An Offer He Can’t Refuse

by WandersUnderStarlight

Summary

Jazz is a new Enforcer in Praxus. Who knew that saving a certain sweet-faced youngling from an out-of-control racer would get him an in with the mob he never wanted.

Notes

This first chapter is also posted in my Drabbles and Snippets. It decided it wanted a full story, so here we go.

I made a couple of tiny edits, but nothing substantial.
Earning the respect of his Enforcer colleagues in Praxus had been difficult, but Jazz had managed with the grace and adaptability that Polyhexians were known for. He’d come to Praxus on loan from the Polyhex Enforcers to help investigate the new illegal racing circuit that had spread through lower Praxus. Racing itself wasn’t illegal, but doing so outside the approved areas was dangerous and a lot of credits were exchanged under the table at such events.

To their credit, the Praxian Enforcers had had the problem mostly under control until a new drug had been introduced to the circuit. Noss, when injected into a bot’s systems, gave them both a high and exponentially increased their speed for a short time. It came with the unfortunate side effects of addiction, hyper-aggressiveness and hallucinations.

The Praxian Enforcers were simply not fast enough to capture a Nossed mech. That was where Jazz came in. Polyhex had a long, celebrated history of racing. As an Enforcer of Polyhex who’d participated in the legal races since he’d been old enough to enter, he was the fastest mech on their roster and he had a helm for racing. So when the call for assistance had come in, he’d been the obvious choice to send.

It didn’t hurt that he was disarmingly cheerful and easygoing. Those qualities helped him to win over the insular and sometimes uptight Praxians.

He was now quite good friends with his patrol partner, a no-nonsense femme named Crossfire. They were in charge of the illegal racing investigation and their personalities balanced each other well. The cyan and yellow femme was modded; the fastest Praxian on the force, he was just faster. It had irked her to be partnered with him at first. But after many light-cycles of patrols together, and long night-cycles spent discussing the investigation she’d slowly warmed up to him.

They were cruising their normal patrol route when the call came in.

:All available units, we have a Nossed racer heading inbound to Garden Square. Mech appears unstable and extremely dangerous. Immediate backup requested.: Garden Square was the most influential and heavily populated area in Praxus. A Nossed mech there was going to cause unimaginable amounts of damage to property and bots alike.

Crossfire was quick to answer as they both sped up and turned on their sirens. :Dispatch, officers Crossfire and Jazz, heading to location.: To him Crossfire said, “Jazz, go, don’t wait for me.”

Jazz revved his engine. “Ya got it. I’ll get ‘em cuffed fo’ ya.”

“Slagger.” she said good-naturedly as he roared away.

Jazz weaved expertly in and out of the ever increasing density of traffic towards the location of the racer. He caught sight of the drugged mech on a ground street as Jazz passed overhead on one of the lower aerial highway. The wailing sirens of the other pursuing Enforcers were too far away to be of any consequence. He was raging with angry snarls of his engine, sideswiping the mechs and femmes he was speeding past. He was careening directly for a crowded crosswalk. The bots had just seen the incoming danger and several were attempting to get out of the way in a panicky rush. Jazz saw a
grey and red youngling get shoved and go down. He wasn’t going to make it in time to prevent damage if he didn’t change course.

With a determined rumble, Jazz gunned his engine and swerved to the edge of the highway. He transformed, vaulting himself off the structure and down onto the back of the Nossed mech. The drugged bot let out a howl. Jazz slammed his servos onto specific points on the mech’s frame and loosed a set of mag pulses into his T-cog causing him to yell in shock as his frame twisted into transforming without his permission.

While the bot was still trying to figure out the confusion of his own shifting parts, Jazz grabbed first one flailing arm and then the other, slapping stasis cuffs on the mech. The racer dropped insensate to the ground.

Jazz vented heavily, opticking the mech to make sure he was down for the count. He sent a comm. to the dispatch.

:Dispatch, this is Officer Jazz, suspect has been caught and restrained with stasis cuffs. Requesting transport.: 

:Copy, Officer Jazz. We are sending the transport now.: 

Jazz turned his attention to the bystanders and held back a wince at just how close the Nossed mech had come to hurting somebot. The crosswalk was not ten feet from where he stood. The grey youngling was still sprawled on the ground looking up at him with something like awe. It looked like the mech had just gotten some fresh detailing done, though he might need to get a rebuff after his run-in with the ground.

The Polyhexian walked forward and offered a servo.

“Ya alright, young mech?”

The mechling looked confused for a moment at his outstretched servo and then smiled brightly taking it and allowing Jazz to pull him upright.

“Yes! I’m alright. That was really scary. What’s wrong with him? Are you alright? Wow, I’ve never seen anyone move like that except in entertainment vids. How did you do that? Are you an Enforcer? What’s your name?”

“I’m Officer Jazz,” he said, amused by the youngling’s rambling. “Nice wing decals, by th’ way. An’ who do I have th’ pleasure of speakin’ t’?”

Again, there was that split second of confusion before the younglin beamed at him. “Thank you! I’m Bluestreak. I’m very pleased to make your acquaintance.” He tapped his fist lightly on his chestplates in a formal greeting complete with dipping doorwings.

Jazz smiled. The formalities that the Praxians practiced always entertained him. Especially when they came from younglings. He tapped his fist on his own plating in a returned greeting. The youngling looked delighted.

Jazz then heard Crossfire roar up behind him and transform. “Excuse me fo’ a moment.”

He turned to his partner with a small smile only for it to morph into a confused frown as he took in the almost panicky look the light blue femme was shooting the mechling. “Wha’s wrong ‘Fire?”

“Nothing!” She said too quickly. “We should get this mech to the station.”
“I already called fo’ a transport, it should be here… now it looks like.”

Sure enough, the transport hovered into view as several more officers finally made it to the scene. They cordoned off the area and began the task of bundling the unconscious mech into the transport.

In the bustling confusion Jazz glanced back over at the youngling to make sure he was alright only to see him being fussed over by two other mechs. They weren’t old enough to be the youngling’s creators. Older siblings, perhaps? No, he’d been in Praxus long enough to recognize that despite similar frames, those mechs were not related. The doorwing language was all off for that. Older friends, maybe.

Bluestreak caught his optics and waved cheerily. Jazz smiled and waved back. Then the three of them melted into the crowd.

“Jazz,” Crossfire said tightly, drawing his attention, “do you know that mechling?”

“Know him?” Jazz asked in bemusement, “Nah, jus’ met him. He was in th’ wrong place at th’ wrong time. Nearly got run over.”

Doorwings that had been tense nearly sagged a foot in relief. “Good thing you got here in time.” She said giving him a wan smile.

“Everythin’ okay?” Jazz asked.

“Yes! Yes, of course. Let’s just get this mech processed and start him on the detox program.”

Jazz wisely let the conversation drop.

The previously-Nossed-racer was still recharging off the effects of the system purge detox in a cell the next light-cycle as Jazz and Crossfire were working on the incident report.

A courier came to the front desk of the Enforcer headquarters with an elaborate arrangement of crystalline blooms. Some colored with streaks of opaqueness running through them, others clear as glass, set upon a lit base. It dazzled the optics.

“Huh, looks like somebot has an admirer.” Jazz commented offhandedly before returning his attention to the screen of his console. Crossfire just hummed noncommittally, her focus on her own work.

Jazz’s sensitive audials picked up the cessation of noise that followed the courier as they made their way to to whoever the bouquet was for. It seemed to be nearing... to... his... position…?

The Polyhexian looked up in surprise when the courier stopped by his desk with a smile.

“Officer Jazz?”

“Yes?”

“Delivery for you! These were hand picked today from the Helix Gardens. If you would just ping me with your ID, please.” The mech said offering the glittering arrangement.

So befuddled was he, that Jazz gave the courier his ID ping without realizing that he did so. The mech placed the arrangement on his desk and a fancy, high-end data pad engraved with a seal on the back in his servo.
“Have a wonderful cycle, Officer.” The courier said, and then was gone.

Jazz glanced from the crystals to the data pad and back again. “Th’ frag is this…?”

Crossfire had an uncharacteristic look of mischievous glee in her optics “Somebot has an admirer, huh?”

And the Praxian Enforcers, who had all tuned in to their favorite outsider, got the unbridled delight of seeing the normally smooth Jazz stutter like an academy-aged youngling. His EM field teeked with embarrassment.

“I-I don’t. Who would even-? What?!”

Kindly laughter filled the room.

“Well, go on!” Somebot said. “Don’t leave us in suspense. Who are they from?”

Jazz stuck his glossa out at them to more laughter. Immature, yes, but it made him feel better. He turned on the data pad, which then asked for his badge number as an extra security measure. Intrigued, he put it in.

It was an invitation.

“The Viscount Prowl of the Crystalspire family requests your presence for a private dinner in recognition of your brave actions regarding his ward. The dinner will be held at The Cobalt Lattice on the fifth cycle of the third orn at the beginning of the dark-cycle. This occasion is a wax and polish event. Your company is greatly anticipated. Please show this invitation to the maitre'd when you arrive.”

The fifth cycle of the third orn? That’s tomorrow. Jazz realized

The atmosphere of the room had turned from pleasant to tense. Jazz felt the change in the room and decided not to read aloud the postscript at the bottom that said: I do hope you enjoy the crystals. They are but a small token of my appreciation.

Jazz looked around the assembled Enforcers in confusion. “Um, somebot wanna clue me in t’ who this mech is?”

Several pairs of optics blinked off and on again. “You… really don’t know who he is?”

Jazz threw up his arms in an exaggerated shrug.

Crossfire sighed and grumbled as she stood and then bent over her console to look Jazz in the optics. “He’s the Lord of Praxus.”

Jazz tilted his helm. “...I thought Duke Bellicose was th’ Lord of Praxus?”

The other officers started to chime in.

“The Viscount is the head of the criminal underworld of Praxus. Everybot knows it, but noone can, or will, produce proof of it.”

“He runs basically everything, he’s more of the Lord of Praxus then the Duke is. And he knows it.”

“He’s extremely dangerous.”
Flabbergasted Jazz tried to ask. “Wha’? Then why would he even-?”

“His ward is the mechling you saved yesterday.” Crossfire cut him off.

“Bluestreak?” Jazz blurted incredulously.

“Yes. And now you’ve gotten his attention.”

“I jus’... tell him I appreciate it, bu’ there’s no need t’ thank me.”

The room fell into shocked silence for a klik.

“You can’t just brush off the Lord of Praxus.” One of the beat cops said in a horrified whisper.

Jazz frowned. “I didn’ ask t’ be taken out t’ dinner. Especially not fo’ doin’ my job! B’sides The Cobalt Lattice is th’ most expensive restaurant in Praxus. It ain’t my scene. I’ll jus’ send him a message that says thanks, bu’ no thanks... In the nicest possible terms o’ course.”

He examined the invitation, only to realize that there was no rsvp comm number. Oh well, he’d just have to look it up later before he got off shift. He subspaced the invitation and settled back in to finish his report. The other officers slowly drifted away when they realized the show was over for now.

Though every now and then, a bot would wander by and offer unsolicited advice about a polish he should use or to regale him with a story they’d heard about a bot that had slighted the Viscount. Jazz had made a habit of keeping his olfactory out of the politics of Praxus; it wasn’t his business unless it pertained to the case. But the staggering amount of what looked like corruption was beginning to grate on him.

Just when he thought his cycle couldn’t get any weirder, the Chief Enforcer’s voice rang out over the room.

“Jazz, my office. Now.”

He saved the document he was working on and made his way to the Chief Scattershield’s office.

“Sir? Wha’ can I do fo’ ya?”

The older Praxian stood behind his desk. “Come in and sit down, Jazz.”

Perturbed, Jazz did as instructed. Scattershield was known for his yelling. This patient, subdual was putting Jazz on edge. The door shut remotely.

“You are quite the topic of gossip today.”

Jazz reset his vocalizer. “Yes, Sir.”

“Am I to understand that Viscount Prowl has invited you for dinner tomorrow?”

“Um, I don’ intend t’ accept the invitation, boss.”

“You most certainly will accept that invitation, officer.” Scattershield snapped.

Jazz jerked back physically from the near-order, his visor sharpening in annoyance and his EM field flaring with affront.
“Wha?” He deadpanned.

Scattershield sighed, reigning himself back in and held up a servo. “Apologies. I know what this must look like, but you must understand that the Viscount and the Enforcers have an understanding. He respects us and therefore will not stand in our way to dispense justice.”

“Except when it comes to his affairs, right?” Jazz said acidly, still radiating displeasure.

“Even then.” The chief said unexpectedly. At Jazz’s surprised look he added, “As I said, we have an understanding.”

“Humph. A mob boss with a sense o’ justice.”

“Please don’t call him that to his face.” Scattershield sighed.

“I still didn’ agree t’ go!”

“Jazz, I guarantee that all he is doing is thanking you for saving Bluestreak’s life.”

“Th’ crystals were enough!”

“Jazz… please.”

The visored mech said nothing for a while and then huffed out a vent. “Fine. I’ll go t’ th’ fancy dinner.”

Scattershield nodded. “Thank you. I’m sending you the name of a salon in the Resin District. Take tomorrow off and get a full repaint, polish and wax. Tell them it is for a state dinner and to charge it to the Enforcer account. I want you to represent the Enforcers in style.”

Jazz suppressed the urge to give his superior a rude Polyhexian gesture. And gritted out, “Yes, Sir.”

It was almost comical to see the scramble of officers that were pretending to be suddenly absorbed in other things as they scattered from the abruptly opened door. Gossipy slagers.

Thankfully, Crossfire said nothing. Only gave him a sympathetic look.

Just as he stood to leave for the end of his shift she put a servo on his arm and murmured. “Be careful.”

He just nodded and left.

Annoyed as he was at being forced into the situation, he had to admit that the mechs at the salon had certainly known what they were doing. His plating shone; he hadn’t been this shiny even at his own graduation ceremony. He was pretty sure they’d covertly added glitter dust to his paint. They’d removed debris from under his armor that he hadn’t even realized were causing him discomfort. His cables felt wonderfully loose from the added message. He hadn’t dared look at the full bill, but maybe it would be worth it to schedule a spa day once an orn or so.

Mechs and femmes around him were certainly noticing the effect. He’d gotten more than one appreciative look accompanied by a flirty doorwing wiggle. He supposed that to most Praxians he must look quite exotic.

Earlier that cycle before his spa appointment had been quite productive, too. He’d run some errands
that had been on his list and casually cruised by a known gathering spot for illegal racers. He’d been both relieved and disappointed when it proved empty. Citing a high speed chase would have been a good enough excuse to get out of the dinner, right? He had one more stop to make, back at his apartment, before he had to leave for this weird dinner date.

He offloaded the energon he’d bought from the market and the “new” data pads he’d bought from the second-hand store out of his subspace.

There was a single, small box on the vanity in his washracks and he reverently opened it. In it was a single audial horn adornment that his carrier had hand made for him. Delicate silver filigree interspersed tastefully with glittering blue gems. It was defiantly Polyhexian in design. “For luck,” his carrier had told him.

He’d certainly need the luck tonight.

Jazz carefully affixed the magnetic clasps and spared himself a glance in the mirror. He vented out a sigh.

“Alright, mech, let’s do this.”

He made it to The Cobalt Lattice just as the dark-cycle began. The maitre’d gave him a suspicious look when he entered, however the expression was quickly swept off the mech’s face when he presented the seal engraved data pad containing his invitation.

“Oh! You’re Officer Jazz. Yes, please come this way. The Viscount has reserved the balcony level for your dinner.”

