than they visit you," Dai Atlas accepted the choice with a wing-nod.

"Understood," Pantera said immediately, recognizing that the Sovereign wished to reserve this space for his own unit, a group that he was now part of but Thundercracker, Deadlock and Jazz were not.

"You do have a right to personal possessions. While I may look through anything I will not take what is yours," the giant continued seriously. "Have you determined your natural recharge cycle yet?"

"I tend to be an earlier riser than Wing though the orn at the temple was rather early to me," Pantera admitted.

"Then we'll begin your standard training orn at joor eight. If we discover you do better with a different timing we will revisit it," Dai Atlas decided. "I expect you to be awake, clean, fueled and ready to learn by then."

"I will be ready on time, Daoshi," Pantera agreed. "Where should I be?"

"Unless told otherwise, here," Dai Atlas motioned to the living room. "I saw the time Dagger reserved for your driving lessons after next fueling. Outside of that I wish you to study, think, discuss with anyone you wish to decide what your colors will be. There is an appointment with Deco at joor ten tomorrow."

"Yes, Daoshi. I have been looking through some color options with my unit. I will expand my search and make a decision," Pantera said, immediately beginning to scan through what his unit had selected and options he had seen on other Knights. It gave him little to work with other than personal choice. It also left him confused that he was drawn heavily towards looks that had little to nothing to do with the colors this frame had always worn. What was even stranger was what he was drawn to. Rich jewel tones of greens and blues that Jazz joked looked like a curl-tailed astrapia or a jeweled
pigeonoid. He didn't like the image of them on him but they were colors he *liked* for some reason.

"Good. You are free to do as you please until morning then," Dai Atlas turned him loose.

"Thank you, Daoshi," Pantera acknowledged the dismissal with a small bow and doorwing dip before heading off to find Dagger.

"There you two are," Deadlock grumbled as he stalked up to Pantera and Dagger sitting at a table. Jazz and Thundercracker trailed behind him not nearly as visibly anxious. "Where did you get off to?"

"Pantera accepted Dai Atlas as his Daoshi. I was telling him what to expect in the first couple of orns since he hasn't had much of a chance to watch others be accepted," Dagger replied.

"You knew what I was going to do," Pantera fluctuated between chagrined at upsetting a unit mate, irritated that he'd done nothing wrong and Deadlock was upset with him and warmed that Deadlock cared enough to come looking.

"So you came in here to bug Dagger on duty instead of contacting us?" Deadlock gestured towards the small lounge where the medics could sit and refuel in an emergency.

"Dagger instructed me to comm him when Dai Atlas turned me loose for the orn," Pantera replied firmly.

"A reasonable request considering he knows more about this process than the rest of us," Thundercracker said calmly.

"Too bad Wing can't be here to help answer questions," Jazz added glancing around the lounge to see who else was around and made note that Redline wasn't busy.

"Punishment shifts are not fun," Dagger agreed. "He'll have some time though, just like before."

"Why did you come looking so soon? I didn't expect to be turned loose until after evening energon," Pantera asked.

"TC felt an emotional shift in you through the bond," Deadlock said with a small grunt, acting much calmer now that he'd found the mechling unharmed.

"Since everyone is here, I have an assignment to finish before tomorrow morning," Pantera addressed them all. "My new color scheme is to be set."

"Do you have any idea what you'd prefer as a base color?" Thundercracker asked.

"I *like* those jewel tones Jazz keeps teasing me about," Pantera huffed. "I don't like how they look on me in the pictures though. It's just wrong."

"What part of its wrong?" Jazz asked taking note that Pantera seemed serious about the color scheme that was so different from what Prowl had. "Is it getting the mix of shades correct or something else?"

"I don't know. They don't look right on me," Pantera grumbled with expressive doorwings that did nothing to really express how unsettling this was for him.

"Well, what about adding another neutral color to act as contrast?" Thundercracker asked as he focused on the mechling's issue. Coloration was a big decision for someone so young even if it was
relatively easy to change.

"Dark base, gemtone highlights," Deadlock suggested with a motion towards himself. He preened a bit when he saw Pantera comprehend and then like it. It didn't matter in the least at that point that Pantera focused on Thundercracker when he spoke. Even Deadlock understood rank on the simple level the mechling used.

"That sounds good."

Thundercracker took out a datapad with the coloration program on it and loaded the youth's file then selected a black base with the rich blue, green, red, gold and silver that had consistently caught Pantera's attention. He kept the highlights the same but with a white base, then a gray base and offered all three to Pantera.

"I like some of the look from both the black and the white base but something feels missing from each," Pantera said thoughtfully as he looked at all three options carefully, weighing the balance of colors and contrast. "Which one do you prefer?"

Thundercracker regarded him seriously and accepted the pad back to look them over, then passed it around.

"Prowl was black and white," Dagger said uneasy.

"That doesn't mean this design has to look at all like that one," Jazz said as he created a swirled almost spiral pattern with black and white making a cloud pattern similar to what Thundercracker remembered from the storms for his mourning flight on the surface.

Dagger got a look at it next and trilled. "You're right. Black and white and nothing like Prowl," he complemented Jazz and offered it to Pantera after Deadlock snuck a look over the medic's shoulder.

"Oh!" Pantera's surprise, and pleasure, were evident in every way. "It is. Complicated, but I like it."

"Deco will love the opportunity," Dagger promised.

"I'll keep this to show him when we meet as long as it won't be too much," Pantera said as he stared fondly at the new image.

"It's not half a difficult as Jazz's, much less Thundercracker," Deadlock grunted a promise that Deco had better not have a problem doing it.

"Thank you," Pantera directed to Jazz.

"So now, you coming back?" Deadlock demanded.

"What about getting him some tire time here on the grounds?" Jazz suggested. "There are driving paths that'd be good practice before being in public."

The way Pantera perked up he didn't have to say a word; everyone knew where they'd be for a while.

"I'll join you in just a few kliks down there. I've got a mech I need to talk to for a bit," Jazz promised.

"Catch up soon," Dagger said figuring it was a discrete way of handling Jazz's masochistic tendencies without Pantera being exposed to them just yet. It was a move he very much approved of. Let the mechling get a solid sense of self and normal interfacing, and his own inherent kinks, before
heading into that deep end. He spotted Dart chatting up the staff as they left and knew Jazz wouldn't get in trouble for being solo.

Jazz nodded his promise, watched them leave and went for Redline's office.

Jazz gave Redline a quick comm, ::You have a moment to chat about Pantera? Nothing's critically wrong.::

::Yes. My office.:: the CMO replied.

Jazz entered the office and glanced around, the smells and sounds reminding him briefly once again of Ratchet. The details were different but the theme of medicine, awards and authority were the same. Ignoring the bit of nostalgia, he looked over at Redline, "Good orn. Pantera's headed down to driving practice so he won't be popping in on us."

"He couldn't get through the door anyway. What concerns you?" Redline asked more patiently that Ratchet could anymore.

"Why did you leave all the personal contract coding in Pantera? It cause a bit of an issue earlier since he couldn't handle just enjoying time together without explicit lists of what was acceptable and what wasn't," Jazz asked neutrally.

Redline sighed. "Because it can't really be edited out. I'm surprised Prowl didn't warn you, or you didn't remember. That coding touches on everything involved in interacting with others, even objects. We all have a version of it. His is just more assertive than most and much more blunt. I expect he'll have it back to what Prowl had sorted out within the vorn."

"It's been a long time since I've dealt with anyone that young, especially a sparked mecha. It's a bit of a learning curve having him around," Jazz admitted. "I think we've got him sorted out with our unit for the most part."

"That's good. He also managed well among the priests, though he was incredibly stressed by the report I got. Was there anything else concerning you?"

"He didn't do well with his sparkling protection protocols when they activated there. Could you make a note in his file that he should be sire not a carrier?" Jazz asked.

"I heard and I have. Prowl was of much the same opinion, though ultimately it is Pantera's choice. It wasn't an unexpected reaction for a first activation in an adult," Redline assured him. "He handled it very well."

"Other than that everything is okay with him?" Jazz asked directly, wanting some reassurance to give to the others that their mechling was thriving.

"Given what he is, everything is going well, Jazz. He's learning fast to hide the most obvious of his coded differences and hasn't had any inappropriate reactions that I've heard about," Redline was willing to indulge the worried unite mate.

"I'll let the others know when he's not around," Jazz said, not wanting to worry their mechling.

Redline nodded and watched Jazz leave before making a couple more notes in his files.
Chapter Summary

After meeting with Deco Pantera emerges a walking thunderstorm with azure mist optics, a cyan visor and a strong sense he just learned something important about himself.

Dagger was doing his best not to vibrate with how pleased he was at Pantera's choices as they rode the lift down to the level with Deco's workshop. The azure mist optics were even paler than Prowl's had been, literally one shade off of the restricted priestly white. It had concerned him at first, a signal of being uncertain about not becoming a priest, but the mechling's reasoning on both that and cyan were awesome in Dagger's opinion. Azure mist as the flash of lighting and cyan for the break of light through the storm the rest of his coming paint job would make him look like. They were going to be a stunning compliment to the final look.

"Deco is going to enjoy completing the paint and decorations your requesting," Dagger smiled at his companion, a mech who was already much more confident in himself than he'd been only a few orns ago.

"I hope so. This is the only style that has truly appealed to me," Pantera said.

"You will look amazing," Dagger assured him as they entered the hallway from the lift and headed for the workshop. "Deco loves it when mecha want something a little more than normal solids."

"I'm looking forward to finally becoming an adult and pulling my weight in the unit," Pantera admitted.

"You will. I'd say to enjoy the mechling time but I know how much you thrive on duty and a function," Dagger said before palming the workshop door open.

"Welcome Dagger, Pantera," Deco greeted them warmly as the pair entered his painting space with chairs and tables for various sizes the Knights came in. "Have you made any changes since you sent me the pattern last night?"

"No, I haven't thought of anything additional to add or change, Knight Deco," Pantera said as he looked up at larger Knight. It was the first time he'd been this close to Deco, and the way the Knight loomed over him reminded him a bit of Thundercracker and triggered most of the same desires. There was a nanoklik of gratitude that Deco didn't have wings or the flare he knew was in his field might have been hard enough for them to pick up more than just arousal. He didn't have terms for what he felt other than desire only that this was different. It was how he felt fantasizing about his unit leader.

Thankfully neither Knight reacted to his field's outburst, not even via comm.

"Then I'm ready. Come on back and let's get that paint off you so we can start on your new look," Deco gracefully motioned them into a back room that Pantera was familiar with from his unit's
shared memories of what 'repainting' entailed.

He willingly entered the room, wanting to finally wear the colors he had chosen instead of this white he admitted looked good on Wing but marked him as clearly as anything as an immature mecha when it was this solid. It was just as he'd been shown and he walked into the stripping chamber without fear. This solvent rain was much harsher than what he showed under and, instead of feeling cleaned by it, it made him itch. Even so he managed to draw on Prowl's training of the frame to hold still and follow directions until he was base metal and dry, then primed a dull metallic gray and dry.

Deco took a long time working on his base coating of paint, adding careful layers of grays, blacks and whites to each section of armor. Having such a powerful frame hovering over him, touching him, commanding him, was intensely arousing but Pantera drew further on Prowl's training to keep the frame still so he wouldn't mar the artist's work. He tried to keep his field still too though that was proving much more difficult despite how much Prowl knew on the subject.

Gratefully neither Deco nor Dagger said anything about it while Pantera struggled with the charge that refused to cool.

"Do you want some help with that charge?" Dagger asked directly once Deco was finished with the base coatings of paint and had left to collect more supplies. He'd learned from observation that it was the best way to handle the mechling in situations like this. Pantera was worse than Prowl when it came to asking for what he wanted.

Pantera's field was clear despite the hesitation. "If it won't disrupt the work."

"I know how to be careful," Dagger promised and knelt in front of his charge to kiss the rich gray spike panel.

"Opening it won't hurt. Neither will the overload," Deco said calmly. Touch-ups would be easy compared to forcing the mechling to keep still with such a charge. An overload during actual painting could force a partial repaint.

With Deco's words Pantera snapped the panel open keeping an optic on the larger mech even as he keened at the pleasure Dagger was drawing out of him with his lips. It was barely a quarter klik before Dagger could swallow around him and Pantera shook as he began to lose his finer balance. A hand found Dagger's shoulder and on the next sucking swallow Pantera surrendered to the bliss of the charge exploding across his systems and mellowing.

Dagger drank down the last bits of transfluid until the small shudders subsided and Pantera's hand felt steady. Gently cleaning Pantera off with a mesh cloth, he asked, "Do you need more or should Deco start working again."

"I believe I can hold still again," Pantera stood fully upright and retracted his spike. "Thank you," he told Dagger then looked at Deco. "Thank you for your patience."

"It's no problem. You're not the first mech to react to the intensity from painting, tattooing or detailing," Deco said with a small smile before moving forward to touch-up Pantera's finish. He knew full well it wasn't the only thing going on here but it was a truth he could give the youth to make him feel less awkward. They could talk about indulging whatever kink was being triggered later when they were both on personal time, and after he had a chat with Dagger.

In all it took three blow jobs before Pantera was painted, sealed, waxed, buffed and his new look deemed ready to present to the outside world.
Having gotten a comm while Pantera was being detailed letting him know that Dai Atlas would be delayed by a few kliks, Dagger admired Pantera's new look as they waited for Dai Atlas to join them. He didn't mind the delay at all especially since it gave him a chance to ask Pantera a few questions. With a bit of fond teasing in his filed, he asked, "So, you like bigger mecha?"

"Apparently," Pantera answered with the lack of shame his upbringing had produced. "It seems some preferences carried over."

"So it's not just Deco?" Dagger asked curiously. He hadn't seen Pantera react like that to anyone outside his immediate unit.

"Not that I've noticed yet. Prowl knew he was drawn to larger mecha; convoy class height or so, whether they were flight frames or not. I've had this reaction to both mecha I've come close to that fall into that category. Deco and Thundercracker," he elaborated.

"But not Redline," Dagger nudged at the disconnect.

That caused Pantera to pause and dig through his files. "He's a medic. There is an override code to keep such reactions in check. They seem linked to survival protocols."

"An override code that applies to him probably because you've mainly seen him in medical," Dagger speculated. It seemed like a reasonable deduction given Pantera's reactions to him. "So I take it Dai Atlas is too big?"

"Too big for what?" the Sovereign asked as he entered the room.

"Daoshi," Pantera dipped his doorwings in a respectful greeting. "To trigger my ... size kink?" he glanced at Dagger to check that he chose the correct term.

"That's probably a good thing given the nature of our current relationship and some of the training we will be doing," Dai Atlas said with an understanding nod as he looked over his new Initiate. "You've chosen a very optic-catching design."

"Thank you Daoshi," Pantera's doorwings gave a happy wiggle at the clear approval from his superior.

"He does look good," Dagger said with a grin at the display. He hoped Pantera didn't lose that openness for a very long time, and he knew the rest of the unit would protect the mechling long after Pantera himself thought he needed it. Very much like Wing in that way. To the war-weary such innocence was a treasure they guarded fiercely for its rarity.

"Indeed. Tell me what you have learned of your kink," Dai Atlas said smoothly. There was no missing that it was an order though, not that Pantera needed to be pushed. He didn't yet understand shame in relation to interfacing or likely anything else yet.

"I find mecha around the size of Deco and Thundercracker very arousing whether or not they have wings. Especially when they are over me, blocking out the rest of the room," Pantera admitted freely.

"How distracting is this for you?" Dai Atlas went to the core of whether this was a problem to work through or a desire to carefully indulge in the safety of the Citadel.

"It was distracting while I was being painted and detailed," Pantera admitted with a small doorwing dip.

"He didn't lose control and lunge for Deco or anything like that," Dagger added.
"Of course not. I don't have permission," Pantera replied with just enough of how indigent he felt at the suggestion it was even possible showing. "I may have overloaded if Dagger had not helped. I would never touch without permission."

Dai Atlas tipped his wide wings in acknowledgment of the facts. "Then this is something you should work on learning to control while not an impairment to your orn to orn functioning. Perhaps Thundercracker," he paused at the subtle flinch from Pantera and Dagger's wing-wiggle of negative. "He has not gotten that far himself. Then is there anyone you desire beyond their size to learn with?"

"Not anyone your size, Daoshi, and I don't think Redline would be the best choice unless he is truly interested in me," Pantera said thinking things over. "Otherwise I will trust your judgment."

"Coding interferes when it's a medic," Dagger supplied.

"Have you encountered Cladin?" Dai Atlas asked after a moment of thought.

Pantera thought back briefly before saying, "No I do not believe so, although I know he raises the mecha-koi in the ponds."

"He is also the primary metalsmith for the Citadel. A calm, steady convoy class with heavy armor. I will arrange time for you to meet soon to see if you are comparable," Dai Atlas explained.

"Thank you, Daoshi," Pantera said with a pleased doorwing dip, trying to conceal how much the idea of meeting a potential lover appealed to him.

Pantera relaxed in Thundercracker's arms and watched the city pass below them. It was still a little unnerving though nothing like that first flight had been. He was looking forward to this landing more as well. Driving practice. Soon he'd be allowed to drive at will and his spark gave a flutter at the thought.

::I'll be watching from above to make certain nothing goes wrong. You can relax and enjoy the training. I'm looking forward to seeing how much progress you make,: Thundercracker said as he aimed for the familiar racing track. Long a setting for relief to them it was now a place of training for their youngest.

::Thank you,: Pantera nuzzled him with near-platonic affection before he stilled to give the Seeker no distractions for the landing. When his pedes touched down Dagger, Jazz, Deadlock and Dart were already there and a moment later Dai Atlas set down as lightly as Wing could.

"Ready for another lesson?" Dagger asked with a grin as the group watched Thundercracker launch back up to his familiar post above them.

"Of course," Pantera replied, transforming and waiting patiently for Dagger's instructions.

"I want you to take three laps as fast as you feel is safe," Dagger instructed.

Pantera headed to the starting line and paused there before starting off with a quick burst of speed. It wasn't anything as daring as he'd seen Jazz and Dart do for fun, but he reached a higher speed than last practice before the first turn. If things kept going well he might match Deadlock by the end of today. He was long used to his frame and AIs understanding the physical world far better than he did and he watched as they followed his directive of driving as fast as was safe. In the niggling that he already recognized as Prowl's memories responding to his thoughts he knew this wasn't nearly as fast as the frame could go. He didn't try to override the Enforcer AI though and on the second lap he took more control to learn how to do this for himself. Knowing that either AI would take control from him
if he truly pushed the limits encouraged him to push his limits a bit. Still nowhere close to what Prowl drove like but better than he’d have dared without the safety net.

On the last lap of the drive he was feeling more confident with maintaining speed by shifting his weight during curves. He had always had the knowledge of how to do it, and now he had the confidence to do it without wrecking or relying on the AIs.

"You were doing the driving on that last lap," Dagger grinned at him when Pantera transformed in front of him.

"Yes, I was," Pantera agreed, a bit of pride in his field for having accomplished that much so quickly. "You could tell even from here?"

"Definitely. It became less precise. When you are relying on the AIs and your frame memory it's flawless. When you control it you're showing your skill rather than theirs," Dagger smiled. "Ready for some traffic?"

"Yes," Pantera said straightening back up and looking over at his extended unit. He wanted to learn how to drive with his unit, and he was itching to join the crowds on the roads and feel that energy on his plating. They seemed just as eager and within a klik everyone, including Dagger and Dart, was lined up at the starting line in a pack two across, three deep with Pantera in the middle. When the light turned for them to go they quickly fanned out in the staggered formation where everyone had a spot next to them to shift into if something swerved towards them.

Pantera concentrated on holding his position in formation while keeping an optic out for any trouble. The Enforcer AI reminded him that even on a closed track awareness was key to safe driving. After the second turn went smoothly Deadlock began inching closer to Pantera's rear bumper. He wasn't blatantly tailgating yet, but he was clearly testing Pantera's response. Despite his desire to do more, and his curiosity at the Enforcer AI balking at the idea, he held his place and let Deadlock push. It wasn't a crime. Not yet. By the third turn Deadlock was definitely tailgating and Pantera pushed his field back with a clear message and far more authority than he actually possessed: back off.

Deadlock ignored the warning and continued to tailgate Pantera. Pantera knew intellectually that Deadlock was deliberately pushing to see how he'd respond, but it was a challenge to the Enforcer AI and his coding that was difficult to resist. Everything in him, from coding to AI to the lingering part that was still Prowl in the frame, all told him to respond to this challenge directly and bluntly. It all said he didn't just have a right to pull the miscreant over but a duty to do so.

It was all from another existence and he no longer had that right.

Yet what could he do? Deadlock gave no indication of what he wanted. Traffic made passing impossible. He couldn't speed up for the same reason. His options were to tolerate this, make an emergency lane change or ... or slow down and make Deadlock go around him?

Pantera began to gradually slow down on the straightaway and signaled that he was going to shift lanes to the right. Hopefully Deadlock would be patient enough to wait for space to pass him instead of trying to force his way through. He teeked a bit of surprise from Deadlock but as Pantera moved over traffic shifted around him and now the heavy grounder was on his left and holding there rather than shifting into the staggered pattern that was defined as polite. Again it wasn't strictly illegal or even overtly dangerous. Just rude.

Knowing he had no actual authority to punish Deadlock for this behavior and also noting that no one else was visibly objecting, Pantera resolved to ignore the rudeness on his left and continue in formation as best he could with the others as instructed. The Enforcer AI was not pleased by the
decision but reluctantly agreed that the move wasn't actually illegal so little could be done in retaliation. Even so that AI was taking careful note of who it was and their condition for later reference. It wouldn't matter now but out in public it could become valuable intel. At any rate it was something to keep him occupied and away from thoughts of retaliation.

He definitely needed to work on the aggression he felt. It wasn't helpful at best and could be dangerous at worst. He wasn't certain meditation would help with that but his Daoshi might have some thoughts about the matter. He'd certainly have past experience with controlling aggression in military mecha. Prowl had mastered expressing himself fully. There were many lessons in there even among methods that wouldn't work for Pantera.

As they came around for the second lap Deadlock settled into a staggered position next to and behind Pantera and suddenly Dagger was off, his tail lights all but demanding Pantera chase him down. The Enforcer AI roared as it surged forward demanding control and to chase the lawbreaker down.

Pantera tried briefly to wrestle it back under control, but the urge to speed up and catch Dagger was too strong. He revved his engine hard and surged after his quarry. He recognized the lack of surprise in the teeks around him as he raced by, locked onto his target and continually trying to activate lights and sirens he no longer had. Within ten lengths the AI had given up on the now-absent systems and went for what it had to mimic the siren. With every length it became harder to control the base instincts and he felt arousal building to a distracting level.

Almost every sensory system he had was focused on the taillights ahead of him as he crept closer to his target, determined to be the one to catch and claim this prize. The AI noted a cluster ahead that would force his quarry to slow and make it easier to subdue. A small part of him knew this was wrong but he could no longer figure out what it was. The chase was too much, the Enforcer AI too dominant, the rush far too strong. Racing didn't come close to being this good.

Closer and closer with each length he was nearly on his target's bumper. Once he reached range he redlined his engine and launched forward to try to take his quarry down. Ramming the bumper to spin him out or transforming to jump on him. Either would work depending upon how the target responded to his charge.

Suddenly his comm pinged. Dai Atlas. It opened automatically.

::Stand down and back off.:: the Lord of Law ordered calmly.

Almost screaming internally in frustration the Enforcer AI obeyed their superior's orders and throttled back the engine slowing them down and allowing their quarry to join the group in front of them. The process allowed Pantera more in control yet he was still deep in the grip of wanting to chase, wanting to spike someone after he caught them.

Hard as it was he pushed it all down as best he could as he settled into the back of the pack.

::You okay?:: Jazz asked from his right and just in front of him. ::Your field is a riot.::

::I can control it,:: Pantera grumbled, trying to obey his Daoshi's orders and focus on the traffic pattern around him.

::When lessons are done we can race and you can finish the way the code wants,:: Jazz offered. ::I know what it wants.::

::Thank you,:: Pantera seized the offer and used it to placate the Enforcer AI and his own revved up systems. It wasn't pleased with the change of targets but agreed that Jazz would give them a good
chase and the prospect of 'facing him at the end was sweet. Prowl's notes had plenty to say about the frustration of that stop-code at the end of a chase. It made it easier to settle and focus on the traffic around him. Fortunately no one else broke away like that to test his control. Now that he was paying attention he was sure both moves were tests. He was less sure how badly he'd failed the second, only that he had managed to obey his Daoshi's order.

One more lap and Dagger's ping caught everyone's attention. ::Race time! Three laps::

With that Jazz wiggled his bumper and flashed his tail lights before flooring it.

Pantera shot after him, ignoring the others on the track except to keep from impacting someone. Dagger was keeping up with them on his right side while Deadlock trailed them. All Pantera saw was Jazz's tail lights and the promise of relief when he caught him.

Jazz had no intention of making it easy for him. Yes, he was going to let the kid win but that didn't mean it wasn't a teaching opportunity. Pantera would never be the warrior like himself, Deadlock and Thundercracker but his unit was going to make sure he could take care of himself if this paradise was ever compromised.

With the combination of Knight training, Prowl's reflexes and the help of his unit, Pantera was not going to be vulnerable if the city was attacked.

Pantera pushed hard trying to catch up to Jazz as they rounded a turn. He'd noticed the difference between his heavier frame and Dagger before, but now he was focused entirely on the shift of that weight as he shot through the turn. The AIs helpfully supplied every calculation needed to catch and capture Jazz and both understood patience far better than their orn's-old mech.

::Hay Dagger, neither of us care if we 'face in this kind of public. Will it be an issue if I let him catch me on the track? It'll probably be pretty rough." Jazz quietly commed the unit's liaison.

::No, it shouldn't be an issue since there are no civilian spectators. I'll let Dart and Dai Atlas know although the Sovereign probably suspected as much from his Initiate once the chase started the first time:: Dagger replied. ::I assume Deadlock and Thundercracker won't intercede?::

::Nah, they know what's up;:: Jazz promised as he wiggled his tail lights in a taunt and pulled a bit further ahead. It only lasted a fraction of a klik as Pantera's growing charge fueled his speed.

Pantera surrendered a bit more control to the AIs allowing them to coordinate as he closed in on Jazz and then gave up more to the enticing code that promised pleasure with the same intensity that thoughts of energon after starving brought. All the frustration from the earlier aborted chase was still flooding his systems, and the only way he knew to sate it was to catch his prey and take what he needed. He had permission. Now he just had to do his function.

Pantera was barely self-aware and what was there amazed at the sensations in his processors and frame as he impacted Jazz's rear bumper with the exact force needed to cause him to spin out and then Pantera's frame was transforming and leapt onto his transforming prey.

Jazz was ready for it and relaxed into the impact, allowing his hands to be pinned as his legs forced apart. He tipped his chin back and exposed his valve, already slick enough for the pressurized spike to sink into it without pain.

That small part of Pantera still aware was pleased that the valve was slick enough not to damage Jazz, but that was a dim presence compared to single-minded desire to take and claim his prize. Pantera latched onto the exposed throat, biting hard enough to visually mark it even as he brutally
drove his spike rapidly into the frame pinned beneath him. The pleasure rippling up in Jazz's field, the participation, was lost on the frame but not on Pantera.

The first overload came fast and hard and caused some of the predatory code to sink down as it was sated. The second left Pantera largely self aware and in control, though he still desired more. He continued to thrust into Jazz's compliant frame, aggressively chasing another overload even as he now put a little more effort into drawing pleasure out of his prize. The predatory coding wasn't completely happy with that change of focus but accepted the concept of making Jazz overload under him as another form of dominance. He continued to bite and mark Jazz's throat although he was a lot less brutal about it; nipping lightly rather than tearing at armor.

When he sank down, spent from his third overload, it registered that he wasn't pinning Jazz's wrists because those hands were now stroking his sides, then gently further up to his face.

"Ya with me?" Jazz asked softly as he stroked Pantera's cheek with a thumb.

"Yes. I'm sorry if I caused you any pain," Pantera said as he pressed a light kiss to Jazz's jaw. It wasn't a lie; Pantera was sorry even if his predatory coding had enjoyed inflicting damage.

"Don't worry about it," he promised honestly he turned into the kiss. "I can get off pretty hard on this kind of play too. It was good."

Pantera wiggled his doorwings in understanding and thanks and reluctantly slipped his spike out of Jazz's valve. He got to his pedes before offering a hand to help Jazz up. Jazz accepted with a smile and warm, sated field.

"Good show," Deadlock commented casually. He'd clearly known how close he could get without triggering Pantera's aggression. The tac-net helpfully informed Pantera that Deadlock likely had a lot of experience with judging aggression and how close was safe.

A step forward and Pantera caught the extent of how good a show it had been. "Want to burn that off before you drive back?"

"I'll take you up on that," Deadlock said with a hard rumble of his engine. Moving forward, he grabbed Pantera's helm and kissed him hard even as he reached his other hand down to check just how slick the excitement had made the mechling. He was greeted by a hot valve more than slick enough for him as Pantera kissed him back eagerly despite the full submission in frame and field. While he snapped his spike cover open Deadlock picked Pantera up so that the Praxian's weight was fully supported. He let out a growl as Pantera hitched his legs up on Deadlock's waist giving him easier access.

"I'll help support him," Jazz said as he stepped up to help steady the pair.

"Don't need help," Deadlock growled and thrust into Pantera. It was intense to feel someone so compliantly willing in his arms, trusting him in a way few ever had, if any ever had. The surge of pleasure in Pantera's field only enriched the pleasure from his spike. Despite his words he made no more objection when Jazz remained as a brace for their mechling and lightly stroked them both.

Pantera just keened in arousal, barely able to pay attention to Jazz's words as he focused on the sensations Deadlock was driving into his frame and the strength on display in holding him up and controlling their frames. It hit many of the same places that bigger mecha did. Distantly part of him appreciated Jazz's support, knowing it would reassure the Knights who might worry that Deadlock's legs would give out during an overload. Even more distantly he was aware that Thundercracker had landed nearby and remained just inside easy teeking range.
Deadlock's bite on his collar brought on cry of sharp pleasure and quickly throttled rev of thrusters. It felt so intoxicating having the majority of his unit here while Deadlock took his pleasure from Pantera's frame, although he briefly wished Wing could be here to join them. Part of him also wished Thundercracker would accept an offer of more than a wing-rub. It stung in a way he was sure his new culture wouldn't understand.

The roar that signaled Deadlock's overload broke that line of thought with a surge of pleasure and Pantera gripped Deadlock as he lost himself to his frame's bliss.

When he came back to himself he was still being held in midair by Deadlock's firm grip with Jazz plastered against his back.

"That was hot," Jazz said as he nuzzled Pantera's shoulder affectionately.

"It was amazing," Pantera purred and rested his helm against Deadlock's before relaxing and helping get his pedes on the ground. "There can be more when we get back," he turned to give Jazz a smoldering kiss.

"Looking forward to it," Jazz purred as Deadlock revved his engine at the suggestion.
Cladin and Pantera meet. Kimark tells Deadlock very clearly that he chooses his Daoshi, not the other way around. Deadlock brings it up with Jazz and Thundercracker while Pantera is with Cladin.

"He's passed all the driving tests though I do not recommend letting him out without someone to check him until he has better self control over his Enforcer AI. He really is an exceptional driver," Dagger said as he walked next to the Sovereign bringing him up to date with their mutual charge.

"He has the processor to be exceptional at almost anything he tries," Dai Atlas agreed. "It has been a long time since we've had a mechling with his coding around, and it's good practice for everyone considering we've already had a warrior-coded Seeker reappear in the civilian population."

"From Thundercracker she seems to be adapting well to having authority figures she respects. I can't say I like what little I know though," the medic voiced his concerns about the violence he knew the youngling was enduring in the effort to civilize her.

"It's not that unusual among military frames. It works," Dai Atlas said without inflection. He understood why the medic felt as he did, but he could not and would not dissuade Aurora from her chosen methods. He knew first and second hand how effective they were and that for those with the coding it did more good than harm. He was honestly grateful that she had others she could entrust Photosphere with for a time. There were precious few military coded Seekers left.

"I know. Thundercracker told me far more than I ever wanted to know about how their kind did things and why. It's as good to know as it is disturbing for me," Dagger admitted, then fell silent as they entered the central library of the Citadel. It barely took a glance to find their storm-colored mechling. "How is he recharging? None of them are happy about the separation."

"I know but it is necessary. As much as he dislikes it Pantera must learn to be independent of his gestalt, and learning to recharge separately will help speed up that process," Dai Atlas said, understanding the reasons behind the objections. Separating a new Enforcer-coded mechling from his unit this early wasn't normally done and gestalts rarely ever voluntarily separated, but this wasn't a normal situation by anyone's standards. "He has been having some difficult recharging although he does better when he curls up against me for a time."

"As long as he can manage a stable field," Dagger politely asked to hear about it if it wasn't true at any point. "How often will he be allowed to be with his gestalt."

"Eight times as often as I had with Axe. Every fourth night, barring training needs," Dai Atlas huffed, but there was a softness there for his Initiate that was far more like a military creation than the adults he was used to. "He'll have enough time with them."

Dagger nodded and looked up at the storm-colored Praxian. "It's a shame to interrupt him when he teeks so happy."
"I know but he must socialize. He would study all orn if I allowed it."

"That's why he's restricted to ten joors an orn?"

"Yes," Dai Atlas said and twitched his wings. Pantera looked directly at them and nodded his doorwings in acknowledgment of the order. He subspaced the pad he was reading and stood to put two others back in their places before coming down to join them on the central floor.

"Greetings, Daoshi. Dagger," he said with a polite doorwing dip for his superiors. The tac-net wasn't pleased at study time being interrupted early, but he was looking forward to meeting this potential lover his Daoshi had recommended. It had helped ease his unit's worry that Dagger had nothing bad to say about this Knight either.

"Are you ready to meet Cladin?" Dai Atlas asked and motioned him to follow.

"Yes, Daoshi," Pantera said as he fell in step behind the pair, although Dagger broke away to head off to medical during the walk. In truth he was more than ready; he was eager. Like his drive to chase law-breakers and to chase in general, he knew that an effective way to learn to manage his reaction was exposure. This exposure was going to be a lot more enjoyable than learning not to chase unless invited to.

Cladin's quarters were on a lower floor than the unit's shared quarters and when he stepped inside when Dai Atlas motioned him to the layout was identical. They used it in very different ways though. This one was full of tanks of truly tiny mecha-koi and models of many famous Cybertronian buildings from the Golden Age and before.

"Hello Pantera," the large green mech with red garnet scales outlining plating on his arms that contained intricate tattoos. Rich red optics matched the trim.

All of it was lost on Pantera once he'd stepped inside and assessed no threats.

This mech was as least as tall as Deco but even more massive due to his heavier armor and sturdy frame. Physically he was comparable to the warriors in the gestalt, and Pantera could easily envision that frame towering over him.

"Pantera?" Cladin pitched his voice with concern and stepped close enough to get a solid teek on what had stunned his guest. The arousal in that field was clear even though the mechling was trying ineffectually to conceal it and remain focused. It wasn't a bad effort for one so young, but an experienced mech could see through it without difficulty.

"Yes, Knight Cladin?" Pantera managed to say as he looked up at the mech moving closer to him. He wanted desperately to feel the heat from that frame around his own, inside him, pressing him down and shielding him.

"Ah, good, you are with me. Come, sit so we can sort out the contract," Cladin motioned to the living room where there was seating for at least seven in chairs and two couches.

"Thank you," Even as he headed over to a seat designed for frames like his Pantera couldn't help a thrill that one of the only mechs to immediately bring up contracts was this appealing. Even if he'd been coached about it, the willingness to accommodate like this was a very good sign. "Do you already have an established contract to start from?"

"Based on yours, yes," Cladin pinged it to him.

The contents were simple enough and looked a lot like Wing's. No intentional pain, no intentional
damage, respect duty shifts, any kink or desire was open to discuss but may not always be indulged at that time.

"I know we have been introduced to indulge your size kink. Do you wish the potential for more to be included at this time?" Cladin asked.

"More?" Pantera asked wondering what Knight Cladin might want from him. Did he enjoy having smaller partners that he could carry and cover during interface? The idea of being held while this mech drove his large spike into his valve like Deadlock had done at the track almost sent Pantera's engine racing.

"To see if we might be friends as well as lovers," Cladin explained, sure that Pantera went somewhere interfacing related. He could get to that once the contracts were signed and he learned just how well-developed this kink was and what aspect it came from.

"I would like that option to be explored if possible," Pantera said after dragging his thoughts away from interfacing. The idea of developing a friendship outside his immediate unit by himself—even if it was with a member of the extended unit—was a bit daunting, but he knew from observation that such connections would help his unit flourish. Both AIs approved of it as well, though for different reasons. That steadied him more.

"Then I have this addendum for the interfacing contract," Cladin pinged Pantera another document that made the compiled contract even more like Wing's. The significant difference was in access to Cladin's quarters. Pantera was not getting access codes. "We can work on that one after we indulge you."

"Thank you," Pantera said as he stored it with the others in his files. This one hadn't been any more complicated to create than the ones he'd developed with his Daoshi and Master Axe earlier although those hadn't included any interfacing clauses. With his attention back on those thoughts, he asked, "What are your preferences for interfacing?"

"Very little beyond mutual enjoyment," the convoy class smiled warmly. "I enjoy my spike and valve, tactile, both sides of bondage and driving my lover off line. Do you know any specifics of your desires?"

Keeping his engine and field as much under control as possible at the list of possibilities, Pantera replied. "I enjoy valve, spike and tactile. I don't have much experience with bondage beyond being pinned physically by a frame. I know I want to be covered by my lover, surrounded by a larger frame and field. The thought of being pinned and claimed makes my engine race whether it is on a berth, against a wall, or being held in midair. I have Enforcer chase coding which loves claiming a pursuit quarry although that is now under control."

"I can't give you much of a race but I can definitely indulge your desire to be pinned, covered and claimed every way we care to," Cladin rumbled eagerly and extended his hand. "Though I would like to begin on my berth."

Cladin picked Pantera up, pressed him against his chest and carried him over to the berth. The heat was enticing, as were the exploring hands that traced his twisted knot tattoos and the red garnet trim around them. Cladin placed Pantera carefully but deliberately down on the berth, mindful of the doorwings even as he used his weight and size to make Pantera feel just that bit much more smaller than him. His hand splayed to support his mass next to Pantera's helm as a finger traced down the Praxian's centerline. By the time he was below his engine mount Pantera was shaking and each intake was a gasp.
A few finger widths lower and both interface panels snapped open to expose them to anything Cladin wished to do.

Cladin stroked the edges of Pantera's valve lightly, testing how flexible and ready he was for a large spike. It was all it took to draw and keen and bowed frame when Pantera overloaded hard just from the simple touches and heavy frame over him. It added another gush to the puddle of lubricant under his valve and Cladin made a note that this was a seriously intense kink. He hoped it would settle in time; as enticing as such a needy lover was a fully coherent one was nice too.

While Pantera calmed down he pressed a single, then double fingers into that incredibly slick valve and was rewarded but calipers eagerly cycling around him. He knew enough about Praxian interfacing habits to expect that Pantera wouldn't have any issue once he was prepped. It still surprised him how quickly it happened.

Lining up he pushed his spike into Pantera's valve using a steady but firm motion. The Praxian was tight but not amazingly so and the pressure felt amazing on his spike. Smoothly drawing out, he pressed further in with each thrust. By the third thrust Pantera was panting again and rolling his hips up to meet each thrust, silently pleading to be taken deep and hard. His black fingers gripped Cladin's grill as if it were the only thing holding him together.

Cladin continued to increase speed and depth but kept himself under enough control that he wasn't going to accidentally hurt the mechling by taking things too far. The enthusiasm and desire coming from Pantera were wonderful to feel in a partner, and he could tell he was going to enjoy their times together.

With the next full-depth thrust Pantera screamed and whited out, lost to the pleasure that was only half physical. This was going to spoil him, he was sure, and it was too good to even think about giving up.

After another thrust into the frame beneath him Cladin overloaded. It wasn't as intense as any of Pantera's but was still extremely pleasurable. Remembering Pantera's desires he lowered himself over the Praxian, blanketing and letting him feel his weight and size without crushing him. As systems came on line for the young Praxian he purred and squirmed to snuggle in well before he was fully aware. The drunkenly happy, safe-feeling field only deepened in contentment as system after system came on line.

"That was amazing," Pantera eventually found his vocalizer.

"You were a very incredible as well," Cladin said as he nuzzled Pantera wanting to see if cuddling was desirable or if the mechling just wanted overloads from him. He could work with the latter, but cuddling would make things more special. After another partial klik it became clear that Pantera was very content with cuddling like this. Despite the large, hard spike still deep inside him there was no effort of the valve to encourage him to move.

"Thank you," Pantera's field flushed at the unexpected praise, then teeked curious as he registered just how coherent he felt. "Is it normal to not feel the need to indulge again right away?"

"It varies per individual. For some it depends upon how intense the overload was and how recently they had indulged. For others multiple overloads come with a partner they care deeply about," Cladin said. "Perhaps for you this is because you have indulged your kink."

"For however long it lasts, it's nice to be able to think around you," Pantera smiled and leaned up to give him a soft, chaste kiss. "It improves the chances of something besides interfacing between us."
"Yes, it does," Cladin agreed as he returned the kiss to Pantera's forehead. Taking advantage of the opportunity presented, he asked, "How are you and your unit doing since you selected the Sovereign as your Daoshi? It's a big change for you and them."

"It is difficult to recharge alone. It's simply not natural for me," Pantera sighed softly. "I still need to snuggle against him to shut down. I believe he moves me to my berth when his conjunx endura is ready to join him."

"It can be a hard thing to get used to especially when your coding wants you to be with your unit," Cladin agreed. "One of the things we can work out during our interfacing scheduling is to give you the best schedule of paired recharging as you get used to being alone."

"The most difficult night for me is the one after my night with my unit. Every fourth orn for now," Pantera admitted. "I think that is the night most likely to have this help."

"Then we will talk to your Daoshi about having our encounters at that time," Cladin said, noting to himself that the contact with Thundercracker probably amplified the mechling's desire for larger frames.

"Thank you," Pantera purred and squirmed a bit to snuggle closer against the larger, heavier frame above him with a content sound. "What do you like to do with your free time?"

"I have a few hobbies besides working with metal although that is a passion of mine. I assume you've been told that I breed the mecha-koi in the pools. I occasionally show some of them when I have a particularly beautiful or exotic specimen. If you look around my quarters you'll see my other major hobby which is strictly for fun is building scale models of Cybertronian buildings," Cladin said with a small chuckle. "What about you? Have you found any hobbies you enjoy?"

"Depending on who is discussing it, my love of learning is either a hobby or an obsession," Pantera actually chuckled. "I consider it keeping the tac-net happy, though I do enjoy it. I love driving. I think I could be on my wheels all orn every orn."

"Neither is a surprise for a Praxian tactician," Cladin replied with a knowing grin of his own, pleased the youngster had a sense of humor about his own quirks. "I wouldn't mind helping expose you to other possible hobbies."

"I am always interested in trying something new," Pantera perked up with honest excitement. "One never knows when it might be useful."

"True although some hobbies and skills are more obvious than others," Cladin said easily as he cuddled Pantera a bit closer noticing how the smaller frame fit well in his arms and how much honest enjoyment Pantera had of it untainted by desperation. It felt nice; far more than he expected given the original briefing.

"Such is true of all knowledge and skills, and most personal information," Pantera agreed and quiet happily allowed the conversation to fade in favor of snuggling and a light nap.

"You look annoyed," Kimark observed as he sat down across from Deadlock who was glaring at a datapad.

"What's the point in this stuff? Dai Atlas has snagged Pantera but no one has claimed me as an Initiate yet," Deadlock admitted grudgingly. He didn't want much to do with the Sovereign, but it was a bit frustrating have someone else advance so much quicker. The reality that Pantera needed the structure was the only thing making it bearable.
"What happened with Pantera is extremely uncommon. It's undesirable in many ways. We much prefer to give a Supplicant time to get to know several Knights and for the Knights who might wish to train them to know them. Most are Supplicants for several vorns before the offers are made," Kimark tried to explain. "I don't expect it'll be that long for you."

"So it isn't that no one wants to deal with me?" Deadlock asked, looking at Kimark with an achingly honest field and optics. The berserker had been abandoned so many times it was hard to believe that anyone outside the gestalt actually wanted him.

"No," Kimark's field expressed his honesty. "I know of two others that have already expressed interest to me to arrange for time with you. There's likely a couple more that aren't quite to that stage yet."

"So who's interested so far?" Deadlock asked, leaning back with a bit more confidence.

"Myself, Wing and Axe. I expect Marwir to offer but she often takes several vorns to study as she specializes in the most difficult cases. Those worthy to be Knights but with serious issues to address that few could manage. I wouldn't be surprised if Demeter was given she's grown quite close to your unit through Jazz. She's still a scout by nature and she takes her time. Some of the other former military have given you a look or two but it's already a rather crowded field. One might offer but they'd need to connect with you personally first."

"Marwir was Wing's Daoshi," Deadlock said as he thought about the list Kimark had just given him. He had known for over a vorn now that Wing wanted to be his Daoshi, but he didn't think it was a good idea anymore given the nature of the gestalt bond and the influence it had over them. Kimark was someone he could get along with and enjoy being around given the parts of their pasts they held in common. Axe was the big question. The Sovereign's mate was a power figure in the Knights, and it meant that he could expect to have even more contact with Pantera since their Daoshis would be mates and living together. Pantera said there were two Initiate rooms but they were right next to each other. It was a powerful combination.

The real question was whether the advantages were worth being that close to Dai Atlas for so long. Sure he knew he could manage. He survived Turmoil after all and Dai Atlas was not nearly so abusive. More annoying in some ways but not nearly as physically abusive.

"Yes. He was her last before she became a Master of Light," Kimark smiled softly. "She's an excellent teacher even if she's not one I'd inflict on many."

"Inflict?" Deadlock asked paying more attention to the comment that didn't seem to fit Kimark's mood.

"She's extremely good at turning uncontrollable troublemakers into solid Knights with good self control," Kimark pointed out seriously. "Everyone was surprised when Atl became my Daoshi. Apparently I was exactly what her usual Initiate was like. Her methods are rather of the blunt force trauma variety."

Well, even if she was brutal in training methods compared to other Knights it didn't sound like anything that Deadlock didn't think he could handle considering how Wing still behaved after having her as his teacher. He'd already realized that Demeter wouldn't be a good choice for him; it wasn't likely she could physically control him if he went berserk. That was another point in Axe's favor. The mech was big enough to sit on him or pick him up if need be.

Besides, he'd have to be insane to turn down training by the Order's SIC. It just wasn't a smart move. Oh, the Knights might claim that there wouldn't be consequences to rejecting a powerful mech like
Axe, but everyone would know what had happened and someone might want to gain favor by giving him problems. He'd seen it happen often enough on the streets and in the Decepticons. He knew it happened among the Autobots from Jazz and Prowl even if it wasn't as common. On top of all that if it upset Axe he could take it out on Pantera, directly or through making his mate unhappy. It all left no doubt that Axe would train him. Even so he'd bring this up to the gestalt, just to hear their thoughts.

"Deadlock?" Kimark's voice was low.

"Hu?"

"You're thinking hard," he let the comment stand on its own.

"Sorry," Deadlock said neutrally as he looked back at the datapad. At least he knew all this studying wasn't pointless anymore.

Knowing he'd given Deadlock a lot to think about and the reflexes he'd been briefed about gestalt psychology, Kimark asked, "You want to hang out here or go meet up early with Jazz and Thundercracker?"

"Meet them," Deadlock said instantly.

Thundercracker looked up as the door opened earlier than he or Jazz had expected given Deadlock's normal attitude towards these gestalt interactions. The berserker was still the most aloof of the group unless it involved interfacing. Glancing over at Jazz he noted that the Action didn't seem too concerned even as he rose to greet their flock mate. He watched Jazz carefully to gauge what mood Deadlock was in and relaxed when he remained relaxed.

"Where're Pantera and Wing?" Deadlock didn't quite demand.

"Pantera isn't back from visiting Cladin yet, and Wing is stuck on cleaning duty," Thundercracker offered. He didn't rise since Deadlock would have thought something was wrong if he did. Instead he offered a seat next to him.

Deadlock grunted and flopped down. "So I heard who's considering training me."

"Who?" Jazz asked even though everyone already knew Wing was interested.

Thundercracker brushed a wing lightly around his flock mate, offering a bit of subtle comfort since he'd realized a few orn back that the Action had been unsettled by that lack of information. No one said anything about Deadlock subtly leaning into the offering.

"Wing and Kimark, maybe Marwir and Demeter. And Axe," Deadlock let the names say it all, just to get reactions.

"Wing we already knew, and Kimark we expected given how well you two get along," Thundercracker said after briefly contemplating the list. "Demeter gets along with all of us and more importantly understands us and our quirks."

"Yeah, those two are obvious," Jazz agreed, pleased that this list proved Deadlock's acceptance in the Knights. He'd discreetly asked around earlier and knew it normally took a while for Initiates to be chosen and got confirmation that Pantera's case was an extreme aberration on every level. "Marwir would be interesting if she offers. She doesn't put up with much, but from what I've heard she wouldn't tolerate anyone messing with you."
"And she's close to Wing, and a Master far longer than any of the others. She has authority and skill to spare given she can beat Wing," Thundercracker offered.

"She is a Master," Deadlock asked as much as stated as his thoughts on who held more power got upended. "She out-ranks Axe?"

"In strict terms, yes," Thundercracker answered seriously. "Axe is the newest of the Masters. She's the oldest. He has the Sovereign's audial and spark though. It gives him more effective power when it comes to swaying Dai Atlas by moral or emotional arguments. Aurora can't recall a true debate when tactical and legal issues are at play. In truth even she had difficulty ranking the Masters when I asked. She insisted it was dependent on the subject. When it's science or theology she can argue the Sovereign down, though she didn't phrase it that way. When it came to war or colonization Dai Atlas and Axe held sway with Sovereign Vanguard when they were the newest Masters, and even before that."

"No different from Autobot command. A specialist's opinion was rated far beyond their actual rank in their subject," Jazz nodded. "I'm not surprised she doesn't think of rank in a group of four that have worked together so long."

"I guess. She hasn't asked Kimark for time with me. Axe has. He's likely to offer first. And it gets me closer to our kid," Deadlock pointed out.

"Don't pick Axe as a Daoshi solely to be near Pantera although it is a consideration," Thundercracker said firmly. "This is someone you are going to be spending a lot of time around as well as be willing to submit to for discipline and training."

"Like I'm ever willingly going to do that," Deadlock snorted.

"Except Megatron," Jazz nudged at the contradiction. "But I agree with being careful. We have enough allies here. You can simply say yes to Kimark before Axe asks you."

"Maybe, but Axe is more powerful than Kimark and picking him would let me keep a better watch Dai Atlas to make sure he doesn't cause us problems," Deadlock almost snorted at the idea of comparing Megatron to these two generals even though he didn't think of obeying Megatron as submitting like Jazz claimed. "I didn't submit to Megatron. He never asked anything of me I didn't want to do."

Jazz gave him a funny look but let it drop. Now wasn't the time or place to debate Deadlock's memory core.

"Are you going to start spending voluntary time around Axe to find out how annoying he'll be?" Thundercracker asked.

"Yeah. Kimark suggested that I spend some time sparring or talking to each of the potential Daoshi to make certain we're compatible," Deadlock said with a shrug. "We'll see if Axe drives me off the track like Dai Atlas does."

"If he does I'd really rather do the checking in and have you train with somebody you get along with," Jazz said seriously, then gave a cheeky grin. "Don't think I won't sic Wing on you if you can't stand Axe."

Deadlock theatrically groaned even as his field flickered briefly with pleasure that Jazz cared enough to look out for him, "I don't think I could take those turbo-puppy optics especially in an instructor."

Thundercracker let out a small chuckle and glanced at the door, "Pantera should be here shortly. Do
you want his opinion on Axe?"

"Have they even met?" Deadlock asked. "Seriously though, kid's got morganite-colored lenses for anything Knights even worse than Wing. I doubt he'd even comprehend the question."

"He's met Axe at least long enough to work out a contract of no interfacing," Jazz said seriously. "I asked because of his size kink and them being so much bigger than him. Apparently, they're too big to trigger it, thank Primus."

"Not disagreeing, but it's not that impossible," Deadlock shrugged. "If his processor isn't scrambled by his fun I'll ask. Can't hurt to hear his thoughts."

Almost as if summoned, the door opened and Pantera walked into the room. As he got closer, the lack of frustration and pure satisfaction in his field made it clear to all of them that he'd had a very good time. Flopping down on the berth next to Deadlock he gave the warrior a happy hug. "Good orn, everyone."

"Looks like things went well," Jazz said with a bit of amusement in his voice even as his frame relaxed minutely.

"Even better," Pantera shivered with a happy sigh. "He's smart and sweet and he even suggested the contract before I had to."

"Sounds like he actually researched how to make things go well for you," Thundercracker said approvingly and relaxed a bit more himself. "Are you planning on seeing him again."

"When schedules permit," Pantera wiggled his doorwings in anticipation. "It is enjoyable."

"At least you seem to have gotten a good berth partner out of this. I think I might need to meet this mech," Deadlock said waiting to see how Pantera responded.

"You might want to ping him before dropping in. The forge has a lot of special rules," Pantera suggested without a hint he had a clue what the meeting could involve.

Jazz barely kept from laughing at the naivety displayed by their youngest even though he wasn't entirely sure whether it was being faked or not. "We all want to meet him. What's he do besides forging?"

"He breeds mecha-koi for the ponds and show and builds ... interpretative replicas of Cybertronian monuments, mostly the buildings," Pantera readily divulged what he knew to his unit.

"So he likes creating things regardless of whether they are his own design," Jazz said thoughtfully.

"Raising mecha-koi would take patience," Thundercracker said approvingly even though fish were not his preferred choice of pets. That the product of the Cladin's actions were on display for them to examine was left unsaid so the fledgling didn't become upset or defensive.

"He's very patient," Pantera's smile went a bit dreamy. "He definitely likes to create things. I expect most of the decorative work on his armor is his own. It really is amazing even if it's hidden under soot and heat-stain most of the time."

"Not much point in cleaning up if you're just going to get dirty again," Deadlock agreed neutrally. At least this sounded like a mech who put in an honest orn of labor instead of a fancy noble who didn't want to get dirty, but he did want the mech to treat Pantera like something special.
"He cleaned up for me, polished to a shine and everything. I just don't know how long it'll last if you want to see it," Pantera nuzzled him.

Jazz decided at that moment that Pantera was definitely honestly naive when it came to Knights. Probably coded that way on top of youth. Even to the end Prowl was snarly about any implication that corruption could exist in his Enforcers. A glance over at Thundercracker showed that the Seeker was following similar thoughts about their youngest and was now masking any of his own concerns about the pairing. "We should definitely arrange a time to meet with him. Perhaps you can discuss it the next time you see him if it is already arranged?"

"It is. We're going to try and meet the night after we get a unit night. It's the hardest time for me to get into recharge," Pantera did his best to gloss over that this was a significant issue to him and fooled no one. "So I'll talk to him tomorrow night."

Deadlock gave Jazz a pointed look over Pantera's head at the admission of trouble recharging. It was another reason to take Axe's offer as Daoshi seriously once it was made since it meant the mechling would have a unit mate close at almost all times.

"We can push against this separation," Thundercracker offered cautiously. "I know it's no more natural for an Enforcer to recharge alone than for a Seeker to. Aurora might be able to explain it to him."

"What he is trying to do is a valid goal," Pantera countered uncertainly. "I need to be able to recharge by myself."

"No you don't," Deadlock actually snarled only to visibly restrain himself when Pantera flinched. "You're never going to be alone if you don't want to be."

"I need to be able to if at some point all of you want to," Pantera pointed out. "Once Thundercracker has his trine he will want to recharge with them. Jazz will be moving out into civilian life and will not want to spend all his time in the Citadel. You will have a Daoshi, and Wing has his responsibilities. When we are Knights we may take an Initiate who will require individual attention. I cannot expect all of you to schedule your recharge around me," Pantera pointed out, not liking the idea of being alone but understanding the logic behind it.

"He's got a point," Jazz grumbled. "At least until he can do it reliably. Then there's no reason to keep isolating him."

"Then we will revisit this subject later," Thundercracker decided as he would for any flock he led.

Pantera flicked his doorwings in acceptance of the order.

"Wing will be here in a joor or so. Let's just relax and enjoy ourselves until he shows up," Jazz agreed, watching as Deadlock grudgingly settled back as well.
Jazz lounged in the shared quarters the unit now all but lived in. He had to admit it was nice to have quarters again instead of just crashing in Dart's room. Powerful thrusters got him to glance towards the balcony and he waved a greeting at Thundercracker when the Seeker had settled enough to see it.

"I see Deadlock is still out with Axe," Thundercracker noted as he picked up a light spiral off a tray on a table before settling next to Jazz. "At least he hasn't driven off one of his potential Daoshi yet."

"I'm pretty sure Axe is made of tougher stuff. Mech's got a rep from hell on his own," Jazz grinned. "I'm not expecting Deadlock back 'til midnight or so given how late they started."

"It's just as well he missed your visit with Pantera to Srila Absolute Zero since he's not pleased that we are being expected to remember and report about the war. I think he'd put up more protests if Pantera wasn't so determined to pass on Prowl's knowledge. You're first impressions of her?"

Thundercracker asked the highly-observant Action.

"Ever been interviewed by a scholar?" Jazz shrugged. "No sense that I might not want to talk in front of Pantera. I've got an appointment for a one on one. I'll find out what it takes to shock her."

"If she's spoken to other warriors about past wars she may be harder to shock than we expect. I do not look forward to talking to her about the destruction of Vos or Praxus," Thundercracker admitted.

"Expect to be grilled on Starscream and Megatron too," Jazz warned him. "She's already asked me about Sentinel. You still liking Highdive for your Action?"

"So far she is the best choice. She's strong willed enough to stand up to me and accepting of my defects both mentally and socially," Thundercracker admitted while giving a nod of thanks for the warning. "Have you heard anything about her or her flock that should concern us?"

"Nothing you don't already know. I got a couple warnings to be careful in that eyrie because of Gloaming. She's really liberal for her flock, even to most fliers. Everything else I've heard says she's a good match, really. She's social in a way you just aren't. Her energy might smooth over some of the edges in time. My only real concern is the experience difference. She's so young for a lifelong commitment even if it is socially normal."

"It being socially normal is to my advantage," Thundercracker admitted his relief that there was nothing unexpected coming from the grounders in his field. He approved of Jazz' concern for the younger Seeker; it bode well for her acceptance by the flock. "There is no one available with my own level of experience. She, Pantera and my Vision will grow into our flock."

"Speaking of Pantera and flock, he's gotten awfully close to Cladin entirely too fast," Jazz didn't hide his concern around what he considered the other commander of the unit. "I can't find any reason not to like Cladin for him, but this fast isn't right."

Chapter Summary

Thundercracker and Jazz chat about current flock happenings.
NOT WRITTEN: Thundercracker flight class 34.
"Pantera is in a strange position for a mechling being a reformatted pre-prog, but I understand and
share your concerns," Thundercracker told the mech he considered second in the flock. "Prowl mentioned that his triad coding had become active around Towodi and Dagger. It's not the same as
trine coding, but if it is still active around Dagger it may be searching for a compatible Knight."

Jazz hummed thoughtfully and snagged a light spiral. "Honestly I rather hope it's that. Might be
worth having a chat with Dagger about this coding and if he's got plans for introducing Pantera to
Towodi. Better to find out if it's still fond of Towodi before he and Cladin get too much closer. I
rather want to know just how insistent this code is."

"Agreed," Thundercracker said as he reached over for another light spiral. "By the way, I have some
other news to pass on to you from Tailslide. They caught the intruder in the greenhouses."

"Oh?" Jazz perked up and grinned savagely. "Details, my mech. Details."

Thundercracker gave an appreciative wing dip to the Action. "Apparently it was a minibot
designated Doubletake. He's known to be infatuated with another horticulturalist, Spoor. Apparently
Doubletake thought Spoor would appreciate having an upstart contender taken out, and he was
destroying Crimson Sprite's work as a courting gift. The Peacekeepers are looking into whether or
not Spoor was aware of Doubletake's efforts. I've been informed they were very pleased with the
results from your system." Even though he wouldn't be joining Tailslide's flock, in the long run it
was important socially that Jazz's work had helped them.

"That gig just gets better and better. Got paid, got a good ref out of it and now it worked and the
Peacekeepers are even happy with it," Jazz wiggled with how much good news it represented to
him. "I know Haji isn't looking to expand into grounders but he did right by me in the meeting."

"No, he wasn't looking but you've opened his optics to a possibility for him to increase business. I'll
check with him to see if he's thinking about it for the future. He's already offered to continue as your
attorney since you are part of my flock," Thundercracker pulled Jazz lightly against his side and
enjoyed the genuine happiness in the other mech's field.
Chapter Summary

Deadlock accepts Axe as his Daoshi and the unit celebrates with a meal at Corundum and a drive in town.

Deadlock was not ignorant of the fact that his sparring match with Kimark had more witnesses than usual. Sure, his unit and their various keepers came by when they could, in whole or in part. Even Wing had managed today. None looked upset or wary so he let it go.

Then Axe and Dai Atlas came and stayed. Not unprecedented but rare.

By the time Kimark managed to pin him they were both going to be visiting Redline and the audience was well over a score.

Glancing over at Wing he noted that the Aerial was almost bouncing next to Thundercracker and kept glancing over at the large triplechangers. It was obvious that something big was going to happen, and he doubted they were going to kick him out at this point. Taking Kimark's offered hand, he got to his pedes and turned to look at their audience. True to expectations Axe and Dai Atlas walked forward onto the floor of the room. Unlike normal it was Axe in the lead.

"You have improved your control since your arrival," Axe began. "Do you still wish to become a Knight of Light?"

Next to him Kimark was holding himself still but his field was alive with a happy anticipation fluctuating with disappointment and acceptance.

"Yes, I do," Deadlock answered as he straightened up and almost glared defiantly, daring anyone to object. As much as it had galled him to give excuses for a decision he'd made, following Jazz' advice to tell Kimark that Axe was the best choice to mellow his temper to an acceptable level for this city had worked out well. Kimark was still the closest thing to a friend he had outside his gestalt, and Deadlock liked hanging out with the former gladiator.

"Then I would train you in our ways," Axe offered and it was only in the harmonics that it was not a statement or order.

"I accept your offer," Deadlock replied. His orns spent with Axe prior to this moment had helped convinced him that the Master wasn't going to use training as an excuse to abuse his position of power. Being close to Pantera to keep the mechling safe had made the choice of Daoshi obvious no matter how much the others had wanted him to weigh other options. Those who truly mattered to him, his unit, agreed that Axe was a good choice.

"Then come with me. After Redline sets you to rights we will deal with the record-keeping and I will show you to your new quarters," Axe inclined his helm in acceptance of the responsibility.

Deadlock fell into step behind Axe as they headed for medical. It was starting to really hit him that this was real. He'd been accepted into the Knights. Now it was time to find out how well he could
belong here.

As Thundercracker and Wing flew above them, Deadlock followed Dagger and Jazz down the street in formation next to Pantera and Kimark. After Axe had showed him his new quarters and finished all the necessary ceremony involved he'd been given permission to actually go out into the city with his gestalt to celebrate. He realized he'd been so excited to actually go out and drive he hadn't even asked Dagger where they were going. ::So what is Corundum anyway, other than Praxian since Dagger suggested it?::

::It's a relatively upscale restaurant specializing in gem-using recipes. While it focuses on fancy Praxian and Vosian fuels it's not restricted to them. There's quite a range. Some are sweet enough for Wing. Some are too rich for any flier. I think they have a lot of Kaon and other mining cities:: Dagger answered.

::So something for everyone, which is hard to do with a group like this:: Jazz added.

::They're popular enough with a diverse crowd:: Kimark agreed. ::I've been there once before this:: It was a lot nicer than his preferred spots but not so nice that he had to watch his manners.

::Sounds good:: Deadlock agreed as they entered an area that definitely held more wealth than average. Not rich mecha homes but definitely well off.

It was a better neighborhood than most places Deadlock had ever lived, and he almost felt uncomfortable even driving through it. It was the group that he was with that kept him driving steadily forward. He trusted Jazz and Thundercracker to know his limitations. Kimark wouldn't let him get tricked into a bad spot. Wing and Pantera would stand with him if anything did happen.

The group pulled into the transformation lane and then stepped onto the sidewalk to wait for the fliers to land.

"We have a reservation," Dagger gathered them and took the lead regardless of his relative rank to Wing. The exterior had been stylish with simple clean lines, something both Praxians and Vosians liked while the inside was awash in decorations from the minerals used in their dishes. From mosaics to statues to tapestries, rugs and sconces it all glittered in the flickering light that mimicked a strong white spark.

"This way," the host said after staring for almost a klik at the mixed group of five Knights with their peace-bound swords and two massive war-frames with no visible weapons except what their frames promised. The group followed him to a private balcony room set up for seven with their frametypes and mass taken into account with the furnishing. "Your server will be here shortly."

"Thank you," Dagger said politely as they took the appropriate seats, noting that Deadlock made a point of sitting next to Pantera, although the youngster didn't need much protection in this environment.

"Relax," Kimark told Deadlock quietly. "Manners here aren't much different than a Praxian dinner. You'll be fine."