“Um, thank ya.”

“Of course, Sir!”

Truly, Jazz didn’t know how to feel about the deference being shown to him, and he had a feeling that it was only going to get more confusing as the evening progressed.

The maitre’d led him past several rooms full of elegant furnishings and chandeliers. Each room hosted urbane occupants eating and drinking the most outlandish looking energon that Jazz had ever seen. And it occurred to him that he was possible about to be doing the same. Up a sparkling staircase, and through a mezzanine level, the mech finally stopped at a curtained doorway.

“Here you are, Sir.” The mech said. “Just up the stairs is the balcony level. Please enjoy!”

Then Jazz was ushered through the curtains that were then closed behind him. He slowly walked up another glittering staircase.

He didn’t really know what he was expecting, but it certainly wasn’t what he saw. The room was artistically dimmed and enclosed by a glass dome through which he could see a 360 degree view of Praxus, including the lit-from-within Helix Gardens. Once he wrenched his gaze away from the skyline, he took in the other details of the room.

In the center of the room was a flowing energon fountain. To one side was an orchestra pit complete with a full-sized synth, it was empty along with the scattered tables and chairs. It really brought home the point to Jazz in that moment just how much influence this mech had.

He had, on short notice, reserved an entire floor of the most expensive restaurant in Praxus to host what amounted to a thank-you dinner.
Jazz might have turned tail at that moment, but he finally spotted a table with a lit crystal lamp and a seated shadowed figure. He steeled his nerves and approached.

“Good evening.” A voice intoned from the darkness.

“Good evenin’. Thank ya fo’ th’ invitation.” Jazz remembered his manners.

“Please have a seat. I took the liberty of ordering for us. I hope you do not mind.”


The Viscount gave a soft humming laugh and Jazz’s visor finally adjusted to the dim lighting.

The mech was strangely normal-looking. Oh, he was definitely handsome, no doubt, but Jazz felt like he could have passed him on a patrol through Garden Square and not have given him a second look. He had a classically Praxian chevron in a ruby color (hadn’t that been the color of Bluestreak’s chevron?), and elegantly swept back doorwings. He was wearing a fashionable half-circle cape made out of a fine mesh clasped to his right shoulder pauldron. But then Jazz got to his optics and stalled.

Those optics were filled with a frightening intelligence. Piercing and searching. Dangerous indeed as his co-worker had said.

There were already two glasses filled with a gently fizzing silvery-colored energon and after a moment of indecision Jazz took up his glass.

The Viscount gave him an amused look. “You are uncomfortable.”

Jazz took a very small sip of the fizzy drink. It was high grade. “Jus’ not used to th’ fancy digs. Tha’s all.”

The Praxian delicately picked up his own glass. “I see. It was not my intention to alienate you. But I knew not of another way to show my gratitude. My ward is the most important mech in my life; the creation I was never able to have.”

“I understand. I know my carrier woul’ ‘ave done everythin’ in his power t’ keep me safe. It’s jus’… um, th’ crystals woul’ ‘ave been enough.”

The mech quirked an inscrutable smile. “Did you like them?”

“Yes, I did.” Jazz admitted truthfully.

The smile warmed. The Viscount pressed a button on the edge of the table. At Jazz’s confused look he explained, “This lets the mechs in the kitchen know when we are ready for our next course.”

“Ah.” Jazz said intelligently. “An’ wha’ did ya order fo’ us?” And just how many courses am I going to have to get through?

“I chose the Spectrum Dinner. Seven courses of their finest fare.”

_Fragging Pit. Okay, I can do this._

Two servers and another mech with a decal denoting his position as head chef on his chestplates appeared from curtained entryway tucked behind the main staircase.

“Good evening, Sirs.” The chef said brightly. “For your appetizer course, we have prepared a small
array of rust sticks. Please enjoy.”

A plate of fanned rust stick was placed in front of each of them along with a small glass of ruby-colored energon. The servers and chef bowed and then left. Jazz had only ever seen the mass produced rust sticks that were sold in a box, these were far more fancy in varied shades of red. He covertly opticked the Viscount, relieved when the mech forwent any of the fancy cutlery and picked up a rust stick with his digits. Jazz followed his lead and had to offline his visor for a moment as delicate flavors danced across his glossa when he bit down. When his visual center came back online, he realized the Viscount was watching him. Jazz looked away quickly, pretending to be very interested in his food.

“So, tell me, Officer, how it is you came to be in Praxus.”

Jazz forced himself to make optic contact again quickly swallowing down the rust stick in his mouth. “Jus’ Jazz is fine.”

“Jazz, then.”

And that might have been a mistake. His name suddenly seemed alarmingly intimate as it rolled off the mech’s glossa in the Praxian lilt.

Jazz reset his vocalizer. “I’m on loan t’ the Praxus Enforcers t’ help crack down on th’ illegal racin’ rings.”

“Adding your speed and expertise, then?”

“I s’pose so. They didn’t need th’ help ‘til th’ drugs showed up.”

The Viscounts optics sharpened keenly. “I suppose those drugs are to blame for the actions taken by the mech that nearly ran my ward down.”

Jazz saw no reason to lie to him. After all, Noss has become something of common knowledge. “Yes, and th’ number of users is only increasin’.”

“I find the drug trade to be quite detestable. I do hope you are able to find the source of this vile infection that is plaguing my city.”

“We’re gettin’ closer. We ‘ave some solid leads, bu’ I’m not at liberty t’ discuss any more abou’ th’ case.”

That seemed to satisfy the Viscount and he called for the next course as they finished up the rust sticks and the lightly sweetened red energon. A soup course came next. They were served a light copper broth and an acidic energon colored a distressing neon orange.

“So, how is your ward? There was no lastin’ damage, I hope?” Jazz asked bringing a spoonful of the broth to his dermas (after subtly pinpointing the spoon the Viscount had chosen for the course).

The mech’s doorwings flared in what Jazz had come to recognize from several orns of being around Praxians as “proud creator preen”.

“Bluestreak is quite well. Just a few scrapes, but nothing a little polish couldn’t fix. His guardians were replaced, of course. Those other mechs were derelict in their duties to keep him safe, allowing him to walk about unsupervised while they visited the shops. Thankfully, you were there to keep him from coming to harm.”
Jazz could only wonder what he meant by “replaced”.

A salad course of chipped yellow sulfur accompanied by a glass of golden, sour energon came next. By now, Jazz had picked up on the theme of the dinner and was not surprised that the next course, a “palate cleanser” course, consisted of thin green jasper wafers and a base energon that had been colored a deep emerald. He tried to keep up polite small talk, but it sounded stilted even to his own audials.

The fifth course threw him for a loop. The chef presented each of them with a dark blue acid-dwelling aquatic creature that had been boiled until it’s outer shell had become hard and it’s innards had become gelatin-like. It had then been split down the middle and they were apparently supposed to eat the gel-like insides out of the shell like some sort of primitive bowl. It was a delicacy the upper class were all excited about. It was a delicacy that Jazz wanted no part of.

As he was looking down at his poor critter and attempting to figure out how to politely decline eating it, the Viscount spoke up unexpectedly,

“Your reactions tonight are stemming from more than just social awkwardness, are they not? I take it your co-workers may have, hum… warned you about me?”

Jazz froze for half a klik.

“I don’ know wha’ yar talkin’ abou’.”

Another one of those humming laughs floated across the table. “There’s no need to play coy.”

Jazz stalled for time by sipping the drink that came with the course, another acidic blend, this time in a light blue.

“I was told ya are very influential.” He settled on.

“ Hmm, that is very diplomatic.” The Viscount said with a small almost-smirk. “I am surprised you had not heard of me before.”

And just how did he know that? His processor yelled silently about mech-moles in the department.

“Tha’ probably a good thing. The only names I know are other officers an’ mechs under investigation.”

Jazz bravely poked the gel in the shell on his plate with his fork.

“I take it you did not know who Bluestreak was either.” Those optics sharpened again, this time with a cold edge to them. “So my question for you is: Would you have saved him if you had known who he was?”

It suddenly felt like the temperature in the room dropped about 10 degrees.

“Yes.” Jazz said unhesitatingly, meeting the cold optics with his own.

The Praxian tilted his helm with a curiously penetrating stare, doorwings trained on him. “You are speaking the truth.”

“My job is t’ protect th’ people of this city. Tha’ includes you an’ your ward.” Even if I might not like what extracurricular activities you get up to.

The chilly atmosphere vanished as if it had never been and the Viscount relaxed back into his chair.
Jazz suddenly felt as if he passed some sort of massive test.

“You really should try some of the sapphire crab. I promise that despite the off-putting presentation, it is quite delicious.”

Jazz vented softly and ventured a mouthful. Okay, so it was kinda tasty. He caught sight of a little dead crabby eye staring at him accusingly. Nope. Not his jam.

Thankfully the Viscount didn’t seem to mind his uncultured unappreciation of the dish. Merely sending off for the next course with something like an understanding smile.

The sixth course, and thank Primus they were finally getting towards the end, was a block of frozen purple fluorite that the chef brought and served at the table. He took a tiny hammer and struck certain points in the block with a musical ringing that seemed to echo against the glass roof. With one last strike the block broke in half to showcase the interior where they had somehow used some sort of acidic liquid to carve out a perfect replica of the Praxian seal.

Jazz couldn’t help himself and clapped gleefully at the end of the small show. For a moment he thought he might have made a breach of etiquette, but the chef just grinned and made a short bow.

As they tucked into the crystalline pieces with a glittering lavender drink, the Viscount surprised him again, by starting a conversation.

“Your audial adornment is quite stunning. Might I inquire as to where you purchased it and why you only wear one?”

Jazz smiled absently as he touched the adornment. “It’s a Polyhex tradition… well, technically two of ‘em. Yar creators make ya a charm t’ wear when ya leave home. For luck. My carrier made this fo’ me when I left home t’ become an official Enforcer. An’ Polyhexians wear one or two horn adornments dependin’ on their relationship status. I only wear one t’ signify tha’ I’m single. Ya wear two o’ ‘em t’ let the mechs ‘round ya know yar taken. Sometimes a mech tha’ wants t’ court ya will ’ave one made for ya.”

“Ah, that’s fascinating. And have you found any, shall we say, prospects in Praxus?”

Jazz shook his helm, “I’ve been too busy with th’ case t’ really be thinkin’ abou’ tha’.”

“That’s a shame. You’re very attractive. Any mech would be lucky to have your attention.”

A stuttered laugh escaped his dermas. “Oh, well, thank ya.”

Their conversation wandered from there. Uncomplicated small talk that wove itself effortlessly in the dim room with the lights of Praxus around them. It was easy to forget for a while that he was so out of his element he may as well have been on the second moon.

When they called for the dessert course they had begun talking about Jazz’s first love: music. They debated the pros and cons of the most recent musical movement that combined a classical style with a modern sound as they nibbled on glowing white phosphorous and drank sweetened white energon.

“If I hadn’ b’come an Enforcer, I’d probably be in an orchestra somewhere.” Jazz said.

“What made you wish to become an Enforcer?”

The visored mech smiled sadly. “When I was little, my sparker got killed fo’ bein’ in th’ wrong place at th’ wrong time. Th’ Enforcer tha’ got put in charge of his case made sure tha’ me an’ my carrier
were taken care of. Came t’ check on us an’ kept us from losin’ hope when we thought his killer would get away with it. The mech inspired me. An’ I wanted t’ be that mech fo’ somebot else.”

“That is a very noble pursuit. And I am sorry for your loss.”

“It was a long time ago.”

Silence reigned for a few moments and then the Viscount asked softly,

“Do you still play?”

Jazz brightened. “Some, when I can get my servos on an instrument.”

The Praxian smiled, “Well, there is a synth right across the room. Would you indulge me?”

The visored mech shot a half giddy, half worried look at the synth. “Are we allowed?”

“Go ahead.”

Jazz walked over to the magnificent instrument that had been catching his optics off and on the whole night. He reverently touched the rich material it was made of and seated himself at the keyboard. He began to play a lilting sonata his carrier had taught him long ago. It drifted like a fleck of shaved metal, caught in the wind, dancing gracefully. So fragile. Emotive. Sadness and hope. He turned off his visor. Lost himself to the music for a time.

When the song ended, it was like he came out of a trance. He looked over at the Viscount who seemed to be looking at him through his flute of energon.

“Exquisite.” The Viscount breathed.

And suddenly reality came crashing back.

He… he should leave.

Jazz checked his chronometer, relieved that it was late enough to use as an excuse.

“I beg yar pardon, Viscount Prowl, but it’s gotten late and I ‘ave an early shift tomorrow. I’m afraid I need t’ end our evening ‘ere.”

“... I understand.”

Jazz stood, ready to make his escape. “Thank ya for t’nigh. It was wonderful.” And confusing, and amazing, and uncomfortable, and incredible.

The Viscount was suddenly standing by his side. Jazz hadn’t even heard the mech move! He gently grasped Jazz’s servo and brought it to his dermas.

“Tonight was nothing more than what you deserved. Thank you for sharing my company. Perhaps we might cross paths again at a later date.”

“Perhaps…” Jazz echoed weakly.

And then the Viscount escorted him down and out through the building causing a stir of whispers in their wake.

Jazz drove away casually until the building and the Viscount were out of sight and then he sped
home. After carefully putting away his horn adornment he flopped on his berth. Thank Primus that was over with.

A courier came to the Enforcer headquarters a few cycles later and presented him with a box that contained an audial horn adornment and a familiar, fancy engraved data pad. His whole department got to bemusedly witness his viciously verbose swear-cabulary.
Crystals and Conversations

Chapter Summary

Time for a second "date".

Chapter Notes

Here's some new plot. Yay!

“I’m not goin’.” Jazz grumbled for what felt like the thousandth time.

The green and black mech that he was talking to flared his sensor panels in surprise and dismay.
“But the Viscount invited you!”

“I’m aware.” Jazz snapped, stabbing a straw through the flimsy sealed lid of his vending machine energon. Really, he just wanted to enjoy his lunch in peace, but his nosy co-workers kept sidling over to his desk to oh-so-nonchalantly ask about the second invitation the Viscount had sent him. This time for an evening outing in the Helix Gardens.

“Hey, clear out, Duster,” Crossfire said from her side of the desk, flicking an annoyed blue and yellow doorwing at him, “it isn’t any of your business.”

The mech huffed, but left as she levelled a warning glare at him.

Jazz sighed. “Thanks, ‘Fire”

She gave him a sympathetic look mixed with a smirk. “I’m just trying to keep you from getting a black mark on your record for hitting one of them upside the helm with your console. Or, you know, shooting them in the aft with your taser.”

Jazz stared at her flatly for a moment, straw between his dermas, before his composure broke. He chuckled tiredly, field relaxing slightly. “Thanks fo’ havin’ my back.”

“Any time.” She said with the barest hint of fondness. “You’ve made up your mind, and they can frag right out of your business.”

“Yeah.” Jazz sighed again and focused on his computer terminal. He read over the report on the latest Noss bust for the third time, but his attention was wandering. His visored optics fell on the desk drawer where he’d stashed the Viscount’s invitation and gift.

The audial horn adornment had been a shock. The Viscount had obviously known what he was doing because Jazz had explained the significance to him in person.

But why?

Was there some underlying play that the mech was making? Some angle or advantage that he was
trying to achieve by courting him? What other reason could the Praxian have for his actions?

Well, it didn’t matter, he supposed. The date was set for tonight and he had no intention of showing. That would send the message, because he couldn’t actually send one. Once again, there had been no comm. number to send an rsvp. Rather presumptive of the Viscount, but that wasn’t Jazz’s problem. The only thing he needed to worry about was figuring out how to send back the horn adornment before the orn-long period of consideration was up.

A gentle rejection in Polyhexian tradition would be sending it back the way it came to him with a “thanks, but no thanks” note at the very end of the time frame. Truthfully, when he first received it he had been tempted to send it back in the “flat out no, frag off” way, which entailed him marching up to the mech in person the cycle after and throwing the gift at his pedes. But as his ire cooled, he realized that, no, he shouldn’t do that, and, no, he didn’t actually want to do that. He was just confused and apprehensive.

“Hey.” Crossfire’s voice tore him out of his contemplations. He looked up at her. “Are you going to actually eat? You’ve been staring at your desk for ten breems.”

Annoyed at himself, Jazz fluffed and shook out his plating briefly and turned his optics back to his consol. He determinedly sipped on his straw and put the Viscount (and courting gifts) out of his processor. At the end of his shift, Jazz waved off Crossfire’s offer of after-work drinks. As much as he was normally a very gregarious mech, after the stress of this particular cycle, he just wanted to shut himself in his apartment and mindlessly binge watch all the old episodes of Hab Hunters.

He stepped out of the precinct contemplating whether he wanted to swing by a store to pick up some indulgent additives or just take his energon plain when he got home when a bright voice piped up from his right.

“Hi Officer Jazz!”

He looked over in surprise and saw a happily beaming Bluestreak. He stared blankly for half a klik before responding.

“Uh, hi there, Bluestreak.”

Behind the grey mechling two unknown mechs, one red and one gold, stood a couple of mechanometers back, though they were obviously keeping an optic on them. They were polished and upgraded, but anybot with a working visual center could see that they were from Kaon. Under Jazz’s critical optics, he could see the tell-tale signs that these had once been pit fighters. It took a moment for his processor to connect the dots, but he realized that they must be Bluestreak’s new “guardians”.

*Bodyguards.* Jazz’s processor corrected unnecessarily.

The grey mechling grabbed his servo with youngling enthusiasm. “Are you ready to go to the Gardens? ‘Tor’s waiting for us there. I was so happy when he said we’d be spending time together!”

It was on the tip of his glossa to refuse and make up some excuse, but Bluestreak looked so happy and hopeful, big blue optics shining innocently, that what came out of his mouth was a weak,

“I didn’ know ya were gonna be joinin’ us.”

“I was surprised, too!” the mechling said cheerfully, “But then ‘Tor told me you asked how I was at
your dinner and that it would be nice for me to come with you to let you know how I was doing myself.”

...That clever fragger.

Bluestreak pulled him, unerringly, towards his two guardians.

“The red crystals just budded! I can’t wait to show you!”

And what could Jazz do but let himself be pulled into the transforming lane. The four of them shifted to alt-mode. Bluestreak drove next to Jazz chatting merrily while the two bodyguards took up protective positions, the gold one in front and the red one behind. All too soon they were pulling up to the ornate entrance of the Helix Gardens. Even from here Jazz could see the towering centerpiece, the Grand Crystal, an ancient crystal filled with a beautiful rainbow blend of colors that had been growing since before Praxus became its own city-state. The Gardens had been established and formed around it and most Praxians attributed their cultural love for crystals from it specifically.

As they resumed their root-modes Jazz couldn’t help but frown as he noticed a distinct lack of visitors entering or exiting.

“Where is everybot?” he asked.

Bluestreak’s doorwings flicked up and down, unconcerned. “‘Tor doesn’t like big crowds, so he arranged for us to have the Gardens all to ourselves.”

Jazz stopped himself from grimacing at yet another careless show of power. Was that just how the mech lived or was he doing it specifically because of Jazz? Either option was intimidating.

“Ah, there you are.” The Viscount’s smooth tenor sounded from the entrance. The visored mech very nearly startled, but just managed to hold his reaction in. How did the mech move so flipping quietly?

“Hello ‘Tor!” Bluestreak said, darting forward. The Viscount gracefully received the hug given to him by his ward and pressed a sirely kiss to the mechling’s helm crest.

“Bluestreak, why don’t you take Sunstreaker and Sideswipe and explore a bit. We will join you in a moment.”

The mechling glanced over at Jazz for a moment, but agreed. He grabbed a servo of each of his guardians and towed the bemused-looking mechs in through the entrance.

The white and black Praxian approached him. In the dimming light of the ending cycle he was more handsome than Jazz remembered. He had opted for more casual accoutrement; no cape this time, just a ruby colored steel-silk sash held in place at shoulder strut and hip by magnetic crests. “Good evening, Jazz.”

“Viscount.” Jazz responded with a helm tilt. Respectful, but uncertain.

The mech’s dermas lit with an enigmatic smile. “There’s no need for such formality. Please call me Prowl.”

Jazz self-consciously rebooted his vocalizer. “A’ight… Prowl.” The mech’s designation felt alien in his mouth.

Prowl offered his arm aristocratically. “Shall we?”
Jazz tentatively placed his servo on the proffered limb as if he was in one of those period drama holofilms. A sudden mental image of himself and the Viscount dressed up with the ridiculous bangles and gems from the early Golden Era had him suppressing a sudden and inappropriate burst of giggles. They passed through the gates of the Gardens quietly. Two magnificent crystalline structures greeted them as they entered. Varied shades of blue streaked through them, turning purple in the evening light. The low hum of the crystals teased Jazz’s audials pleasantly.

“You have questions.” Prowl said perceptively.

Instead of asking what he wanted to, Jazz opened with:

“So, ‘ow did ya convince two former pit fighters t’ switch gigs?”

The Praxian looked amused, but answered. “I bought their contracts from the arena that owned them in Kaon. I needed two and, as it happens, they are twins and would not leave without the other. I offered them the option of paying their contracts off in a reasonable amount of time, provided they do their job to the best of their ability; something they found to be quite acceptable.”

That was likely a gross understatement of what actually happened, but Jazz decided not to press for details. Reigning in his curiosity paid off, however as Prowl continued to speak.

“I am providing them a basic education as part of their obligations. I have also encouraged them to take up elective pursuits for the time after they have bought their freedom. That way they will be functional, productive members of society rather than uneducated savages.”

They were past the front thoroughfare where there were a couple of gift shops and cafes for visitors. The main path of the Gardens stretched out before them in glass and chrome, green crystals lined in beds on either side.

“Mostly the reason I chose them is that they are just about Bluestreak’s age. Or, I should say, Bluestreak is nearly theirs, minus his final upgrades. It is a sort of socialization for them, if you will. I plan for them to be well-treated and I wouldn’t be surprised if they chose to stay on in my employ even after their contracts are paid for.”

“Owning” mechs bound by contracts or indenture wasn’t illegal, though Kaon had a bad reputation of exploiting such mechs as near slaves. Truthfully, the twins were probably in a much better situation in Prowl’s household than they ever would have been in the fighting pits.

Jazz mused thoughtfully, “Sowing crystal seeds o’ loyalty?”

“I would be a fool not to. Now it is my turn for a question.”

I didn’t agree to that!

Jazz had to clamp down on a wave of panic as they turned down one of the branching paths to a circular energon garden. A fountain crowned the middle of the space, surrounded by a spoke pattern of interconnected pools. Tiny white cyberfish swam to and fro from one pool to another, soft pearly bio-lights visible in the pink liquid. On top of the energon floated thin, steel pink wafers of accumulated impurities. The cyberfish, in turn, nibbled these wafers for food.

“Why are you not wearing the gift I sent you?” The Viscount didn’t sound offended, merely curious.

The visored mech decided to go with a variation of the truth that didn’t include his bewildered emotions. “In Polyhexian tradition th’ receiver o’ a horn adornment has an orn long consideration period b’fore they make an official response either in favor or in rejection of courtin’. There are
different presentations at certain points in th’ consideration period that mean different responses.”

“Oh? And not wearing the gift means something as well?”

Jazz spent a klik mentally brushing the rust off the old teachings of adornment exchange traditions and wanted to smack himself in the face at a sudden recollection.

“I… am not wearin’ either your gift or my original adornment. It… it means tha’ I’m considerin’ yar offer positively, bu’ wish t’ have more time t’ get t’ know ya.”

How could he have forgotten that?! If he had been wearing his original adornment, but not the gift, it would mean that he was politely considering courtship, but the answer would likely be a no. He was just so used to not wearing his own adornment. He didn’t really consider its purpose as his relationship indicator; it was his good luck charm. He only ever brought it out for special occasions, especially since living in Praxus.

Following Polyhexian convention meant… doing what they were doing. Spending time together to measure compatibility during the consideration period. A sort of pre-courtship. Beginning a true courtship after acceptance of the proffered adornment traditionally would involve meeting creators, and holding a small feast, and... Jazz yanked his processor away from that line of thinking.

Why hadn’t he lied? It wasn’t like the Viscount knew the nuances of Polyhexian courtship. The answer to that came almost as soon as the thought had crossed his processors.

Doorwings. Damn things were almost as good as lie detectors. The mech would have known he was telling a falsehood.

They were walking close enough as they made a circuit around the pools that Jazz could feel the quick there-then-not pulse of pleasure through the other mech’s field as his words.

“Hmm, and yet you are still uncomfortable around me?”

“It’s my turn fo’ a question.” Jazz said quickly. “Two, actually, ‘cause ya got an extra one.”

“So I did.” the Viscount said with a slightly sly smile.

They exited the energon garden and continued along the main path.

“Wha’ made ya decide t’ bring me here?” That hadn’t been what he meant to ask!

“You mentioned at dinner that you had not yet gotten the opportunity to tour the Helix Gardens and I thought it might be a nice outing.”

Had he said that? Jazz honestly couldn't remember. That whole dark-cycle had gone fuzzy around the edges afterward. Just a warm mix of delicious fuel, murmured words, and a canopy of glass filled with muted Praxian light.

Jazz’s digits curled slightly from where they rested on Prowl’s arm. “‘Ow did ya get th’ place t’ agree t’ a private showin’?”

“The Crystalspire family has a long history of patronage to the Gardens. Even as far back as funding the original plans for enclosing the Grand Crystal. I, myself, have made several contributions, including a new wing in the Growing Center to house and study any mutations that occur. The caretakers are quite willing to indulge me when I request it.”
“Oh, tha’ makes sense... I guess.”

They passed by a nook filled with terraced beds of mixed green and yellow jasper.

The Viscount brought them to a stop at the main ring of intersecting paths in front of the Great Crystal. The ancient crystal rested in a sunken bed below the ring, but had grown up large enough to tower over the it. There was a healthy distance between it and the railing of the path, lest anybot got the idea to attempt to take a piece of the priceless crystal home with them. “Let us pause here for a moment.” he said softly.

“Why?” Jazz asked, a curl of anticipation in his spark. “What is it? Prowl...?”

The Praxian looked at him with a small, warm smile, doorwings fluttering gently.

The Great Crystal lit up from within as lights set up around the base of it came on as the dark-cycle began. From there, lights came on in a spiral from the center point, flushing the darkened crystalline forms with brilliant luminescence. The air left Jazz’s systems in a rush of vents at the sudden blaze of beauty.

Prowl’s engine rumbled contentedly. “I made sure we were here in time for the dark-cycle lighting of the crystals. I hope the Gardens have lived up to what you have heard. Do you like them?”

“Very much.” The visored mech murmured looking at the glowing formations around them in awe. “Always ‘ad a soft spot fo’ crystals an’ growin’ things.”

He caught sight of a particularly beautiful white bloom jutting off one of the structures in a perfect sphere of spikes. He let go of Prowl’s arm, entranced by it and cupped careful servos around it. Making sure not to touch the delicate spines, Jazz admired the play of light refracting off the crystal through the shadows cast by his digits.

“S beautiful.”

“I agree.”

Jazz glanced over at the other mech, but the Viscount wasn’t looking at the bloom. His optics were fixed on the Polyhexian’s visor. He offered Jazz that warm smile. Jazz felt his fuel pump stutter.

Why did the mech have to be so fragging charming? Primus, it wasn’t fair.

“Tor! Officer Jazz! I’m hungry, can we go eat now?” Bluestreak nearly skipped up the path to them still holding the red twin’s servo, while the gold trailed behind at a more sedate, if still watchful pace.

“Are we leavin’ t’ go t’ dinner?” Jazz asked with a flash of disappointment. They had just gotten here!

Bluestreak giggled. “No, no, we’re having a picnic in the Growing Center! The servants set it all up for us.” He released the red twin’s servo in favor of taking Jazz’s. He tugged on it excitedly. “It’s this way! And it’s where the red crystals are too.”

The visored mech couldn’t help but smile at his antics. Bluestreak was so innocent. It made him wonder if the mechling knew what his adopted creator got up to. Not that Jazz really knew just what it was that the Viscount did that had him named as the crime “Lord” of Praxus. So far Jazz had seen the behavior of a spoiled noble and the almost comical respect afforded to him, but nothing overtly illegal. Either the mob of Praxus worked very differently than the mob of Polyhex, or all of his Enforcer co-workers were wrong… which Jazz very much doubted.
Jazz let the mechling tow him around the Grand Crystal towards the glass and metal structure of the Growing Center, charmed despite himself.

“So, uh, wha’ are we havin’? Nothin’ too fancy?” I hope.

The Viscount’s EMF flared slightly with amusement behind him. “No sapphire crab this time, I promise.” Prowl said with a definite teasing lilt. Jazz ducked his helm for a klick with embarrassment at the mech’s perceptiveness.

The Growing Center seemed to be bursting with color and sound as they entered the enclosed space. The front was its own internal garden filled with exotic crystals that might have not survived the normal PH of Praxus’ atmosphere. Here, they could be carefully tended and monitored. The path wound and twisted through the crystals until it finally opened up into a cozy grotto lined with cushion covered benches. Portable tables had been set up and covered in an array of delicacies, some of which Jazz had never seen outside of a patisserie. Icosahedron shaped clear gel treats, crispy tuille energon wafers dipped in sweet mercury paste, and a tiny mountain of fancy rust sticks. The aforementioned servants were hovering unobtrusively on the edges of Jazz’s vision. Bluestreak led him to a bench in front of a blooming structure of red crystals.

“Look! Aren’t they pretty? They’re almost the color of Sideswipe.”

“They are, aren’t they?”

Jazz darted a glance at the twins, who had seated themselves a few benches away, watching as the red twin rubbed the back of his helm with a bashful look on his face and the gold twin smirked at him.

Huh. Seemed like he wasn’t the only one susceptible to Bluestreak’s guileless charm.

After he’d appropriately admired the crystals he sat down on the bench. Bluestreak happily settled down next to him. Unexpected warmth on his other flank alerted him to the fact that the Viscount had seated himself closely to Jazz’s opposite side. Thusly surrounded by Praxians, Jazz tried to relax. The servants approached them with decorative trays laden with a veritable rainbow of energon varieties.

Jazz hesitated, servo hovering, a little overwhelmed by the number of choices.

Bluestreak’s EMF gave him a friendly nudge. “You should try the green one.”

The visored mech gave the mechling a smile and picked up the light green energon with darker emerald swirls drifting through it. He took a sip as Bluestreak beamed at him and took another glass of the green energon off the tray. The Viscount selected a copper colored energon.

“’Tor told me you’re really good at playing synth. Do you play a lot?” Bluestreak asked.

After swallowing a mouthful of the deliciously savory energon, Jazz answered. “I play when I can. Not’as much as I’d like, though. Don’ really have th’ shinax or space fo’ a instruments.”