"Of course I will be," Deadlock huffed at him even as his field appreciated the assurance. His focus remained on Pantera and the tightly control nervous vibe that had been there since they'd left the Citadel grounds. He wasn't sure what the others made of it but to him it looked like when a commander got demoted and everything but conscious thought said one thing, reality was another and the price of screwing up was severe. Or maybe that was just what Deadlock felt like. It was true
Wanting to mitigate Pantera's discomfort in the unfamiliar place, Dagger said casually, "Since I know everyone's tastes fairly well, I think we should start out with some almandine and sphene tetrax cross gels and tsavorite laced spiral flares. Spirals are a bit more potent than nebula swirls since they're made with a mix of solar high-grade and magma mid-grade."

"It sounds like a good mix for all of us," Thundercracker agreed. "Are you settling in well, Deadlock?"

"So far. Room's nice. We'll see how often I'm actually in it," he shrugged casually, then caught Dagger's optic before the Knight could speak. "Until Axe says otherwise I just have to be in the quarters. What room hasn't been dictated."

Pantera caught up before Dagger and smiled brightly at his fellow Initiate before he caught himself and schooled that expression back to a sort of command neutral that he'd tried to hold since he'd transformed. His field kept the appreciation longer and left no doubt Deadlock was welcome in his quarters at night.

"He's already given me real blades even if he insisted I not wear them out tonight," Deadlock added.

"As an Initiate you have a right to them given your current level of skill. I'm sure Pantera will be granted that privilege soon," Kimark agreed even as he added. "Not bringing them is reasonable to keep with the citizenship requirements. It's not like any of you would need them to take out most of the civilians here."

Thundercracker barely managed to modify snort into a chuckle when a sleek civilian Praxian slipped in with the poise and standing of the Corundum resting on him and a teek that this was his function of choice. Four variety baskets of mineral puffs were placed on the table. He slipped away as soon as Dagger placed the appetizer and drink order.

"No doubt on both counts," Wing agreed as he joined Dagger and Kimark in carefully keeping an optic on the four who could have issues with unconsumed fuel.

"We'll behave," Jazz said with a grin as he grabbed a mineral puff.

Deadlock grunted and snagged a mineral puff of his own, noting that Pantera was nibbling the low-energy treat. The tac-net was really regulating what the mechling consumed, and he couldn't help approving of it even as the restriction was a bit annoying. They didn't need him collapsing because of energy levels. "TC, you getting any closer to picking an Action?"

"Unless something goes wrong I expect it to be Highdive. We are not ready to make that public yet," the Seeker answered in a tone that even now warned of this not being something to test him on. "To an extent we have tried to push at subjects that could cause friction. It's not perfect but we have not come across anything that makes me believe she will not be a suitable Action for me."

"How long are you going to wait?" Dagger asked what he hoped was a polite question.

"If it were up to me, not until she was in her adult frame. Realistically, in another metacycle or two," he had to focus on settling his wings long enough for Pantera to offer a soft hum of support.

"I want spend more time with her at gestalt night before you officially pick," Deadlock said staring straight at the Seeker. He trusted the Seeker, but he needed to have someone look after him. "We need to make certain we think she's good enough for you, and we couldn't ask the questions we wanted with their creators around."
"Such as?" Thundercracker prodded.

"For one thing, we need to know if she can handle being around the rest of us, especially if we wind up caught in memory loops. We also need to find out how close she's willing to get to us grounders," Deadlock gave Thundercracker a flat look. "I'm not asking her to interface with us; I know how Seekers feel about that with grounders. I'm asking if she can actually recharge around us or if you're going to be here alone with us every time we have unit night."

That made Thundercracker still and think back. He still nibbled on a puff while he put together what he expected of her.

"I believe she is fine with grounders in general. Some of her study group are grounders and she will call them friend when no other Seeker is nearby. I have no intention of allowing her to be close enough I can't get her away if someone snaps until I am sure she can react correctly and how to get away or play gray," he said carefully. "So I do not intend my trine to join for several vorns at least."

"At least not once the high grade comes out and interfacing starts," Jazz suggested. "We're pretty safe for Seekers until then."

Pantera hesitated fractionally before he spoke. "I believe we are stable enough for them to remain longer. It would be nice for Thundercracker to have someone while we are having fun."

"Unless you and Wing decide to have real fun," Deadlock said bluntly. "I know I'm not going to be comfortable having her around when you two decide to spark merge until she's proven trustworthy."

"She won't be there every time or for recharge for a very long time," Thundercracker stopped any offers to forsake the activity. "I haven't reached the point of a merge with her yet. I would hardly expect you to be ready before I am."

"We'll be careful of her being there," Pantera promised.

"I'm not going to want to do that with her there for a while yet either. Knights are one thing. Civilians need to earn my trust," Wing said seriously. The group fell silent as appetizers came and then ordered their meals.

"Thank you for the private room. It is nice to be able to relax some," Pantera told Dagger after the waiter left.

"It's a time of celebration for all of us," Dagger said with a smile and a doorwing dip towards Deadlock. "You've all done so well choosing integrating here, and Deadlock has just made an important step in joining us. Taking you out to a restaurant and having dinner together was the least I could do." He kept to himself what he knew most were thinking; that a private room was well worth it because with any civilians around, even just staff, Pantera went full Enforcer on them between one spark pulse and the next. Controlling that was going to be Pantera's greatest challenge in becoming a Knight.

"It allows all of us to relax some," Thundercracker insisted. "Jazz and I may fake being relaxed in public better but it's not much more fun."

Pantera nodded his doorwings in acceptance of both statements.

"Besides, being in here means we can actually talk without rumors and gossip disrupting us," Kimark agreed as he finished off one of the gels. "Having the two of you walk in marked as Initiates is going to spread quickly. Praxians and Vosians both love to gossip."
Jazz burst out laughing despite his effort to muzzle himself. "Oh, mech, name one group that doesn't!"

Thundercracker was almost shaking with suppressed laughter, "Seekers do love to gossip, although it will probably mostly be about me being in public with my flock. The Praxians will be focusing on Pantera."

Dagger laughed as well, "I can think of a few mecha who claim to dislike gossip, but they all seem to want to hear it. There's probably going to be a bit of a scramble to be the first to pass it on."

"How often do Knights go out?" Pantera asked after savoring a tetrax cross gel.

"It depends on the Knight. A group almost always goes out for important events like this. Going out just to go out," he shrugged his doorwings.

"If you like going out, as often as you can afford it. Some go out more nights than not. Others I don't think ever go out without an event to celebrate," Wing helped out.

"The Sovereign and his mate are often in the Citadel but that might have to do with their size as much as personal preference," Kimark offered. "I usually go out into the city to spend time with my mate. Whether we are in a restaurant, club or her place depends on our mood."

"When I'm not in trouble I tend to go out a couple times a decaorn, less if I've hit sweets hard," Wing added and was happy to see Pantera's doorwings give a wiggle of understanding.

"Sounds like fun," Jazz agreed as he finished off the last of the tetrax cross gels and turned over the puff basket next to him. They needed to save space for their real meals that should be arriving soon and was glad to note that the rest of the baskets were turned over as well.

"I'm still thinking about learning how to create some of the sweets. There are so many recipes to create and develop variations," Pantera offered.

"That's a hobby that will definitely keep you busy," Thundercracker agreed.

"And save me a fortune if you need a test subject," Wing offered himself with a grin. "I'd be more than happy to get you supplies."

"I'm sure I will avail myself of your offer," Pantera trilled back with a playful wiggle of his doorwings. "Just remember you wanted it when a batch turns out sour."

"It's a risk we'll all take," Jazz offered with a small nudge to Deadlock who nodded in agreement.

"More testers means a more accurate analysis of the offering," Pantera said as he almost vibrated in delight. He managed to control himself as the staff brought their meals and took the empty baskets and plates. The two Praxians and lone Seeker made certain to shift a few pieces out as offerings for sharing. After a beat Jazz followed suit, though his offering was smaller and more carefully separated from what was most definitely his. True to training no one touched what wasn't explicitly offered and did take of what was.

"I'm sure you will not be lacking for tasters," Thundercracker rumbled in good humor and a more subtle statement in his wings that he would also taste and speak honestly.

"I'm looking forward to having time to cook for everyone," Pantera said cheerfully as he sampled an emerald gel cube from Dagger's plate. It pleased a part of his coding to be able to offer something everyone in the unit wanted.
"Deadlock, you have anything special you want to do after dinner?" Kimark asked his former charge.

"Drive, anywhere to street race?" He decided to see how far he could go.

"Drive definitely. There are street races. They are not for Knights," Kimark saved Dagger from having to say it. "We can race on a track."

"That'll work," Deadlock agreed as he filed away the restriction he'd expected. The Knights were honestly more uptight than he would have once tolerated, but at least they didn't mind interfacing and racing. It was worth going through this effort to make the rest of the unit happy ... and to prove Dai Atlas wrong. He wasn't sure which was the stronger motivator but he suspected it was his unit. Pantera's happy field at the prospect of driving in town was reason enough to do that more than racing. He was seriously out-classed in this group anyway. It was going to work and to the pit with anything that thought otherwise.
Chapter by gatekat

Chapter Summary

Cladin and Pantera have a date (#7 that's an actual date).

Pantera was more excited than usual for the activity date he had with Cladin. Yes, their interfacing dates were very enjoyable and had done a lot to help him recharge those nights and on his own, but he genuinely liked the big, calm, intelligent mech and the handful of activity dates so far have been enlightening and so very enjoyable to more than his frame. The mecha-koi that the Citadel put on such prominent display in several gardens were fascinating. The breeding and care of them far more scientific than he'd ever expected.

Leaning first hand was a worthy way to spend a few joors.

"Now, these are dragon mecha-koi spawn," Cladin said as he showed Pantera a tank filled with tiny fish, none longer than Pantera's finger. "I traded a pair of drusy koi to one of the other breeders for their creators. They made an interesting addition to the south pool."

"They're so small," Pantera murmured in wonder at such a minuscule being could grow to the size of Dai Atlas and larger. "To construct something like that by hand would be nearly impossible. How old must these be before they are put into an outside pond?"

"They will stay in this tank for approximately nine decaorn to grow and weed out the defective specimens. The survivors will be transferred to the larger tank on the left to continue growing," Cladin said as he squirted a dropper of fry food into the tank. "I'll move them outside to a pool in about two vorn."

"How many do you expect to survive to two vorns?" Pantera asked with open fascination as he watched the tiny things flail, fight and steal for a share of the fuel that seemed plentiful. "Why are they so aggressive with their fuel? Even the larger ones seem to be, yet they never seem to be shorted."

"Mecha-koi are constantly hungry due to the design of their fuel systems and the speed at which they grow," Cladin explained as he scooped out a few dead fry floating on the surface. "You have to be careful how much you feed them so that they don't get sick. A good spawning will result in two to four dozen large enough for the ponds or sale."

"That is why each pond only has so much in the canister to feed them with?" Pantera made a connection to something that hadn't seemed efficient at the time he saw it. "So no matter how many feed them they do not get too much fuel." Pantera hummed. "So very few survive. It seems wasteful."

"Or too little," Cladin nodded and smiled at the bright, curious youth next to him as he placed the dead in a small container to look at later for what caused their end. He was glad the deactivated fry didn't bother Pantera. Some protective sparks had a difficult time of seeing deactivation in any form. "Yes, each container contains an orn's fuel for the pond. Whatever is left in it at joor thirty five is
tossed in, then the container refilled. The low survival rate may be wasteful but it is how they survived in the wild. They put out thousands of fry so a handful survive long enough to reproduce. The domestic lines produce fewer fry, though it's still in the hundreds."

While he checked the oil filter to see if it needed changing, he continued his explanation. "It might seems wasteful for them to have so many creations that won't survive, but those fry become food for larger fish, predatory avianoids and other mechanimals. They also enrich the ground with material for plants of many kinds to grow better."

Pantera hummed and his optics dimmed briefly as he processed that, then nodded his doorwings. "I can see the usefulness far better in the wild environment. Reducing their fry numbers below what it is now would produce too few for sale?"

"Largely," Cladin nodded and topped off the oil lost to splashing, consumption and the filters. "One can only shift the reproductive system of a mechanimal so much before the failure rate becomes too high to sustain the species. If it begins with a system of producing many so a few survive it will never be a creature that has a high fry survival rate."

"Do you know why different methods are used?" Pantera frowned at the question.

"Part of the logic behind the different methods is due to the investment from the creators. Creatures like mecha-koi create offspring that require only a limited investment of resources in the individuals. Other creatures are like us and only have a few offspring at a time that require more of an investment of resources," Cladin explained. "Parental care can also come into play. Sea-chronohorses don't have as many offspring as mecha-koi because the creator invests time and resources by carrying the eggs in a pouch instead of scattering them."

"Yet they still have many more than more advanced mechanimals that invest time well after hatching," Pantera began putting more pieces together. "Multiple methods are used because the multiple methods all work?"

"Yes," Cladin said happily, pleased that Pantera was beginning to grasp the complexities of mechabiology. "Each species has developed a method of reproduction that suits its coding and frametype. For instance species like ornflies produce one massive set of offspring and then deactivate."

"Such a strange idea, yet it works for them," Pantera murmured as his processors focused more resources on all the varied creation-investment strategies used. "I admit I am surprised that domestic mechanimals have not all been coded to the same reproductive strategy given we control their reproduction and survival."

Cladin smiled and motioned Pantera over to look at another tank which had a ruby moon mecha-koi that was ready to spawn in the next couple of orn. "Like I said, you can only change the reproductive coding so much before it renders the species unsustainable. You also have to consider the longevity of a species. Guinea pigatrons and turborabbits don't live as long as ironhorses; they can't have the same reproduction especially if you have pets like cyber drakes that require mechanimals for fuel."

"None of those have expected losses on the level of fry," Pantera countered. "Losses are under 1%, instead of a survival rate at that level." He suddenly stopped, his frame and field twitching with an internal conflict between coding, intellect and tac-net. After a moment he cycled a deep ventilation. "It is what it is. This is not a system to be made efficient."

"No, although there are some things that can be improved in a species," Cladin said as he waited to see if this was going to cause more of an issue for Pantera. "Part of the breeding process is to
improve coloration and frame for a species. For instance, I bred this ruby moon which has desirable markings to another ruby moon that has a slightly more vivid red coloration. I'm hoping that some of the fry will have a good mix of those traits."

"The best of which you will breed to produce more with the more vivid red and the markings," Pantera said with the harmonics of a question.

"Correct, although the process is more complicated than just breeding the offspring together to improve the species. I also have to monitor their physical structure, lifespan and mental well-being. For example, when the long-tailed mecha-koi were originally being bred there were several false starts where a longer tail was developed but the specimens had brittle armor. Those problems were eventually corrected but that breed has always been more delicate," Cladin explained as he checked another tank holding a pretty red fish. Continuing to ramble, he said, "It's not just mecha-koi that you have to monitor during development of a new breed. When I was on my walkabout in Telicrox I met a breeder of frilled oil lizards. They're a species where most breeds have blue markings. Despite them being an oil-dwelling species someone decided to develop a flying strain for reasons I don't understand. Anyway, she'd been trying to develop flying strain with red mark, but the few offspring with that coloration were always stillborn. After examination it was determined that something in the coding between the color and the wing mutation conflicted and rendered the offspring nonviable. I left before I could learn if they solved the problem."

"Interesting. I do not see the connection, though I suppose I might if I studied mechanimal coding more thoroughly," Pantera hummed. "Or I might never understand. Valuing on appearance is not an easy concept for me."

"Coding conflicts are a mystery even among breeders. Not everyone is suited to developing breeding new strains; it's not something I am interested in at this time," Cladin agreed as he stepped back from tank and took a moment to admire his pets. "On the other hand, pets can be therapeutic and relaxing. After a long day I enjoy sitting back and watching the koi swim about in their tanks. Observing their simpler lives is settling for me."

Pantera cocked his helm, one doorwing up in confusion-question. "If you are not interested in developing new strains, why breed the ruby moons to change the offspring?"

"I'm improving an existing strain not create a new one," Cladin explained patiently. "All I'm doing is trying to take what is already a red and black strain and make it more vivid so it will stand out even more in the pools. If I like what I see from this line I'll bring some of them to the next show and compare them to what other breeders are doing. We'll sell or trade specimens to widen the coding pool and continue our individual work."

"What is the difference? Both are trying to take existing creatures and change them." Pantera struggled with how the two ideas were different.

Cladin thought for a long klik before answering, trying to think of a way of explain what was to him an obvious difference. "What I am doing is trying improving what is already in existence, much working to perfect a kata. Creating a new strain is sort of like creating a new kata. It requires much more effort and skill. You could also think of it as the difference between working to perfect a recipe and creating a new dessert."

The raised doorwing have a faint shiver while Pantera frowned. "It seems like an artificial distinction rather than a practical one. I believe I need more experience to understand such a distinction," he eventually decided. "It may also be an artifact of the tac-net. I do not perceive many things the way most do."
"Not everyone sees everything the same," Cladin agreed easily. He didn't always understand Pantera, but it was easy to accept the differences and find ways to work around them. "As you experience the world you grown and change. Do you want to help me deliver food to the pools later?"

"I would. I enjoy watching the mecha-koi feed," Pantera smiled up, and knew the instant that he'd lost the fight to keep his kink where it belonged. Arousal surged through him, off-lining much of his higher functions with calculations related to pleasure and its possibilities.

Cladin immediately noticed the lust filling Pantera's field and made a note that it had taken longer to hit this time even as he reached out for Pantera's shoulder to pull the smaller mech close. "Do you want a kiss, love?"

"Yes," the answer came with a soft moan and black hands that reached to caress his grill and windshields.

Cladin picked Pantera up against his chestplate and moved far enough away from the tanks that they wouldn't cause any damage. He wasn't worried about the fish being bothered by the vibrations from their voices or activities. Settling down on the couch, he placed a kiss on Pantera's chevron and teasingly asked, "Is that what you want?"

The powerful pursuit engine revved hard and Pantera reached up to pull Cladin's helm down into a passionate kiss that left Pantera burning hot and his interface covers open.

Setting the teasing aside, Cladin twined their glossa together as he cupped a hand over Pantera's valve. Releasing his own spike cover, he shifted his lover so that tempting valve lined up and slowly pulled Pantera down against the head of his spike. The pleasure of being enveloped was intense. No matter how ready Pantera was he was much smaller and always tight. It was still the youth's field that dragged the deepest moans from Cladin. It was an intense, wild reminder that this wasn't about the overload. It was fueling something deeply set in Pantera's psyche.

By the time interface arrays were flush Pantera had melted in Cladin's grip, desiring nothing more than to be held and used. Obliging his partner, Cladin lifted Pantera's frame and slid him back down onto the waiting spike, gradually moving him faster as their charges built and the pleasure intensified. It was wonderful having such a willing partner who took so much honest pleasure in pleasing others and Cladin made certain to give back as much as he could as they drove closer to overload. It hardly mattered that Pantera would overload just from being held and the strength displayed. It was a matter of pride to provide more than what was strictly needed.

Pantera cried out, his back bowed and face falling back without warning as his charge broke and surged through him and into his lover. Cladin continued lifted Pantera up one more time and pulled him down hard, prolonging the Praxian's overload while his own peaked and he pumped charge-heavy transfuid deep into Pantera to saturate the nodes only touched that way. He held the Praxian tightly as they jerked and rocked together, both fully in the grip of the mutual pleasure for a blissfully long moment before gradually going slack.

"Thank you," Pantera nuzzled whatever part of his dark green lover was in front of him. His field was rich with thanks for being indulged but also with genuine affection unlinked to the kink or being indulged in it.

"You lasted longer than last time. Is it getting easier to control?" Cladin asked, wanting to know if he was actually helping Pantera in ways other than an enjoyable overload.

"I believe so," Pantera sighed with contentment at being where he was. "Exposure is definitely
improving my ability to focus when larger mecha are around. I managed to get through an entire touch-up with Deco."

"I remember that. You were deliciously wound up," Cladin purred.

"And burning it off was very enjoyable," Pantera shivered at the memories of taken on his hands and knees on the berth, the heat and mass over him.

"So your issues with this kink are mostly maturity based, which is understandable given how young you truly are. In time you won't need sessions with me to help you control it," Cladin observed as he settled back against the couch enjoying the heat coming from the frame sprawling happily on top of him.

"I may not need them, but I still enjoy your company whether or not we interface," Pantera purred. "I do not believe that will change soon."
Energon in hand, Cladin followed Dagger over to one of the side tables in the common room. He figured the conversation would have something to do with Pantera since the youngster was the closest connection the two of them shared. Despite being Dai Atlas' Initiate, Pantera still liked to talk about his fellow Praxian almost as much as his unit, and Cladin knew Dai Atlas encouraged the connection that would strengthen ties to the Knights. Any connection that held the affection Pantera had for Dagger was a good one as far as Cladin was concerned. The youth needed connections more than most who came here.

They sat and settled slightly away from most in the common room before Dagger spoke. "How much do you know about Praxian dating habits?"

"Not much although I've been discretely asking a few others about them since Pantera indicated he wanted more than just interfacing," Cladin admitted. "Most of the Knights know we're involved so it's not an odd question to ask."

"We often form triads, not unlike Seeker trines though less set in individual roles. Left undirected he's showing every sign of trying to form a triad with us," Dagger explained simply. "At this stage it would be a hub triad with him in the middle."

"A hub triad?" Cladin asked cautiously. He knew and trusted Dagger like he did almost all the Knights, but he couldn't say they were friendly enough to become mates. That didn't sound exactly like what the Praxian was talking about though, and he wished he knew more about Seeker trines so this might make more sense.

"In the simplest form it is a formal arrangement of what we are doing now. He is mate to us both but we are not mates to each other. Some hub triads share quarters, others do not. I do not believe he recognizes what he's doing yet," Dagger explained.

Cladin thought about that for a long moment. It would solidify his place with Pantera, and he did enjoy the time spent with the mechling even when they weren't interfacing. There was one issue that was going to have to be dealt with before anything got more serious. "We'd have to live together if we all decide to do this. He's already having enough problems bouncing between me, the unit and his Initiate quarters for recharge. Adding in a fourth place is going to make things worse."

"There is another option, depending on what he wants once he is a Knight," Dagger countered. "He has stable quarters with his unit and we visit him. To be honest every time I think about this I end up with the most viable solution being taking over a level or two in one of the towers with his berthroom in the middle of yours, mine and his unit's. Something else to consider is how strong a connection Prowl made with Towodi. Pantera may well respond the same." He paused and considered the convoy from Tesarus. "Do you truly like him enough to bond?"
"At this point I am not completely certain on spark-bonding since I do not know how he feels, but I can see settling in with him," Cladin admitted. "I know that I enjoy spending time with him in and outside the berth. I want to help him develop into the Knight I know he can become. His gestalt does not deter me. I understand why they vetted me as they did, and I appreciate both the warriors they are and the civilians they are trying to become. His possible connection with Towodi will need to be addressed before this goes any further. How do you feel about this?"

"He's far too young for me," Dagger admitted. "My rank to him also bothers me. Neither are likely to be an issue by the time he understands what he's doing. I rather like Towodi," he smiled faintly. "He's fun in the berth and I know he was heavily vetted before Prowl started to see him even if I wasn't told of it. I don't know if I have much in common with him in the long run. He does have one advantage on you right now. He's Praxian coded and raised. Triad coding and the culture it helped build can be very important for a triad's survival. That said I'd rather have three Knights than three Praxians involved if he keeps to this path."

"So neither of us think this is a thing to actively pursue right now, but when he is older it is an option," Cladin said slowly. "It sounds like I should learn more about how this coding will affect me if it is installed."

"Agreed. I wanted you to be aware of what I see so it doesn't take you by surprise. Now is the time to dissuade him from seeing you as more than a casual lover-friend if you are so inclined. It's possible he'll drift away on his own. He *is* very young and we're his first real contacts outside his unit. As for the coding," he offered a datachip. "This is everything I could get on it installed in an adult. It's not common but it's known and documented."

"He should explore more options outside his unit," Cladin agreed even as he subspaced the datachip for through inspection later. He was interested in learning more about it, which he realized was a sign he was seriously considering this change. "I don't think we should directly suggest it since he could take it the wrong way, but perhaps he should be introduced to other Knights in more casual settings? Perhaps Wing could do it since he's so friendly to everyone."

"We are doing that as we can with a focus on the Praxians and aerials. His unit insists on vetting anyone he might get into a berth with," Dagger nodded with a fondly frustrated chuckle. "As frustrating as they can be it is adorably sweet in its own way. Since you are inclined to consider becoming his mate I want to be sure you understand any such discussion must be put off until he is a full Knight and back from his walkabout if he brings it up."

"Of course, I have no wish to trap a mechling into something before he is properly matured. I think that's why Dai Atlas picked me to help him through his kink; he knew that I wouldn't take advantage of him," Cladin said, not taking offense since he understood Dagger's concerns. "They're just going to get worse even as he matures. The connection between them is growing stronger all the time. I've noticed it the few times I've been around them."

"I know. As dangerous as it could be it's also a good sign that they aren't too damaged to socialize," Dagger did smile for real. "They're quite the complex group and every one of them is incredibly intense on their own. Have you met their combined form yet?"

"No, although I know I'll need to if I continue spending time with Pantera. I'll admit I'm curious to see how Flightplan behaves. I've heard he's rather young," Cladin said with a smile.

"Far younger than even Pantera and with almost no directive coding. It's a very strange sensation to have creator coding lock onto such a huge being," Dagger chuckled. "He's very considerate and wants to please. He'll be an amazing addition to the city's S&R and disaster response departments."
"I look forward to meeting him. It's strange to think about someone so young and innocent sounding being a link for all those warriors," Cladin said with a small chuckle of his own.

"It is. For all I know the technical end of it and I've met and worked with them all a lot in the last couple metacycles I still can't really understand it. Yet I can't deny it's true and it's been a potent force in their adaptation. Flightplan is really quite the sweet being. I wish he could be around more but that takes away from the individuals," Dagger finished his energon and relaxed in the chair. "Has Pantera showed any signs he objects to being trained differently than Deadlock?"

"Not that he's mentioned to me. He seems to be focused on trying to relearn Prowl's skills so he'll be less of a threat to others," Cladin admitted. "I have noticed that he's mentioned wanting to practice more with Deadlock. Dai Atlas and Axe don't tend to schedule their sparring times when the other is free."

"Their waking joors are fairly offset as well since Pantera likes mornings and Deadlock likes to sleep in as much as Axe," Dagger chuckled. "I'll make sure Pantera is talking to his Daoshi about it. So you really like spending time with him out of the berth? What do you do?"

"I like him a lot. He's taken a bit of interest in my mecha-koi although he doesn't understand why I breed them the way I do," Cladin said with a smile. "We spend a lot of time in the gardens, and I've taken him out to a few restaurants. I'm glad we don't have to have a chaperone although I know his unit keeps an optic on us when we're here."

"I expect they do in the city even more. You're dating their little brother/creation they in no way trust to stand up for himself yet," Dagger's doorwings waved in fond amusement. "Though the fact that you made it out the front gate says they ultimately trust you," he added more seriously. "Have you spent any time with the others?"

"I've met them all and been properly interrogated," Cladin admitted. "I haven't spent much time with them although I do see Wing and Thundercracker in the gardens when I'm feeding the fish."

"If you're serious about staying with Pantera it wouldn't hurt to try and spend a bit more time with them. Spar with Deadlock, go to a debate with Thundercracker, just ask Jazz what he wants to do. You might not be interested in them but as they're bonded to Pantera you are courting them in a way," Dagger suggested. "It might not be exactly the same but courting part of a gestalt is going to have a lot in common with courting to join an existing bond."

"I'll work at spending more time with them. Perhaps we should spend some more time together as well? Especially if we are seriously going to look at spending a very long time together with Pantera," Cladin pointed out.

"I'm open to it," Dagger smiled. "Perhaps I can go with you during the feeding rounds tonight?"

"I'd welcome the company," Cladin said. "Shall I see you about joor thirty five?"

"I will be there unless there's an emergency," Dagger agreed readily.
Wing's wings are broken in punishment for escaping, then set, and the Citadel learns how Pantera responds to bond-stress.

Wing settled himself as much as he could and closed off the gestalt bond as best he could. Everyone knew what was coming. Thundercracker had opted to spend this penance in stasis, not trusting himself to remain peaceful when the pain came. The others were conscious and under various levels of obvious guard. Jazz was with Dart and Windsinger's trine hoping they would distract him. Deadlock was sparring with Kimark with Axe watching. Pantera was in the main library deep in study with Dai Atlas and Dagger nearby.

With the same steady pace he always used Wing walked through the counsel room and down to the penance chambers behind Redline. He never looked forward to this part but he'd had his wings broken at least a dozen times in a simple square room like these and knew it was nothing to fear. It would hurt but he would recover and fly just as well as before.

Marwir and Aurora were waiting in the chamber to observe the coming punishment. Neither was looking forward to watching this penalty, but they were also here in case of any problems caused by the gestalt bond. There was no telling what feedback could cause and all agreed it was better safe than sorry.

He stood and allowed his arms to be bound above him. It took two deep ventilation cycles to convince one slender wing to extend, another to lock it into place. Four more to get the other one locked in full extension. Another ventilation cycle and he braced himself for the coming pain as Redline took his place behind him and prepared to break the left wing. Strong hands gripped the wing near the mid-point and Wing turned his optics off to focus completely on containing the scream trying to force its way from his vocalizer when the snap reached his audials. No matter how many times this happened he was never ready for it.

Whether a mercy or a torture Redline paused until Wing had recovered enough to stand steady once more before the right wing was gripped and snapped. This time Wing fell forward until his shoulders caught his weight as he forced the scream down. He could feel flashes of fear and concern, then bright anger/will-protect coming through the bonds with his unit. He tried to suppress the pain, but he knew it had passed through to the others.

Halfway across the Citadel compound Pantera jerked unsteadily to his pedes, leapt over the second floor banister and bolted towards the Citadel's central tower before either of his watchers realized he'd even moved.

Dagger cursed and headed out the window after him, amazed that the youngster could run that quickly. As he headed through the gardens he thought he saw Windsinger's trine in the air. He hoped that Jazz wasn't in ISO mode because stopping him would be devastating for the Citadel and could trigger Deadlock if he wasn't already on his way to Wing.
Deadlock is turning it into fighting anger. Dai Atlas pinged him. Jazz is headed Deadlock's way. His large flight form swooped down to get a teek on his Initiate. "Pantera. Stop." He demanded in his most authoritative voice.

Somewhat to everyone's shock it worked well enough for Dagger to get close to the quivering armor. A fresh burst of pain/disorientation hit Pantera and his field went flat.

"He's under AI control!" Dagger yelled up at the Sovereign.

"Pantera, listen. Wing has had his punishment for breaking the rules. He is not going to be hurt any more. Now he is going to need you to help take care of him while his self-repair works," Dai Atlas said firmly as he landed, braced for whatever happened next. It was difficult to predict what was going to happen next since he didn't know whether it was the Enforcer AI or Tac-net in charge right now. He still didn't know when the Praxian frame darted forward to get passed him as it transformed but he suspected it was the Enforcer AI. There was urgency and distress but none of the aggression he expected if the tac-net AI was in charge.

As they turned to give chase a silvery-white form with bright lines of color barreled into the half-transformed mech. As Pantera staggered to the ground and tried to scramble away from his attacker, Jazz continued to try to pin his heavier unit mate. The delay let Dagger reach them as he added his frame to the pile.

A fresh surge of pain and dizziness distracted Jazz enough for Pantera to get out of his grip and right into his Daoshi's large hands where he was encircled and lifted up. Spikes of distress mingled with the far less familiar power struggle of the three residents of the frame until Pantera finally clawed some margin of control from the Enforcer desperate to reach his dying unit mate.

"Be still." Dai Atlas rumbled again and this time felt more compliance. Not so much he was willing to let go though.

Now that Pantera was less likely to try to force his way free, Dai Atlas took a moment to check on the other member of the unit present even as he quietly thanked Primus that Thundercracker had decided to be in stasis for this event. Looking down at Jazz and Dagger as they scrambled to their pedes, the Sovereign asked, "Are you stable?"

"Yes. It's crazy distracting but I've dealt with a lot worse," Jazz promised. "I'm hoping the worse is over."

"It should be. Two spikes of pain were the damage. Anything beyond that is from trying to move with broken wings," Dai Atlas answered seriously. His grip never wavered and soon Pantera was compliantly limp, then increasingly embarrassed as the mech grasped what had happened.

"No need to be embarrassed," Dagger said firmly having teeked it as well from the youngster. "We didn't really know how any of you would respond given the varying strengths of your bonds. You reacted to a member of your unit being severely injured, and you didn't hurt anyone."

"I still lost control," Pantera said quietly.

"You did and it will be addressed," Dai Atlas said as he cautiously set the youth down. "Everyone loses control on occasion. It is expected and part of maturing."