The mechling’s optics brightened in excitement. “You should come play at our house! We have lots of instruments!”

“Tha’s, um, tha’s really sweet of ya, Blue, but ya should probably ask yar ‘tor b’fore invitin’ me over.”

“Oh! You’re right!” Bluestreak leaned forward to look around Jazz. “Please ’Tor? May Jazz come
and play at our house?”

Amusement flicked through the Viscount’s field.

“I certainly would enjoy an encore.”

Jazz turned his helm to look at the Viscount and felt a rush of heat through his lines. The mech was smiling at him slyly, as if they shared some sordid secret, glass poised at his dermas.

*Double entendre, much? What the frag?*

Jazz dragged his visor away and drank another mouthful of energon to cover his confusion. Fortunately, whatever the Viscount was implying seemed to go right over Bluestreak’s helm.

“Yay! I can’t wait to hear you play.”

Before Jazz could form a response, Prowl’s field suddenly withdrew from where it had been warmly teasing against Jazz’s own leaving him feeling suddenly chilled.

“My apologies, I am receiving a comm. Please excuse me for a moment, I must take this.” Prowl got up and stepped away from the benches as to not rudely ignore them as he spoke over his private comm. Jazz watched him covertly out of the side of his visor, at how his posture turned stiff and businesslike. Morbidly curious, Jazz let his specialized audios tune in with a momentary flash of guilt. Due to certain evolutionary holdovers, about 40% of the Polyhexian population had the ability to “listen in” to short range frequencies. Meaning that at least one side of private comms weren’t actually private around them. Jazz was one of that 40%.

Prowl answered his comm with a clipped tone. :This had better be important:.

…

His voice turned deadpan. :Did you interrupt my evening merely to call to complain that you have made no progress? One would think you are not giving your full attention to the task I gave you.:

“Do you play other instruments, too?” Bluestreak asked, startling the visored mech. He lost his concentration on his frequency hearing.

“Wha’...? Oh, yeah. I play electro-sitar an’ vibrolin. An’ I sing sometimes.”

“Wow. That’s amazing! I wish I knew how to play all of that. Maybe you can teach me when you come to play?”

“Uh, sure?” he said trying to split his attention between the youngling and finding the Viscount’s short range frequency again.

“Oh thank you! You’re the best, Officer Jazz.” He wiggled excitedly halfway out of his seat to put his nearly empty glass on one of the tables and grab a handful of rust sticks which he then offered to Jazz. “Here! You should try these, they’re my favorite.”

Jazz accepted a couple of treats with a smile, hiding his triumph as he managed to tune back in to the correct frequency.

:Are you threatening me, brother?: Prowl was asking with deceptive mildness. :You know better than that.:
His voice dropped to a venomous hiss, though his outward appearance didn’t change. :Do not test me, Barricade. You live at this moment because, for some reason, your creation still loved you enough to ask me to spare your miserable life. But if you threaten me and mine again, I will personally send your gift-wrapped helm to the Enforcers.:  

Well, that hadn’t sounded like a euphemism. That had, in fact, sounded dead serious.  

:Do not call again unless it is with a pertinent update.:  

Prowl turned back toward them with a pleasant smile on his face. Fortunately, Jazz had still been using his visor to mask where he’d been looking and busied himself by nibbling innocently on a rust stick.  

*Play it cool. You didn’t hear anything.*  

“Don’t forget to share with your guardians, Bluestreak,” Prowl said with a mildly chiding tone.  

Bluestreak’s doorwings wiggled cheerfully, “Yes, ‘Tor.” He jumped up off the bench and picked up a plate of the icosahedron shaped treats. He presented them to the gold and red mechs with a smile, chattering brightly.  

“’E’s a sweet mechling,” Jazz murmured finishing off his energon and setting the empty glass aside.  

Prowl sat back down next to him again, voice matching his in volume. “He is.”  

“’E asked me t’ teach ‘im t’ play.”  

A fond chuckle brushed over Jazz’s plating like a physical thing. “Quite kind of you.”  

“Ya don’ mind?”  

“I prefer for Bluestreak to indulge in his pursuits. That way when he reaches his final upgrades he can choose a calling to his liking.”  

“Ya don’ want ‘im takin’ over th’ family… business?” Jazz asked carefully.  

Prowl locked optics with him. Cunning and clever. “My nephew is much more suited to taking over for me if need be. He has a head for business, even if he indulges in a little too much gambling. But far be it from me to deprive a mech of their little pleasures. Bluestreak is a gentle spark. One that needs to be protected.”  

Jazz frowned, feeling a tiny bit of frustrated temper well up at the verbal dancing. He bit down mulishly on a rust stick. “Ya may ‘ave adopted ‘im, bu’ he’ certainly takes after ya.”  

“How so?” Prowl asked with a curious helm tilt.  

“Grand manipulation.” the visored mech said flatly.  

The Viscount’s optics and field flared with genuine surprise. Then, to Jazz’s astonishment, he let out a full-bodied laugh. His face changing from coolly elegant into something gorgeous.  

The sound drew Bluestreak back to them. His optics were filled with mystified wonderment. “What’s funny, ‘Tor?” he asked.  

“Unfortunately, it was situational and difficult to describe.” Prowl said, mirth still alight in his optics.
“Aww.” Bluestreak said with a disappointed doorwing droop. He sat down again with a pout, but soon forgot about the let down in favor of sampling treats with Jazz. He dominated the conversation with questions about the Enforcers, which then led to curious inquiries about Polyhex, and (when he found out about Jazz’s training) Metallikato. That, of course led to questions about the upgraded magnetic mods in his servos. Jazz had to juggle the mechling’s genuine inquisitiveness along with Prowl’s more pointed and clever colloquy.

Eventually, Prowl stood, effortlessly cutting off Bluestreak’s chatter with an authoritative doorwing flick. He offered Jazz a hand up. “If you are finished eating, we can continue our tour.”

The visored mech considered sticking another treat into his mouth just to be contrary, but his tank was pleasantly full and he did want to see the rest of the Gardens. So he placed his servo in Prowl’s and let the mech pull him to his pedes. He transferred Jazz’s servo to his arm again. They made their way out of the Growing Center with Bluestreak and his guardians in the lead. Prowl seemed content to let the three younger mechs wander farther ahead, keeping his pace (and by extension Jazz’s) steady and sedate.

They passed silently through a geometric bismuth garden and a path surrounded by artfully cracked open geodes. By this point Jazz had lost sight of Bluestreak, though he could still faintly hear him. The next garden they entered was almost completely enclosed by towering gypsum crystals that had grown up and intertwined making it seem like a glittering cave.

And here Prowl stopped.

He shifted their positions until they were face to face, holding Jazz’s servos in his own.

“Tell me what I must give you to gain your permission to officially court you.”

“W-wha’?” Jazz stuttered in shock.

“Surely there is something you want. A synth of your own, perhaps? A holiday to some exotic place? Those things are all quite within my reach, I promise.”

Outrage lashed through Jazz’s lines and field. He tried to yank his servos out of Prowl’s. “Excuse ya, m’ Lord, bu’ I can’t be bought like tha’.”

Prowl kept his hold, dipping his helm for a moment in apology. “Ah, you misunderstand me. Forgive me, that is not what I meant. Amongst the Praxian aristocracy it is common for a suitor to gain favor by offering gifts. I never meant to imply that I was attempting to buy your affections.”

Jazz stopped fighting to get away, but remained wary. Jazz knew nothing about the Praxian way of courting, aristocratic or otherwise. Was that common, or was the Viscount trying to indebt him?

In the midst of his internal debate Prowl gently tipped his chin up with a crooked digit. “Nobot has ever treated you like the treasure you are, have they?”

Startled did not even begin to cover what Jazz was feeling. His fuel pump beat wildly. “I-I’m not… Ya don’ even know me!”

“I would like to.”

“Why?” he demanded weakly.

“You intrigued me from the moment Bluestreak told me of you. And then I met you. You had integrity and depth that I was not expecting. It also does not hurt that your are quite beautiful.”
“I’m an Enforcer, Prowl.”

“I am aware of that.”

“That’s nice. I don’t know what the frag I’m doing half the time! I’m making this slag up as I go.

The Viscount continued, “Is there some other way to convey my interest that you would be more comfortable with?”

Maybe… maybe if I just go along with it for now, he’ll eventually lose interest.

The thought stung slightly for some reason.

Jazz chose his words carefully. “Traditionally… for Polyhexians, the suitor doesn’t give gifts ‘til after the courtship is officially accepted. But during the consideration period the couple is encouraged to spend time together.”

The warm smile he received caused a fluttery feeling in his spark.

“In that case, would you do me the honor of joining me and my ward for energon at our estate in a few cycles time? Bluestreak will be quite thrilled to show you our collection of musical accoutrement.”

Jazz huffed. “Manipulator.”

Prowl just chuckled. “Is that a yes?”

Later that night when he got home, he placed the new arrangement of crystals Bluestreak (and Prowl) had given him as a parting gift next to the one he’d originally received. Then he flopped faceplates first onto his berth (he’d been doing that a lot lately) and commed Crossfire.

:This had better be an emergency.: Came her grumpy voice over the line when she answered. He glanced at his chronometer and winced, not having realized how late it was.

:‘Fire. I think I just did somethin’ stupid.: And it all came pouring out. Well, most of it. He refrained from telling her what he’d overheard on the Viscount’s private comm. He itched to know who “Barricade” was, but he could look it up on his own.

After she got done cursing at him, the Viscount and the world in general, she settled down.

:He’s not forcing you, is he? Because “Lord” of Praxus or not, I’ll kick his aft.: Despite the words, Jazz could hear a tremble of fear in her voice.

By this point he’d turned over onto his back and he frowned up at the ceiling. :’E ain’t pressurin’ me. ’E just ‘as a way of gettin’ under my platin’.:

She fretted. :He’s dangerous.:

:I know.; Jazz sighed. An image of the Viscount smiling warmly at him had him placing his servo
over his chest as his spark fluttered. She didn’t need to know about that either. She was worried enough as it was.

:Promise me you’ll be careful.: Crossfire said solemnly.

:I promise.: Jazz murmured turning onto his side so he could see the glittering crystals. His spark fluttered again. He just hoped that promise was one he could keep.
Jazz does some digging at the Hall of Records.

The Praxus Hall of Records was one of the oldest buildings in the city. Built by the first Lord of Praxus, the classical pre-Golden Era architecture had been meticulously maintained. White and cream metal columns and arches soared overhead accented with splashes of blue steel. Updated solar-glass windows designed to emulate the structure’s original style absorbed the light to power the building.

Jazz drove up to the entrance and transformed casually. He covertly opticked around him from behind his visor. There was an older couple walking across the street. Young professionals scurrying to and fro. Mechs and femmes entering and exiting the transforming lane. Most bots were being careful not to crowd him, though that was probably due to his decals. Enforcers tended to get a respectful amount of venting space even from law-abiding citizens.

Jazz wasn’t sneaking. Not really. He was just being very careful not to be seen as acting suspicious. Also, he hadn’t told anybot why he was going to the Hall of Records. It wasn’t like he was going for any… nefarious reasons. He just wanted to look up information on the history of some of Praxus’ noble families… Okay, one noble family… specifically…

Perfectly normal.

He supposed he could have just asked around the precinct. His coworkers had been practically brimming with “need-to-know” information after his second outing with the Viscount, but their knowledge was likely to be flavored by personal bias and colloquial gossip. They also expected him to spill intimate details about his “dates” in return for their dubious wisdom. Brushing them off was just for the best, really.

Crossfire was probably his best bet for mostly factual data. He’d already entrusted her with the particulars on this strange burgeoning relationship and she’d kept her dermas shut to anyone pressing for details. Going so far as to tell them under no uncertain circumstances where they could shove their curiosity. While it was nice to know that she would defend his privacy, he didn’t want to worry her more than he already had. After he found some information on his own, he’d talk to her.

The imposing doors to the Hall of Records loomed up in front of him as he ascended the marbled cream and white steps. The architects had decided for a play on symmetry. Instead of matching doors; they had placed a rampant petro-deer on the left door, mirrored in stance by a turbo-wolf on the right. Petro-deer were long associated with learning and knowledge while turbo-wolves were...
usually used to indicate protection. So, the door itself symbolized that this was a place of protected knowledge. The design made Jazz smile to himself for half a klik. The doors slid open on silent hydraulics.

Warm, amber-toned light filtered into the arched ceilings of the lobby. He nodded politely to the mechs at the front desk and headed back into the Archives. Something he’d learned early on as an Enforcer was that if you looked like you knew what you were doing and belonged, most people wouldn’t question your presence or motives.

Shelves stretched high over his helm full of ancient flimsies and datapads. These were just the physical copies; Jazz knew everything contained in the rows and rows of shelves had been digitally copied into the main database. Here and there he saw mechs and femmes at the public computers or pulling hard copies off the shelves. Some at rather precarious heights.

He found a semi-private console with a seat next to a wall, half hidden by shelving. He sat gingerly with one last quick look around from under his visor and unspooled one of his wrist data cables. Cold-connecting to a non-sentient machine wasn’t exactly his idea of a fun way to spend his cycle off, but he was both intensely curious and wary of onlookers. He bypassed the screen of the console altogether routing the visuals through his visor.

The seat was comfortable, at least. Plush steelsilk designed to cradle and support Praxian sensor panels. The visored mech settled back into the chair’s soft embrace and began with a straightforward search of the family name.

Alright, let’s see…. Crystalspire, Crystalspire… ah! Here it is.

The first thing he found amongst the records was an extensive family lineage chart stretching back to the founding of Praxus. Which was… pretty impressive, actually. The Crystalspires had started out as minor nobles, slowly climbing their way up the ranks over several millennia. Well known for being patrons of the arts; theaters, music halls, museums and gardens all over Praxus boasted some wing or addition with their name attached to it.

Jazz only skimmed the oldest records, designations and dates flying out of his processor once he considered them inconsequential. He paid a bit more attention to the later generations. From there he found the file containing the family’s official portraits. Faces flickered past his optical feed, sometimes in ones and twos posing in ornate rooms, sometimes as many as a dozen in a single capture sitting outside an impressive mansion or arranged in a garden.

A holo-capture near the end of the file caused him to pause. A family of four in an tasteful sitting room stared out at him from the picture. A red and black mech with a red chevron grinned roguishly while he stood behind a seated lilac and white femme. She was gently smiling and holding a black and silver sparkling. Standing just to her left, holding her servo, was what could only be a miniature Prowl looking solemnly into the camera. Jazz felt his dermas lift in an inexorable smile; he’d been a cute mechling. A tab highlighted at the bottom of the image and Jazz opened it curiously.


Swingline and Rhodium. Prowl and Barricade.

Well, Barricade was a name he recognized, so he searched through the biographical profiles for the mech first. The Honourable Barricade of Crystalspire had grown up well. His final upgrades had given him a sleek racer’s build, which the black and silver mech had apparently put to good use. There were several mentions of his involvement at the local (legal) racing clubs that catered to the
wealthy and privileged. He had the unfortunate reputation of having a temper. There were several
documented instances of Prowl stepping in to smooth over ruffled plating at these clubs.

There was something familiar about the black and silver noble mech that was more than just family
resemblance, but Jazz couldn’t place what was tugging on his processor. It was like he’d seen him
somewhere before. On a whim, Jazz saved a copy of the most up-to-date holo-capture of the mech.

One of the older holo-captures featured him grinning victoriously after a race with a blue and red
youngling at his side. Jazz opened the caption.