Pantera nodded his doorwings and seemed to be reassured. "Where is Wing?"

"On his way up from the penance chambers. Come," Dai Atlas motioned them to follow.
"At least Deadlock didn’t flip out like I did," Pantera muttered as he followed his Daoshi to see Wing and reassure himself that the other mech wasn’t going to offline.

"He’s got a more lot of experience dealing with rage and pain and he’s sparring with Kimark so he had an outlet in front of him," Jazz reminded him. "We misjudged a lot on not giving you something more active to do."

"A mistake that will not happen again now that we understand the strength of your responses," Dai Atlas added.

"I need to learn to handle it in case the Knights are ever called to fight. I cannot be diverted like that during a real battle," Pantera said even as he tried to imagine being in a war and having this connection to his team.

"Hopefully that won’t ever happen, or if it does it will be a very long time from now," Dagger said calmly beside him.

"It’s not the same in battle though you’ll just have to trust me on that. I expect you’ll have to have mastered it before they let you have a Great Sword," Jazz said carefully.

"True. Though I hope much of that learning will not involve harming another, though I have no doubt that Deadlock will have to endure several painful penances before his training is done," Dai Atlas agreed and paused as the doors to the counsel room opened. Aurora held them open while Marwir helped her unsteady former Initiate down the steps.

Pantera and Jazz immediately headed for Wing offering hands, shoulders and comforting fields as they assured themselves that the Aerial was online and mostly functional. Pantera let out a small growl of anger as he took in the damage to Wing’s frame.

"Looks professional. Hurts like the pit but should heal cleanly," Jazz observed as he studied the broken wings.

"Of course it was," Redline growled at them from the back of the group. "I am a professional. They’ll heal cleanly. Once he’s in medbay I can set them and then he’s all yours to take care of."

"We’ll take him there," Pantera said firmly, struggling with his impulses towards the chief medic. His coding said to respect his position and authority, but he’d hurt a member of his unit. It was a punishment that Wing had warned them about before it happened, but he’d been too naive to realize just how bad it would really be for a flight frame especially given how calmly Wing had spoken about it. Wing was still calm but he was also a bundle of pure pain-soaked misery.

"I agreed to this," Wing nuzzled Pantera as they group walked far more slowly than Redline towards medical. "You will understand in a few vorns."

Pantera gave him a doubtful look. "I do not know if I can comprehend the idea that one would willingly cause such injury to a comrade."

"I didn’t either, when I began. There is absolution in the penances we do. It’s not just a punishment. Done right it can help understanding," Wing promised him as he steadied a bit more now that the pain and how to account for the damage wasn’t so new. "Give yourself time. Like so many things it will make sense when you know more."

"Perhaps," Pantera said softly as he shifted to better help Wing. That it was a punishment was something the AIs understood better than him, but accepting that level of damage to a member of the unit was difficult. "There are many things I do not understand besides this method of punishment."
"Experience and knowledge fixes a lot of that," Jazz backed Wing up. "Do you get the symbolism of it?"

"Breaking the rules by leaving the city was penalized with losing the ability to travel by the route used," Pantera said while thinking for a moment. "Is this more than actions having direct consequences?"

"That's pretty much it. Grounders have their leg struts broken. Penances are very much a reflection on what you did. Far more so than penalties," Wing flashed pride towards Pantera at his deduction, then sighed in relief as the medbay's main door came into sight. "My wings will be set soon. I'll feel discomfort but it won't be nearly as bad."

"Good," Pantera replied as he and Jazz guided the wounded mech through the doors and towards a medical berth where Redline was waiting.

Thundercracker finished booting and onlined his optics. He could already feel anxiety and pain through their bonds, and he was not looking forward to seeing how badly injured Wing was despite his repairs. Hearing it, and Wing had explained it far better to him than to the others, was very different from seeing it. All he could comfort himself with was the fact that Wing would fly again. Even as a war punishment breaking wings was something he had never done. It was torture, pure and simple. Anything worthy of such a punishment was dealt with by a shot to the spark and be done with it.

This though ... the thought stopped as his gaze found Wing and the mech stepped close so their fields could mesh smoothly. There was fresh pain in his field although it was muted with acceptance and a bit of affection.

"Good orn, Thundercracker," Wing said as he brushed a hand against the larger mech's shoulder.

"It went as expected?" Thundercracker asked to give himself a moment and to take in the state of the other three. Deadlock was trying to look indifferent but he was ready to lash out. Jazz really was calm. Pantera though was showing his agitation. It didn't carry the same feel as Deadlock. It was more like Skywarp when Starscream was being repaired. He wanted to act but had nothing to act on.

"Yes. Redline is as skilled as anyone. I'll recover more quickly than some of the times," Wing assured him.

"Come over here, Pantera," Thundercracker said as he lifted himself off up the berth and offered an arm for a hug. The youth managed not to scramble but he was quick to take the comfort and snuggled close.

"I don't like this," Pantera finally said from the safety of no longer needing to be strong in front of outsiders.

"None of us do, but it is a price Wing is willing to pay for what we have found here," Thundercracker replied as he cuddled Pantera closer. He wanted to hold Wing but was leery to press him given his injuries.

"Now that everybody's mobile let's get to our quarters, a nest and make sure Wing can recharge," Jazz said just shy of ordering it.

"Yes," Thundercracker agreed readily and allowed Pantera to move so he could get up. Even so he inspected Wing's damage and felt a flare of anger at the simple splints that was all he'd received.
"I'll be fine," Wing promised as they all began to leave, Wing in the middle of the loose formation. "I've recovered from far worse."

"Somehow I don't find that comforting," Deadlock snarled for his position behind everyone which gave him a clear view of the damage to the Aerial's wings.

"It means I can judge the severity of this and how long it will take," Wing told him, more than willing to lean on Pantera a bit so the youth could feel helpful.

"At least you know what penalty to expect," Jazz offered to Deadlock as they approached their quarters. He was habitually tracking Dagger who was trailing quietly behind them. At least the Praxian medic hadn't done the damage to Wing even if he wasn't allowed to repair it. It would be interesting to see how far he was willing to push that line tonight and what Wing would do about it.

"For trying to escape. Not the rest," Deadlock huffed.

"It's clearly documented," Pantera told them. "At least Deadlock can read it anytime he wants."

"It's not information for outsiders, but it's not something to hide from the unit either," Wing clarified and sagged slightly in relief at their door.

Thundercracker scanned the room for trouble, his heightened concern making it more obvious than normal. Once he was certain it was still clear he headed for the pile of pillows and bedding. "What can we do to help?"

"I'm going to recharge on my front. The best help is going to be not jostling them and letting me move as little as possible," Wing explained as he settled in the middle in a knowing concession to how his flock-mates were going to respond to their agitation by surrounding and guarding him. "Fortunately their natural fold makes that easier to do than for many."

"I'll take your left, Pantera has the immediate right," Thundercracker said firmly as he carefully shifted the padding and pillows around to make a nest for Wing. That put the two most rattled members of the unit close enough to Wing to easily teek if he needed anything during recharge. It also allowed Thundercracker to completely cover his fledgling with his wing. He knew he was more than familiar enough with his not to jostle a damaged wing in recharge to manage it.

"Thank you," Wing murmured as he began to shut down. The others waited until he was settled before one by one following him into recharge. The last was Deadlock who kept a long optic on Dagger keeping vigil before finally following the others into rest.
Chapter Summary

Caring for Wing.

~Wing looks ready to implode trying to decide if he's annoyed or enamored of them right now,~ Axe snickered silently to his mate as they casually watched the gestalt fuss and posture protectively over their injured member in the common room three orns after the penance began. Sweets were in front of Wing, his energon fetched by Pantera. Thundercracker had tried to feed him though Wing managed to get that to stop without upsetting the Seeker further. Deadlock was glowering as Knights came by to check on Wing and just get a teek on the suddenly very unfriendly gestalt in their midst.

~They are extremely protective of him. Redline has been avoiding getting close to them right now, although he isn't hiding from them,~ Dai Atlas agreed.

~Can't blame him, even if I seriously doubt any of them would act on their agitation with Wing there. He'd get himself hurt stopping them,~ Axe hummed and hid his smile at Pantera getting another sweet into Wing's mouth.

~The warriors wouldn't attack the chief medic unless something goes horribly wrong with Wing's healing which Dagger is closely monitoring,~ Dai Atlas agreed. ~I've been told that Deadlock always has a painkiller on hand from Dagger for whenever Wing needs it.~

~Or Deadlock thinks it's wearing off,~ Axe snickered. ~And Pantera takes over when I've got Deadlock for training. Which, for reference, he's focusing on nicely. He grumbles all the way but any concern he has for Wing is well controlled when he needs to.~

Dai Atlas gave a small grunt. He still wasn't fond of the berserker but at least he wasn't giving Axe too many problems yet. ~Pantera is extremely respectful and has been doing well with his training although he's having trouble with meditating.~

~With the concept or the practice?~ Axe focused on something that honestly surprised him given Prowl's skill at it.

~Both, although the practice of it seems to be the biggest problem. He finds the mental stillness of meditation a problem. In some ways it reminds me of the issue he had dealing with sparklings at the temple. I think most of the problem is actually with the tac-net,~ Dai Atlas explained as he watched Thundercracker flare his wings briefly at an approaching Knight. It was like watching an agitated new creator and was an almost amusing sight to the former general.

~Yes, that thing. I'm sure most of your issues will be with it and teaching Pantera to dominate it as Prowl could,~ Axe agreed. ~It is rather cute the way they're acting. And I'm sure Jazz's magnets really do feel that good.~

~He could start a small side business joining a spa and using them for massages,~ Dai Atlas agreed. ~I know a few Knights who would be interested in the option after a long training session.~
I don't know many who wouldn't be,~ Axe hummed thoughtfully as Wing began to sink forward.

Mech really does have a lot of civilian talents.~

Many of them are probably from his ISOorns and used to be used for things that won't happen
here,~ Dai Atlas commented as he watched Jazz gently work over Wing's frame with a focus on the
lines to and from the slender folded wings. ~It's given him a good skill set for adapting to our city.~

Likely. Or for undercover IDs he no longer needs,~ Axe hummed and had to hide another smile.

It's hard to believe most of that care is coded.~

It's not really. To care for each other is coded. How they express the emotion and unit status is very
much individual to each of them.~ Dai Atlas watched as bit by bit the odd group relaxed as the
Knights in the room had already come by. Pantera focused on getting as much fuel into Wing as he
could. Jazz focused on keeping the tension from Wing's frame and interrupting the pain signals they
all knew Wing could handle even if the neural block wasn't working. Thundercracker hovered like a
protective creator expecting trouble but focused on his creation until it came and Deadlock was
visibly on guard.

Hopefully nothing goes wrong with his healing and things will get back to normal around here,~
Axe almost laughed as Wing tried to refuse the treat Pantera was trying to feed him before relenting
and accepting it. ~I can't believe he's actually full.~

He might be getting a buzz. It'll make his wings vibrate,~ Dai Atlas said thoughtfully. ~Though I
definitely agree I'm looking forward to things settling into some variant of normal. Has Dagger talked
to you about Pantera's triad behavior?~

Yes, although he said he's explained more to you,~ Axe admitted. ~I'm hoping he doesn't take up
with Towodi like Prowl did. It will be easier to deal with three Knights than two Knights and a
civilian.~

Agreed and what Dagger intends to nudge him towards if the interest continues. Fortunately as
young as Pantera is he's very unlikely to look outside his function for long-term companionship
without a good deal of encouragement. It's also entirely possibly this is just an instinctive desire for
stability when he doesn't feel enough of it and as he settles into himself and the Order it will fade. I'm
honestly hoping it's that for all I can't fault his current choices in any way.~

It might simply be a desire for stability, but Prowl was interested in Dagger as well. That coupled
with his connection to the unit means that might prove to be a stable relationship in the long run,~
Axe agreed as he watched the unit hover around Wing as he accepted help he didn't need from
Thundercracker in rising from the table.
Wing lay on his chest on the medical berth, waiting impatiently for Redline to finish his examination of the stunt Aerial's wings. He'd been experiencing less pain every orn, and if this was anything like the last few times he should finally be approved for flight. Marwir and Thundercracker were both waiting to escort him back to their quarters by air if he was cleared. If not, all six of them would walk back and try again in the next couple of orns. It only occurred to him after the exam had started that Redline being allowed in the same room as his unit indicated that the medic had been forgiven his duty.

"All right. You can fly. Just keep it down to twenty Gs and below for a few more orns," Redline said gruffly.

Tension all around the room broke with Pantera giving the audible reaction and Thundercracker's wings the most visible.

Deadlock offered a hand to help Wing stand, his own pleasure at the news in his field if not his face. "Looks like we'll be following Dagger back while you three go have your idea of fun."

"Very much fun," Wing grinned at him. "I'll see you all after my shift."

"Let's fly," Thundercracker rumbled, nearly as eager as Wing.

Marwir was the first to take to the sky, turning to watch Wing launch into flight. Thundercracker remained on the balcony ready to catch Wing in the unlikely event his wings and engines failed him. It wasn't likely to happen, but these events had made him remember times back in his old eyrie when fledglings were learning how to fly and far more recent ones when Seekers had to fly before they were fully repaired. Let Wing be embarrassed if he had to be, he was not going to crash.

Half a klik later Thundercracker was in the sky and eagerly doing a lazy spiral around the two far smaller stunt jets.

::Redline would be far more mortified that I would be if you had to catch me,:: Wing trilled to his flock mate.

::I've had to do it in the past due to insufficient repairs. It's a habit I'll hopefully break soon,:: Thundercracker admitted. ::It's good to fly with you again.::

::It's good to fly again too,:: Wing trilled with giddy happiness and joined Thundercracker's spiral to form a double helix while Marwir simply kept pace. ::I will try to give you few opportunities to practice such caution.::

::That'll be the vorn.:: Marwir snorted. ::You're always in trouble.::
But not often the kind that grounds me, Wing countered cheerfully.

"You'd better not," Thundercracker growled playfully and willingly engaged in the spiral. "If you do I'll let Deadlock sparklingsit you until you're better."

"Oh, the horror!" Wing couldn't help the bright laugh. "He'd literally sit on me too."

"Yes he would, and Pantera will feed you until you vibrate out of your armor," Thundercracker's smirk was audible. "You have no idea how cute that was to watch."

"It was. Your whole gestalt took good care of him," Marwir agreed.

"Where did he get all those treats? He couldn't have been gone long enough to make them and train," Wing asked as he made a loose corkscrew.

"Everyone who went into the city came back with a box," Marwir chuckled. "That Praxian has nearly the turbo-puppy optics you do. I'm sure he made plenty given how well he multi-tasks as well."

"He did. It seems he can study Citadel things, study treat-making and make treats all at once without slowing down," Thundercracker supplied. "Makes me wonder what he's learning extra when he's just studying."

"Anything from city regulations to new languages would be my guess," Wing offered and slipped off a bit to exchange a spiral with a couple Knights that came up to greet his return to the air. "He's pretty desperate to keep that tac-net busy."

"True. At least there's enough to learn to keep it occupied for ages," Thundercracker hummed.

"I'm hoping he'll having an easy time getting it under control since this isn't a war zone," Wing said as he banked towards Thundercracker. He was broadcasting his intent to prevent problems, but he knew the Seeker could adjust.

"At a minimum he won't be in any situations that damage his coding again. Prowl has said the three of them got along very well until Praxus fell and he had to rebuild himself to survive," Thundercracker said as he and Wing slid smoothly my each other in a lazy swapping of left and right more suited to Thundercracker's broad wings than Wing's all-engine frame.

"It's been fun flying with the two of you, but Wing needs to get to his duties," Marwir pointed out as she watched the duo flying smoothly beside her as if they'd been training for vorns.

Wing angled around to come to her side as obediently as he had when she'd been training him.

"Then I will greet you when you return," Thundercracker accepted the end of their flight time gracefully.

Jazz lounged on a simple chair at the edge of the nest, the one Dagger often claimed, and strummed the piezoelectric violin he had been given on long-term loan from the Citadel stores. He was just playing for himself, practicing for the gig he knew he'd eventually get. There were so many songs to learn and he had to prove he was good with what was popular before he'd be allowed to play his own material for pay.

"Sounds good. Your practice is obviously fixing any rustiness in your skills," Thundercracker said as he sat down in the nest near Jazz. "Do you know any Vosian music?"
"Not for this," Jazz shook his helm. "I know some for the harp, though I'm definitely not performance worthy with it yet. Had to focus on what the crowd likes where I'm applying and all."

"That makes sense," Thundercracker agreed after a thought. "Most Seekers would consider it unusual to have a grounder playing our city's music, although I'm certain Aurora would enjoy a concert some night if you're interested. What area of the city are you looking at to start your new career?"

"Maybe after you think I can play it well," Jazz grinned at him. "There's a few clubs around the Citadel that play a club mix that's a bit like some Polyhexian and Ibexian music I used to play back in clubs on Cybertron," he continued. "There's a lot of differences, but it was a good starting point for picking up the newer stuff like this piece and the others I've been learning."

"You are obviously skilled and should be able to find employment soon," Thundercracker offered.

"How much more difficult is it this time?" Pantera asked from where he was lounging against Deadlock, both of them more than happy to claim the after-dinner personal time to spend with the unit while it lasted. Both knew there would be vorns, even decades, where they'd only have the time deemed medically necessary for the gestalt's health.

"It's more difficult but not by a lot. Back on Cybertron I was competing with a lot more new performers but I knew everything anyone might ask me to play. This time there aren't nearly as many new performers but I'll have a very limited range for a few vorns while I catch up. Though one club owner said he knew about a group that grooved on Golden Age club music and would pass my info on to them. It seems like all the work we've done and the good word Knights give has gotten the club managers past any reject on sight reactions. I'm getting auditions and good feedback on the songs I know," Jazz smiled at their youngest member to reassure him that despite the lack of work it was going well.

"What about singing and dancing? Don't you prefer that to instruments?" Pantera asked.

"I do. The dancing is part of a singing performance. I don't have a frame anyone wants to see on a pole. Singing like I like means having a band that can play the music for me, and knowing the popular stuff. I'm working on it but that takes time," Jazz explained and was quietly relieved that Pantera accepted the abbreviated version.

"I know it is early but have you considered looking for a band to join? I don't know enough about the entertainment industry to know if that would be easier than striking out on your own," Thundercracker asked.

"The option is out there; at this point I'll take any opening I get," Jazz assured him. "As for easier ... at this level it's largely the same difficulty. We have to get along well enough and groove on the same tunes. I put myself out there, try to be my charming self and prove that I can sing, dance and play a couple instruments well enough to be an asset to a band or loner looking for one of those skills. I might ask them or they might ask me. It's a lot like making friends."

"Worse because shanix are involved," Deadlock grunted. "If you get in one you'll have to watch to make certain you aren't ripped off. At least until you know they won't stiff you or try something shady."

"Always," Jazz nodded seriously. "The odds might be lower here but that's no reason to be foolish."

Pantera offlined his optics as he listened to Jazz go back to playing and felt the vibrations of Deadlock’s frame and field in his systems. It was just another relaxing evening with his unit and it
was wonderfully soothing to the stress of training and educating himself. He relished the challenges but he relished this just as much.

His optics snapped on when Jazz stopped abruptly mid-song and caught up on the constant reports from his tac-net that said it was a comm call. Then asked if he wanted to listen.

::...last klik. There's an opening on stage for one groon. Starts in twenty kliks. Pay's a drink and twenty shanix.:: a voice Pantera didn't know was saying.

::Sure, I can make it.:: Jazz agreed readily and the call ended.

"Is that really okay pay?" Pantera asked before Jazz could even relay the contents to the others.

"It's not the pay that's important; it's the exposure this gig will give me. I'll start insisting on better pay when I can get gigs regularly," Jazz explained to Pantera and the others who were looking curiously at the pair. ::Dart, you know someone who can go with me to Chromatic Pulsar for a gig that starts in twenty kliks? It'll last a groon and some.:,

::Give me a couple kliks to ask around.,:: he responded quickly.

"You're flying so we can take a bit to polish you up," Thundercracker said firmly and quietly preened that the entire group responded as they should by getting polish, cloths and a small touch-up kit in Jazz's colors.

Thundercracker immediately took care of Jazz's chestplate knowing that it would be one of the most visible parts of the performer for the audience. Deadlock took over his legs while Pantera started on his arms.

::Windsinger volunteered as soon as I asked,:: Dart contacted Jazz just as Pantera started working on touching up a small scuff on the performer's helm. ::Expect the full trine.::

::Thanks. I think my unit's going to polish me until they arrive.,:: Jazz chuckled silently and relaxed into the care. It was hardly going to be a show finish where he gleamed, glittered and glowed. It was still going to look good for the ten kliks or less they'd have.

"Where's Jazz?" Wing asked as he walked into the unit's room. He knew Pantera and Deadlock would have to be back in their quarters before he got here, but he'd been hoping to spend some quality time with Thundercracker and Jazz. The pair were all but officially designated the gestalt's leaders in everyone's optics, and he wanted to talk to them a bit about how Deadlock and Pantera's training was going to impact the unit especially if it involved bindings or penance.

"He got a last-klik call for a paying gig. Given the time I would assume he and Windsinger's trine decided to stay and enjoy the club afterwards." Thundercracker set his datapad down. "Should I call him back?"

"He got a gig? That's great! Don't bother calling them. If they're enjoying themselves then that probably means he had a good show," Wing almost bounced he was so pleased that one more member of the unit was finding a place here.

"No doubt. I have no doubt if it went poorly Jazz would be back well before now to sulk and then work out what went wrong," Thundercracker smiled and opened an arm to invite Wing to snuggle. "What do you want to talk about?"

"What the rest of us are going to have to expect during Pantera and Deadlock's training," Wing said
as he gladly snuggled in next to the large Seeker. It was a reminder of the good moments during the trip here when it was just the two of them. "No one knew what to expect from Pantera during my punishment, and no one faults him for what happened. I'm not expecting that to happen again anytime soon, but we're all going to have to be prepared for the future. Especially when Deadlock goes through bindings because I know he has a lot of bad history to work through."

"Dai Atlas and Axe trained while bonded. Now that they know Pantera reacts badly they can adjust accordingly. Like allowing Pantera to study in the room while Deadlock is doing it," Thundercracker suggested.

"Yes, the fact that those two were bonded while training helps us immensely. I'm mostly worried about a feedback loop hitting all of us if it's a particularly bad memory during a binding," Wing hummed as he soaked in Thundercracker's calm field. "We all felt his fear of heights when Flightplan first left the ground. Experiencing why he was that afraid might flow through the bond. Especially as it grows stronger."

"We'll deal with it like with dealt with yours. Be aware, be prepared and make sure our keepers know we might lash out randomly," Thundercracker reminded him. "Deadlock's issues may be more intense but he also has by far the weakest link to the rest of us."

"He does, although it's getting stronger now. I know I'm probably worried about problems that might not happen," Wing admitted. "I've never had this kind of connection before, and I can't imagine dealing with this in an active war zone. How do the gestalts on Cybertron handle it? They must be extremely protective of each other."

"The Constructicons and some of the Autobot gestalts are as are most trines," Thundercracker admitted. "I don't really know how they did it other than how I coped with Starscream's penchant for constantly getting beaten off the battlefield. On that ... I just learned to mute it and focus on something else."

"A skill I hope we don't need, but it might be important for us to learn," Wing said with a small grin, some of his concerns eased. He might be older chronologically than Thundercracker, but the Seeker had a broader range of experiences and knew how to settle his newfound concerns.

"Just remember, this gestalt, this flock, are all survivors to the core. Innocent or jaded, survival is spark-deep in all of us. We'll manage. This is far better a situation than most of us believed possible."

"Yes," Wing said with a sigh as he offlined his optics and settled down to enjoy their time together.
Pantera is taken to a gallery show of Towodi's work and meets the mech his former self was quite smitten with.

Thundercracker pulled Dagger to the side while the gestalt was getting ready to go out on this major outing.

"You are sure that Towodi understands that what he had with Prowl doesn't give him any rights to Pantera?"

"Yes, he should understand that Pantera is a new mech with no current ties to him," Dagger said quietly as he tried not to draw the attention of the rest of the unit. He didn't need all of them getting anxious or aggressive before they went out in public.


"As would I, and I say that as a medic not a Knight," Dagger admitted just as bluntly. "He needs order and structure and the Knights are the best place to find that. A civilian in a triad with him will pull at his loyalties and coding. From what I have read and remember civilians were rarely long term lovers for Praxian Enforcers."

"It's true for many specialties. Air Martials and military were like that as well," Thundercracker relaxed further. He shifted his gaze at the sound of thrusters and went for the balcony to join the other flight frames going. "See you all there."

Dagger went over to join the other grounders by the elevator. "You looking forward to our trip?"

"Getting out of the Citadel, yes. Seeing a bunch of art, not especially," Deadlock grunted.

"But worth it for the driving." Dagger grinned and stepped inside with them. When they got out several Knights joined in, all headed for the art show and to keep a quiet optic on the Initiates.

It was obvious to all that Pantera was truly enjoying the drive through the city. Dagger figured it was partially his Enforcer coding and also the sheer love of driving all Praxians shared. No matter why it felt good to teek how honestly happy he was. That teek was also a reminder that outside the Citadel Pantera did not feel nearly as relaxed and that was a teek Dagger knew well from others. True or not Pantera, or the Enforcer AI most likely, felt that he was on duty and had to behave much more formally.

A block from the gallery they pulled over and transformed and everyone got a visual reminder that Pantera might not be on duty but his frame screamed that he was.

Scanning the entire area, he took in every mecha around him, looking for any potential trouble. He had a stiff and formal air to him unlike all the Knights around him who were obviously here to relax and enjoy the art. It didn't let up even when the fliers landed beside them until Thundercracker gave
him a small wing dip. Then it was there but much more subdued.

"Shall we go inside?" Jazz asked having watched the display with a bit of amusement. It was adorable because he knew there was nothing serious to it. Just powerful coding that Pantera hadn't quite found balance with yet.

"Yes," Thundercracker answered for the unit. He noted that some Knights held back to avoid swarming the entrance more than the six that had to go in together would.

Deadlock fell into step behind Thundercracker and Pantera as they entered the gallery with Dagger and Jazz. There were still Knights entering behind them, but it felt safer guarding them in this new place. He liked being behind Pantera to threaten Towodi without being seen by Pantera in case the rotor got too handsy.

"Ah you came!" Towodi greeted them as a group with warmth. "It's good to see everyone again. How goes your training effort?" he focused on Thundercracker.

"It's going well," Thundercracker said with a small smile of fondness at the thought of his potential Actions. "Neither Cavu nor Highdive were available to visit tonight. They send their regrets and hope to catch it another night."

"They are always welcome," Towodi fluttered his rotors in a subtle flirtation for him that Thundercracker politely ignored.

"Towodi, this is Pantera, a Knight Initiate," Dagger introduced the pair and caught a hint of the attraction Prowl had felt. Unlike Prowl, Pantera showed none of it.

"Greetings, Towodi," Pantera tried not to be on-duty stiff about it and only partially succeeded.

"Greetings," Towodi said as he stared at Pantera, taking in the new color scheme on a familiar frame with an unfamiliar field and very different manner.

Thundercracker couldn't tell if he was attracted to this new formal mecha or not, but the hesitation was personally encouraging to him.

"Come on, I want to show you something," Jazz tugged on Pantera's arm when the pause got a moment too long. "I think I see what he did with Prowl."

Jazz guided Pantera over to a minibot sized statue standing sentry made of bronze with swirls of dark blue, black and white paint across the frame. A large pair of doorwings with golden panes inside the panels rested at attention. Centered on them was a glyph that Jazz recognized as a very stylized variant of Grandmaster of Teris-Spi. The only thing that didn't fit with the Prowl Jazz knew was the severe looking gold visor.

In all it was a striking tribute to what Prowl held dear.

"It's very different than most of his work," Pantera's voice was soft, his field rich with emotions that centered on a non-sensual attraction.

"It's a fitting memorial to him," Jazz said as he studied the statue. The swirls of paint gave the statue a feel of movement despite the firm stance and solid appearance.

"Thank you," Towodi said as he moved next to the pair. "He was an amazing mech."

"He was," Jazz agreed. "Pain in the aft, loyal, dedicated. Never going to be another quite like him."
"He told you of Trident?" Pantera asked.

"He did, though as a Praxian sculptor I knew of the former living treasure of Praxus long before," Towodi smiled. "I let my subjects tell me what to sculpt. It was impossible not to have Prowl's favorite not influence this more than most of my work."

"It is amazing. Do you know where it will go?" Pantera asked, his frame shifting towards Towodi and away as he tried to decide what to do about his attraction towards the rotor.

"I thought seriously about keeping it to remember him, but the Teris-Spi dojo in New Praxus has mentioned wanting to display it," Towodi admitted candidly as he looked Pantera over. "We'll see after the show is over."

"Both would be appropriate. He did allow them to have official grandmasters again," Pantera said thoughtfully. "It is ... beautiful."

"As are you," Towodi said candidly. "I wasn't entirely certain how to handle the idea of meeting his frame again with a new mecha inside it, but you are very different from Prowl."

Pantera smiled brightly at that and his dark doorwings gave a wiggle of thanks. "I hope to become all that was good in him in time."

Next to him Jazz smiled slightly and relaxed. He knew Pantera appreciated that he was different but never had he expressed it so clearly that he was glad to be different from his ... his creator. Yes. That was a good term for Prowl towards Pantera. Prowl provided a frame, knowledge and spark for Pantera to become himself with.

::I can see it's going well.:: Thundercracker's comm was one of thanks and relief.

::He's not being any more forward with Pantera than he was with you,:: Jazz replied with a bit of amusement.

"You have a good role model in him, and a stable home and family to use as a starting point to develop into a wonderfully unique mecha," Towodi said with a small smile.

"I do, and thank you," Pantera spoke honestly, yet he was also a little grateful when the artist moved away to talk to others.

"So, what do you think of him now that you've met?" Jazz asked after Towodi was out of audial range.

"I understand why Prowl found him so desirable. There's a strong draw even for me and I don't want it," Pantera admitted quietly enough that no one other than Jazz would hear.

"You don't want it? Any particular reason," Jazz asked, curious about Pantera's view of the artist compared to the attraction Prowl had repeatedly acted upon.

Pantera gave him a briefly bewildered look before comprehension flashed across his features. "Relationships work best with a shared culture. I don't want to look outside the Knights."

"So you want to stick with mecha that you have something in common with. I can understand that," Jazz said. "It was always easier for ISO or SpecOps to stick to one another for comfort."

"Also mecha who understand the dedication to duty, the code of conduct and priority tree that is a core part of what I will always be," Pantera detailed the core of how he defined culture in this
There is good reason it is heavily encouraged across all levels and castes of society to stay inside one's group for long-term relationships. Basic understanding comes easier with a common upbringing and training.

"If you want to stay involved with mostly Knights none of us are going to object. We want what's best for you," Jazz replied before shifting topic and raising his voice a bit. "Too bad Cladin couldn't come tonight. I'd be interesting to hear what he thinks of Towodi's work being a fellow metalworker."

"He intends to come next time. Duty comes first," Pantera responded with a teek that held fondness for the truth and priorities of his lover. "What is that?" he motioned towards a stack of hoops that seemed to undulate within the overall diamond shape.

Jazz studied the steel hoops on all sides before commenting, "It kind of reminds me of a wave moving across the surface of the Rust Sea or a spinning column of wind moving across a desert. Those could get huge under the right conditions. The surface here probably develops them."

"It does," Thundercracker spoke as he came near and studied the shape. "Though it looks more like two, large end to large end. It is a rather nice design."

"I've seen oil do that in rivers," Dagger added thoughtfully.

"So this shape can represent many possibilities depending upon the experiences of the observers," Pantera said as he studied the statue in front of him making his own analysis based on the other's observations. He'd researched abstract art before coming to the show. He'd decided that it was somewhat like listening to different mecha describing an incident for a report on a crime or event.

"It's all fluid dynamics," Thundercracker nodded his wings. "Gas, oil, water, energon, gel, lava, liquid metal. They all behave the same way."

Pantera gave him a curious look.

"A former trinemate was a gifted scientist. You can't live that closely with someone and not pick up the basics of what they are passionate about," he explained.

"Just as we are learning about each other's interests," Pantera agreed as he thought about Cladin's mecha-koi and Jazz's music and everything he was learning about those hobbies. "Even if you do not share the interest it allows for expanded communication within the unit."

"It also helps when you need to bounce ideas of someone when you're stuck on something," Jazz added. "A different viewpoint can bring up possibilities that wouldn't have been considered otherwise."

"Sometimes a little knowledge but no formal education with it brings up ideas that work that no one formally trained would think of," Dagger agreed. "Training comes with a set of assumptions that aren't always perfect."

"That too," Jazz agreed. "It's why many of the true breakthroughs are from the self taught. They don't make the same assumptions about what won't work."