Pictured: The Honourable Barricade with creation, the Honourable Smokescreen.

Huh. Prowl had mentioned his nephew. Going by the date, Smokescreen would be well past his final
upgrade by now. Sure enough, a recent capture revealed a sophisticated-looking blue and red mech
with gold accents and chevron sporting a charismatic smile. He’s actually been busted by the
Enforcers for illegal gambling once, though the Viscount had paid his bail to have him released.
Amusingly, the bail money had come with an apology letter from Smokescreen, himself, with an
assurance that he would become a better mech. Since then he seemed to have kept his word; a
notable regular installment at the reputable and legitimate gambling dens that dotted Praxus.
Somehow, Jazz felt as if he were only getting part of a larger story.

Though this did lend credence to what Chief Scattershield had said about Prowl not interfering with
the Enforcers’ work. Smokescreen had actually been arrested and forced to cool his heels in a cell for
almost a full cycle.

Jazz decided to nose around in the archived tabloids. If there was a place for semi-truthful rumors
that was it. Smokescreen, it seemed, had a rather rocky relationship with his sire. The mech’s carrier,
a mech that was not listed as Barricade’s official Conjunct, had deactivated when he was quite
young. And Barricade had, seemingly, been far too Unicron-may-care to really take care of a
youngling properly. Prowl had taken over where his brother had failed which had caused some sort
of rift between them. Barricade was too much like Swingline and Prowl was too much like Rhodium
for them to get along. Or so went the rumors.

Now he was curious about Prowl’s creators. Jazz input a search for the femme’s name. He
remembered from the lineage chart that Rhodium had been the heir to the family and Swingline had
married into the line.

Most of the articles attached to the femme’s name were from news stories and popular magazines
detailing her charity work. She’d volunteered at the local medical centers and gave money to shelters.
She’d started several improvement project throughout Praxus. She had been one of Praxus’ most
loved noble figures. She seemed to always be described as elegant and graceful. And then...

There was a link to another article titled: Crystalspire Tragedy. With some trepidation, Jazz pulled it
up.

Viscountess Rhodium of Crystalspire deactivated under mysterious circumstances.

What followed was an article on the death of the much loved femme. A little more digging found
him the actual coroners and police reports. The death had been ruled accidental, but Jazz’s slag
detector was going off even before he got halfway through the texts.

“Fell down the stairs” my aft! That amount of denting and cracked plating… and those are
defensive wounds on her servos. Who the frag was in charge of this slag? Chief Challenger.
Fragger. Whose payroll were you on?
There was a short smaller report tacked onto the official report. The only mech on the force who attempted to look further into the incident had been a young, newly minted Enforcer at the time. Very soon after which, he’d been seriously injured in an accident putting the investigation on hold until it was taken over and closed by another Enforcer. A quick cross reference gained Jazz the name of the young Enforcer.

Scattershield.

... The frag? As in Chief Scattershield?

Obviously, Scattershield had survived. Risen through the ranks all the way to the top. Was this how he was connected to Prowl?

Another tab revealed several holo-captures (obviously taken by somebot attempting to be covert) of the femme’s funeral. One showed Prowl and Barricade, now nearing their final and secondary upgrades respectively, placing crystal blooms on the doorstep of the femme’s mausoleum. Even as a youngling, Prowl’s body language was difficult to read, but the pain radiating from his optics was plain to see.

Jazz’s spark went out to him. He knew what it was like to bury a loved one.

The visored mech remembered vividly the chill of the underground tunnels. His own rattling plating as he pressed his small form into the warmth of his carrier’s side while they watched his sire’s stripped down protoform being interred in the city’s catacombs. A large, but gentle servo being placed on his opposite shoulder as Officer Corona and his bondmate stood with them. Silently offering their sympathy and support.

Jazz shook off the memory and flipped to the next picture. His vents stuttered. Swingline was walking away from the crypt with Barricade beside him. Prowl was still standing next to the building, but his optics were filled with murderous intent as he stared daggers into his creator’s back.

With mounting disquiet, Jazz input a search for Swingline next.

Alleged drug trade connections. Looks like sire-dearest wasn’t the most subtle about his dealings. That might also explain Prowl’s aversion to drugs.

Even though he’d been born to a lesser family, Swingline was described as well-educated, good-looking and charming. He had been a suave racer who frequented the same clubs that his creation, Barricade, would in the future. Jazz mentally winced; Barricade had not picked a good example to follow in the pede-steps of. By all accounts, Swingline had swept Rhodium off her pedes. Theirs had been a whirlwind romance that had scandalously delighted the upper class until the next juicy story of noble misconduct had come along.

The romance hadn’t lasted. More and more over the vorns there were incidents of domestic violence, but each instance had been carefully smoothed over. And on every report was the name Chief Challenger. If nothing else was clear, it was the fact that Swingline had owned Challenger. It made Jazz sick to his tanks.

Another article link caught his attention: Mysteries continue for the Crystalspire family.

It seems this family is to be plagued by misfortune. It has only been two vorns since Lady Rhodium’s tragic accident and now it seems that disaster may have struck again. Late in the second cycle of the 8th orn, the head of the Crystalspire’s was reported missing by his first creation. The Enforcers have begun an extensive investigation and search for the missing Viscount. The Honourable Prowl of
Crystalspire is offering a sizeable reward for any information regarding his creator.

Jazz found and played the linked recording. By this point Prowl had been fully upgraded. He stood stalwart and confidently on the podium of a press conference surrounded by Enforcers as he implored the public to help him find his sire. The visored mech found himself paying more attention to Prowl’s body language rather than his words. Just enough doorwing droop to convey distress. Just enough glow in his optics to show hope. But something about it bothered Jazz. It took a rewatch for him to realize what it was. It all looked very… rehearsed.

After Prowl finished his speech he was led away from the podium by one of the Enforcers. Jazz cycled his optics as he realized that the Enforcer was Scattershield. He leaned in slightly to murmur something in Prowl’s audial just as the recording cut off. There was clearly some sort of relationship there, but Jazz wasn’t sure what it was. The nagging sensation that he was missing something nigged at his processor. He had a bunch of puzzle pieces, but no reference picture to put it together.

A quick check confirmed what he already suspected; Viscount Swingline had never been found.

Prowl had refused to claim the title of Viscount of Crystalspire until the requisite mourning orns had passed after the search had been called off. The nobles had applauded his respect. It had painted him as the picture of a grieving creation. Jazz wasn’t convinced.

Now truly uncomfortable, Jazz input Prowl’s designation.

The number of modern hits was… startlingly few. As if he was being very careful to keep himself out of the public optic. Of course, if Jazz was doing questionably legal things he would probably go to great lengths to no call attention to himself too. Most of the official articles on him showcased his philanthropy. If those authors were to be believed, the Viscount was well-liked by his peers and adored by the common folk. Officially.

Jazz dug through several links until he found an anonymously posted piece on how the Viscount had ruthlessly weeded out mechs from several organizations to install ones on his payroll. It claimed that the Enforcers were one such group. Unfortunately, the account was circuitous and unorganized. It could easily be written off as the ramblings of a paranoiac.

Still…

He made a quick compilation of the key investigators from the original reports on the Viscountess’ death. Only the ones who he suspected to have a part in covering up what actually happened. Then he cross referenced those names, searching for their official profiles. The churning feeling in his tanks intensified.

Deactivated in the line of duty.

Accidental deactivation.

Accidental deactivation.

Suicide.

Deactivated in the line of duty.

…Primus. Could Prowl have somehow been responsible for all this?

If he was, the underlying fear and respect from his colleagues made sense now.
Jazz shut off his visor for a few breems and drew in a couple of vents. When he turned it back on again, he closed the files he was looking at.

Shakily, he looked up Bluestreak’s profile.

Here, at least, was a nice story. Prowl had adopted the sparkling from an overcrowded orphanage after sponsoring Smokescreen, and gifted the institution with a sizable donation of shinax. The public reaction had been mixed. Most of the lower classes applauded him. The nobles, mostly the ones who would have benefitted from a marriage contract with the Crystalspire line, questioned why he hadn’t gone the traditional route and chosen a Conjunx to start a family with. Though nobot had disputed Bluestreak’s adopted lineage once it was made official. Jazz rather thought that was due to mechs who crossed Prowl suddenly ending up deactivated.

He glanced over the adoption documents and found a candid holo-capture of Prowl holding sparkling Bluestreak. Jazz’s spark flipped and fluttered. There was a warmth and softness to the black and white Praxian’s optics that Jazz recognized. He’d seen it directed at the youngling on their recent outing, but also he’d seen a version of it directed at himself. It was obvious that Prowl cared for his adopted progeny, that was a given. But Prowl couldn’t possibly care for Jazz so strongly after only two interactions.

This had become much more convoluted. Of course it had; what had he been expecting?

The visored mech made a couple of discreet copies of Swingline and Rhodium’s case files and then disconnected from the database. A klik later the cold-connection helmache hit his optical center. He blearily checked his chronometer and realized that several joors had passed. He’d missed lunch, too, which wasn’t helping his helmache. A quick stretch straightened a couple of uncomfortable kinks in his cables and then he vacated the console.

The front desk hosted a new shift of mechs. Jazz gave them a tired nod as he left, sighing as the hydraulic doors shut behind him. His favorite cafe wasn’t too far from the Hall of Records and he made the spur of the moment decision as he stepped into the transforming lane to grab a hot cube on his way home rather than bother with making his own. The heated energon would go a long way with re-stabilizing his systems.

It only took a couple of breems to drive to the cafe. It was a tiny hole-in-the-wall place that had once been a storage unit until it had been repurposed and renovated. The name of the cafe “Oil and Gel”, was lit up with orange and blue lights. The door opened with the familiar, cheerful jangling of crystals. Inside, the decor could only be described as “eclectic” by some and “chaotic” by others, but Jazz liked the feel of the place.

“Hello Officer Jazz!” The owner of the cafe, an old, but still highly polished Praxian, greeted him jovially from behind the counter. “Lovely to see you.”

“Evenin’ Extruder. I coul’ really use a hot cube, please.”

“Of course, of course! Come sit, you look like you’ve had a rough cycle.” He gestured to an empty table.

Jazz slid into the seat gratefully. “Jus’ a helmache, mech, bu’ thanks.”

Extruder bustled behind the counter for a few breems before coming out to him with a steaming cube and a baked goodie made of layers of gel and silica wafers. Jazz’s favorite. His optics brightened with pleasure as he bit into the treat, polishing it off in three bites. He picked up the warm cube, cradling it reverently in his servos to let the heat seep into them before taking a sip.
“Thanks. ‘Ow much do I owe ya?”

“Oh don’t worry about it. It’s on the house, Officer. You looked like you needed it. Besides, friends of the Viscount don’t pay.”

Jazz nearly choked on his drink. “Wha? ‘Friends o’ th’-’ But, I’m not-!”

“I insist, Officer!”

The visored mech could only watch helplessly as the mech merrily waved off his protests and went to serve another customer. Troubled, Jazz finished his energon quietly. He covertly left enough shinax to cover his meal under the empty cube. He exited the cafe with a weak smile and wave to Extruder.

Fortunately, the energy had, indeed, made the helmache abate, but now he could actually think and his thoughts were turbulent ones. Instead of going home, Jazz walked a few blocks to one of the small inter-city parks, trying to clear his processor.

The park, of course, was much smaller than the Helix Gardens, but it was still big enough to host a plethora of nooks and crannies off the main circular path. The city noise quieted under the hum of crystals. Jazz wandered down the provided path and let his mind mull over things.

Alright. What did he know about Prowl?

One. Prowl was powerful. He’d been sparked into power. He was used to power. And he knew how to use power to his advantage.

Two. Prowl had used his power to get rid of mechs that had wronged him.

No, no. I don’t know that. I just suspect. So scratch that. What do I know.

Two. Prowl’s carrier died and his sire went missing in the space of two vorns. Even if Prowl had some responsibility for what happened to his sire, a loss like that was devastating. And a loss that Jazz could relate to.

Three. Prowl loves his family. He may have had an issue with his brother, but it was clear he favored and adored Smokescreen and Bluestreak, respectively. And he obviously loved his carrier or he wouldn’t have been so upset by her deactivation.

And… that was it really. Everything else was conjecture and puzzle pieces. If he were to go on what he knew, a relationship wouldn’t be so strange. He did like Prowl. If he went on what he suspected, it would make things much more complicated.

He contemplated calling Crossfire for about a quarter of the path, but when he activated his comm., it was a much more familiar frequency that he contacted. There were no Polyhexians with the ability to listen to his comms. in any sort of appreciable range, but habit had him seeking out a secluded corner grotto in the park.

His comm. was answered almost immediately.

:’Ello, Jazzy!: A much loved and familiar voice said. :Ya caught me at a good time. I jus’ got done with my shift at th’ dispatch. Brightside brought’in th’ mos’ wonderful gel treats t’day, I’m gonna wrangle th’ recipe outta ‘im t’ make ya when ya come home.:

His carrier’s voice filled him with a both a fond warmth and a nostalgic ache.
:Tha' sounds great, ‘Ri. I can’t wait t’ try ‘em.: He said trying to sound cheerful.

:Wha’s wrong, sweetie?: Dolce’s voice turned from happy to concerned in a sparkbeat.

Carriers were more perceptive than Praxian sensor panels sometimes.

:Nothin’!: Even Jazz knew that had been too quick. :Work’s jus’ a little stressful righ’ now.:

:Mnhmm. An’ is Primus tap dancin’ in yar kitchen too?: Dolce said archly.

A tired laugh bubbled up out of his vocalizer at his carrier’s signature ‘I don’t believe your slag’ line.

:I miss ya, Ri.: Jazz murmured whole-sparkedly.

:I miss ya, too, Jazzy. Now wha’s got ya wires in knots?:

He’d always been unable to lie to his carrier. :I, uh, well, I sorta met somebot. An’ we’re sorta datin’?:

:A Praxian? Sweetie, ya know I don’ mind tha’ kinda thing.: Jazz felt his field flush with embarrassment. :Tha’s not it! I’m jus’ not sure abou’ ‘im. We met ‘cause I saved ‘is ward an’ he took me to dinner as a thank ya. I was wearin’ my charm an’ ‘e asked abou’ it. Then ‘e gave me one. Then I forgot th’ rules abou’ adornments an’ I agreed t’ pre-courtin’. I don’ really know anythin’ about ‘im, an’ ‘e’s a noble. I feel like I’m gonna make some sorta misstep at any second.: An’ yar stressed about it.: Dolce gently interrupted his rambling. :Tha’s normal. Especially since ya stumbled int’ it. Why didn’ ya jus’ explain abou’ forgetting th’ adornment rules?:

Dolce crooned at him soothingly. :Then yar fine. Ya haven’ had time ta get t’ know ‘im. Give it a few more dates. Even if yar following tradition t’ th’ T, ya can still say no at th’ end of th’ consideration orn. If ‘e’s a noble then e’ll understand. An’ if ‘e gives ya a hard time, I’ll come t’ Praxus an’ punch ‘im in th’ faceplates.: Jazz rubbed his servos down his face, chagrined :See th’ aforementioned comment abou’ ‘im bein’ a noble an’ me not wantin’ t’ frag ‘im off.: :Language.: Sorry.: How many dates have ya been on an’ how far int’ th’ consideration orn are ya?: Jus’ two, though th’ first one was th’ ‘thank ya’ dinner, an’ seven cycles.: Dolce crooned at him soothingly. :Then yar fine. Ya haven’ had time ta get t’ know ‘im. Give it a few more dates. Even if yar following tradition t’ th’ T, ya can still say no at th’ end of th’ consideration orn. If ‘e’s a noble then e’ll understand. An’ if ‘e gives ya a hard time, I’ll come t’ Praxus an’ punch ‘im in th’ faceplates.: :Riiiiii!: Jazz whined, though he was laughing. :I can take care o’ myself.: Ya maybe past yar final upgrades, bu’ ya’re still my sparkling. I will create an international incident if I ‘ave t’: Dolce pronounced imperiously.