"They can also make some of the biggest disasters, although even those sometimes prove useful in the right circumstances," Thundercracker pointed out. "The maneuvers the Aerialbots tried in flight didn't always work the way they intended, but it did force everyone to learn to adapt quickly."

Jazz snickered. "Especially Fireflight. Mech could disrupt the most disciplined formation."
"Many of his flights were disasters in and out of combat," Thundercracker agreed. "I don't think most of my new flock would believe the kind of insanity he caused in the air."

"You might need to record or recall some of his more unusual flights as examples of what not to do," Dagger offered, privately thrilled to have Thundercracker so easily talking about Aurora's creation flock as his own.

"It is a gift of sorts. Rather like Misfire and shooting," Jazz snickered. "Some beings are just like that. They cause havoc all around them without wanting to."

"Those two would make great examples for a comedy set in a war," Deadlock agreed. "Being on the battlefield with them was ridiculous."

"I'm not sure we want to show war as anything but a bad thing here," Pantera almost flinched as his AIs revolted at the idea. He wasn't keen on it either but the two parts of him that had survived war were far more assertive on the subject.

"No, it's not a subject that could be made," Dagger agreed quickly. "A bookfile, audio file or audio vid possibly, depending on the context it was put in."

"Possibly as real examples of mecha who were not suited for but forced into battle. First Aid and Beachcomber could be other examples," Jazz said thoughtfully. "A reminder for adults that not everyone who fought in that war wanted to be out there or should have been out there."

"Misfire may have wanted to fight, but he never would have been allowed near a weapon under any other circumstances," Thundercracker agreed.

"Prowl believed Fireflight would mature out of his distractibility if he survived long enough," Pantera offered. "The twins would be a good story to tell if such a collection is made."

"Yes, there are stories that should be told from both sides," Thundercracker agreed. "Although most of the Decepticons ill-suited for war offlined a long time ago or cracked and became violent."

"Like the twins did. An artist and a merchant, though the gladiator pits likely broke them before the war did," Pantera relayed what Prowl had written. "Prowl's is another story to be told. He was a social, well-adjusted mech before the war. You all know what it did to him."

"Okay, enough of the past, what's this thing supposed to be?" Deadlock asked as he pointed at a small statue to his left. The partial egg shape was open in the middle with pieces extending around to create half of the shape. "Looks like a weird set of talons closing on something to me."

Despite what Deadlock said, both Thundercracker and Pantera teeked the same; a sharp surge of creator coding.

"A freshly hatched egg," Thundercracker countered with a kind of absolute certainty that would not accept a different opinion as correct.

"Egg?" Jazz looked at the pair oddly, then cycled his visor. "Oh, right Seekers come from eggs. Do Praxians?"

"No, but we remember it culturally." Dagger explained.

"So when a new Seeker finally enters the world this is what's left?" Deadlock looked at the inside of the statue curiously. "Is it supposed to be a beginning and an end to stages of life?"
"Roughly. Real egg shells are much thinner," Thundercracker dragged himself from the initial reaction to egg and into what it might mean. "I don't know if rotors lay eggs or not," he mused to buy himself time to think.

"Not normally. Prowl's files indicate it is possible but only a couple framelines do so," Pantera offered. "It looks a bit like a nest too."

"A safe place one leaves," Thundercracker gave more context.

"A safe place that can protect you while you're in it, but you can't grow until you leave it," Dagger added thoughtfully. "I like that. It makes those sharp points defensive."

"The main difference between offense and defense is when it's used," Jazz said as he wondered at Deadlock's easy acceptance of the challenge to his interpretation. Granted no one sane would challenge the Seeker's teek at that moment but backing away would be more normal. Not engaging the new idea. If it held it was a huge leap forward.

"True," Pantera responded to the legal definition he agreed was accurate.

"You can't go back in once you leave either," Deadlock said. "Protection only lasts so long."
Chapter Summary

Photosphere's upgraded to mechling and spends the aching time firmly plastered against Thundercracker and not wanting Wing there.

Photosphere onlined with a jolt and looked around the eyrie for any trouble. She still wasn't used to the size of her new mechling frame although Aurora had promised that things would settle after a few orn. Haji, Cheoseo and Aurora were cuddled together next to her. Aurora was starting to online but the other pair were still recharging soundly. Dismissing them, she looked over at Thundercracker who once again had Wing plastered on top of his frame. It caused her engine to growl, a much deeper sound than she was used to though still high-pitched compared to even Aurora's.

She wanted to reach over and pull the annoying Aerial off her Thundercracker. She just ached too much for it so she settled to try and recharge some more. How did Thundercracker manage to drop into it so easily? Several kliks passed as she tried to force herself into recharge but the aches in her frame kept her from settling. Onlining her optics again she glared at Wing. He looked so warm and peaceful on Thundercracker's chestplate; it should be her drawing comfort from his larger frame.

While she glared Wing twitched, then shifted.

"Go on, you don't want to be late," Thundercracker's voice was low. It was still enough to cause the Knight to rouse and stretch, clearly in no hurry to be gone.

"Here, you'll feel better in a few kliks," Aurora's voice startled Photosphere into striking at her only to find her wrist caught by one expecting the move.

Fighting the annoyance at her lack of control and anger at being pinned, she tried not to growl too loudly as she belatedly reminded herself that striking out at Aurora wasn't acceptable behavior. It didn't help but remembering just how much it hurt to anger the Vision did. Then the aching in her frame began to ease and with it her temper.

"It'll settle in a couple more orns. Until then it's just one of the annoyances in existence," Aurora said. "Want to snuggle on Thundercracker?"

"Yes, please," she replied immediately, taking note of Aurora's teek of approval at her effort to remember polite manners even when stressed. As soon as the older Vision let go she crawled over towards Thundercracker. When he helped her get where she wanted to me a knot of ill-temper and stress unspoolied and she sank down with a grateful sigh as he began to gently stroke her wings in a way she knew well was meant to comfort.

It was much easier to offline her optics and let the warmth and low vibrations of his frame seep in to help soothe her aches. "She's cute like this," the annoying Aerial spoke up from over by the balcony.

"She is. It might be good if you try to recharge with Jazz for a couple nights," Aurora suggested. "She really does need the rest."
"She doesn't like me being here does she?" he said.

No, I don't like it she growled to herself. He took so much of Thundercracker's attention and affection whenever he was around.

Aurora simply motioned to the berth-nest. "You take up her spot and until he's said yes she's unlikely to see you as anything but a threat."

"She does know I've got no interest in training with Thundercracker, right?" the Aerial added.

That's the only reason I tolerate you at all, she growled to herself, engine revving hard. You're not worthy of him, but at least you know it.

"Shu," Thundercracker cooed and shifted his hand to focus her attention towards himself until his gestalt-mate left.

"She knows," Aurora assured him. "Now shoo. I have a new mechling to take care of."

It was good to hear the annoying Aerial leave. Now it was just her and her foster flock. Mecha that knew what she was and weren't afraid of her, and who seemed to recognize that Thundercracker was hers. She hadn't understood the draw before her upgrades. Now she did. She wasn't an Order like so many thought. She was a Vision, a strong, fierce one, and she was being drawn to the Order she could respect. She doubted there was another in the city.

Just as she began to get agitated thinking of that a strong, commanding field wrapped around her and drew her back down to the warmth of recharge.
Chapter Summary

Photosphere spends her first orn not aching focused on Thundercracker and then her first flight.

The movement and heat above him roused Thundercracker from recharge earlier than normal, although he was pleased that he didn't combat boot from the stimulation. Onlining his optics, he stared at Photosphere, whose engine was rumbling loudly as she pressed herself across his frame. With a knowing teek and soft smile he reached up to stroke her sides.

"No longer aching?" He asked and willingly gave her the kiss she sought.

"Different kind of ache," she shivered at his responsiveness.

Thundercracker carefully stroked the edges of her wings, listening to her responses to the touch she wouldn't have understood just a few orns ago. It wasn't going to be exactly like watching Pantera learn to enjoy interfacing with the rest of the flock; this time it was his task to show her the pleasure her frame could bring. In only a few strokes she'd all but given up trying to return the attention. Her field did what her frame no longer had the coordination for.

The click of her interface panel opening, possibly both of them, was masked by a needy sound and the scrape of her frame against his.

Thundercracker took a moment to pull the tube he'd gotten from Aurora out of his subspace. She whined a bit at the temporary loss of contact with her wings, but he was determined to make this as painless as possible for her. She'd appreciate it later; the care he showed even if she likely didn't care if it hurt or not.

He opened the tube one handed and squeezed the lubricant out onto this fingers. Photosphere was quite vocal in her enjoyment as he ran his fingers around the rim of her valve, making certain to thoroughly coat the seal. The heat behind it nearly burned and the lubricant sloshed as she pressed against his fingers with the utter shamelessness of a healthy youth.

"More," she gasped out as she gripped his chest vents to keep herself oriented against the pleasure surging through her frame.

Thundercracker obliged, fondling the edge of her wing with one hand while the other hand moved to her open spike cover and worked to coat the seal there with lubricant. He'd have to see to it first or it would break the seal itself if the tip nudging against his fingers was any indication.

Photosphere shuddered and keened as her legs came down to clamp against his hips. It all but pinned his hand between them as she ground against him. Her back arched as energy crackled along her frame.

At least his hand was pinned against her array, and he made certain to put it to good use. He placed a kiss against her shoulder nibbling on the exposed cables as he fondled that spot on the edge of her
wing that was driving her charge higher the fastest.

Her grip tightened without much warning and her frame froze with her face buried against his shoulder. At every point of contact her charge jumped to him and made it harder to keep his spike retracted. It felt so good to be the first to someone who didn't panic at the loss of control. Like so much of what she was Photosphere embraced this reaction without fear and simply reveled in the pleasure and indulging what she wanted.

Ready for another chance to indulge he carefully rolled her over onto her back as she relaxed. She made a rumble of displeasure when he pulled away only to stare in confusion as he kissed his way down her chestplate towards her hips. "Be patient; good things come to those who wait," he teased before running his glossa around the rim of her spike seal.

Amber optics flickered off and her face went slack. Her hands gripped the large pillow under her and her hips lifted, seeking more of that incredible sensation that was so much better than rubbing against him.

He could feel her spike straining against the seal as he flicked his glossa lightly across the tip. It was as responsive as the rest of her, jolting under his touch and straining against the weakening seal. She gasped and rolled her hips up with every movement he made. Despite the overload that had just drained her Photosphere was already trembling with little zips between them.

"Relax and let it happen," Thundercracker purred over her spike seal and had to jerk back a touch to avoid catching her spike against his nose as it surged upwards. Thundercracker began to lick the tip of the spike while his hands held her hips still. He could hear her engine racing and the gasps coming from her mouth with each touch of his glossa. Her field surged and tangled with his, encouraging, pleading and sharing how amazing this felt to her.

He let his own control slip enough to allow his spike to emerge, letting her teek how much her enjoyment was affecting him. Mutual pleasure during interfacing was something to actively encourage at this stage in her development. He waited until he teeked her respond to his arousal before swallowing her spike in a smooth motion. The buck into it strained his ability to keep her hips down without hurting her and he had little down that the threesome going on only a wing-length away was hurting both their endurance.

"Thundercracker!" her keen was commanding and pleading all in one as her charge crackled where they touched. He applied a bit of suction to her spike even as he tried to move with her hips. She didn't have the control to make it any easier for him as she thrashed at the peaking pleasure. It was a reminder why tradition encouraged one's first lover to be an older member of the flock, one who knew enough to not he hurt by the loss of control.

With a screech Photosphere pushed the first burst of transfluid from her spike and whited out from the intensity so much sharper than the tactile overload she'd just enjoyed.

Thundercracker reached down and lightly stroked his own spike as he watched her begin to recover from the intensity of the overload. His own charge had climbed as he played with Photosphere’s spike, but he still had enough control to clearly remember his role and to concentrate more on her pleasure than his.

"Felt 'mazing," Photosphere mumbled and reached for him almost blindly, her coordination still marginal.

"Good," Thundercracker rumbled as he pulled up to lay his frame on top of hers and making certain their arrays were lined up so she could feel his spike against hers. She shivered and rocked against
him, rubbing their spikes together while her hands and mouth focused on what was directly above her: his cockpit.

The contact made him shiver as he braced himself above her with one hand planted firmly above her head. He briefly hoped she wouldn't develop Pantera's size kink from this encounter but the thought passed quickly from his processors. Instead, he reached down and wrapped his hand around both of their spikes, rubbing them together for a few strokes. That was all it took to distract her from doing anything but enjoying his touch with a moan. Her optics shuttered as she tried to move against his hand and spike to increase the sensation.

"Want to feel that inside me," she eventually managed to gasp.

"As you wish," he said with a bit of amusement in his voice. Removing his hand from her spike, he lined it up with her valve. He knew this was going to hurt her some because it was inevitable, but the pleasure she'd already felt should help minimize that quickly. That trusting teek rich with desire and arousal was something he hadn't expected to earn so soon but he was glad for it. It made the moment of pain when her valve seal was torn away and pushed inside her with the tip of his spike all the more tolerable.

He stilled briefly when their arrays came flush to catch his charge and control it. Any regular lover would expect him to only last a few thrusts. As Photosphere's first it was his duty to last at least as long as she did.

It didn't feel like it was going to be as challenging as some in the past because she was extremely eager as if the pain didn't faze her at all. She wasn't coordinated enough to assist him by matching his thrusts, but she was vocal with her pleasure and was almost clawing at his cockpit by his third thrust. Her frame knew a bit more, the calipers rippled around him, drawing more than a few moans from him.

"Yes. Yes!" Photosphere keened under him, seeking more control over their movement but without the skills or size to do so. The failure did nothing to hamper her enjoyment of the pleasure building inside her.

It was obvious she was going to become an enthusiastic participant who'd try to dominate most partners. As it was she was definitely driving Thundercracker towards an overload and it took all his skill and will to hold off until she keened and stiffened. Finally his duty done Thundercracker let go of his self control and thrust into her one last time to pump his transfluid as deep inside her as he could.

As he came down he didn't collapse on top of her, but he did slump over her braced up by his arms. He could still hear and see the trio beside them going strong on their own third round. This was another thing he'd forgotten to miss about having a real flock. As good as the overload felt the social normality of it felt even better.

"That felt amazing," Photosphere's voice was laced with static and echoed the deep contentment in her field. "Tired though."

"Go ahead and recharge," Thundercracker told her as he rolled over and shifted her onto his chestplate. "You're going to have a busy orn today."

She hummed softly and snuggled against him, happy to be against his broad, strong frame.

Still being used as a pillow by the booting Photosphere, Thundercracker lay back and glanced over
at Aurora. He'd worn her out in a good way that morning, so hopefully she'd be in a good mood for the coming lecture and absorb a couple key points. He already knew she'd be one of those that learned on repetition and application.

"How's her teek?" Aurora asked.

"Content, steady," he answered. "And booting up."

"Good. Hopefully this conversation will go better than some of the others," Aurora said.

"She'll pay attention because she wants to fly," Thundercracker observed right before Photosphere finished onlining.

"Always try," Photosphere said and stretched, including a full rotation of her more-complex wing-joints. "Do want to fly."

"It's just strong incentive to work harder. You're having a busy orn today," Thundercracker said with an encouraging teek.

She glanced around, then down at Thundercracker. "You start while we clean up, then I'll listen to Aurora?"

"Does that sound like a good plan to you too?" Thundercracker asked Aurora, reasserting her authority as the adult Vision in the eyrie at the same time that he encouraged Photosphere's attempt at compromise.

"It is agreeable," Aurora nodded her wings, privately thrilled at such a reasonable suggestion. Photosphere had not been nearly as difficult as she'd expected.

"Good. I feel sticky." Photosphere made a face and got up with suitable care for Thundercracker's wings.

"That's normal if ones falls into recharge after interface. Once you have better control I recommend cleaning cloths to wipe down with if you're tired or a shower if you still have energy once you and your partner are satisfied," Thundercracker said as he got up once she was clear. He was also unpleasantly sticky, but it was a minor discomfort he'd already known was coming when he'd agreed to help the mechling through first interface.

"I'll remember," she promised as they walked to the lift, content to walk on his left instead of rushing ahead.

He resisted the approval the gesture brought in his coding. It was a gesture Starscream had rarely ever made for him, and Thundercracker once again cursed the folly of his second Vision's flock. If they had only recognized and accepted what he was he could have had similar opportunities to what Photosphere was getting and Thundercracker wouldn't have needed to deal with the crazy result.

Even so the lack of rejection seemed to make Photosphere happy and Thundercracker quietly prayed that she wouldn't make a proposal to him before he had an Action to put the brakes on it. He really, truly did not need another half-socialized military Vision. Hopefully this was just a mechling crush that would fade once she started spending more time again with others her own age and enjoying the attention as a mechling should. A Knight would attract attention from the more adventurous Orders and Actions, and there were several Seekers here who could explain trining with a Knight and her type from the civilian point of view. He was sure Aurora would be doing it for the most part. As a military-coded Vision and Photosphere's guardian it was expected.
He turned the shower on and quietly noted that she was now tall enough to reach the same controls he did. Granted he reached down and she reached up but only a few orns ago she would have to jump. The liquid heat drew a groan from him and his topics powered down to simply indulge for a klik.

Only the fact that he never lost track of her kept the startled jump from happening when he felt a washcloth slid along the top of his wings with extra care with the ailerons.

"Thank you for the assistance," He said as he kept any potential arousal out while allowing some of the pleasure at the attention to enter his field. It was a careful balancing act to encouraging her attentiveness to an interfacing partner while preventing any obsessions from developing. "Now, one of the most important things I can teach you is this: Do not accept the first offer of a trine if it does not feel right for you. It is good and proper to be choosy; this is a lifelong commitment that will shape all of your futures. Your true trine mates will not try to change you into someone you are not, but they will help you become a better mecha."

"Not many are going to want me," she told him quietly. "I scare my age-mates."

Thundercracker sent her a small wave of understanding through his field. In this they were very similar, "You have gained a lot of control and are willing to continue to improve; that is something that will go a long way in helping you fit back in with your peer group. You'll find that some of them will change their minds and find you attractive as you all mature and figure out your interests. Remember you don't have to find your trine immediately. I was over a thousand and had a career when I first trined. There are a few older Order/Action pairs that might find your stronger temperament desirable especially since it is so rare in civilian Visions. It might be that a younger pair will find you alluring. What you choose to do as a function will bring you into contact with different aspects than flight class as well."

"A thousands vorns?" Photosphere paused as she tried to wrangle with the concept of being without a trine for more than six and a half times longer than she'd existed.

"Yes. You have time. There will be many flight classes before it will be a worry," he reassured her firmly and was pleased when she began to clean his wings again. "One important thing to remember is that there are social expectations of Visions regardless of whether you are military or civilian coded. It is acceptable to be strong-willed and opinionated in the eyrie, but a Vision does not disrespect their Order by actively challenging them in public. Deferring to them is not a sign of submission; it is a sign of respect." Thundercracker wished once again that Starscream had been taught that distinction.

He knew from her teek that it wasn't something she was ready to understand yet. It wasn't even a disappointment. She'd heard him. Not understanding was something that could be worked with. He'd fully expected some parts of today's lecture would be repeated many, many times before she grasped them.

That lead to another topic he figured she'd have difficulty with immediately, "You also need to remember that non-Seekers will react differently to you than Seekers. They will place a greater importance on your status as a Knight or priest than your role as a Seeker. Many of them will not understand the distinction that you are a Vision. My flock is an exception to that rule because they are learning more about Seeker culture than most other mecha ever will or would want to know."

Photosphere stilled again, but this time it was thoughtful and she was still thinking when she resumed cleaning his wing. She was thinking when she finished and they switched places so he could clear her wings.
"So grounders just see a Seeker, no matter what they are?" she eventually asked while scrubbing her chest clean and pressing her wings into his touch.

"Correct. Most of them do not have a reference for the differences we have coding-wise as a frame type. Praxians are the grounders most likely to comprehend it due to shared past connections, but even most of them have difficulties recognizing the differences between an Order and an Action. It can be both frustrating and liberating depending on the situation," Thundercracker admitted.

"Huh," she grunted thoughtfully, then shivered when her hand reached her spike cover and it snapped open.

Thundercracker deliberately cleaned his own interface panel as he paused his lecture to see whether she would give into following more pleasure or work to learn control over her interface systems. He couldn't be surprised when her first opportunity to explore herself while not aching was indulged. Yes, she cleaned up too but it wasn't long before her focus was on touching her fully pressurized spike; one that was out in arousal rather than on command. He waited patiently while she explored. It shouldn't take too long; she was too young and impatient to make the pleasure last. It would likely be vorns before it even occurred to her it could.

He was ready when she wasn't for what an overload did while standing and kept her from crashing to the floor while her motor controls were scrambled. Her field flared back against his with an invitation to play before she had her pedes fully under her.

"Play time later," Thundercracker reminded her, ignoring the invitation. "Others treating us just as Seekers is helpful for mecha like Master Aurora and yourself who do not conform to what many view as standard Vision behavior. That is not to say that every Vision should behave the same way. Some want to focus on the eyrie and flock; others have jobs and positions outside of it as well as their duties to the flock. Both options should be open to all Visions."

"Mmm, I'll be the second, like Master Aurora," Photosphere cycled several deep vents in an effort to obey and focus on cleaning herself. Eventually a growl escaped when he was well done and simply enjoying the liquid heat. "How do you clean up when every touch feels like that?"

Thundercracker smiled. "Your systems are still running hot due to your recent upgrade. As you get used to your protocols and understand your frame better you will gain more control and be able to clean up much as you did before your upgrade. For now try to turn them off. It should buy you a klik to get the last of it off."

She cycled another deep vent and got the washcloth ready before navigating all the new commands. Her wings gave a small sag of relief when she found the master control for interfacing protocols and turned it off. As quickly as she could she wiped down pelvic plating and interfacing components that were suddenly not incredibly distracting.

"Better?" He asked with some amusement. "Now, there is one last important thing we need to discuss. No matter how annoyed you are, do not physically attack a potential rival for a trine mate or lover. It will get you in severe trouble with Master Aurora and the Peacekeepers."

"I'll try," Photosphere promised the most she could. "I almost never intended to damage things when I did."

He dipped his wings in understanding. "Control is not an easy thing to learn. Mistakes will happen. Even so those mistakes will carry penalties. One thing to remember is that the mecha you are interested in will not appreciate a physical attack and will probably reject you for it."
"I'll try," she promised again.

"That is the best we can ask for," Thundercracker replied. Seeing that she was finished cleaning up, Thundercracker turned off the shower and helped her dry off before they returned to Master Aurora in the eyrie. While Photosphere endured her final pre-flight instruction as a grounded youth he focused on the gathering Seekers outside. This wasn't going to be just Photosphere's first flight. This was going to be a very real test of how well he'd absorbed civilian flying rules and laws. The four full flocks -- Photosphere's creation flock, Aurora's creation flock, Haji's flock and the Seekers of the Citadel were all coming in. Every flight frame of the Citadel that could manage it was there and on wing beyond the mass of Seekers. He suspected that much of the Citadel's grounded population would be watching as well.

Yes, the first flight was the most important moment in a Seeker's functioning but even by Thundercracker's pre-war standards this was going to be a huge audience. He reminded himself that any fostering done with consent of the creation flock would have had such a crowd. It was a reminder of just how many ties this young Seeker had and the connections she had among the civilians and Knights.

Looking out at the crowd on the edges he spotted Wing flying relatively close to Ciel and some of the Seeker Peacekeepers. It made sense though given she was the first military-coded Seeker created here and had given rise to the real concern that more would appear. Especially since her flock had no real history of the coding. Even those only indirectly involved with her life wanted to see for themselves that she was adapting and was capable of thriving here on this isolated, civilized world.

Judging by the startled flare of Photosphere's wings and field as she stepped onto the balcony she hadn't grasped just how many would be there either. Aurora took off with her trinemates and Thundercracker and Photosphere's creators landed in a very intentional pubic show that they were still her creators no matter who was doing the bulk of raising her for now. Thundercracker was careful of his placement as Aurora's mechling creation and mindful that he was being watched nearly as much as the freshly upgraded mechling on the balcony right now.

It wasn't long before the first good sign was given: Stormdat, Pitchback and Mubakkir all lifted off to hover in front of the sphere of wings and almost directly in front of Photosphere. It didn't surprise Thundercracker that she wasn't afraid of falling. She had no sense of self-preservation as far as he was concerned and probably would never have much of one.

With one long look around, each pause marking a mecha she recognized but needed a moment to place. When she came to focus on her creators there was no hesitation in her as she leapt off the balcony and ignited her thrusters.

Thundercracker watched her intently looking for any faltering or signs that the flight was straining her. He didn't expect to see anything; she had a strong frame to go with her temper and he knew her thrusters were more than strong enough to support her.

She wobbled momentarily but managed to straighten out into a decently stable flight towards her creators. Her misjudgment in stopping was easily dealt with by adults who parted then remained stationary as she came to an unstable hover and gradually turned to face the beaming expressions of her creators.

"Photosphere!" Mubakkir cheered his creation succeeding in her test of being Seeker. If nothing else she would not be shunned for failing to fly.

A cheer of approval passed through the flocks starting with her creation flock and spreading out to the others. Ultimately it included all the Seekers present and even the other Knights and visitors.
watching.

Thundercracker knew his flock on the ground was also celebrating because of what she and her success represented for them personally. There was a decent chance any creation of his would have military coding, and this was a good omen for his own creations' futures. They might have a limited choice in functions but they would have them.
Orn 703

Chapter by gatekat

Chapter Summary

Thundercracker and Highdive go on a date to listen to Jazz perform.

"Greetings, Master Aurora. Is Thundercracker ready?" Highdive asked as she stepped into the eyrie and glanced around for her date. She gave a small wing dip to Knight Lightwing waiting patiently to escort them to the club. She knew that he like most of the other Knights didn't view being escort as a burden; Thundercracker had mentioned that the strange Praxian Aerial enjoyed hearing Jazz perform and by being an escort it counted as work.

"He'll be here in just a klik as soon as he finishes helping Cheoseo," Aurora said with a bit of amusement.

"Greetings Highdive," Photosphere said from her spot at the table.

"Greetings Photosphere," she replied in kind. The freshly upgraded mechling unsettled her at times but it was becoming less so. Like any young mechling Photosphere was fixated on interfacing and flying, the order up for grabs on a given orn. Instead of becoming more violent like most mechlings she'd actually calmed down.

And she flirted, abet badly, with almost anything with wings.

"Are you coming back here with Thundercracker after the Jazz' show?" the young mechling asked having blatantly made the assumption that Thundercracker would be immediately returning.

"I'm planning to," Highdive answered, relieved that Photosphere seemed to still be tolerating her interest in the Order. Personally, she thought Thundercracker was deluding himself if he thought the mechling's crush was going away anytime soon. She couldn't blame his desire for it to though. Photosphere seemed a lot like the Vision that had scarred him so badly during the war.

The tilt in Photosphere's wings was too easy to read.

"We will see," Thundercracker's deep rumble of annoyance carried over the roar of his thrusters as he landed on the balcony as he and Cheoseo came up from below. "Hello Highdive."

"Hello. You look more than ready for a good time tonight," she remarked as she stared at her date, filing away Photosphere's interfacing desires for later discussion. She'd never seen him apply a silvery shimmer like that to his frame. Looking closer she realized the layering and consistency reminded her a bit of the swirls on Pantera's frame.

"I would prefer a shower and scrub first. This is undignified," he huffed and looked down at himself. "At least we're going to a club," he dipped a wing to her in suggestion they could go.

"No one will think poorly of you for decking out like a normal mechling going clubbing," Highdive teased lightly as she gave the others a small wing dip goodbye before they followed Lightwing out to the balcony. "Besides, Jazz will be shiny enough to draw everyone's attention away from you."
"I know, and he revels in it," Thundercracker tried to relax as they took off and smoothly settled into formation as an Order-Action pair with Lightwing flying further off enough not to link to them. It wasn't a very long flight from the Citadel to the club, but Highdive enjoyed every chance to go flying as a pair with Thundercracker. She was trying not to get too hopeful about spending the rest of her existence flying next to him as a trine mate, but the longer they dated the more she was getting more hopeful it would happen some orn. It wasn't an official count that he was no doubt keeping but she had enough friends to be confident that he dated her more than twice as often as he dated Cavu.

Following his lead she headed down to land near the club entrance and was very happy to lay a hand on his arm as he paid the cover for them and led her inside the fairly small club. With room for only three score it was difficult not to notice the Great Swords and familiar faces with there being a dozen of them.

"Thundercracker! Highdive!" Jazz's welcoming cry drew her attention to the silvery white mech decked out in colorful scroll work, trim lines and an intentional coat of glitter as he waved and headed for them with a wide grin.

"Jazz," Thundercracker greeted him with a nod of his helm and wings, their relationship clear in the designation.

"Looking good," Jazz looked the pair over and focused on Thundercracker's shimmering frame and the small flicker of annoyance in his field.

"We're looking forward to your show tonight," Highdive added smoothly, trying to discretely keep Jazz from commenting to the Order on the glitter.

"Looks like it's going to be a full house tonight," Jazz said with a smile and a bit of a bounce of excitement.

"Indeed, though I can't be surprised. Your performances are enjoyable," Thundercracker gave a faint smile for his flock-mate's excitement. "They aren't here just to support you."

"I know. It's awesome," Jazz's field actually wiggled in the flare of enjoyment at the truth. "Helps keep the least reputable places from trying anything too. Only the good clubs want the influx of Knights."

"Are the others going to make it?" Highdive asked with a wing-motion towards the table with Pantera, Dagger and Cladin.

Jazz shook his head. "Deadlock's at a pedeball game with Kimark and Wing's got duty, though he might make it later. I'm pretty sure that's actually a date," he grinned at the threesome.

"Really? Good for them," Highdive looked at the odd trio sitting at the table. She'd only met the larger Knight a handful of times, but he seemed nice and very attentive of the mechling. Dating the flock's medic was rarely a bad thing.

"Yap. I can't tell if they know if they're as serious as you two but I expect it'll last. Pantera is totally smitten with Cladin. It's really adorable. I don't think it's as serious with Dagger but he'll do the right thing if it ends," Jazz's energy mellowed for a moment to the soft affection of seeing something that made him feel good. Then he was right back to his bouncy self. "You two need a drink and a table unless you intend to dance all night."

"We'll get a table for now," Thundercracker guided Highdive towards a table one over from where the trio were sitting. She couldn't help appreciating that he was balancing his desire to keep an optic
on his younger flock mate with a willingness to keep their dates separate. Dagger's doorwing wiggle said the dominant of that date noted and appreciated it as well.

"Do Praxians have coding like we do for who's what?" she asked quietly.

"No, they figure it out on their own and if Prowl's memories are anything to go by some of them change roles as readily as they transform," Thundercracker answered, his voice also quiet but without her concern of offending the Praxians nearby.

"So different and yet so similar to us. Coding certainly does strange things in different frame types," Highdive said thinking about the oddity of not knowing how to fit together as a trine. Glancing over at the counter to note what was available, she asked, "What do you want to drink?"

"A mood whiplash if they have it. Otherwise high grade," he said and didn't really hide the appreciative look he gave her retreating form.

Knowing he thought she looked good was always a boost to her ego, and Highdive couldn't help throwing a bit of strut in as she walked away from him. Once it was her turn at the counter, she ordered two mood whiplashes and impulsively added a serving of oil crisps dusted with copper and carbon to share. She gave him a bit of a show walking back as well and caressed his field when she set the drinks and basket on the table. His caressed back with approval and a taste of the arousal she had caused.

Picking up one of the crisps she held it out just far enough for him to either take from her or eat from her fingers depending upon how daring he wanted to be in public. Either response would help publicly stake her claim on him as her Order. Her wings quivered nearly as much as her field when he leaned forward and nibbled it right from her fingers. It was a move that got a not-so-quiet rev of Pantera's engine and she accepted it as the complement to her choice of Order that it was. Pantera wasn't an Action so his attraction wasn't competition.

She didn't think he'd be an Action even if he was a Seeker; he acted more like an Order or Vision to her. Focusing briefly on Thundercracker's strange flock she had to agree with him that Jazz, Wing and Deadlock could all almost be considered Actions in non-Seeker frames. It was really for the best since that was the position best suited for an impure Seekers as far as most were concerned. Pantera was like any hatching: far too young to be showing what he was yet. Prowl may well have been a military Vision but there was no knowing what Pantera would be until he was much older.

Highdive smiled faintly to herself and caught the curiosity-question from Thundercracker. "I just had a silent conversation about what kind of Seekers your flock-mates are."

It earned a flared of surprise, then warmth as he smiled and offered her a crisp held carefully between two fingers.

Leaning forward she gently lifted it out from his fingers with her glossa and savored the taste. "You should be proud of your flock; they all fit together well."

"We do," he admitted. "It's been a strange path the past few vorns have taken us on. The longer we're here the more I'm grateful for it."

"I'm very glad you're here," Highdive admitted before quieting as Jazz took the stage and started his set. It was an upbeat song she recognized from one of her siblings' vids. She had to agree with many others. He was good. She'd heard him practice before but he came alive on stage and brought that energy to the song and it seemed like the entire room.
She caught movement she wasn't expecting and glanced towards the Praxians where Pantera was drawing Cladin to his pedes to join those dancing.

The larger Knight reluctantly followed Pantera onto the dance floor and started following his movements. He wasn't the most graceful of the dancers, but his martial training was at least keeping him from tripping himself. The way Pantera melted against him seemed more than reason enough for him to continue. Leaning closer to Thundercracker, she asked, "Do you want to join them?"

"I would," Thundercracker knocked back what was left of his mood whiplash and paused when he heard a whistle-click. "Are you going to finish? Dagger will watch it if not."

She gave Dagger a thankful wing flip before leaving the partial cube and leftover crisps to follow Thundercracker out onto the dance floor. She tried to recall some of the dance moves she'd seen in the vid even as she focused on Thundercracker's actions. Less than half a klik in and she knew he knew less about the official moves than she did. This was going to be much like Pantera and Cladin: just moving to the music. It let her relax a bit and simply enjoy the energy, motion and feel of Thundercracker close. It was a bit like flying together. The big difference was that it was a lot easier to touch here than it was in the air although it was no match for the excitement of soaring through the air beside him. She noted the change of song while they were on the floor, but the beat and tempo were close enough that they didn't falter as it changed.

"I'd like to go flying after this, before we return to my eyrie," Thundercracker's low rumble and field spoke of more than just flying if she wanted.

"I'd love it," She replied, thinking about the joy of having him to herself again however briefly before heading back to the mechling waiting in the eyrie. Photosphere could be a fun addition at times, but she needed so much attention right now. Briefly Highdive wished they could go back to her eyrie, but it wasn't worth the potential hassle later from Gloaming and his trine. For now they had the skies and dates like this and Photosphere wouldn't be nearly the hassle in a few vorns. She might not be over Thundercracker but she shouldn't be a beginner desperate for attention anymore.

"Good," he shivered faintly in anticipation without losing track of the dance or music as they sank back into enjoying the movement and contact.

Jazz switched to what she realized was a mix based on a song she remembered hearing at other clubs. The tune had always been catchy, but he'd thrown a few extras in to liven it up.

"He must feel confident to put his own angle to it," Thundercracker rumbled in pleasure at his flock-mate's success.

"It's catchy but not so out there to throw anyone off," she agreed as they headed over to the table so she could finish off her drink and they finished the last of the crisps.

Thundercracker gave a covert glance at Lightwing to be sure the Knight wouldn't have to gulp his drink and found him just finishing the cube off. It was enough that he stood and offered Highdive a hand up. "Ready to fly?"

"Yes," Highdive said as she gave Dagger a wing dip and a nod, pleased that Thundercracker had enough trust in him to watch her fuel. It bode well for the future that his trust in the grounder Knight did not appear to be misplaced. In their leisurely pace from the club Lightwing was out before they were and had some altitude when Thundercracker's turbines revved.

"Catch me if you can," he teased and launched fast.
Highdive shot up after him climbing rapidly after the Order. She didn't have his mass and skill in the air, but she had learned how to use her lighter frame to chase after him. It was a fun contest that never failed to rev both of them up. Flying close to the ceiling as high as she had ever been she used everything he'd taught her to close on him. It didn't matter to either of them that he chose a path that gave her the best odds. She still had to work for it, to catch up and come up under him, belly to belly. Now it was only a question of whether he'd allow her to be there or roll them over so she was on top.

A klik of teasing her by allowing her to close the last length between them and he gently took formal control and responsibility by rolling them over so he was flying on his back and carefully matched her speed. Sensors and teek both told her he was more than aroused enough and his spike panel was open. It was not her choice to come down the last bit and join him.

She opened her own panel and matched his course as aerial interfacing protocols took over to prevent damage to equipment that was impossibly vulnerable to the slightest shifts in alignment at this speed. There was good reason she was the only one of her class to have done this with a potential trine mate. Any adult in the area would stop two mechlings from trying. She suspected that wasn't true when Thundercracker had grown up when life wasn't valued nearly as much.

The intensity of flying like this and being so free was intoxicating in a way high grade couldn't match. As more and more of her conscious processor space wasn't taken up by flying she could devote more to feeling and simply enjoying the sensation of the magnetic locks and then the slide of his familiar spike into her. Despite knowing the shape it felt nothing like interfacing on a berth or even against a wall. There was no slide, no motion involved up here. It was only ripples and pulses of energy into equipment used to friction. Instead the friction was on their plating, especially their wings, as they soared through the sky. It was both a decadent show anyone could potentially watch and private up here so high above the city. She'd read stories about Cybertronian avianoids that mated like this on the wing, tumbling towards the ground only to pull up at the last possible moment. She knew she wasn't a good enough flier to try something like that just yet and while Thundercracker no doubt was he wouldn't try until she was good enough.

That was about the last thought she had before the intoxicating pleasure of mixing flight and interfacing claimed her. It was a floating sensation for the moments before the overload hit, Thundercracker first and then hers barely a nanoklik later.

After she recovered she was as impressed as always that Thundercracker had managed to fly so smooth and straight even during an overload. The protocols obviously helped keep them together, but it was a visible testament to how good of a flier he really was that even this didn't make him falter. The shiver of separation was restricted to their fields until he had fully withdrawn and retracted and the magnetic lock released them to their own control.

::Thank you,: Thundercracker rumbled, his field and tone full of warmth.
Cavu waited for Thundercracker to arrive at the park. It was public place but still secluded and close to perfect for what he'd been expecting for the past couple decaorns. He'd known for a while now that Thundercracker was spending considerably more time with Highdive than with him, and he thought he'd figured out what this requested meeting was about. The small part of him that wasn't deeply disappointed at not having such an impressive Order was relieved to not be linked to such a strange flock. He didn't mind them but they were strange with ways of thinking he didn't understand and he was entirely too aware that every one of them was incredibly dangerous if he moved wrong or said something that triggered a reflex.

He watched as the most graceful, powerful and skilled flier of all the untrined Seekers flew in smoothly with his adoptive creator-Vision on his wing. Thundercracker set down neatly close to Cavu while Aurora set down a polite distance away.

"Good orn, Thundercracker," he said while trying not to be wistful about what could have been. There was no point in dwelling upon what wasn't going to happen, and he was going to take the mature route and not make things harder for either of them. At least he'd gotten some good flight training and contacts out of the experience. If he played this right it might even continue. He knew Thundercracker still spent time with Tailslide and they had agreed not to trine after two dates.

"Good orn, Cavu," Thundercracker didn't hide that he was uncomfortable. "I have chosen my Action."

"I assume I should pass my congratulations on to Highdive?" he said keeping his wings and voice stable even if a bit of resignation managed to slip into his field.

"It would be suitable," Thundercracker let out a small vent of relief and extended his field in support. "You fly well, Cavu. You will have an Order worthy of you."

"You and I might have been compatible at one time, but she suits you better right now. I hope the two of you will be happy and find a good Vision," Cavu offered. That was another reason he was honestly relieved not to be paired with Thundercracker. He'd seen how Photosphere acted around him and he didn't think he could handle her temperament on a regular basis, especially once Thundercracker started to court other Visions. "I look forward to continuing to see the two of you in flight class."

"Thank you. Perhaps after class after as well?" Thundercracker offered tentatively. It didn't matter how old he was. That moment when he had no idea how a meeting would end always stressed him.

"I'm looking forward to it," Cavu said straightening up and allowing a tentative smile to emerge. It emerged further when Thundercracker returned it and relaxed. "At the least I'm looking forward to getting more flight tips from you."
"It would be my pleasure," Thundercracker said honestly. "You are a good student. I like your music as well."

"Well, I assume you're going to be busy today, so I'll see you at next class," Cavu graciously offered Thundercracker a way to end the awkward conversation. It was time to go back to his eyrie and give careful consideration to his remaining options and look at waiting to see how the next class held up compared to the powerful Order.

Aurora was well ahead of Thundercracker when Highdive joined him and settled on his wing.

::Ready to get the formalities over with?: he asked with a wiggle of excitement.

::Primus, yes,: Highdive said almost shivering with excitement and a bit of trepidation. It wasn't going to happen today, but this was the first official step towards leaving her flock and joining Thundercracker's flock. It was going to be a big change for her, but she was determined to be up for the challenge.

::Good. Northwind and Aurora have been nothing but agreeable. I foresee no issues. What of Order Nightflight and your creators?:

::Nightflight will have no issues; he's known about and discreetly supported my interest in you since shortly after you joined the flight class. My creators understand my interest and have helped keep Gloaming from causing any more problems for me. Silversun did voice a worry about the possibility of military-coded grand-creations, but Photosphere has turned out well and that has helped soothe my carrier's concern,: Highdive explained.

::Good. I've helped raise many of them and before the war I was prepared for what to expect with my own,: he assured her. ::I will prepare both of you before we create on what to expect.::

::That'll help reassure them even though they know I've been taking notes about handling Photosphere,: Highdive replied knowing all of her creators would be reassured by that confidence. Order Greenflash had remarked favorably a time or two about how Haji's trine took responsibility for Photosphere and was handling her without completely usurping her origin flock.

::You can also remind him that my adoptive flock and creator has raised military creations as well. Master Aurora raised four to adulthood that became Knights. They raised her. We will not be alone,: he said as they watched Aurora land so she could be in place for the simple event.

::We'll tell them together,: Highdive agreed as she followed Thundercracker down to land in front of Flock Order Northwind. She wasn't going to show any nervousness at this point; she was Thundercracker's choice and had proven herself to him. Even his gestalt flock accepted her, and they were tougher and more dangerous critics than most Seekers here could ever be.

"Welcome Thundercracker, Highdive," Northwind kept his voice in the ritual cadence to signal he knew full well what was about to happen. Flanking him were his trinemates. Beyond the Vision stood Aurora.

Just that was enough to allow Thundercracker to relax into a presentation he'd made before and believed was a good one.

"Flock Order Northwind. I would present my Action, Highdive," Thundercracker stood steady and sure.

Northwind tipped his wings slightly towards the young Action. "Action Highdive, do you wish to
join our flock as a member of Thundercracker's trine?"

"Yes, Flock Order Northwind," Highdive replied.

"Do you submit yourself to my authority as Flock Order?" Northwind asked.

"Yes, Flock Order Northwind," she controlled her excitement to a small flutter of her wings and her field.

"Then welcome. Come and be introduced to your new flock," Northwind angled his wings in a greeting that his trine copied. Beyond them Aurora's wings gave an excited flutter and she smiled warmly at the pair.

Highdive waited until Thundercracker had stepped forward to follow him over to officially meet the leaders of her new flock and her Order's adopted creator before following them down into the eyrie to continued the official introductions of Seekers she knew, at least in passing.

After the relatively easy acceptance of his flock Thundercracker knew he wasn't going to have nearly as easy a time convincing her creation flock to give her up to him. Though she'd always be part of them socially she would no longer count among them legally. That social connection also meant they would be bound to the very non-tradition flock of Northwind and Thundercracker's own gestalt flock. He was strong in the air and had a solid future ahead of him; that didn't mean that they were eager to be tied to him. Especially given there were members of the flock that still didn't like or trust him. Still enough of them were willing to give him a chance, and he wasn't going to lose face in front of them. He'd faced much worse in the past, and this would be a picnic compared to what a real interrogator could and had done to him.

::It'll be okay. Gloaming might bluster and bluff but those who count haven't raised objections,:: Highdive kept her comm very short range.

::I know. I've faced far worse than this. It's simply important to perform well. If I speak badly enough they can change their processors on my suitability,:: Thundercracker explained. ::Yes. It will go well.::

::Of course it will; you're doing most of the talking,:: Highdive said cheerfully trying to encourage him a bit as they approached Nightflight's eyrie and the small crowd she knew was waiting inside. She had little doubt that the entire flock had made time to be there and a fair number of the extended flock. Trining was a big deal after all.

They landed as neatly as they could without making it look like they were trying. Thundercracker actually accomplished it, at least in Highdive's opinion.

Her creators were the only ones waiting outside for them, and they had a solemn tint to their fields and faces that sharply reminded Highdive how bittersweet this moment actually was for them. "Greetings, Thundercracker," Greenflash said formally.

"Greetings, Greenflash, Hothatch and Silversun," Thundercracker acknowledged each in turn with far more seriousness than he typically used with the trine that would soon be kin-by-trine to him. "Thank you for giving me this opportunity."

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"Flock Order Nighteye will determine if you are worthy of our Action," Greenflash replied formally. Everyone present understood that just handing Highdive over to him would be a disgraceful mark towards the young Action. The greetings out of the way, the trio turned and headed into the eyrie with Thundercracker and Highdive following in their wake.
"Greetings, Order Thundercracker," Nighteye was standing with his trine mates behind him in the center of the main area while most of the flock was gathered around the perimeter. Highdive quickly noted that Gloaming and his trine mates were off to one side with a handful of others who preferred to call Thundercracker the outsider or worse rather than use his designation. Fortunately there weren't many of them in the flock anymore. Thundercracker's time in the eyrie had won many of her creation flock over enough to make this more formality than not.

"Flock Order Nighteye. I wish to trine with your flock's Action Highdive. My own flock has agreed to welcome her," Thundercracker managed not to loom despite his deep voice and large frame.

It was a moment that struck Highdive once more than he wasn't larger than her just because he was an adult. He stood helm and shoulders above anyone in either flock with a wingspan to match. It made him all the more desirable to her and forced her to put a hard check on the arousal building in her.

"We will determine if you are worthy of trining with our Action Highdive," Nighteye replied showing no external signs of being intimidated or impressed by the heavier framed mech who was easily capable ofofflineing him in physical combat. "Why do you believe you should be allowed that honor?"

This opening was the one Thundercracker had worked the hardest on with Aurora and Northwind. He'd never been someone without something significant to offer. He'd been groomed to be a flock Order from a youngling. He'd already become an Air Martial when he first trined. Among his peers he was one of the most desirable. Here he was no such thing and it galled him not to be able to speak of what he was, what was written on his very wings.

"I come from a good flock with many connections across the city," he began with what was what mechlings were judged on. "I have completed my second degree testing and am advancing quickly through my third degree. Highdive and I like each other for trine; a status that all our creators and my flock agree is an acceptable match."

Highdive heard a small derisive scoff at his words from over in Gloaming's group. She reined in the temptation to shoot a glare at them since her part of these proceedings was to display her own maturity and control. She knew Nighteye would handle things later if he thought they were behaving disrespectfully.

"You have been accepted into a good flock," Nighteye acknowledged both the truth in Thundercracker's words and the reality that they were his adopted flock to which he had no coding connections. "How do you intend to support your trine?"

"By encouraging them to become what is right for them. I already have requests to flight train for pay while I study and make the requirements for emergency search and rescue. While I am still uncertain what my full time function will be I have enough prospects already to ensure she can finish the education she desires," Thundercracker covered the points that were important to him and Highdive before moving on to the others he'd been told were a good idea to mention. "My flock includes three Knights of Light and my adoptive creator is a Master of Light. They will help provide stability through anything that might occur and create connections to the leadership of the city. I have lived a long time and survived two very different trines. I know how to support those in distress and show them how to get past it and thrive despite any setbacks."

"Those are points in your favor if times become hard," Nighteye agreed, acknowledging Thundercracker's points while he also ignored the bits of displeasure the reminders of the Order's non-Seeker connections generated. "Do you have any potential prospects for a Vision for your trine?"
"Acharaj or Eryu are the most likely from this class," Thundercracker answered. "Both have indicated through Saamanjasy that they are interested once I have an Action."

"Visions from good flocks. Why would they or you chose to wait?" Nighteye agreed even as he asked the question he already knew the answer to given Thundercracker's circumstances. It was an issue that need to be discussed.

Thundercracker cycled a vent as bad memories were dragged up. "Because of the ratio of Visions to Orders and Actions during the war I have serious doubts as to my ability to say no to a Vision bold enough to ask to trine other than out of respect for my Action. While I can survive a poor match I do not wish to again."

"So you are protecting both you and your Action by placing a limitation upon yourself. A limitation that is being respected by your peers," Nighteye acknowledged Thundercracker's personal humiliation by rephrasing his answer in a more positive light. Admitting a weakness like this was embarrassing, but the willingness to answer honestly was another strong point in the Order's favor no matter what a few individuals present thought. "Are you prepared for when your trine will be granted permission to raise sparklings?"

"We will be by the time permission is granted," Thundercracker admitted to not being ready at the moment and it stung far more than admitting he couldn't tell a Vision no. "There will be time to teach my trine of the quirks of my frame and sparklines before there are any creations of it. My first Vision was carrying when Vos was destroyed. I expected to create once the war was over with my second. I'm looking forward to finally becoming a creator here where they will be safe."

"My condolences on your losses," Nighteye said as a small murmur flickered through the crowd at the reminder of all those deactivations back in Vos. "Sparklings are always precious, even more so when one has been lost. You are prepared to handle any who possess military coding?"

"Yes," Thundercracker answered with the firm ease of having no doubts. "My entire creation flock had it. I am helping with Photosphere as I helped with the seekerlings younger than myself. There are experienced Seekers we can turn to for help should we need it because of coding issues. Master Aurora and both her surviving creations have military coding."

"And there are places here for those with military coding provided they do not become a large portion of the population," Nighteye added with a nod and a small wing dip. "Order Greenflash, do you have any questions or concerns for Order Thundercracker?"

"You have spoken of your connections and abilities. Why have you selected my creation as your choice for an Action?" Greenflash asked.

He paused to choose his words before answering. "Highdive has shown herself to be strong enough to push back when I need it without challenging me. We share a view of what a good trine is and how to become one. She has a goal in functioning I find admirable and interests that are either compatible or not a conflict. While respectful of my gestalt flock she is not afraid of them and they approve of her. We agree that we are compatible and each Seeker I have looked to for confirmation that we are has agreed. You raised a fine Seeker, Order Greenflash."

"Thank you, Order Thundercracker," Greenflash said with a pleased teak to his field even though he kept his frame impassive. "Action Highdive is a credit to this eyrie. I see no reason to voice disapproval of this trining."

"Does anyone else in this eyrie have anything else to say about this potential trining?" Nighteye asked as he looked at the assembly.
"I do not believe that Order Thundercracker has proven he is worthy of a member of our flock," Gloaming said barely keeping his composure as he had to call Thundercracker an Order due to propriety. "He is a military mech bonded to a group of grounders and Aerials."

"I am," Thundercracker acknowledged without a hint of his still mixed feelings on it or the dislike he held for the speaker.

"He also proven, with your assistance, that he is not violent even when assaulted," Nighteye pointed out calmly. "I cannot say I like his bond to grounders. I also cannot accept it as a reason to reject him if she does not."

"The bond with his gestalt was not done willingly," Greenflash added after a respectful dip towards his Flock Order to request permission to speak. "I cannot fault him for adjusting to circumstances that cannot be changed and using it to the advantage of all."

"Are there any objections based on his actions in the city?" Nighteye made a clear statement of what he was willing to listen to.

Gloaming glared but held his silence since there was nothing he could bring up that hadn't already been discussed and dismissed. Highdive had realized a while back that her older sibling would never accept Thundercracker. While it hurt a bit that this would be rift between them he was more than worth that price to her.

"Since there are no objections, your request to trine with Action Highdive is granted," Nighteye said after a long pause.

"Thank you, Flock Order Nighteye," Thundercracker kept his bow and wings to the expected standard even though there was no missing the excitement in him.

Nighteye accepted the acknowledgment and focused on Highdive. "Though you are leaving us you will always be of this flock and welcome in the eyrie."

"Thank you, Flock Order Nighteye," Highdive said with a respectful bow. With the formalities over, she endured several long hugs from her creators before she and Thundercracker headed off to begin packing up her things for her move. Aurora's eyrie which was going to be her new home until Thundercracker was granted citizenship and moved into Northwind's eyrie.
Chapter Summary

Photosphere staked her claim on Thundercracker by driving off Acharaj coming for a date.

Highdive was trying to focus on her studies at the table in Aurora's eyrie but two orns after moving here she still felt dizzy at times. It was so different from where she'd grown up. It wasn't just that it was only one trine and three mechlings. It was also the trine dynamics. Right to the part where she did think of this place as Aurora's eyrie and not Haji's eyrie. Maybe it was because they only had a space in the Citadel because of Aurora's function. In that way it really was Aurora's. Just Aurora the Knight's rather than Aurora the Vision's.

The trine dynamics just made her processor ache. A Vision that was a warrior with a lawyer of an Order and an artist Action. She lived with them and she couldn't understand how such a group functioned. They spent more time with Aurora's flock than Haji's flock although some of that might currently have to do with Photosphere and Thundercracker and their unusual status. Haji's position at least made a bit of sense for a traditional Order since he was focused upon corporate law creating contracts, but Cheoseo and Aurora seemed to have their traditional places in a trine switched. Despite her confusion she could see that it worked for them.

It was also incredibly quiet here compared to her old quarters with only six Seekers living here permanently, although Photosphere could make enough noise for three when she lost her temper. It wasn't the first time she'd seen what discipline meant with the younger mechling. Thundercracker had made sure the level of violence was something she could tolerate. It didn't make it any less unsettling to watch a large adult hitting a young mechling hard enough to send her into the far wall. That Photosphere sometimes got up and lunged at him for another round until she physically couldn't wasn't any easier. It would only get worse when she started to think of flying more than walking, though Thundercracker was certain that she'd snap progressively less often as she grew older.

She kept telling herself that their own creations would be raised correctly from the beginning instead of being allowed to run wild like Photosphere had. Flock Order Northwind knew how to handle someone like Photosphere as a fledgling; that was part of why Thundercracker was with Aurora's creation flock instead of Haji's flock. She would learn to handle this even if she couldn't raise a hand against the mechling herself.

Thudercracker's wing gave a questioning flick and he looked at her over his study pad.

"Just thinking about all the changes recently and what's in store for tonight," she said as she pressed a pede against his shin. She didn't want to trouble him or make him think she was having second thoughts about their match. The reality of being with him was worth the potential problems in the future.

"Mmm, yes. I'm looking forward to it," Thundercracker rumbled softly and caressed her field with an invitation to more. "If we finish early we can go flying before Photosphere returns."
"I'm almost done with my work for now, but we still have to get ready for our date tonight. We do want to make a good impression," she said pushing a bit of flirtatious mischief towards him. Getting to fly without Photosphere along would be a treat; she'd been constantly hanging around with the pair ever since Highdive moved into the eyrie. She'd always paid some attention when the Action visited and wanted to interface, but Highdive had originally thought most of it was because she was so young. She'd only intensified her interest and was fairly blatant about it. It only convinced Highdive all the more that Photosphere intended to have Thundercracker. Part of her wondered if it would help or hurt any petition for creations. It would all but guarantee the entire clutch had military coding but it also meant that the coding would be focused in one trine and not two.

"Then finish and we can go flying for a bit before cleaning up," he suggested with a pointed look at Tornado's weaponless kata practice across the room. "He's just killing time right now."

"How can you tell?" Highdive looked over and tried not to let her ventilation catch at the speed and power on display.

"If he was practicing to improve it wouldn't look that easy," he paused and glanced at her, then at the Master of Light. "I suspect it's something of an experience issue in being able to tell."

"Thundercracker is correct. These are relaxing katas for me," Tornado confirmed. "You may go flying when you have finished your studies."

Highdive nodded her wings and focused on her lesson with new determination not to allow her thoughts to wander. Despite her determination finishing up still took her a little while, and she couldn't help a triumphant pulse through her field towards Thundercracker once she was actually done. "Finally finished. Are you done?"

"Yes," he willingly stood and stretched, flaring and rotating his wings in a display that was pure sensuality to Highdive. "Let's fly."

They waited politely for Tornado to finish his kata before they all headed out the balcony and into the air. Flying with Thundercracker as his Action felt so much better than when they were just dating. She could hardly wait for when they were considered adults and could properly trine. Diving and soaring with these two experienced fliers was a true joy and she learned something every time.

Thundercracker and Highdive swept up from the ground level shining clean and freshly detailed by Deco to land on the primary balcony of the eyrie. Thundercracker took note that Photosphere was back as expected and steadied himself for what he expected would be an unpleasant few breems until she grasped that she did not get to be the only Vision in his lovelife. Up til now he'd been careful to meet lovers elsewhere. Silently he also knew this was a test for Acharaj. The Vision said he could take the reality of raising military coded creations. He was about to see what that meant.

"You're both looking exquisite tonight," Photosphere rumbled from her spot on the bench watching them almost hungrily.

"Thank you," Highdive said accepting the compliment without indicating any desire towards the younger mechling right now. "Deco did a wonderful job; Thundercracker cleaned up quite nicely."

"Yes he does," Photosphere's wings fluttered. She didn't pick up the careful positioning of Aurora as the older Vision prepared for the worst.

"It is important to look good for a first date," Thundercracker told her.

"First..." Photosphere's wings went from flirting to aggressive in a sparkbeat. "You chose your
"Yes, and now we are exploring our options for Visions for our trine," Thundercracker said firmly, making certain he was between Photosphere and Highdive in case of an attack. Highdive was so much lighter and very inexperienced with combat; it was his duty to protect his Action physically even as she braced herself mentally. Out of the edge of his view he could see a Seeker approaching the eyrie, but he kept his focus on Photosphere while she processed his statement and struggled with having her beliefs challenged so directly.

"I'm your Vision," Photosphere hissed.

"No, you are a military-coded Vision being fostered by Master Aurora who happens to be my adopted creator," Thundercracker corrected even as he felt a bit of concern that she really was that fixated on him. Highdive flickered her field a bit behind him, and the reminder of her presence strengthened him enough so he could reject that demand. "That connection does not give you a claim as a member of my trine."

"You felt it just like I did when I came here!" Photosphere was on her pedes with wings raised high and no sense that she was facing off against a Seeker that had to try not to kill her if it came to blows. "You are my Order."

"I am not your Order simply because you want me," Thundercracker said even as he leaned heavily on Highdive's influence to issue the rejection. "You haven't even considered anyone else? There are many Orders closer to your age that will be trining soon. Did you even listen when you were told to consider all available options for a trine? Did you think that meant we wouldn't also be considering our options?"

"No! You felt the connection just like I did!" Photosphere advanced on him, her field trying to latch onto his and press the sensation across. She was so focused on him that she didn't notice the red, yellow and cream mechling land and look with uneasy confusion at the scene.

Highdive did notice him and shifted to defend him if things went any further sideways.

"This is unacceptable behavior," Thundercracker said firmly as he kept himself between Photosphere and other mechlings. He had registered the new arrival and was hoping he'd keep his vocalizer muted. If Photosphere realized another mechling Vision was actually here in the eyrie it could get ugly quickly.

The statement seemed to register with Photosphere and she wavered, uncertain and shifting towards upset rather than outraged.

"What is going on?" Acharaj whispered to Highdive even as she edged them towards the balcony.

"She just found out the world isn't aligning with her view on how things should work," Highdive replied back just as quietly, not wanting to antagonize the angry Vision by pointing out her perceived rival's presence. She wasn't quite quiet enough and Photosphere's attention locked on the pair.

"You!" Photosphere snarled and her wings rose again as rational thought fled her. "He. Is. MINE!" she howled and lunged towards him, claws forward and thrusters powering up.

Highdive braced herself in front of Acharaj ready to take a blow that never came. Thundercracker had seized Photosphere as she tried to lunge past him and thrown her across the room into a wall with a loud crash and screech of outrage and pain.

"That is unacceptable behavior," Thundercracker stalked towards Photosphere. With his wings
arched high and wide and his armor fluffed for true combat he looked as dangerous as he truly was.

Aurora put herself firmly between the two pairs of mechlings and extended her field to reassure the ones she was protecting.

Photosphere shook her helm and gave an inarticulate snarl as she got to her pedes, how fully focused on Thundercracker.

Highdive watched as Photosphere lunged at Thundercracker who grabbed her arm and used it to toss her towards another wall away from Aurora. She could teek Acharaj's shock and horror behind her, but she was too intent watching the melee to do more than project her own reassurance towards him, shaky as it was. She knew Thundercracker easily outmatched the volatile mechling in a fight and could take her down without offlining her. He could probably do it without damaging her but that wouldn't be a lesson she'd process.

"How badly is he...." Acharaj stammered as he took in the reality of what he'd been told.

"He can control himself and the damage he causes her," Highdive said in support of her Order even as she tried to comfort the Vision behind her by repeating what she'd been told herself. "He won't permanently injure her."

"She can't be allowed to attack civilians just because she's angry she isn't getting her way," Aurora added with the firmness and conviction of a military-coded frame watching what must occur to rectify the situation. "Unfortunately this is the only form of punishment she recognizes when in this state."

Highdive winced when the next round involved Thundercracker bringing a double-fisted strike down between her wings. It send Photosphere flat to the floor with black optics and she didn't move again.

"It's a strike that overloads the neural net. She's merely shut down for a klik," Aurora told them. "Thundercracker. Why don't you go on your date. I will ensure she understands."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Acharaj asked hesitantly. He trusted the Master Knight to know what was best, but this scene had rattled him.

"She cannot be allowed to believe that this behavior will get her what she wants," Thundercracker said firmly stepping towards the pair as Aurora moved away from them. He gave them a quick but thorough scan to make certain they were both unharmed physically.

"That makes sense I guess," Acharaj agreed after a moment of thought.

"Good. Come," Thundercracker took charge like the experienced Order he was. His field hummed with approval when they followed and easily settled on his wings as they should: Vision on his right and Action on his left for the flight to the Gentle Breeze. He'd originally thought the tea house would be a quiet place to get to know one another without an audience before heading out for a flight together, but he knew it would be a good spot to discuss what Acharaj had seen without being overheard. The young Vision was badly rattled and needed to talk soon.

Fortunately it wasn't far and they were quickly shown to a private room.

"I didn't damage her worse than a rough landing would," Thundercracker opened the conversation as he pinged an order in.

"The fact that you had to damage her at all was disconcerting to watch. I know intellectually that she
needs a different kind of handling than other mechlings or fledglings, but it was still shocking to have thrown so suddenly in my face like that," Acharaj admitted before he ran a quick wing shudder before settling in his seat. "What set her off?"

"She is fixated on Thundercracker as her Order and doesn't want to understand that we are looking at options who are compatible with us," Highdive admitted.

"So I can expect this reaction again?" he asked uneasily.

"Given the strength of this response, yes," Thundercracker acknowledged. "Fortunately she is not allowed to fly without an escort so you do not need to worry about her outside the eyrie. Given her age when we got her I expect to be a citizen before she is free of restrictions. It is much more difficult to civilian-ready such coding when you don't start at hatching."

"Do you actually have to strike a hatchling with that coding?" Acharaj asked hesitantly.

Highdive's hopes sank a bit internally at the question even as she kept it out of her field. She'd hoped that when Acharaj said he knew what to expect he'd actually considered these possibilities before agreeing to a date. Still, he hadn't flown away screaming so that was a good sign. It wasn't as if it was easy for her to accept and she still doubted her ability to do it. She just knew she could allow Thundercracker to.

"No nearly so hard, though yes, aggression must be met with aggression and pain until it fully sinks in that one obeys the social order because there is always someone capable of breaking your wings," Thundercracker answered. "There is good reason it is called military coding and not simply aggressive coding. A Seeker may be aggressive or unstable and not be military coded. It is only those with military coding that respond to pointed violence by settling. The calm ones like myself can function in civilian society once we're sorted out, though we always do best in a function that has a clear command structure especially when young. Aggressive ones like Photosphere are always directed towards the military, or in this city the Knights or priesthood. I expect any creations of mine will end up in one of those two functions though it's possible one will be as calm as I am and have more options."

"So it is likely any creation of ours will require such discipline and be restricted like that," Acharaj said as he looked directly at Thundercracker before shifting a glance towards Highdive.

"There is no military coding in my spark line, so it may not occur in all of our trine's creations. However Photosphere's creation flock doesn't have military coding and she still managed to develop it," Highdive said carefully reminding the Vision that it was never certain which hatchlings would develop such coding.

"That is true. Military coding developed on its own originally. It was not crafted for the military," Thundercracker agreed. "There is much that can be assessed based on the creators. Traits the creators show are no guarantee, good or bad."

"No one suspected that Photosphere would online with military coding; no wonder she was so hard to control if they were unprepared for it," Acharaj muttered. "They were fortunate that Master Aurora was around to take her otherwise should could have become completely unmanageable and that would have reflected badly upon the flock."