:I know.: Jazz said warmly. :Thanks. I think I needed t’ talk t’ ya.: I’ll always listen, sweetie. Now, when are ya gonna see yar Praxian again?: Jazz was pretty sure his field was so full of awkwardness that it was radiating in the visible spectrum.
Um, I’m going t’ ‘is… estate fo’ dinner in two cycles an’ t’ teach ‘is ward ‘ow t’ play the synth. Little mech took a bit o’ a shine t’ me.:

Ya’re so sweet, Jazzy. Bu’ don’ let th’ little one take alla yar attention. Ya need t’ get t’ know this mech, this… did ya tell me ‘is name?:

No… it’s Prowl.:

Right. Now ya make sure ya spen as much time wit’ Prowl as ya do wi’ th’ mechling, alrigh’? Make sure ‘e’s good enough’ fo’ ya. Ya don’ settle fo’ anythin’, ya hear?:

I won’t, Ri.:

Good! Ya’ll do jus’ fine, sweetie. Now, is everythin’ else alrigh’? ‘Ow’s tha’ partner o’ yars?:

Jazz felt his dermas lifting into a smile. She’s fine.:

He chatted and gossiped with his carrier for half a joor catching up on news from home before Dolce had to go. Jazz was feeling much calmer. Dolce had reminded him that he wasn’t trapped. Granted, his carrier didn’t know the whole truth, but his advice was still sound.

Ya promise me ya’ll be careful. Dolce said as they bid each other goodbye. A slight waver entering his voice as it always did when his carrier imagined something bad happening to him.

I promise. Jazz assured him unequivocally.

Ya should come visit next holiday ya get, since th’ case is takin’ so long. Maybe bring yar partner wit’ ya, or yar beau if th’ courtin’ turns out righ’, yeah?:

Riiii!

Dolce laughed. I love ya, Jazzy.:

I love ya to, Ri.:

Bye-bye.:

Bye.:

He sat in his little secluded grotto for a while listening to the crystals.

Was he actually going to do this?

…

Yes… Jazz wanted answers.
Lessons and Largesse

Chapter Summary

Jazz visits the Crystalspire estate.

Chapter Notes

*shifty eyes*
I may have based the Crystalspire estate on the Biltmore House in Ashville, NC... because I want to live there... so badly

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This neighborhood is waaay outta my price range.

Driving through the secluded roads of the Regent District to the Viscount’s estate weirded Jazz out a small bit. He was still in the city, but he wouldn’t have know it by just looking around. Crystal structures lined the road and obscured any sight of Praxus except for the tips of the Great Crystal. The Regent District of Praxus was the home and playground for the aristocracy. Stately mansions and grand houses hid among cultured gardens and mech-made crystal “forests” in the middle of the city.

Jazz had know, objectively, about the Regent District, but he’d never actually been in the midst of it before. There were special, private squads of constabulary, separate from the Enforcers, who made the rounds here. Most of them third or fourth creations of the nobility. And the illegal racing circuit tended to avoid the area: they were willing to risk buildings and mechs of the more populated city streets to their shenanigans, but not the crystals and wrath of the nobles on the private roads. Praxians, Jazz reflected to himself, had some fragged up priorities sometimes.

Then again, if there were particular nobles (or a particular noble) they were actively attempting to steer clear of, the aversion made a certain sort of sense.

Jazz tamped down on his jangling nerves as he reached a the coordinates he’d been given and turned down a fenced path. The edge of the Crystalspire property. Farther down the road, an ornate gate made of a multitude winding and twisting shapes of metals blocked the way. Before he even had to consider slowing down, the barrier unlocked with the smooth sound of well-oiled bolts and the gate slid open. Behind the barrier, towering spires of opalescent crystal cultures lined the road. Jazz wasn’t sure, but he thought they might be a play on the family name.

After driving a (relatively) short distance down the winding road, he came out of a curve and the crystals gave way to a large open courtyard with a mineral-grass esplanade that led up to a truly massive house. It sprawled gracefully across his vision nestled in the embrace of the crystal spires. He recognized bit and pieces of the architecture from some of the holo-captures he’d looked at of the Crystalspire family. A transport dock encompassed the right side of the structure. Arches and metal spires decorated the cream outside walls, while crystalline gargoyles in what looked to be the shapes of predecons guarded the blue-colored roofs. It was bigger than his apartment block.
Primus, what am I doing? I don't belong here.

Nevertheless, Jazz steadied himself and continued to drive up to the front entrance. He tried to mask his uncertainty as he transformed and walked up the three wide steps to a vestibule that housed the overwhelming front doors. Before he had the chance to raise his fist to knock, the door swung open to reveal a blue and silver Praxian. Unlike Prowl and Bluestreak, this mech did not sport a chevron, but he did have the tell-tale sensor panels. On each pauldron was an etched metal magnet of what Jazz recognized to be the Crystalspire crest. He greeted Jazz with a lightly tapped fist to his chestplates and then gestured welcomingly inside.

“Good afternoon, Officer Jazz. We’ve been expecting you.”

“Ah, er, right. Thank ya.” Jazz wasn’t sure of the proper protocol so he greeted back with the Praxian chest tap and gingerly stepped over the threshold into a high-ceilinged entrance hall. To the left he could see a grand circular staircase made of dark metals.

“Um, an’ ya are…?”

The mech chuckled. “My name is Skids. I am the Crystalspire’s butler. Please don’t hesitate to ask if there is something you need.”

“Oh. Nice t’ meet ya. So, where-?”

“Officer Jazz!!” A happy exclamation interrupted him followed by the sound of running pedes. Jazz let out a startled “oof!” as an excited blur of a field and frame zoomed in enveloping him in a surprise embrace. Slender arms squeezed for a moment then the mechling bounced back and grinned up at him.

The visored mech found himself answering the smile with his own. “Hey there, Blue.”

“I’m so glad you could come! I can’t wait to show you around the house and then we can have my music lesson.”

Skids coughed politely. “I shall send somebot to remind you when your tutor is ready for you, then.”

Bluestreak pouted. “Okay.”

The mech just gave an indulgent smile. “Very good, young sir.” To Jazz he said, “Please enjoy your stay. I will inform the Viscount of your arrival.”

As the butler walked away Jazz asked the youngling, “Where is yar ‘Tor anyway?”

The pout became slightly more pronounced. “He’s been locked in his office working all cycle and he was really frowny at breakfast. I don’t know why. I thought he’d be excited that you were here.”

That… was slightly worrying. But Jazz attempted shake off the sense of foreboding and said cheerfully, “Well, tha’ jus’ means ya get me all t’ yarsel fo’ a bit. Ya gonna show me around, now?”

Bluestreak’s face bloomed into a smile. “Yes! Come this way!”

He tugged Jazz to the right through an archway and out of the entrance hall. They stepped through an open, airy corridor and immediately down two steps into a sunken octogonal-shaped indoor garden filled with chiming crystals. An intricate, buttressed glass ceiling allowed the light to enter from outside and fill the crystals with shimmering sparkles.
“This is our inner garden. ‘Tor and I grow our favorite crystals here. Look! He just added this one.” The mechling pointed out a perfect sphere of white spikes atop a carefully trimmed branch that was by itself in a small pot of mineral solution. Jazz cycled his optics in confused recognition. Was that… the crystal he’d admired at the Helix Gardens? But he couldn’t think on it for long because Bluestreak was already excitedly leading him up, out of the room and across another open corridor to the next.

If Jazz had thought the ceilings in the entrance hall were high, they had nothing on the two-story tall arches of the next room. A huge, fancy table with seating for at least two score mechs only took up the middle of the space with plenty of walking area around it. Three mech-sized fireplaces dominated one side of the room while the other had a balcony that held a fully piped, triple-keyboard synth. Jazz fought to keep his jaw from dropping.

“This is the banquet hall. It’s where we have those really boring formal dinners with the other noble houses. Though sometimes ‘Tor will host a party and then the servants will move the table so we can use it as a ballroom and dance. Isn’t that neat?”

“Sure is.” Jazz managed to say sounding normal. He noticed a door under the balcony tucked next to a set of built-in shelves. “Hey, where does that door go?” he asked curiously.

“Oh! That’s the game room, but I’m not allowed to go in there by myself because it’s right next to the weapons gallery. I don’t know why that’s still a rule. I’m old enough to know better! But it’s probably locked right now anyway because ‘Tor’s office is back there too.”

“...Weapons gallery… right.”

Bluestreak shrugged, seemingly unperturbed. “You know, like antique blasters and hunting rifles and stuff. There’s preserved mecha-animals in there too. They’re kind of gross.”

Jazz let out a little huff of a laugh. “Don’t like huntin’, huh?”

The mechling shook his helm. “No way! I don’t want to shoot anything whenever there’s one of those big hunting parties. I’d rather just stay in the practice range. It’s okay, though, ‘Tor says I don’t have to shoot mecha-animals if I don’t want to.” Bluestreak tugged Jazz down closer so he could whisper to him, “I don’t think ‘Tor likes hunting either.”

“Oh.” Jazz straightened and looked around the giant room. “So, uh, is this where we’re gonna be eatin’ later?”

Bluestreak giggled. “No, no! This is for boring formal stuff.” He led Jazz to a nearly invisible door that the visored mech hadn’t noticed next to the fireplaces and opened it to a (still large) but much cozier amber tinted room with an extended-family-sized table.

“We’re going to be eating in here; the breakfast room.”

“But aren’t we having dinner?” Jazz joked. It was weak, but it made the mechling laugh again.

“Silly! It’s just called that. This is where we eat when it’s just us. Usually it’s just me and ‘Tor, sometimes Smokescreen when he comes to visit.” He swung their servos back and forth happily.

“Smokescreen?” The visored mech played dumb.

“My cousin. He’s got a room up on the third floor that he uses when he visits, but he usually lives at his house in Garden Square.”
“Oh, I see.” Jazz gave him a small smile. “Well, thank ya fo’ lettin’ me eat in here with ya, rather than th’ in th’ borin’ formal room.”

The grey mechling beamed and towed him back out of the room (through a different door) into some sort of sitting room that he called the salon. Jazz barely had a chance to take in the lounges and steel-silk draperies before the mechling moved on.

“The music room is in there.” He said pointing to an adjacent door. “But I want to leave that for last because once we go in you won’t want to leave!”

“Ya’re probably right, Blue.” Jazz admitted. “Um, yar not gonna show me the whole house are ya? Much as I’d like t’ see it, tha’s like, what, a hundred rooms?”

“Two hundred and fifty,” Bluestreak said gaily, “with all the servants’ rooms. But no, we don’t have time. I’m just going to show you the main floor. Maybe another day, though?” He looked at Jazz hopefully.

“Maybe.” Jazz acquiesced. “If it’s alrigh’ with yar ‘Tor.”

They walked back through the entrance hall to a long room lined with paintings on one side and shielded glass windows on the other.

“This is our art gallery. ‘Tor says all of these were painted by famous mechs, but I can’t remember any of their names.” His doorwings drooped a little, embarrassed.

“Tha’s okay, Blue. I probably wouldn’t know who they were anyway.” Jazz soothed with a lopsided smile.

The grey doorwings perked right back up and Bluestreak nearly skipped through the gallery. A large portrait at the end of the room caught Jazz’s attention. It featured a lilac and silver femme dressed up in fancy meshes and gems smiling serenely.

“Lady Rhodium.” He murmured in recognition.

“Oh yeah. That’s my grand-carrier.” Bluestreak affirmed. “I never knew her, but ‘Tor told me all about her, so I love her anyway. And she was super pretty. Don’t you think she was pretty, Jazz?”

“I do.” And tragic. Jazz thought to himself. But her life was a mystery to puzzle out another day. He let the mechling lead him through a set of double doors.

“This is our library.” Bluestreak said proudly. The visored mech looked around in awe at the small fortune of flimsies and datapads that lined countless shelves in a room that was nearly the same size as the banquet hall. Another mech-sized fireplace was in this room along with a balcony that ran around the entire space, accessible by an open hydraulic lift. Cosy-looking couches and armchairs were clustered together and a large heavy desk was situated in front of a picture window showing off terraced, cultured gardens outside.

“Wow. Yar ‘Tor must’a been collectin’ fo’ a long time.”

“Yeah, but most of these have been here way longer than that. Some of them are from when my great-great-great-grandsire was alive.”

“Tha’s pretty impressive.”

The mechling pointed to a small door in the wall. “The reading den is back there, but that’s where
we have lessons with our tutor. Sunstreaker and Sideswipe are in with him right now. Usually I go first, but they switched with me today since you were coming over.”

“Tha was nice o’ them. Are they yar friends?”

“Yeah! All my guardians up until now have been so much older than me that they were like sparkling-sitters. But Sunny and Sides are so cool and they like hanging out with me even when they’re not on duty, even though I don’t have my final upgrades yet. They’re from Kaon, did you know that? They said it’s not very nice there and that they like living here much better even though they’ve only been here for a little while.”

He wondered for a moment if Bluestreak had grown up lonely. Jazz hadn’t seen anybot else, but he could hear faint murmurs and pedestept from behind the walls that could only be the servants walking to and fro in their back passages. Had they helped raise him? How did living with servants work, anyway? Were they all contracted or were some of them free workers?

He kept his thoughts to himself and gently squeezed the mechling’s servo. “I’m glad they like it here.”

“Me too!” He tugged their linked servos imploringly. “Come on, I just wanted to show you the library, but I don’t want to get caught in here by Legacy. He might start my lesson early!”

“Who’s Legacy?”

“My tutor.” His face told Jazz what the mechling thought of the mech.

Jazz just chuckled as they made their way back to the salon through the art gallery and entrance hall. Bluestreak finally let go of his servo to use both servos to open the door of the music room theatrically. He waved Jazz through the doorway excitedly.

Jazz couldn’t hold in his gasp this time. A beautiful grand synth stood in the center of a room made lush with warm brown and cream walls, accented with pale green steel-silk meshes and painted beams. Chairs cushioned with pillows made of that same green steel-silk were positioned around the room as if awaiting a performer and audience. Three glass cases contained a variety of other instruments. The fireplace in here showcased a relief of the Temple of Primus in Iacon.

The Polyhexian approached the synth with something that felt distantly like reverence and ran his digits soundlessly over the keys.

“Do you like it?” Bluestreak asked from behind him with enthusiastic impatience, doorwings fluttering.

“...It’s amazing, Blue.” He turned his visor to the youngling. “An’ yar sure I’m allowed t’ teach ya usin’ this?”

“Of course!”

It was an echo of the tone in Prowl’s answer to him about the synth at the restaurant. The self assured knowledge of ownership. Jazz mentally pushed away the feeling of unease that the thought gave him and sat down on one side of the bench in front of the synth. He patted the free space on the bench. It took no further encouragement for Bluestreak to sit down and scoot next to him.

“Alrigh’ now, do ya know ‘ow t’ read music?”

“Yes! I was taught when I was younger and my tutor tried to teach me vibrolin… but I wasn’t very
good at it.”