"It would have and worse," Thundercracker agreed gravely, pausing as the order was delivered. "She likely would have deactivated her siblings before she was executed or wiped. Fortunately no further military coded surprises are likely to face such a situation. Peacekeepers are aware of its existence now and how to deal with it."
"How horrible," Acharaj paused and allowed Highdive to fill up a small plate of gels for him. "I suppose the government is going to put some regulations in for us, the Aerials and the grounders. They can have military coding too, correct?"

"They may. They may simply check when violence shows up young," Thundercracker said thoughtfully and accepted a plate from Highdive with a warm caress of his field. "I know other frametypes can have military coding. I do not know if it exists outside of sparked frames."

"It's unfortunate that this it isn't something that can be handled privately inside a normal Seeker flock, but it's a good thing that a system is being created to help resolve the problem if it occurs in the future," Acharaj said after taking a bit and give a small wing flutter of approval at the taste. "Especially if this sort of coding shows up in someone who has less familial support than Seekers."

"Agreed, although Praxians have a fairly strong support level built into their social structure. It's not the same as a Seeker flock, but they do share some of our coding," Highdive pointed out. "They're one of the groups that would probably handle it better than most."

"I expect they would. Many others are not so lucky. This city is better prepared than most to handle it with minimal loss of sparks," Thundercracker agreed. "Fortunately for my trine I have extensive experience with recognizing and helping raise those with military coding." He paused and his wings gave an uneasy twitch. "I will check tonight if the abuse laws are being updated to reflect what is necessary with military code. Now, Acharaj, is there anything about military coding or dealing with it that has not been answered?"

"How likely is it that you're going to have to do something like that in public to one of the trine's mechlings or hatchlings?" Acharaj asked seriously. "Most here outside the Knights will not understand even if the reasons for those actions are explained to them."

"Extremely unlikely," Thundercracker answered just as seriously. "By beginning at hatching and keeping them inside the eyrie during transition periods where all creations push boundaries I know how to keep it private. I also know how to pin and restrain if one becomes unruly in public. It might not teach the lesson but it will stop them from doing more harm at the time. Acting out in public results in punishment in the eyrie and restricted movement. It's not quite as effective but by then if it is still a serious issue there is something beyond military coding at play. As I demonstrated with Gloaming my first response is not to strike."

"If we can keep our creations more socialized and less prejudice than him we'll be doing a service to this city," Highdive said with a flicker of annoyance at her sibling. Thinking about what she'd learned from talking with Thundercracker's flocks, she continued with a different thought. "Military-coded mecha can adapt to living here. From what I understand most wouldn't have come even if offered the choice because of loyalties on Cybertron whether willingly granted or coded."

"It is true among Seekers," Thundercracker confirmed her assessment. "Intense loyalty is part of the coding. So is a lack of fear and little sense of self-preservation. Just like law enforcement it takes the order of a superior to get one to come."

"Are any creations without military coding going to be aggressive or potentially have problems?" Acharaj asked.

"They're likely to be more strong-willed than average with stronger loyalty and a willingness to use violence when needed, though I don't honestly know if it is coding or culture that produces it. My primary experience is in a flock that was half military and half law enforcement. Those traits are valued in both groups," Thundercracker admitted.
"How did you know whether a hatching was military, law enforcement or neither?" Highdive asked curiously.

Thundercracker stilled to really think about the question, one he'd never considered before.

"There is a feel, not quite a teek but related, to military coding. We simply knew who had the coding and who didn't. Of those that didn't we let them tell us. It was often obvious to us but it wasn't something that youths were told unless they asked," he attempted to explain. "Being military coded did not require military service or to be a warrior; it was simply the best place for such code to be understood. There was one youth while I was courting my first trine that had the coding but was an artist at spark. He still went into the military but he wasn't in a fighting wing. He was an artist there. Here I believe he would have become a priest, or possibly remained with the flock as an artist."

Highdive's wings gave a twitch as she stared at Thundercracker. "You ... don't have military coding, do you?"

"Not in the sense we're discussing, no. I do have it. There are just large sections that didn't activate until after the war."

"So it was dormant in you or implemented after the war started? There is still a lot I have to learn before we create," Highdive admitted after thinking about everything Thundercracker had just said.

"It was dormant. There is a lot to learn and there is a long time before we are allowed to," Thundercracker reassured her and reached over to gently stroke her wing. "We will be ready before it is time. Remember; we will not be alone in raising them. It might not be a normal flock but there are a small flock's worth of Seekers that have active military coding and most of them have raised creations. Northwing's flock raised Aurora. They will all be there for us."

"But it is something the Highdive and my creation flocks wouldn't be able to help with most of the time. In fact, they probably won't want to deal with anything other than short visits," Acharaj said grimly.

"I'm afraid I cannot speak for them. It is true that my creation flock rarely socialized outside our functions. It is also true that there were more law enforcement flocks in Vos than there are Seeker flocks in all of New Crystal City. I expect once any creations are younglings they will be socialized enough for extended visits. It is definitely a case by case thing and up to your creation flocks how much involvement they wish. Mine is not a future for everyone."

"There are limitations but also opportunities," Highdive said while keeping her hand on Thundercracker's arm. "What are the chances I'd get to meet a Master Knight and consider her kin?"

"Almost none," Acharaj admitted. "I just wasn't ready to see that. It's one thing to hear it, to think you understand. That ... was just another."

"Sudden exposure to anything can be overwhelming," Highdive agreed, understanding his circumstances. "The first time Photosphere lost her temper around me was a bit frightening. After seeing it and the results afterwards I understand a little bit better why the coding requires this sort of discipline."

"There will be time to assess things," Thundercracker promised him. "This is not a choice I intend to make as quickly as I did for my Action."

"Time to process is good for everyone," Acharaj agreed as he ate another gel.
It had taken some waiting to get Photosphere out of the eyrie while Aurora was in it but Thundercracker was good at being patient when he saw a point to it. So now he had Aurora and Highdive alone in the eyrie while Photosphere was visiting her creation flock with Tornado to keep her in check.

"Are there any ideas on what might be going on?" Thundercracker finally allowed the weariness to show as he looked at Aurora.

"This level of obsession is abnormal compared to anything demonstrated by my creations," Aurora admitted.

"She's certainly obsessed with you and showing no signs of interest in any other Order," Highdive agreed. "She's gone after every untrined Vision to come near here, even my friends that aren't interested in trining with us."

"Then I want to merge hardlined with her," Thundercracker sighed. "Even if I can't determine what it is I can at least rule out a spark link, coding lock or broken code. I know what each of those looks like."

"You're not merging with her alone," Highdive said with a possessive growl. "I don't trust her not to try to link with you, and I don't want you to have to resist her on your own."

"I can watch the hardline while Highdive watches your spark," Aurora suggested. "A medic can check for a coding lock or broken code. How would you check for a spark link?"

Thundercracker nodded his wings in acceptance of it all. "She is correct about one thing. There was a connection of some kind from the moment we met. In theory she could be someone I knew who is long gone. Not one of my first trine or close kin, I would have recognized that on teek. A flockmate. A soldier. A co-worker. It's possible that such a spark might lock onto me as a familiar in a very frightening world."

"This isn't like Pantera's connection, but I can see how frightening it could be for someone with misunderstood coding," Highdive agreed reluctantly feeling a bit more sympathy for the confused mechling.

Thundercracker caressed her field with thanks for the effort. "No matter what it is, if the cause can be determined we will know better how to deal with it. Even if it is none of the reasons I know how to check for we will know far more. Something must be done."

"She wouldn't trust a medic to do this instead of you would she?" Highdive asked quietly even as she leaned into his caress.
"I don't know. She probably would with the right story. A medic can't check for spark familiarity though. That has to be me," Thundercracker willingly leaned closer as they each drew strength from the other.

It was a move that forced Aurora to hide a pleased smile at how they were acting like a good trine already. As fast as he'd chosen she had concerns for it. Yet as she watched them work on choosing a Vision she felt less and less concern.

"Aurora, would it be better for you make arrangements for the four of us to be mostly alone or should we have others standing by in case of problems? Would Haji and Cheoseo want to be present? I imagine Jazz at the least is going to want to monitor these events," Highdive asked as she looked pointedly at Thundercracker. She wasn't going to be the one trying to hide this from Thundercracker's possessive flock.

"My trine should definitely be elsewhere. I believe the three of us can handle her," Aurora said very firmly. "If your flock insists on watching have them hide from her."

"I will try to keep them away. I expect Jazz will be the most difficult to deter but he'll willingly hide from her. Wing will at least respect a firm order to stay away and we can time it for when he's doing chores or otherwise on duty," Thundercracker said.

"Axe and Dai Atlas can keep Pantera and Deadlock busy if necessary," Aurora said, agreeing with his assessment of Jazz after the experiences with Gloaming. "I'll make the timing arrangements and speak with Redline about scanning her for a code lock or broken code. He'd seen to enough Seekers to know what to look for."

"I still want to check myself," Thundercracker said after mulling that over.

"It'll make her creators feel better if we have a medic involved, and it'll make us feel better if you check everything out," Highdive summed up with a hand on Thundercracker's arm.

"Most likely," Aurora agreed and began to make arrangements for it.
Chapter Summary

Thundercracker's spark merge and hardline with Photosphere to determine what her fixation with him is.

Thundercracker made note of Jazz's presence on top of a decorative beam of the eyrie's interior and privately wondered how much the gestalt bond had helped in it. It wasn't as if Jazz was poorly hidden or Thundercracker was anymore skilled than he had been in war. If anything Thundercracker expected he was less skilled to go along with the lessened paranoia.

"Ready?" he glanced at Highdive.

"Ready," she said as she finished steadying her field and resolve; she was determined not to be the one that put Photosphere on edge today. It felt strange to be involved in something as intimate this spark merge was going to be, but it was her responsibility to protect Thundercracker's spark; if necessary even from himself.

Thundercracker took the lead and it felt as natural as it was to let him. With a soft whistle he had Photosphere's attention. A glance at the berth and tilt of his wings and she was on her pedes to join them, her lesson forgotten.

"Come join us. You have insisted for many decaorns that we are connected. I would have you show us what we mean to you," Thundercracker offered her a hand and drew her very willing form to the berth and then to her back as he settled over her. He didn't say a word as Highdive settled next to him and Aurora beyond. It was Highdive who plugged Aurora into him while he kissed Photosphere.

"How?" Photosphere asked with the innocence of her youth.

"Let me watch your thoughts and code as you think of me, of what I am to you. The same when we merge," he explained gently and was quietly relieved when she offered the port they'd used before to hardline.

"I want to understand better," Highdive offered her own cable discretely to Thundercracker as she gave Photosphere a kiss. Despite her own misgivings and concerns about this strange situation, Photosphere was still a good lover who was eager to learn more every time they interfaced. She as willing if he wanted her in the hardline but it was his choice since she was the most vulnerable here to a potential attack. It would be easier for Aurora to pull her away if she wasn't linked directly to Photosphere before the spark merge. She felt herself relax when it was Thundercracker's handshake she received.

It was interesting to watch things through Thundercracker and it wasn't long after Photosphere joined the link through him that Highdive knew he was shielding her while allowing her see what Photosphere was doing and thinking. She kept up the kisses and wing caresses to help Photosphere stay eager for the spark merge to come. Highdive had always known Photosphere paid much more attention to Thundercracker than to her when they were interfacing together, but she hadn't realized just how much focus went towards the older Seeker. With the instructions to stay focused on her
feelings towards Thundercracker the Vision kept noting how the older Seeker was responding to the show they were presenting beneath him. The more it revved him up, and by Primus it certainly was, the more Photosphere put into it.

Given her behavior over the past few decaorns Thundercracker wasn’t surprised by the single-minded devotion directed his way. For now he needed to figure out what was causing this obsession, and watching the pair was giving him an initial read on the mechling’s thought processes. It was only a klik before he’d ruled out bad code. Two more and a kiss and he knew the code lock on him, while there, was a result of deeper things rather than the cause.

He nudged at that, silently asking for the thought trail. Simple as it was it was enough to make him really think about her differently.

~Sparks.~ He offered as his cockpit split to slide out of the way.

Highdive responded by immediately opening up and pressing up towards him. Not close enough to look like she was trying to block Photosphere, but definitely making it clear to the younger mechling that merging with Thundercracker involved merging with her. She was not taking a chance on anything happening with Thundercracker's spark.

He appreciated her actions even as he hoped her caution wasn’t necessary. So far Photosphere seemed to have accepted that Highdive was a permanent part of his existence and her trine coding was solid enough to recognize that an Action was no threat to her status. Despite Thundercracker having begun first he finished opening his armor last.

Despite her own eagerness to merge with Thundercracker again Highdive noticed that Photosphere felt patient. Eager to be sure but no more inclined to rush forward than she was. It was an interesting tidbit logged just before the pleasure of the first leaders flared through them all. It hadn't been until Thundercracker had chosen her for his Action that he’d been willing to merge with her, which she understood given the tense situation he’d described between his trine and the rest of the Seekers in the Decepticons. It was definitely worth it given the strength of his spark and the pleasure the trust that had developed between them generated. He’d been Photosphere's first in everything, so the lack of hesitation made sense.

Even in this it felt different. Thundercracker wasn't just guiding them in pleasure. He was searching and it made Photosphere curious enough to focus past the pleasure.

~What could my spark know?~ she asked in the joint space.

~If it knows mine, even a little,~ he caressed her. ~I want to know why the connection exists.~

Despite the pleasure Highdive kept herself back as much as possible in the merge to allow them to figure out the connection she knew did not exist between herself and them. The concept that Photosphere was someone that the Seeker had once known seemed like such a strange coincidence given Photosphere was created before Thundercracker arrived here.

~Reincarnation was common before the war if priests are to be believed,~ Thundercracker responded to the thought and his spark nuzzled against them each in turn before drawing them deeper into a rapid overload.

Highdive came out of the overload and smiled up at Thundercracker who was already active. Glancing over at the offline Vision, she asked ~Did you learn anything helpful?~

~I believe so,~ he said and unplugged everyone before tucking Photosphere's cables away. "She was
never anyone I knew well and her code looks good."

"I'm pleased you agree with Redline," Aurora relaxed.

"I suspect this is simply part of how she interprets the loyalty coding she has. It does tend to be very strong for those that hatch with it active." He glanced at Aurora. "You're there as the first who spoke in a way she understood to her core. It looks like I'm there because I also do, I'm untrined and not a Vision. I've seen this a few times in cases like her if I'm right. She's terrified of being alone again."

"And like any military creation fear becomes aggression before it's even recognized as fear," Aurora nodded her wings and noted Photosphere rousing.

Highdive hovered next to the younger mechling, feeling a bit more sympathy now that she understood Photosphere a little better.

"How are you feeling?" Thundercracker asked wanting to gauge how Photosphere had interpreted the merge.

"Warm," she smiled up at him lazily. "You're so strong," she looked at Thundercracker, then directly at Highdive. "You are too. I really liked that."

Thundercracker took a moment to relax here with his flock in their quarters. Dagger relaxing back against the far wall didn't feel like an intrusion since he was now so closely linked to them as their medic. He treasured the time with them all knowing that it would decrease as Pantera and Deadlock advance further in their training and he and Jazz advanced towards citizenship.

"So what's so important that Atlas let the two of us come by so quickly?" Deadlock asked, cutting into his reflections.

"Photosphere," Thundercracker summed it up.

"Which also explains your Action," Jazz suggested as much as stated.

"Yes. As everyone knows she's fixated on me," Thundercracker said.

"That can be fixed," Deadlock promised.

"She's not bad enough to require your help just yet," Jazz said although he looked like he might agree with Deadlock if things got worse.

"I merged and hardlined with her today to try to figure out why she is so obsessed with being my a part of my trine," Thundercracker explained.

"Since she has not been transferred to medical I assume there are no coding issues involved with her obsession," Pantera said.

"No. They are involved but not the cause. Military coding comes with extreme loyalty. Normally a hatchling will have enough caretakers that it does not feel isolated and threatened. In Photosphere's case that didn't happen and she was nearly a mechling before she met anyone who understood her. She locked onto Aurora as a creator figure but as an untrined Seeker not of her type she locked onto me as her only chance at a trine that at least somewhat understands her. Unfortunately unless a couple Knights have creations this decade she is fundamentally correct."

"The odds of that happening are almost nil," Wing offered reluctantly.
"Frag," Deadlock muttered feeling far too much sympathy for a mechling who was in a position he actually understood. "She's almost as out of place as we are."

"She is," Thundercracker admitted. "I thought she was too much like Starscream to tolerate. This merge and looking at her processors gives me hope that while they both respond to feeling isolated and denied in a similar way Photosphere has none of his political ambition and none of the deep seated anger. She doesn't desire anything socially difficult for the path she has. I believe I can work on her. With help," he looked at them all meaningfully.

"I can work with you to see if she is suitable for our trine now that we know why she is behaving this way," Highdive offered. "I won't accept her just because she believes she needs us, but she'll always be your foster sibling and a part of our flock."

"If she'll tolerate me around you," Wing said remembering more than a few grumblings about his presence.

"If she's really not as bad as Starscream she's welcome to hang around providing she can tolerate grounders," Deadlock grunted.

"She has her own issues. I do not believe she'll ever be as bad as Starscream. With the Knights she has a flock that supports her, a creation flock that accepts what she is and a path that should suit her," Thundercracker reassured them as best he could.

"If she develops political ambition as a Knight she lives with an example that a Vision Seeker can reach the highest rank here," Wing added. "I don't think Starscream had anything like that."

"Not as long as he was known to be a Vision," Thundercracker acknowledged. "She's tolerated everyone before at one point or another. Expanding her social circle to those who understand her reactions would be to her benefit. I'm also going to really grind it into her helm that I'll always be flock and always there for her."

"Are you going to keep dating in the meantime?" Jazz asked.

"Absolutely. I'm just going to meet them well away from Photosphere now that I know her reaction is out of fear rather than being unsocialized," Thundercracker said.

"Sounds like a plan, but what happens if you pick someone else? Is she really going to have options?" Deadlock asked.

"None that are very good," Thundercracker admitted. "Even if she manages to find a comparable trine it won't be anyone who really knows how to handle her."

"Dating isn't just about finding trinemates. It's also lovers, friends and social contacts. Like how Thundercracker and Tailslide still see each other fairly often. Terrible trine match. A good contact and maybe friend," Highdive added. "If he'd chosen Cavu as his Action I would still have wanted to be friends and lovers. That network is how society remains stable. The trine is the foundation and the flock how to track sparklines but it's the connections, lovers and friends make that keeps us strong."

"Well said," Thundercracker purred. "I want time to think about this and how to do it. I also need to date for social reasons. There are ... issues ... involved with forced trining that are stronger than I'm used to. It's also a bit odd to trine with a flockmate, adopted or not. Too much inbreeding is dangerous."

"Isn't she considered a fosterling still in her creator flock?" Wing asked looking confused even as Panteria seemed interested in the intricacies of flock behavior as well.
Jazz kept his own curiosity visibly at bay but was avidly storing all the information the two youngsters in the unit were coaxing from Thundercracker.

"They are her creation flock. She is my sibling by fostering and thus flock to me by fostering. If we trine she will join my flock; Northwind's flock," Thundercracker offered the basics, then glanced at Highdive when she shifted a wing and nodded.

"Most Seekers will have various levels of rights with several flocks. If Thundercracker had been an Action he would have had unquestioned full membership in his creation flock, his first Order's flock by trine, his second Order's flock by trine and his third Order's flock by trine and likely had creations in each of those flocks in time," she began. "The flock Order he answered to any given time would depend on what eyrie he lived in."

"In that scenario when I was between trines I could return to my creation flock or remain with the flock of the trine I just lost. I could return to a previous flock by trine as well, though it's not as common," Thundercracker added, then realized he probably wasn't helping.

"Yes. In addition most will have rights to reside in the eyries of lovers, mates, conjunx, conjunx endura, flockmates that had trined out, creations that had trined out and sometimes the creation eyrie of flockmates who have trined in," she stopped herself from extended the list.

"In some functions, law enforcement and the military in particular, you also had standing permission to spend at least a few nights in the eyries of those in your unit without asking first," Thundercracker added.

"No wonder Seekers are fragging insular. You have to keep track of all that mess," Deadlock said almost gaping at the two of them. He was almost jealous of the reality that Seekers had so much family to fall back on in times of trouble.

"That helps explain the other reason you were so depressed on the way here," Wing said with a bit of bitter realization in his field. "I didn't just take you away from your trine, I took you away from your entire support network."

"The Nijihito did it; not you," Jazz said firmly.

"I..."

"No." Jazz said firmly.

"I chose not to return. You did not force me," Thundercracker reminded them all despite that it hurt. "The real loss was Vos."

"How do you keep track of all that when you talk about it?" Pantera asked, hoping for a better subject.

"Vosian is its own language rather than a dialect and considered difficult to learn for good reason," Thundercracker chuckled. "Every relationship type is its own glyph and word."

"And pronouns," Highdive giggled. "I usually use ... four or five. I think there's ten once you include the weird formal variants."

Thundercracker hide a smile behind his cube. "More than that once you get into the legal variants and some functions. Though before the war, yes, four or five were enough to get by with in all but a handful of very rare situations if one was a commoner."
"More pronouns than in Standard?" Jazz asked.

"Oh yes," Highdive said with a chuckle. "We place much more importance on whether you are an Action, Order, or Vision than we do femme or mech although we do occasionally use those terms. As an Order, Thundercracker is properly referred to as so instead of he in Vosian. I'm an Action so I would be referred to as sa by another Seeker. Up until recently Photosphere would be referred to as se as we would any fledgling Seeker or an instance where we weren't certain. Once she discovered she was a Vision we correctly started calling her si."

Wing blinked several times and Jazz had to hide just how much he was getting out of these two.

"Some of those pronouns you use are for non-Seekers?" Pantera half guessed as he dug into Prowl's files on Vosian.

Thundercracker downed the rest of his cube in a swallow and grabbed a second with a huff. "Okay, here's the short version on formal Vosian pronouns. So is an Order. Sa is an Action. Si is a Vision. Se is any Seeker where you don't know, whether because they are too young or they are trined and you don't know them. While not a direct correlation se's as close to mecha as Vosian gets. Sy is a non-Seeker flier of any kind and an honorary pronoun for grounder citizens of Vos, few as they were. In general conversation in Vos you could manage with those. K'sy is everyone else. In my time it was an insult. It doesn't seem to be anymore."

"It's based on tone now. When I say it it's not. When Gloaming says it it is," Highdive used an example they could all relate to. "Mecha is working its way into Vosian as a frametype and such neutral term for anyone."

"Then you get into the common but unnecessary variants," Thundercracker smiled behind his cube again. "For sa, so and si, you add a t' in front, so it's t'sa, t'so and t'si, if they are trined and you are trying to make a point of that fact. It doesn't mean they're your trinemates, just that they are fully trined adults. It's rarely used in normal conversation but there are situations you hear it a lot. Mostly with creators arguing or berating adult creations.

"For any pronoun you can add an 'r to the end for a mech or 'd to the end for a femme. It's not common in speech but you see it a lot in writing. If you want to get fussy during the war I would be a t'so'r."

"So when talking about Aurora you would formally use t'si'd and Highdive would be sa'd?" Pantera said looking at the pair for verification.

While Thundercracker debated how technical he wanted to be in his answer Jazz really wished he'd had this information back in his ISO and SpecOps days; even just the culture insight they were giving him would have helped him in dealing with his Seeker agents.

"Yes, although we don't tend to use them around non-Seekers here," Highdive said with a shrug.

"I'll stick to mech and femme unless you find it insulting. Unless its Gloaming; him I'll gladly insult," Deadlock grunted.

"He'd probably be more offended if we used it since we aren't Seekers even though we are Thundercracker's flock," Jazz pointed out.

Deadlock grinned at Jazz, then looked at Thundercracker. "So he's got a trine, he'd be a t'so'r?" he carefully tried to replicate the sounds Thundercracker had made.

Instead of answering Thundercracker looked at Highdive to choose how it was handled as it was her
sibling and her creation flock.

"Try not to do it when other Seekers are present, although you'd get a bit of a pass from the more liberal ones because of your relationship with Thundercracker and the fact that you are being precise and not directly insulting," Highdive said with a small giggle before shrugging at Thundercracker. "He may have had the right and duty to challenge our trining, especially since his challenges made our case stronger in front of the flock, but he didn't have to be such an aft about it while we were dating."

"If he'd actually thought he would have realized his protests were driving you towards Thundercracker instead of away from him," Jazz pointed out.

"His loss; our gain," Wing said cheerfully.

"Agreed," Thundercracker rumbled and drew her against him with a touch that made her wings shiver. "Back to the original topic; Photosphere. It's my choice in the end but I will listen to my flock."

"At the least we should get to know her better, especially now that she's not a fledgling anymore. We've proven we can handle her if she loses control, and it gives her another support group," Jazz said. "I've got no direct objections to her if you two decide you want her."

"She's not going to be scared off by us being who we are. That's a good point in her favor," Deadlock admitted with a nod towards Highdive. "You got props for not running away from me."

"I did warn her to a degree," Thundercracker chuckled.

"Oh hush. It doesn't make him any less nerve-racking," she teased her Order, then looked at Deadlock. "I was ready to fly if I really thought you would hit me. Short of that I knew you wanted what was best for him. I fully intend to be that."

"We protect our own," Deadlock agreed, scanning his gaze across all of his unit. If it lingered a bit on Highdive, Wing and Pantera the others didn't comment.

"Don't accept her into your trine out of pity. She'll hate that when she realizes it," Wing said. "Remember that you have choices and so does she. Better a happy lover than an unhappy mate."

"Yes, there is much to think about, a few things still to learn and some things to teach her," Thundercracker agreed. "I have time. She has far more. I will not have an unhappy trine again."

"No, you won't. We will be happy," Highdive leaned over and impulsively kissed Thundercracker.

"Frag, yeah," Deadlock muttered as he pulled Wing over onto his lap. "I refuse to put up with an unhappy unit."

Pantera grinned and looked at Jazz when Thundercracker returned her kiss.

"Oh yeah, come here pretty," Jazz relaxed back and offered himself for anything the Praxian wanted. It was so much easier now that Pantera at least acted normal even if Jazz knew full well he needed social contracts just as much as before.

Strong dark fingers stroked Jazz's valve cover while dark lips kissed his spike cover in a coordinated move intended to convey what he planned. Eagerly snapping both covers open for Pantera to play with, Jazz used one hand to stroke Pantera's doorwing edge while his other moved from Wing's hip to reach down to Pantera's tempting chevron. Both touches were welcomed with bright flares of
arousal and pleasure, encouraging Jazz while Pantera teased his spike out with lips, glossa and sucking that was still more technical than understood. As usual the enthusiasm more than made up for any lack of technique, and Jazz was more than willing to let Pantera practice this and other interfacing skills.

Having Thundercracker a willing participant instead of a watcher made this so much better and was another benefit to his making things official with Highdive. She was proving willing to feel the grounders' pleasure around her as their fields touched and overlapped. A moment later Jazz realized Pantera had lost track of what he was doing and he looked down, then followed the Praxian's gaze to Highdive giving Thundercracker a show as she rode him. There was no upset in Pantera's field, only lust.

"You like what you see?" Jazz asked stroking Pantera's chevron while they both watched the pair. "They are beautiful together. How about you spike me while you watch them."

"Very much, yes," Pantera quivered with arousal and desire and leaned up to kiss Jazz while his fingers teased Jazz's valve rim, ever aware of the manners he'd been drilled in.

Jazz kissed Pantera hard before shifting down to lick and suckle on his neck, allowing the younger mech an unrestricted view even as he helped line up their valve and spike. Watching Thundercracker actually happy gave Jazz a thrill when he checked in on the Seeker, and being able to actually teek that pleasure was arousing. His valve was slick and more than ready for the quivering spike that pressed into him. Even for Jazz is was a debate who moaned more deeply at the physical pleasure but he had no doubt that half of Pantera's charge was from watching.

Even so it did nothing to hamper Pantera's precision when he thrust to rub as many sensors for them both as he could. Jazz kept his hands away from Pantera's chevron so as not to spoil the view, but he still had plenty of options to touch and caress to help drive his partner's charge higher. He had to admit that Cladin had done a good job helping Pantera learn to control his kink, and he decided to indulge the youngster a bit. Keeping an optic on Thundercracker for inspiration, he mimicked some of the Seeker's touches to Highdive's frame keeping it just similar enough to help Pantera's fantasy.

The overload that hit Pantera came so fast even he was startled for the moment he had before the world dissolved into blissful white. Jazz moaned and rocked his hips as Pantera's transfluid filled his valve. He'd known that stunt was going to drive his partner wild, and he hoped Pantera would be up for another round. Glancing over, he watched Deadlock drive his spike repeatedly into Wing's valve while the pair joined hands stroked the Aerial's spike. Wing's own thrusts were getting erratic, and he knew they'd both be overloading soon.

An uncoordinated nuzzle was Pantera's first move, then a questioning teek that soon turned into an effort to coordinate his frame enough to thrust again. "Felt amazing," he murmured against Jazz's mouth.

"Ready for round two or want to switch off?" Jazz asked as he chased his own overload now that the thrusts were helping stimulate him.

"Switch, when you've ... overloaded," Pantera moaned and forced himself to focus on the mech under him rather the entrancing set of wings nearby. "Want your spike. Maybe Wing's too?" he glanced at the pair too distracted by a joint overload to hear him.

"I bet he'll be up to that," Jazz said with a moan before he his own overload hit. It wasn't nearly as potent as what Pantera had experienced, but it was still bliss as he felt the thrusts continuing to send sparks of pleasure through him. What he lacked in skill Pantera always made up for in willingness and a desire to please and a refreshing lack of triggers. It made him a pleasure to be with as far as
Jazz was concerned and that was before the gestalt coding got to enhancing the feeling.

When Jazz had come down and Pantera stilled to nuzzle him Wing’s voice caught their attention over the roar of turbines that were just spooling down.

"Heard my designation?"

"How about you and me sharing Pantera's valve while I swallow Deadlock's spike?" Jazz asked looking over at the pair beside them. "Pantera's and I are game if you are."

"Oh yeah," Wing grinned eagerly and rolled to crawl over to them. His hands went to Pantera's hips and he kissed the exposed platelets.

"I'm game," Deadlock rumbled just as eagerly while he watched Pantera being maneuvered into position between his elders.

"Do all nights end like this?" Highdive asked quietly from her sprawl on Thundercracker's chest.

"Most of the time," Thundercracker said as he looked over at the show starting beside them. "We don't always get together for serious reasons; this is my gestalt flock's temporary eyrie. The gestalt coding encourages anything that strengthens the bonds in our flock. Most of the time I have been content with wing rubs from Pantera who is becoming rather skilled at it, but having you here makes this a much more enjoyable time for me."

"I'm glad. Has Photosphere met Flightplan yet?" she asked. As strange as they looked there was an undeniable beauty to the comfortable way the four shared pleasure and very flock-like teek to their fields about socializing this way.

"Not yet, although I'm going to talk to Aurora about including her along with Cladin the next time we merge. Flightplan needs to know her whether or not she joins our trine," Thundercracker relaxed and lightly stroked Highdive's wings, enjoying the dual pleasure of Seeker company and a happy flock.
"Welcome Master Aurora," Dai Atlas carefully used her title as a Knight to remind her creation that she was his equal here. Tornado might not forget very often that Order/Vision dynamics had no place here but it was always bad when he did and talk of her charges was as likely as anything to do it.

"Greetings Sovereign Dai Atlas, Masters," she replied, an amused but appreciative glint in her optics. She appreciated the discrete reminder that would hopefully keep things peaceful during the meeting. Looking around at the others she gave Marwir an almost amused smile, "I trust your charge is as preoccupied as my two?"

"Oh yes. He's far easier to keep in place as long as I want him to stay with his gestalt," Marwir chuckled. "They have mellowed his penchant to wander wonderfully. I know Dagger enjoys gestalt night as much as they do."

"It's a good thing they accepted Dagger's presence so readily. I never realized how little Wing actually kept still until gestalt night started and I suddenly knew where he was for joors at a time. I know Thundercracker enjoys the time with everyone," Aurora agreed and sat down before picking up her cube of high grade to enjoy. "Photosphere is with Windsinger's trine at her creators' eyrie, so she should keep out of trouble. She's doing much better since we figured out how frightened she actually was of being abandoned. It looked, teked just like possessive behavior."

"I hope you can make more progress. How is Thundercracker handling it?" Axe asked.

"He and Highdive are both working to reassure Photosphere that she will always have a place with them in the flock even if not in their trine. Really, Highdive is the one I'm most surprised by in right now. She's handling everything that's been thrown at her very well for a civilian. I was worried he was being too reckless choosing even an Action so quickly, but Thundercracker made a very good choice with her. She seems to be getting along with the entire gestalt," Aurora looked pointedly at Axe. "Speaking of reckless, how is Deadlock doing?"