Jazz laughed kindly. “Well, th’ synth is quite a bit different from the vibrolin. Firstly, ya use both servos th’ same way.” He wiggled his digits over the keys. “Secondly, ya gotta read two lines o’ music at th’ same time.” Jazz pulled out a battered, well loved datapad from his subspace.

“Two?” Bluestreak sounded slightly concerned.

Jazz positioned the datapad on the synth’s music stand carefully as it flickered to life. He flipped through until he found the lesson he was looking for.

“One line is fo’ yar right servo an’ one line is fo’ yar left servo. Here we are. This was my first practice pad when I was learnin’. My carrier sent it t’ me when I told ‘im I would be teachin’ ya.”

Dolce had, in fact, express shipped it right after getting off the comm. with him.

Bluestreak looked delighted. “You told your carrier about me? What did he say? Does he like me? What’s he like?”

“Let’s see, that was four questions.” Jazz said with mirth. “So, one, of course I did. Two, ‘e thinks ya learnin’ from me is sweet. Three, yes. An’ four, ‘e’s warm an’ kind an’ carin’.”

“Just like you!”

The visored mech couldn’t stop the flush of pleased gratification through his field. Being compared to his carrier was definitely a compliment in his mind.

“Thank ya, Blue. Now let’s concentrate on yar lesson or we won’t even get started before yar tutor comes lookin’ fo’ ya.”

The mechling nodded seriously and sat up straighter, sensor panels tilted in an “at attention” pose. Primus, could he get any more adorable?

“Alrigh’. So first let’s learn where th’ notes are on th’ keys.”

He demonstrated which keys corresponded to which notes on the screen and had Bluestreak imitate him. The mechling picked it up astonishingly quickly. It may have had something to do with his previous experience, but Jazz thought it was more likely due to the fact that Bluestreak was exceptionally bright.

Half a joor later he seemed to have the notes-to-keys memorized.

“Very good!” Jazz praised. “Now we’re gonna have a little fun an’ play together. I’ll play th’ left servo part; tha’s th’ one at th’ bottom, remember? An’ ya’ll play the right servo part.”

“Okay!” Bluestreak wiggled cheerily looking at the simple piece Jazz a pulled up on the datapad.

“An’ one, two, three, four…”

Jazz’s servo carried the harmonies as Bluestreak’s tapped out the melody. It started off a little choppy, but smoothed out a the mechling got the hang of it. His doorwings dipped and twitched in time with the beat. It was a simple little song with a hopeful sound.

When the last notes drifted away, the mechling laughed and flung his arms around Jazz.

“Yay! We did it!”
Jazz returned the hug, acutely aware of the (probably very) dopey smile on his face.

There was the sound of a deliberate shuffle from behind them and they turned as one to see a red form leaning casually in the doorway.

“Blue, Legacy is waiting for you.” Sideswipe said sounding nonchalant, though Jazz could see how the bot’s optics were fondly soft.

Bluestreak pouted at Jazz. “I have to go take lessons from my tutor now, but I’d rather stay here with you and play more music.”

The visored mech gave him a soft smile and a gentle nudge. “Go on, an’ don’ let me get ya in trouble. We can play more later.”

The sunny smile he received seemed to brighten the room and Bluestreak hopped up from the bench. Jazz watched the bright ball of energy bounce out the door. Sideswipe pushed himself off the door jam in a lazy motion and nodded respectfully to Jazz before he casually followed Bluestreak down the hall.

The visored mech switched off the datapad. He turned his optics contemplatively to the synth’s keyboard. His digits wandered pensively down the keys before settling into a soft flowing melody. Now alone in the music room he felt a little at odds with what to do with himself. He should try to go find Prowl, but... The tune twisted and turned gracefully through a few chromatic variations.

Jazz caught sight of something out of the corner of his visor and startled, a cacophony of sour notes cutting off his song. He turned sharply on the bench, servo over his wildly beating fuel pump. Prowl stood a few feet away coolly observing him.

“Primus, Prowl, ya nearly scared th’ spark outta me!”

“Apologies.” Prowl said dryly.

Something about that single word put Jazz on edge. He suddenly felt the need to be standing, as if their differing heights was putting him as some disadvantage. He carefully slid off the bench to his pedes.

“Prowl? Is somethin’ wrong?”

The mech smiled wanly, devoid of amusement. “The Hall of Records is an interesting place to choose for a stint of light reading.” Prowl’s voice was icy.

It figured that Prowl would have some way to know what he’d been up to. In a way it was nice to know that his caution had been warranted. On the other servo it was a little disappointing.

Jazz steeled himself and didn’t bother to deny it. “I prefer t’ base my opinions on recorded facts rather than gossip and hearsay.”

“Just because it is recorded does not make it true.”

“I’m aware of tha’, but I don’ ave th’ cultural knowledge tha’ comes from growin’ up around here. I was fillin’ a gap in my education.”

“So you decide to research my family?” Prowl’s doorwings flared aggressively. “You had no business digging through those files. Did simply asking me not occur to you?”
Jazz frowned, his stubborn streak rising and refusing to be intimidated. “They were public records, Prowl. Besides, would ya have tol’ me th’ truth or strung a bunch o’ pretty words t’gether?” he snarked fearlessly.

Prowl actually looked startled for a moment at Jazz’s backchat. Then he scoffed and said nothing. He turned his back to Jazz and stared out the window, cables taut with stress.

After a moment Jazz sighed and deliberately relaxed his posture. Fluffing and smoothing his plating to release tension. “Prowl, I wasn’ lookin’ fo’ somethin’ t’ use against ya. I was lookin’ fo’ somethin’ t’ help me understand ya better.”

Prowl’s doorwings flicked dismissively. His voice was flat. “Oh? And did you find it?”

_I found a mech who endured unimaginable amounts of pain. A mech who might have turned his power into vengence. A mech... I could relate to._

Prowl’s field was pulled in so tight it was practically on his plating. The wound from his past that Jazz had prodded still very obviously not healed. The visored mech followed his instinctive reaction in an attempt to soothe the hurting mech, hoping that it wasn’t about to get him killed.

“I know wha’ it’s like t’ lose a creator. An’ ya had t’ go through it twice.” Jazz murmured.

“I don’t need your pity, Jazz.” Prowl sounded tired.

He approached Prowl’s back slowly, obviously, and placed his servos just behind the mech’s wing hinges.

“Pity comes from mechs who don’ know wha ya’ve been through. _Sympathy_ comes from those who understand. Ya have my sympathy, Prowl. I know wha it’s like t’ lose tha’ anchor in yar life. T’ drift moorlessly on pain an’ anger. I know how tha’ can make ya contemplate terrible things.”

He remembered the cold narrow alley where he’d stood waiting for the mech who killed his sire to pass by. He remembered the bite of the stolen gun in his palm as he clenched his servo around it. He remembered Officer Corona appearing out of nowhere like a wraith; his optics gazing at Jazz steadily, without anger or reproach; the soothing murmur of words lost to time and anxiety. He remembered handing the Enforcer the gun with shaking servos. He remembered collapsing, trembling knees no longer able to support him. He remembered the officer picking up his chilled form and taking him home where he cried like a sparkling in his carrier’s arms for joors.

He laid his helm on Prowl’s back between his servos, field open and nonjudgmental. The Praxian’s doorwings quivered, his field loosening fractionally with astonishment. Jazz carefully pressed his field against Prowl’s.

_I know how it feels._ He tried to convey.

Prowl seemed to soak it up. Stress seeped out of his frame.

“Swingline was no great loss to the world.” Prowl finally said softly.

“Maybe not,” Jazz murmured, “but ya still lost th’ chance t’ ‘ave a sire. I know what tha’ feels like. Losin’ yar carrier too… I can only imagine tha’ pain.”

They stood like that quietly for several breems.

“I wish I could have introduced you to her.” Prowl broke the silence wistfully. “She would have
loved you.”

“Why don’ ya tell me about ‘er?”

“She was beautiful. Compassionate, good-natured and generous. But she was sparked into a world that took advantage of those traits. Considered them weaknesses.”

“But ya don’. From th’ way yar raisin’ yar mechlin’, seems like yar raisin’ ‘im in ‘er image. I think she’d be proud o’ sire ya’ve b’come.”

Prowl’s EMF suddenly washed over him warmly, full of affection and something that tasted like relief. “That is possibly the most kind and sincere compliment I’ve ever been given.” Prowl’s doorwings folded back slowly, enveloping Jazz between them. They stood in comfortable silence for a while, their venting slowly syncing up.

The Praxian stepped forward just far enough to turn without danger of hitting Jazz with his sensor panels. Once facing him, Prowl took Jazz’s servos between his own. He spent a few moments just staring searchingly into Jazz’s faceplates. Prowl met his visor with overbright, yet gentle optics. Jazz’s spark flipped and fluttered in his chest.

Oh no… don’t look at me like that…

“Forgive me for my earlier ire. You did not deserve it.” The doorwinged mech said sounding remorseful.

Jazz shifted uncomfortably. “Yar forgiven.”

“Despite my poor attitude would you still play for me?” Prowl asked.

“Uh... sure.” Jazz carefully extricated his servos from Prowl’s and sat back at the synth. “Any requests?” he asked half-joking, half-serious in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Prowl settled into one of the steel-silk cushioned chairs and looked thoughtful for a moment. “How about the song you were playing earlier before I so rudely interrupted you. I would love to hear it in its entirety.”

“...Alrigh’.” Jazz turned fully to the keyboard and began the song again. He ignored the near physical press of Prowl’s optics on his plating. He concentrated solely on the music to lead the flowing melody through its beginning soft murmur to its many chromatic variations and finally let it reach its triumphant ending chord. When he finished, he eased his servos off the keys. He looked over at Prowl to find the mech gazing at him with pensive optics.

“Beautiful.” The Praxian said softly. “Thank you for sharing it with me.”

“O’ course. Music is part o’ me and tha’wa’...” he swallowed a little nervously. “Tha’wa’ this pre-courtin’ is fo’. Sharin’ part o’ yarself with yar prospective intended.”

Prowl’s optics brightened abruptly from their subdued glow. And though he’d been by no means slouching, he also seemed to suddenly be more upright, sensor panels focused forward on Jazz. An unexpected smile bloomed on his dermas.

“What is it?” Jazz queried, slightly alarmed.

“There was a conundrum that I was contemplating and you have just given me the answer to it.”
Prowl stood fluidly and offered the startled mech his servo. “Come, I wish to show you something.”

After a brief hesitation Jazz took his servo and allowed himself to be pulled up off the bench. Prowl opened what Jazz had thought was one of the windows; it was actually a cleverly disguised door to a covered loggia. It led around the back of the house, past the windows of the art gallery and library, to a terrace on the side of the structure. A small secret smile played upon Prowl’s dermas as he led Jazz down a set of stairs from the terrace to a side courtyard and away from the building. The mech’s doorwings were quivering. Those tells on any other mech would have made Jazz think that Prowl was positively giddy, but the mech was far too serene for that.

The Praxian led the visored mech to a relatively small open air pavilion at the far end of the courtyard. Beyond them the grounds of the estate flourished in several cultured gardens. Prowl clasped Jazz’s servos between his own again.

“You have said it is against your traditions to accept physical gifts until true courting, but it is common in Praxian tradition to show your ability to provide through material offerings. But then you spoke of sharing part of yourself and I was able to devise a compromise.”

Prowl smiled, pleased with himself. “I am gifting you access to this:” he gestured to their surroundings with his sensor panels. “You may come to the estate at any time you wish. This place is my sanctuary and I hope by sharing it with you our relationship will grow and bloom.”

Jazz spluttered for a klik. “Wha’? Prowl ya can’t mean tha’!”

Prowl offered Jazz a coy smile. “You will find that I can and do. And, of course, you may come see me when you visit, though I may be working depending on the time of cycle. Will you accept my gift? Please Jazz?”

The imploring look in his optics twisted Jazz’s spark and his vocalizer online without his permission. “Yes,” he whispered. “Thank ya fo’ th’ gift.”

“You’re welcome… I would very much like to kiss you, now.”

Every time Jazz thought he was finally on solid footing around the mech, Prowl would do something to knock him off-kilter again. He couldn’t fathom how the Praxian kept finding him attractive what with his faceplates in a near permanent state of petro-deer in the headlights. Jazz turned his helm away hesitantly. “I don’ think-”

One of Prowl’s servos left his and curled gently under his chin drawing his face back forward and bringing his objections to a stuttering halt.

“Please? Just a kiss, Jazz.” Prowl murmured enticingly. “Nothing more.”

But Jazz wasn’t going to just let Prowl get away with whatever he wanted. Not this time, at least.

“Ya may kiss me on th’ cheek,” Jazz said stubbornly, “anythin’ more woul’ be improper.”

“Oh?” How could so much amusement and interest be layered on one syllable? “Well, we wouldn’t want to be improper.”

The Praxian leant his helm down and placed a kiss just to the side of Jazz’s dermas. It technically counted as his cheek. Prowl followed that up with a soft nuzzle.

“May I receive one in return?” the chevroned mech asked quietly, amusement suffused in his voice.
“Fine.” Jazz huffed and then used Prowl’s bent helm to his advantage. He tilted his helm and pressed his dermas to the crest at the center of Prowl’s chevron.

The Praxian’s vents stuttered, his whole frame stilled in surprise.

Jazz pulled back, suddenly feeling as if as if he’d accidentally fallen over some unseen line. “Uh, did I do somethin’ inappropriate? I’m sorry, if I did.”

Prowl seemed to shake himself loose of his daze. “No need to apologize. I just wasn’t expecting you to acquiesce. You are delightfully full of surprises.”

Jazz felt a smirk steal over his dermas. It felt good to not be the one flat-peded for once.

The smirk faded away when Prowl stroked his cheekridge. “So many mechs and femmes have attempted to seduce their way into my life and they’ve all failed.” Prowl mused almost to himself. “Yet you have managed to slip your way under my plating with no guile.”

“It was never my intention t’ get under yar platin’ in th’ first place.” Jazz remarked. “But if it’s any consolation, ya’re pretty good at gettin’ under mine too.”

“Am I?” Prowl’s voice way heavy with amused implication.

Embarrassment flashed through Jazz field, though he was feeling confident enough to lightly push the Viscount away in a playful manner. “Tha’s not wha’ I meant an’ ya know it!”

Prowl chuckled and offered his arm. “I only tease. Would you like a tour of our private gardens? I promise they are second only to the Helix Gardens themselves.”

When did my life become a Golden Era holo-drama?

Nonetheless, he accepted Prowl’s arm. “I’d like tha’.”

Jazz felt a wash of wistfulness twist his spark that he hid before it could make its way to his EMF. He would enjoy this while it lasted, but he couldn’t stay in this idyllic dream of a life. He had a racing circuit and drug ring to bust. He had a duty to safeguard the citizens of Praxus. Even if it mean he would eventually have to go up against Prowl himself.

Even if it meant his spark would eventually get broken.

Chapter End Notes

Listening suggestions:
Bluestreak and Jazz's duet- piano version of the Braveheart theme
Jazz's song- Victor's piano solo from Corpse Bride
Pursuit and Dispute

Chapter Summary

Jazz and Crossfire have a chat about Praxian courting customs, an odd suspect gives Jazz a helmache and Jazz has a crisis of conscience.

Chapter Notes

I meant to get this posted two weeks ago, but I got the flu and then had to do a ton of catch up work at my job when I got better. Blah.

See the end of the chapter for more notes:

:You kissed him?! I thought you were going to be careful!: Crossfire yelled over the comm. link, aghast.