"Despite what you might hear," he grinned at his mate, "he's actually a fairly agreeable fellow once you understand how he thinks and how to direct him. He'll never be a particularly proper Knight, but taken in context of Wing and Kimark he'll be a solid one in time. The skills he picks up nearly as fast as Pantera. It's coming to peace with himself and his past that is going to take forever. He's already tougher than we demand in most ways."

"That's good to hear. I know from Windsinger that Jazz is working on building a reliable reputation outside the Citadel," Tornado said. "I'm not certain he'll ever be a city-wide star, but he is slowly gaining a following with those who want something a little different from the standard dance scene. It sounds like he couldn't support himself with gigs just yet, but that along with his security work should eventually keep him comfortable. I know a few Peacekeepers were impressed when they saw
"the security system he built for Crimson Sprite."

"They should be. His real challenge there is the general lack of need," Marwir sniffed. "The few paranoid folks will still keep him busy enough."

"Including us," Dai Atlas rumbled in acceptance of the statement. "I admit I recharge just a little better now."

"So do almost all the military Knights," Axe admitted. "Apparently most of us didn't realize how lax we'd actually become."

"Demeter reported some grumbling about it being unnecessary extra work, but overall there's been a morale boost especially with the new contests during monitor duty. The preparations made a lot of Knights look at the Citadel with new optics," Marwir agreed. "Demeter was also curious how long we planned to make Pantera wait beyond the minimum to become a Master."

Dai Atlas cycled his optics and even Axe looked a bit stunned.

"He's not even in training yet," Dai Atlas pointed out, then began to really mull it over. "We likely should discuss that. I'm already certain he's not interested in joining us, though he would serve to his best. He'd want the knowledge."

Tornado sighed, "He's certainly one of the most unusual Initiates we've ever had. I know several Knights were concerned with how quickly the new mechling accepted a Daoshi, but all inquiries about it have been handled by Redline and some of the military Knights. I'm not around him nearly as often as some of you so I don't know him as well, but he is a strange contrast of youth and experience. Dagger thinks he will absorb every bit of information in the libraries and still be unsatisfied."

"That is true," Dai Atlas assured him. "I am familiar with his kind. New or old, broken or whole, he is a top-level tactician with an incredibly advanced tac-net. He will never slow his need to know. My focus right now is in teaching him not to be a slave to that need without actually telling him that's the lesson to be learned. We have at least a couple millennia to ponder how to handle it. I do agree he is likely to try."

"What, exactly, is there to ponder?" Tornado asked with a curious tilt to his wings. "He is either suitable or not."

"Has anyone here, or in history as we know it, wished to become a Master of Light and not wished to have the authority the title brings?" Dai Atlas looked around the room.

"I wanted the rank more than the knowledge," Aurora admitted. "I've been a leader much of my existence."

"The same," Tornado nodded his wings.

"I couldn't stand not understanding the reason for choices," Marwir shrugged. "Authority was a side effect. I can see where Pantera's coming from but what choice is there? He is either a Master or not."

"He can be trained and simply never be accepted, the same as any other rank," Dai Atlas let it hang there.

"I'll talk to Talon over the coming vorns and see how he handles things," Axe offered. "He doesn't have the same tac-net as Pantera, but he does have some things in common with his temperament. That could give us some insight as the actual events draw closer."
"Might want to chat with Thorn as well," Aurora suggested. "He doesn't have the tac-net but he does have an insatiable drive to know without the desire for power that drove us."

"I will," Axe agreed.

"As will I. We should all think on it, though the final choice does not need to be made until he has finished his Master training. I will be paying careful attention to his ability to command as he matures. He may well mature into a fine Master of Light and not be torn by authority the way Prowl was," Dai Atlas said.

Marwir nodded and noted everyone else did, whether their helm or wings, and looked over at Aurora. "Moving off that topic for a moment, do we having any supply issues to address?"

"Last inventory came up with a few discrepancies I'm investigating," Aurora admitted. "Nothing serious, but it looks like I need to issue a reminder that broken practice swords and excessive cleaner usage need to be reported. I'm not inclined to put the blame on the gestalt's presence for it; their keepers have been meticulous in accounting for supplies and time. They may love long showers and the oil pool but they aren't hiding it."

"That can go with the rest of the reminders we've been pushing lately. We really have become lax," Dai Atlas nodded. "Now, on to the furnace that needs an overhaul. Maintenance has requested three orns of down time, plus the orns needed to cool it down and bring it back up; eight in all. Are there any issues with it beginning in six orns beginning at second shift?"

"Not that I'm aware of although I'll double-check with our metalsmiths to be certain all of their projects are completed or at resting stage by then," Axe said. "Six orns should give us enough time to switch some of the shifts around to cover everything. That's a duty area that Pantera and Deadlock might start covering once they're to that point. They've got the armor for it, and Deadlock isn't afraid to get dirty."

"Pantera hates anything that messes with his finish," Aurora pointed out. "It might be a good area to note in his file for whenever he requires punishment shifts."

"It is," Dai Atlas promised. "It's also an area I'm working on."

"We do need to be careful with both of them and duties that get them dirty. Being clean is closely tied to accessing their civilized protocols," Axe added. "Though I do agree on both duties and punishment. By the time they're Knights we'll have a solid idea of what is punishment and what is only bad for their stability."

"If we can go back to the others for a moment, how is Thundercracker on becoming a civilian?" Marwir asked Aurora. "He doesn't seem to be making the progress Jazz has."

"Oh, but he has," Aurora said with pride for her charge. "It is different progress but he has progressed significantly. It's not simply that he'd found an excellent Action and has good prospects for a Vision. He's done well with my creation flock's young hatchlings. Always under supervision in the eyrie with much of the flock there and it's gone well. His studies have progress and he's passed all his flight tests. It may not look like it but he is doing very well in positioning himself as a flight instructor for both mechlings and as a private tutor. He can earn a very good income teaching Seekers to fly as well as he does."

"How is Wing settling in?" Tornado looked at Marwir.

"He's fitting back into his old roles fairly well and isn't complaining about his extra duty shifts. His
friends are certainly happy to have him back. The gestalt took adorably good care of him while he was incapacitated so healing from that went well. The biggest change I’ve noticed is that he's lost some of his naivete, although he's still sheltered compared to the others, and I know the gestalt has hidden as much of the depths of that evil from him as possible. He's had his optics opened about how bad the universe can be," Marwir sighed. "This changed him a lot, but he's still going to challenge us if he thinks he needs to. I think he'll spend less time running off to the surface to fly because he has the others to think about."

"Challenger of Ways was drawn to his spark. That has not changed," Dai Atlas nodded. "It is good to hear he is progressing so well. Now, is there any other business before we move on to the other Initiates?"

"One previous issue appears to be resolving itself. Flashfire's attitude towards non-Seekers appears to be finally correcting itself. Bladewing and others have reported that he's begun carefully distancing himself from the problem civilians," Tornado reported, pleased that issue had been clipped off early. Pride in being a Seeker was one thing; distaste towards other frames was not to be tolerated in the Knights.

"Excellent. His pride has always been his greatest fault. It is good that he is getting it under control with such limited reprimands," Dai Atlas's wings showed he was far for than just pleased, he was relieved.

"I'm just pleased it was noticed before it could cause harm to the Order," Axe agreed. "Anything else to bring up discipline wise? If not, we should move on to the rest of the Initiates."
"So, I finally get to meet the last member of your unit," Cladin observed while Aurora, Thundercracker, Highdive and Photosphere landed near the group. Noting a bit of tension in the youngster, he decided to lighten things up a bit. "I'm looking forward to watching Dai Atlas look up at someone else for a change."

"It's rather fun to look down at him too," Wing giggled.

"How old is Flightplan, that he's aware for?" Photosphere looked at Thundercracker.

"Perhaps a decaorn now. I honestly haven't kept close track. He's extremely young by any measure; not even three vorns since we first formed up," he told her.

"So he's much younger than me," Photosphere said thoughtfully.

"He'll always be much younger and less experienced than us. There are many things he'll never be able to experience except through the five of us," Pantera agreed, wanting the mechling to realize that this was a very large fledgling and not a threat to her.

"He's really sweet and gentle at spark. We're hoping he never has to learn to fight," Jazz admitted.

"As are we all," Aurora agreed.

"What will he do, as a function?" she glanced at Thundercracker again with the set of her wings was that of a youth looking to her caretaker.

"He does not need one because he only exists when we join to become him. However he will assist in any emergency where his size and strength is an asset and we can reach each other," he explained.

"Emergency response is going to love having him around if something happens," Jazz agreed before he, Pantera and Deadlock began moving a little bit out from the group.

"It must take a special mindset to cope with suddenly appearing and disappearing like he does. Especially if you never know where or when you are going to be next," Cladin said as he pondered the unusual nature of a gestalt. It was something he'd never had reason to think about before.

"It's not so strange to him because he'll never know anything else, but it is a bizarre existence to contemplate," Dagger agreed and watched the strangest transformation he had ever seen. Five mecha becoming the arms, legs and body of a new mecha. It made for one very strange looking being.

Red optics light up and scanned the area, then focused on Dai Atlas. "It is good to see you again," the deep booming voice put Thundercracker's to shame.
"And to see you, Flightplan," Dai Atlas answered, keeping an optic on everyone near him. Every introduction so far had gone well, and he was determined that this one wouldn't have problems. Keeping the most physically dangerous member of the gestalt peaceful and happy to be here was an important part of this integration. "We have some mecha for you to meet before you practice flying."

"He's learning to fly too?" Photosphere whispered from her place beside Aurora. She was a bit awestruck by the mecha towering over her.

"Yes although he'll never be as agile in the air as we are," Highdive said after a quick glance at Aurora for permission to answer. "He's more like a heavy cargo transport; he flies, just slowly."

"Aurora's charge," Flightplan focused in on the Seekers. "Highdive. It is good to see you again. You make my component very happy."

"Thank you, Flightplan," Highdive grinned and waved up at him. "I try. He makes me happy too."

~Well, if anyone was questioning your feelings for Highdive, Flightplan just outed you,~ Deadlock said cheerfully. Everyone could feel a bit of mortification and happiness from Thundercracker.

~That was very nice of you,~ Wing offered Flightplan immediately.

~She's my Action. I should like her,~ Thundercracker pointed out as he gathered himself.

"Flightplan, this is Photosphere. She is going to be close to Thundercracker for a very long time," Aurora introduced the youth.

"Hello, Photosphere," Flightplan carefully knelt and offered her his hand to step on.

"Go ahead. He's being polite so you can look him in the optic," Highdive encouraged quietly.

Photosphere climbed up on his hand with the same assurance she'd shown throwing herself into her first flight. As the hand rose into the air she looked around watching everyone else grow smaller beneath her. It felt a little odd since she wasn't using her wings, but at least she knew she could fly to safety if she fell or was dropped. Not that she expected that to happen. Thundercracker was in there and he wasn't going to hurt her. Once she was at optic level with him, she belatedly remembered her manners. "Good orn, Flightplan."

"Good orn, Photosphere," Flightplan replied. "Do you wish to be friends?"

"Yes, you and I are both part of Thundercracker's flocks," Photosphere preened a bit at the offer of friendship from the last member of Thundercracker's gestalt flock. "That means we have at least one thing in common. Do you like to fly?"

"I do. Some of my components do not. So we fly low," he told her. "You like to fly?"

"I love to fly," Photosphere agreed immediately. "That's two things we already have in common."

~She's handling this very well,~ Jazz said approvingly.

~Fearless,~ Deadlock agreed, disliking the mention of flying but willing to tolerate it for a little while to make Flightplan happy.

~Yes, both because of her age and her nature,~ Thundercracker agreed, warmed and thrilled that she wasn't lashing out even as he wondered how Flightplan could not register as a threat to her.

~You are part of him,~ Wing suggested.
"Will you fly with us this orn?" Flightplan asked.

"Yes," Photosphere replied immediately before glancing down at the group far below. "I think you have someone else to meet before we can do that."

"In a bit then," Flightplan agreed as he lowered her to the ground.

"Hello Flightplan," Cladin greeted and stepped onto the giant's hand after Photosphere hopped off. He kept his field carefully steady as the height increased past the point where it would hurt to fall.

"Hello Cladin." Flightplan regarded the convoy class mech on his hand. "You make my leg component tingle."

"I enjoy his company as well," Cladin replied looking at the gentle optics in front of him. This gestalt really was a giant sparkling, and he could see why the others talked so protectively about him. It was exceptionally strange to teek Wing under his pedes while having a second field overlaying it.

~You really do like him a lot,~ Wing observed. ~I didn't know he was that good in the berth.~

~He is. It's not the only reason I like him,~ Pantera flushed slightly. ~It's enjoyable to spend time with him.~

~You're thinking about getting more serious, aren't you?~ Jazz asked noting the undercurrent of Pantera's feelings.

~It's not allowed until I'm a Knight,~ Pantera didn't deny it though he didn't admit it either.

"You have a very calm field even up high like this," Flightplan observed. "Many grounders don't like being this high up with me."

"Knights work to understand and control ourselves. Once I understood why I feared heights it was a simple process to teach myself not to fear it," Cladin said.

"One of my components is working not to fear heights. He wants me to be able to fly without causing distress," Flightplan agreed happily.

~I like them both,~ Flightplan announced.

His components greeted the statement with varying degrees of pleased.

"He is welcome to anything I might help with. It is not an easy thing," Cladin said seriously.

"You said it was simple," Flightplan focused on the mech on his hand.

"Simple does not always mean easy or quick," Cladin explain gently.

"Like learning to walk and fly? Both have taken time and work," Flightplan asked. "Or was it like us escaping? My components helped me hide how smart I was so the Nijihito wouldn't stop us from escaping."

"I expect it is more like learning to fly," Cladin smiled at him. "Your components are very skilled, smart mecha."

"They are," Flightplan agreed. "We enjoyed meeting you, but it's time to fly now. Do you want to come with us?"
"No, thank you," Cladin said politely and held steady as Flightplan lowered him to the ground.

"Are you going to fly with us, Photosphere?" Flightplan asked.

"Yes!" she almost vibrated in her eagerness for any excuse to get off the ground.
Chapter Summary

While not official Thundercracker accepts that Photosphere will be his Vision.

"Aurora," Dai Atlas looked up from the report he was reading when she walked into his office.
"How are your charges doing?"

"Quite well. Photosphere has calmed significantly since Thundercracker began to assure her he
would always be close. I still expect he will accept her as his Vision; he's already acting like it," she
sighed. "I truly wish they had more options yet I cannot deny that her best chance at a stable
existence is with him and within these walls."

"If they do decide to trine it would be the best solution for everyone. It is unfortunate for them but a
very good thing for the citizens as a whole. The lack of violence we have cultivated here has proven
productive and should prevent many of the problems back on Cybertron," Dai Atlas agreed.

"Yes," she agreed and sat elegantly in a visitor's chair brought out before she'd arrived. "Has there
been further thoughts on how the seven of them will be housed?"

"Once Pantera and Deadlock complete their training they are eligible for separate housing. Axe and I
fully expect at that time they will request to be near Wing, and there would be no reason not to grant
it. That puts three of the five permanently in the Citadel," Dai Atlas paused for a moment before
smiling slightly at Aurora. "Normally Thundercracker and his trine would be expected to live in
Northwind's eyrie, however if Photosphere does become a Knight we have precedent for her and her
trine to reside here as well."

"Which leaves only Jazz without a normal reason to reside here. To be honest I would prefer him
where an optic can be kept on him. Arranging a level for the gestalt with a half-circle of it for the
trine and offering it as their assumed home sooner rather than later would set the idea for them that he
should be with them. The fees we charge are nothing compared to living on one's own."

Dai Atlas nodded thoughtfully. "I don't think many would object to the idea of having him reside
here even though it is a bit unusual. Giving him the security of having his unit around will help keep
him stable socially and mentally. We all know he's more than capable of taking care of himself, but a
lone ISO mecha is a doubly paranoid ISO mecha. It also means Thundercracker won't be worried
about his flock not living in one place."

"It also makes any situation where if one of them doesn't live in the Citadel on their level would be
an internal situation rather than something that could be blamed on us," she suggested. "They're
grateful for us now. It may not be true if one of them gets the idea that Jazz was denied a place with
them."

"Deadlock would be the first to erupt if he felt Jazz was being denied a place because he wasn't a
Knight," Dai Atlas agreed with a grimace. "He has very strong opinions about abandonment and
loyalties due to his past. I could also see Wing suggesting that someone claim Jazz as a dependent as
an excuse to let him live with the others."

"If we lay it out this early and shift their meeting place from where it is now to a place we tell them is the eventual quarters for them all it will be well settled before it becomes an issue," she nodded her wings. "I'll nudge Thundercracker about it. You and Axe nudge your Initiates on what they think of a layout. We'll have their thoughts after the next gestalt night."

"Should we ask Dagger if he wants to consider joining them on the floor? He's been accepted by them as a unit medic, and he does seem to be interested in pursuing a relationship with Pantera once he becomes a Knight," Dai Atlas said reflexively.

Aurora hesitated, thinking over what she knew and what she suspected. Her wings gave several uncertain twitches that would never have shown in public.

"I believe it would be good to ask. In a Seeker I'd say he would; I'm uncertain how that relationship works with Praxians."

"From what I've seen so far I'd say Pantera is interested in something long term with Dagger as well as Cladin," Dai Atlas agreed. "Talon informed me when I asked that it's unlikely anything permanent will happen until Pantera is an actual Knight. I must admit I am pleased that part of his existence will be something closer to a normal schedule."

"I expect the same reason trine bonds are almost never done until the final decade as mechlings at the earliest," Aurora nodded. "It's a life-long commitment. It's not to be rushed."

Dai Atlas cocked his helm. "I thought Thundercracker had chosen Highdive."

"Ah, yes. That's only social. A statement of intent; rather like being mates. It's socially painful to break that promise but there is no actual harm done. Once the trine bond is created is causes actual harm to break," she explained seriously. "Something Thundercracker is more aware of than most."

"Yet she moved in with you," he nudged for more.

A soft sigh escaped Aurora's vents. "Also unusual. He's doing all of the trine building steps faster and with changes to push her as hard as he can before there is a bond to break; normally she would not have moved in until she was in her final frame. I can't say I like it but I have to agree with it given his past. He can't afford a poor match or one that can't handle what it means to have military coded creations."

"No, he doesn't deserve that stress and neither does the rest of the gestalt," Dai Atlas agreed. "If it's that unusual a move I'm almost surprised her flock accepted it. Although getting her out of the eyrie would reduce the internal disagreements about her choice of Orders. Out of sight, out of processor isn't just a saying."

"Quite true and there was a fair amount of discussion about that behind the scenes before he asked because of the situation as well," she chuckled lightly. "Things can change during the request and challenges that can result but because the trining will bind the flocks together legally and socially the flock Orders and creators do a lot of sorting things out before it happens. The mechlings don't usually realize just how much they weren't in on until they're much older."

"A good way to handle any complicated social situation," Dai Atlas agreed. "I hope everything continues to work out for him. He doesn't deserve to have a third broken trine, and none of us want to deal with the potential consequences if it happens."

"Decidedly not," Aurora's wings shivered with a far stronger reaction. "Fortunately he has two
flocks now and soon will have four."

"Two?"

"He has creation by adoption to Northwind's and the Citadel. He'll trine bond into Nightflight's and Knock Out's. He also has in-law status with Gyre's through me, and would have that with Quickfire's if the flock had come." she smiled softly as he began to grasp the social importance of the trine. "Seekers are extremely social beings."

"It makes it all the more amazing to me that there are any among the Knights," Dai Atlas mused.

"Many of us came after losing our trine; that's a time in a Seeker's existence when we tend to make radical changes if we're inclined to. Plus a full half of those here are the creations of Knights," she pointed out.

"Which would make our ways more familiar and lead them to stay here if the life is suitable," Dai Atlas said, understanding the situation a bit better. "It's highly likely any fledglings from Thundercracker's trine will become Knights and expand this flock."

"Given the near-certainty they will be military coded between him and Photosphere, yes. Their options are as limited as hers are. Thundercracker only managed to avoid that fate because of his age, experience and unusually mellow nature," she nodded her wings. "The odds for his are even higher than for mine."

"Given the options likely if he had survived to have any fledglings back on Cybertron, I don't think he'll complain too much about that limitation when the time comes," Dai Atlas said.

"Definitely not. He's already well aware of the odds and their options," Aurora agreed and relaxed a bit more.
Chapter Summary

The unit is shown the tower level that they've been given. Talk of the future. Dagger brings up TC+trine raising the Raccipi eggs is going to help ease any civilian tension about them having fledglings.

Thundercracker had to work to keep his wings steady as he landed on the balcony of the convoy quarters the gestalt spent every fourth night in. It had been a whirlwind of three orns since Aurora had told him to think about configuring a level for both his unit and trine and that it would be their new place to spend gestalt nights with each moving in when they were either a citizen or Knight. He knew the others were just as eager to have this tangible promise of not being separated. Even divided amongst all the mecha and into two separate sets of quarters it was a lot of space.

"You're finally here," Wing immediately pounced on the Seeker and stayed pressed against him even as they joined the others. Thundercracker's field enveloped him warmly and one hand slid down to stroke his back to the side of Challenger of Ways.

"You're ridiculous," Deadlock grunted even as he smiled at the Aerial's exuberance. Even if he was stuck with Axe for most of the next few centuries, the idea of having real quarters with the others to look forward to was something he hadn't expected to actually happen. It made tolerating the training easier to think about.

"You're grumpy," Wing snickered back.

"It'll be nice to have quarters set up with us in mind," Pantera smiled and wiggled his doorwings with the pleasure of having his full unit here and in good moods.

"Hard to believe we're being given this much space and freedom," Jazz agreed. "It's a lot more than I could have hoped to afford outside in the city and the amenities are hard to beat."

"Safer for everyone having you with us," Deadlock pointed out. "It also makes it easier to find all of us if Flightplan is ever needed during an overnight emergency."

"Why would it be safer to have Jazz with us?" Pantera looked at Deadlock, then Jazz.

"Recharging away from the flock could be very dangerous during the war. This way we don't have our coding causing us to worry about him being isolated, and he knows he has someone he trusts watching his back while he recharges," Thundercracker replied, neglecting to mention that it also meant that the ISO agent was going to continue to be under relatively easy surveillance.

"It also means you'll have him readily available to help me test your new recipes," Wing added. "We have to make certain to have a decent kitchen for Pantera."

"Always a plus," Pantera grinned at him. "It doesn't need to be large. I don't make much at once. So just how much space do we have?"
Wing tapped a device he'd put in the middle of the pillow nest on a small cleared space. It activated and projected a circular platform without walls and only a handful of support pillars visible around the edge. The only other object was a lift off to one side. "What's here are the structural things; stuff that can't be moved or removed so we have to work around it."

"Put me near the lift," Deadlock gruffly asked although it would have sounded like a demand to anyone unfamiliar with him. He still wasn't happy about being quartered this high up, but with three Seekers and an Aerial as part of the unit he'd expected it to happen. At least they weren't at the top of a tower like Master Aurora.

"We could section out this part for your eyrie," Jazz suggested as he motioned towards the opposite side from where Deadlock was suggesting. "It would leave more of the middle open for all of us."

"Wait, wait, how are the spaces going to be used?" Pantera stopped them with a bit of alarm.

"Most of us want a private space to retreat to," Wing told him gently. "If you don't you can use the room for something else."

"Like a kitchen?" Pantera asked.

"Yes, like a kitchen, but there's enough space to put it out in the open. Anyway, I think the assumption is that the four of us will each get a berthroom sized space, the size of mine, not yours, a meditation room and an eyrie for Thundercracker and his trine. Plus spare rooms, or space for them, for when the Knights have an Initiate," Wing rattled out.

"What about creations?" Pantera followed the logic.

"Mine will be raised in the eyrie. There should be a door that can lock between the eyrie and the unit's quarters," Thundercracker said.

"That's far enough in the future that it will be discussed and adjusted for when it will happen," Wing promised.

"It will be needed in the future but that might not be as far off as we initially thought," Thundercracker said. "Dagger made a suggestion that my trine raise the Raccipi eggs as proof to the civilians that we can safely handle fledglings."

"Makes sense," Jazz agreed. "They won't live as long as any of us, but they'll be as helpless as any sparkling at the first stages of development."

"Likely only a vorn, though they may manage a very vorns longer with cybernetic replacements," Thundercracker agreed.

"Should we all be involved in raising them?" Pantera glanced around his elders.

"As my primary flock everyone would normally be involved once they were out of the nest. I understand that will be between twelve and fourteen orns after hatching," Thundercracker nodded to him. "Even though they are only truly dependent for a decaorn they require intensive care and will be here for a little over a metacycle."

"Reboot and you miss it is going to be true for this lot," Jazz chuckled.

"If it'll prove you can handle having fledglings it'll be worth the hassle," Deadlock said reluctantly. "I don't know how much use I'll be."
"If there are three of them an extra set of optics to watch for falls or fights would be a great help once they are capable of moving around," Thundercracker said, pleased Deadlock was willing to admit he didn't want to be directly involved with them when they were truly helpless but didn't mind them being in the flock's space.

"How long before they can fly?" Pantera asked.

"Twelve and fourteen orns. Unlike Cybertronians they go from functionally immobile to full flight within an orn. It's incredibly fast." Thundercracker told him. "They're in their adult frame within a decaorn but don't interface until they are over a metacycle old."

Pantera cocked his doorwings and Thundercracker chuckled.

"I'm assuming that creator coding will react to the Raccipi as it would to a Seekerling. Nothing but trine goes near them until they can leave the nest. I'll welcome the help if that's not true," Thundercracker explained.

"Sounds exhausting," Deadlock said looking back over at the map. "Now, where do you want your quarters Jazz?"

"I think near yours would work well," Jazz said looking things over. "We might want to do some decent soundproofing in there for when I'm first experimenting with a tune."

"I'm thinking if we cluster the rooms around the lift it'll leave the largest open space for us to hand out, recharge and play in," Wing spoke up and began to place cubes of equal size around it.

"How often do Knights have an Initiate?" Pantera asked after Thundercracker marked out what he wanted for the eyrie.

"Not often. I've only had thirteen and I've been around a long time," he tapped his left nacelle. "It's not unusual for a Knight to only train one Initiate."

"Then why don't we leave this space," he marked out a square the size of his Initiate room at the edge of the others, "open but keep it in mind that it will be their room when one is here? I can't think of a reason to block off a space that is almost never used."

"Sounds like a good idea. Maybe double it just in case there are two of them," Deadlock agreed. He couldn't imagine actually being allowed to take on someone to train, but it wasn't the strangest idea after every else he'd gone through these past few vorns.

"Is there anything else we need to block out?" Jazz asked looking over the layout to see if it needed adjustment.

"The kitchen," Wing suggested and pointed to a spot. "We can put a long window there for Pantera to look out of when he's working."

"Speak up," Jazz nudged Pantera.

"I'd rather it be facing inward," he murmured.

Wing nodded and shifted the counter. "Like that."

"Yes," Pantera smiled.

"Balconies, flier or grounder?" Thundercracker glanced around.
"Grounder," Deadlock all but demanded.

"I'm sure they can be made deeper so it's easy to land despite the railing," Wing suggested.

"That will work," Thundercracker accepted the compromise knowing Deadlock had already given up a lot by being this high up in the air and having that large an opening at all, door or no door.

"Where do we want windows?" Wing asked, pleased with how everything was going so far.

"Here and here would give good views of the gardens," Thundercracker pointed out on the map.

"My room," Pantera sized what he wanted, then watched as Jazz did the same. Deadlock's room was too far inside for one and it seemed to suit him. But so was Wing's. "Don't you want a view?"

"Honestly, no. When I need to retreat, to be alone, I want an enclosed space if I go for a room," Wing shook his helm. "Usually I'll go flying if I need a break."

Trying to ignore the odd idea of a flier wanting to be confined, Thundercracker looked the map over carefully taking note of how much free space was around Pantera's quarters. He knew the mechling would eventually have a triad, and there seemed to be enough space to give them a place near him since he'd taken a position on the outside. He reached over and began marking where things were in the eyrie and paused to look at Wing.

"How stable is the temperature? Northwind's eyrie has a fireplace but Aurora's does not."

"It's very stable," Wing smiled at him. "You shouldn't need anything even with mostly open walls."

"We might want a fireplace anyway since they can be cozy when cuddling," Jazz suggested as he pointed out a small spot off to the side of the main resting area.

"We'll need to save up for it," Wing regretfully put the kibosh on it. "The Citadel will cover a lot but that's definitely a luxury we'd be expected to buy."

"The kitchen?" Pantera looked at him.

"Umm," Wing hummed. "Aurora said that what was put in the plan fall under the acceptable range. Shelves, a heating pad and oven are all things in the stores and that's all it really is. If you eventually want high end or specialized equipment we'll need to pay for it or justify it as a secondary function like Deco's studio or Cladin's fishtanks."

Pantera nodded and relaxed. "That won't be for a long time and I'll know well in advance if I ever become that skilled."

"We've got room to expand if you eventually need it," Deadlock agreed as he looked for anything else that might be required. "It looks like there's enough room for us to have company over without being on top of one another. Can anyone think of anything else necessary?"

"Remember that any major changes in our existences can mean a remodel," Wing spoke up. "Mates, creations, new hobbies that get series. We don't need to account for all options, just the next few centuries."

Jazz glanced around and nodded. "I think it's good. I'll look forward to moving in."

"Agreed," Thundercracker nodded.

"It'll be good to have our own space, even if I can't immediately move in," Deadlock agreed.
"Pantera and I are going to be stuck in training quarters for a long time."

"We'll always have this as our gestalt space," Pantera reminded him.

"It's not like TC and I'll get to move in much sooner. We have to be citizens first," Jazz pointed out. "So Wing'll be first and that won't be for another fifty vorns or so."

"Well there is moving in and there's residing here. We can move in as soon as it's finished. We just don't get to reside in it until we're each on our own," Wing pointed out. "I expect we'll start to move in when it's finished and once you start to have belongings. I'll be moving mine in well before I get off probation."

"So we get to move your stuff in and clear out of the temporary quarters. Jazz can start storing instruments here. It's a start on claiming it," Deadlock said as he looked at the map. "I think it's more space than I ever had before."

"I think it's more space than any of us have had, except maybe Thundercracker," Jazz glanced at the Seeker.

"My creation eyrie was significantly larger but it was also shared by a couple dozen or more Seekers on any given night," Thundercracker agreed. "Space per mecha..." he traced a finger around the holographic schematic, "The Winglord's quarters in Helix were larger but we were hardly ever there."

Wing was suddenly pressed against Thundercracker's side and trilled. "Okay, work over. Snuggle time."

"Agreed," Pantera eagerly snuggled up against Thundercracker as well. The large Seeker made a wonderful pillow for the two of them.

"It's always cuddling with you," Deadlock mock grumbled even as he moved closer to Wing and watched Jazz settle on the outside of Pantera in the instinctive protective position they usually ended up in.
Kaizen 4 outline

Chapter by gatekat

Chapter Summary

And real life killed another, though we did manage something of an ending this time. This is what story 4 would cover as a pre-writing outline.

Vorn 10: Thundercracker trine bonds to Highdive
Vorn 14: Pantera begins Knight training for real.
Vorn 32: The City Showcase
Vorn 50: Thundercracker is granted citizenship.
Vorn 51: Wing's penalty shifts are over.
Vorn 79: Jazz is granted citizenship.
Vorn 151: Thundercracker and Highdive trine bond with Photosphere (after her adult upgrade).
Vorn 184: Pantera is Knighted, begins Teris-Spi training (takes 1700 vorns for grand master, 100 for the art). Deadlock does something that uses Praxian extensively
Vorn 185: Pantera, Dagger and Cladin triad bond.
Vorn 200: deal with the Raccipi eggs.
Vorn 300: Pantera begins formal Diffusion training (takes 900 vorns for master, 120 for the art).
Vorn 372: Deadlock is knighted as Pertinax (Tax, Nax?) and receives a full set of armor upgrades as a Knighting gift.
Vorn 332: The City Showcase
Vorn 450: Pantera begins formal Circuit-Su training (takes 900 vorns for master, 120 for the art).
Vorn 932: The City Showcase
Vorn 1232: The City Showcase
Vorn 1209: Pantera granted the rank of master of formal Diffusion
Vorn 1216: Pantera granted the rank of master of Crystalocution
Vorn 1532: The City Showcase
Vorn 1832: The City Showcase
Vorn 1886: Pantera granted the rank of grandmaster of Teris-Spi. Major celebration in Praxus for it.

Vorn 2132: The City Showcase

End Notes

nanoklik = 1/8 second;
klk = 496 nanokliks/62 seconds;
breem = 8 kliks/8.27 minutes;
groon = 9 breem/1.24 hours;
joor = 6 groon/7.44 hours;
orn = 42 joor/13.02 days;
decaorn = 32 orns/1.14 years;
metacycle = 256 orns/8 decaorn/9.22 years;
vorn = 2304 orns/72 decaorns/9 metacycles/72 decaorn/83 years;

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