Jazz was glad for a moment that they were in alt mode and Crossfire’s exclamation hadn’t been out loud. They were making their patrol rounds in the business district, slipping smoothly in and out of the hustle and bustle. The affluent Garden Square was only a few walkable blocks away. He’d decided to unload his experience at the Viscount’s estate as well as his worry while they were driving.

Maybe he should’ve waited. It sounded like she was ready to transform in the middle of traffic to thwack him upside the helm. He really didn’t want to be the cause of an accident.

:It was on th’ helm-crest! An’ ‘e kissed me first!: Jazz shot back defensively before he could think about what he was saying.

Stunned silence permeated the comm. for a klik.

:Uh, it was on th’ cheek… ya know what, jus’ forget I said tha’ las’ part.: Jazz muttered. :The point is, I jus’ wanted t’ know if tha’ had any special significance. I didn’ propose bondin’ by kissing his helm-crest did I?:

Crossfire rattled her armor negatively as they waited for a traffic light to change. :No, no. Nothing like that. It’s a fairly benign spot, actually.:

Jazz sighed. :Tha’s a relief.:

:Why didn’t you just ask him, if you were worried?:

:First o’ all: I was embarrassed, okay. An’ secondly: I don’t trust ‘im enough not t’ take advantage o’ my ignorance.:

:That’s not a healthy relationship, Jazz.: Crossfire admonished.

:Ya think I don’ know tha’?: Jazz maintained :I’m stumblin’ around in th’ dark most o’ th’ time.
That’s why I’m askin’ ya. I trust my kith not t’ lead me wrong.:

There was another silent pause over the comm. :...K-kith?: She said, stumbling slightly over the unfamiliar glyph. :What does that mean? Is that, like, a Polyhexian thing?:

Jazz mentally stalled for a klik having never had to explain the concept before. :Kith is… kith.: He said helplessly. :It’s… it’s a group tha’ shares a culture or a purpose. Like… th’ Enforcers in a precinct are kith, th’ medics who work at th’ same medical center are kith, construction mechs working on th’ same project t’gether are kith… ya’re my partner, so ya’re my kith…ya know?: It wasn’t just that. Kith implied camaraderie and friendship and a multitude of other things that he couldn’t find words for.

:I think I get it.: Crossfire said drifting close enough for a moment for her field to brush against his warmly. :So, you want to stop for lunch and get a crash course on Praxian courting?:

:Yes, please.: By mutual silent agreement they pulled off and into a small outdoor cafe. Once they’d transformed and picked a table a server scurried over with menus. They were both quick to order since they’d been here before. Jazz drummed his digits on the table anxiously as the server left.

“So… Praxian courting?” He kept his voice to a murmur.

Crossfire hummed, thinking for a bit before speaking. “Well, to start with, when courting, we’ll generally have a “dominant” partner making the attempts to woo their chosen paramour. Usually the instigator of the courtship. They’re the ones giving gifts and trying to convince the other that they would make a good mate. From what you’ve told me, and I’ve seen,” she raised a brow ridge at him, “it seems that the Viscount has taken that roll.”

“Well, we basically ‘ave th’ same thing in Polyhex tradition, so in my defense,” Jazz said, “I didn’ really think ‘bout it.”

She crossed her arms with a huff. “Okay, then. Let’s see… Oh, usually the mech or femme pursuing the suite will take their intended to their favorite places; it’s a way for the ‘bot to get to know them in a way.”

Jazz frowned. “If ‘e’s following tha’ convention then all I really know abou’ ‘im is tha’ ‘e likes expensive fuel an’ crystals. An’ bein’ at home.”

Crossfire matched his frown “… he’s moving awfully fast.”

The visored mech tilted his head. “Is ‘e? I mean we’re still in pre-courtin’ accordin’ t’ my traditions.”

Her optics flared a little in annoyance. She put her servos on the table and leaned forward. “Jazz, you can’t tell me that you’re not feeling as if this is moving too fast. You wouldn’t be this stressed if you weren’t. Whatever your traditions might say, he’s obviously following his own. Ingratiating you to his ward. Inviting you to his house. Those are all really big steps.”

Jazz frowned at the implications. “Why would ‘e-?”

“Here are your meals, officers!”

They both jumped at the bright voice, interrupting the tense moment. The server smiled as he set down their cubes. Regular energon with crunchy bismuth sprinkled on top for Jazz and purple oil shot through with some green mineral for Crossfire.
“Thanks, mech.” Jazz said with a smile.

“Anything for a friend of the Viscount.” the mech beamed cheerfully.

Jazz’s smile froze. “Wha’?”

“We’re honored to have your patronage, officer.” the mech continued blithely. “I’m Bumper, the owner of this establishment. I do hope you enjoy your meals. Free of charge, of course.”

The Polyhexian shot Crossfire a helpless look, she looked dumbfounded.

“There’s really no need fo’ tha. An’ ‘ow do ya know I’m friends with th’ Viscount?”

“Oh, my sister works at the Helix Gardens. She was all a twitter about you and the Viscount, and, may I say, just a touch jealous. I mean, who wouldn’t be?”

“Righ’.” Jazz said weakly.

Crossfire shook off her stupor. “Yes, who, indeed? Thank you so much for your excellent service, Bumper.” Her tone held the subtlest underlying glyph that she was done with his presence.

“Of course. And if either of you need anything else, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

Jazz waited until the mech’s attention was on something else before slumping over to lightly thunk his helm on the table.

“This isn’t the first time that’s has happened, I take it?” The femme said both worried and amused by Jazz’s display.

“Nope. Fragit, I’ll just leave some money on th’ table an’ run b’fore ‘e realizes wha’ I did. Again.” He muttered into the tabletop.

Crossfire’s field brushed his warmly. “You’re a good mech.”

Jazz sighed and straightened before he made a spectacle of himself. “All it takes is one mecha-sparrow…”

Crossfire gave him a funny look. “What?”

“Old Polyhexian proverb. ‘All it takes is one mecha-sparrow t’ let th’ turbo-wolf know ya’re there.’ Basically means, one gossipy ‘bot can cause ya a lot o’ trouble.”

“Huh.” she said contemplatively. Then in an attempt to lighten the mood, she wiggled her sensor panels ridiculously. “Did you just imply that Praxians are loudmouthed birds?”

A barked laugh forced its way out of his vocalizer. “Well, ya do ‘ave th’ doorwings fo’ it.”

“Slagger.” She said fondly.

They shared a few moments of companionable silence as they ate. Around them the city bustled on. Jazz stared pensively into the dregs of his energon.

“Wha’ do I do?”

“Psychiatric consultation will cost you extra.” She teased.
“Ha ha.” He muttered dryly.

Crossfire sobered. “You want to get back to picking my processor about Praxian courting?”

“Yeah.” Jazz covertly slipped some shinax under a napkin. “Wha’ about courtin’ gifts? ‘E seemed insistent tha’ ‘e get me somethin’.”

“Courting gifts play a big part in it, actually. For the lower classes, they might be things made by servo. While the higher classes will spend huge amounts of shinax for custom pieces. Gifts are like, well, I hate to say claims, but they’re a way for a mech to say, “Here, see how much I can spoil my intended.” Not wearing or displaying a courting gift can be a way for mechs to show that they’re not happy or satisfied with their courter. It might even be seen as an invitation for other mechs to attempt a courting process themselves. Look, I don’t know the Viscount, obviously, but it’s probably driving him up the wall that you refuse to let him give you anything.”

“Bu’ ‘e did!” Jazz protested.

“But it’s not something that can be seen.” Crossfire countered. “As shallow as it sounds, appearances mean a lot to us in terms of courting.”

“Oh… so it probably bothers ‘im that I ‘aven’t given ‘im anythin’…”

“Mmm, I don’t know. Probably not as much, since he was the instigator. You’re also a foreigner, so you’re afforded a little bit of leeway. But giving him a gift would definitely cement your serious interest. Which… are you seriously interested?”

He pointedly studied the tabletop to avoid the earnest look she was giving him.

“I… I don’t know, ‘Fire. If I was anybot else… I mean, I feel like I could easily get swept off my pedes, bu’…”

“But…?”


“Me?” She asked, sounding a bit surprised. She thought for a moment, denta nibbling on her lower dermas, a subconscious tic of hers. “Huh. Well, besides profile basics… nothing, really. I wasn’t even sparked when he inherited his title.”

Jazz nodded. “An’ tha’s part o’ my problem. Tha’s all I know, too. ‘E ain’t lettin’ me close t’ ‘im an’ it’s raisin’ all my red flags. It feels like either I’m jus’ an interesting shiny tha’ ‘e’ll get bored of eventually or…”

“Or he’s getting close to you for some kind of leverage.” Crossfire said sounding worried again. “But… but he’s letting you get close to his ward. He never lets anybot do that.”

And this was why he considered her kith.

“I don’ know wha’ t’ do ‘Fire. Part o’ me thinks-”

The screech of tires jerked them out of their conversation. The caught sight of a car rocketing around a corner.
Jazz shook his plating out with a rattle as he quickly stood. “Chat time’s over, I guess.”

“For now.” Crossfire allowed, following suit.

They rushed to the street and transformed in tandem, accelerating while activating lights and sirens. They rounded the corner and gained on the mech. When it was quite certain that the mech knew they were after him, he sped up.

:Looks like we got a runner.: Jazz remarked unnecessarily.

:Not for long.: Crossfire said grimly. She switched comm. frequencies. :Dispatch, we have a mech in the business district traveling at high speeds, Officers Crossfire and Jazz in pursuit.:

:Acknowledged, Officer. Standing by.: 

:So, ‘ow do ya want t’ play this?: Jazz asked, throwing his attention into the chase.

:We’ll herd him away from the shops towards Areal Highway 18. Then you try to get in front of him. We’ll box him in.:

:Ya got it.: 

Jazz swerved out into the next lane and gunned his engine using his superior Polyhexian speed to roar forward.

“Hey! Pull over, mech!” Jazz shouted.

A flash of shock licked across his sensor net from the fleeing mech’s field. The mech tried to gain ground, but Jazz easily kept pace with him while Crossfire closed in from behind. When the exit for the highway came, Jazz forced him to turn off of the civilian populated road with a persuasive near-collision into his side. A flare of desperation through the runner’s field belied his intent to use the open road to escape.

Jazz veered sharply in front of the runner nearly skimming their front bumper with his back one. No matter how the mech tried to get around him, Jazz cut him off every time. Down the highway they roared. The mech wasn’t going to stop of his own volition, Jazz realized.

He sent a quick comm. to his partner. :’Fire. Scramble and Stop.: 

:Ready when you are.: She acknowledged.

Jazz vented sharply and then shouted :NOW!: over the comm.

Crossfire roared forward in a leap, transforming as she did so and pulling her taser out of subspace. She had gained just enough speed to hit the fleeing mech with a stun shot. The mech let out a garbled shriek of static as he lost control of his vehicle mode. But before he could go careening off the aerial highway, Jazz had also transformed in front of him and executed a spin putting him face-to-windshield with the mech. Jazz balanced on his pede tires for a moment steering the two of them as he was pushed backwards down the road by the mech’s speed. He lowered first one pede then the other bringing them both to a squealing stop.

Bewilderment and fuzzy shock radiated from the speeder’s field. He idled, circuits still scrambled from the painful tag to his back bumper. Jazz kept one servo on the mech’s hood and retrieved his inhibitor cuffs out of his subspace with his other. Crossfire caught up behind them, her taser trained on the mech still in vehicle mode.
“Alrigh’ now, yar gonna transform an’ put yar servos where we can see ‘em. Slowly, now.”

Some of the confusion cleared from the mech’s field, to be replaced with a sudden and unexpected bloom of relief.

“Oh, it’s you. I would have stopped if I had know, I swear. Yes, this is good. I’ll come quietly, I promise,” The speeder babbled. He followed instructions and transformed slowly, immediately putting his servos out to be cuffed.

Jazz didn’t usually make a habit of questioning his luck, but he covertly exchanged a weirded out look with Crossfire as he cuffed the suddenly unresisting mech. While she called in for a transport from dispatch, the mech, who introduced himself as Gearshock, started making pleasant small talk with Jazz which mostly consisted of compliments on his finish. Fortunately, dispatch had been waiting for the call and the transport was quick to arrive.

Gearshock waved to them as the transport took off with a “See you at the station, Officer Jazz.”

“What was that about?” Crossfire blurted out, looking flummoxed.

Jazz matched her baffled countenance. “I ‘ave no idea.”

He found out later that cycle when they got back to HQ. They were in the middle of writing the report on the odd chase when Chief Scattershield approached their desk radiating annoyance.

“Both of you with me.” He barked.

Jazz and Crossfire exchanged a quick look and got up to follow. Jazz wondered, as he often did now, if Scattershield was the one feeding Prowl information from inside the department. They did have history after all. He watched the high, proud doorwings in front of him and hid a frown.

The Chief led them back to the interview room. He stopped in front of the one way glass of the room containing Gearshock. The mech was seated, glancing around the room nervously, still cuffed servos resting on the table in front of him, drumming his digits.

“He’s clammed up on us. Says he won’t talk to anyone except you.” Scattershield sent Jazz a pointed look.

“Me? Why?” The visored mech said in puzzlement.

The Chief gave an irritated flick of his doorwings. “Get in there and ask him. I don’t have time for this nonsense.”

As if we do. Jazz thought with a huff. Some of that must have bled into his field because Crossfire gave a push back of amused agreement. Outwardly Jazz shrugged and said, “Yes, Sir,” before going into the room.

Gearshock perked up with relief when he entered. “Officer Jazz.”

The visored mech projected forth a casual mien and gave the mech an easy smile as he took the chair across the table. “Hey mech, heard ya wanted t’ talk t’ me.”

“Yes! I have information about the racing circuit. About the drugs.”

“Yes! I have information about the racing circuit. About the drugs.”

“Why not jus’ come t’ us in the first place with th’ information?” Jazz asked with a curios helm tilt.
“And why run from us?”

“...The information might implicate me in being involved in illegal gambling... and I might not have the cleanest record.” Gearshock admitted.

Jazz shot a look at the mirrored glass, wondering what Crossfire and Scattershield thought of this sudden development.

“Ya know, ya coulda tol’ me.”

“No! It had to be you. I’ll give you the information, but you have to talk to the Viscount for me, please! I know I’m not the best mech in the world, but you will help me, right?”

Jazz reared back from his comfortable lean on the table. “Wha’?”

Gearshock leaned forward earnestly, optics pale and pleading. The mech’s field opened beseechingly. Anxiety and near hysteria slammed into Jazz without warning. “Please, I’m just a little behind on my payments. He’ll listen to you, I know he will! Please, you must speak to him for me or he’ll send his new pit demons after me.”

Jazz mouth worked soundlessly for a klik before he swallowed and tried again. “Are ya in fear for yar functionin’?”

“It’s my fault of course!” The mech said hastily, ignoring his question, optics darting around the room. “I spent my money frivolously, but I just need more time.”

Jazz sort of felt like a passenger in his own body. His tank churned from the negative emotions flowing through him from Gearshock’s EMF. This was wrong. This was like blackmail. He needed to get out of this room before he purged.

He distantly heard his vocalizer online. “I need t’... talk this over with my superiors. I’ll be righ’ back, okay?”

The visored mech got up and headed for the door. With a flash of sheer panic in his field, Gearshock unexpectedly lunged and grabbed onto his arm. “No wait! It’s the Noss. They’re experimenting with it, making variants. And there was chatter at the houses table that they’re attempting to get an international market started.”

Jazz felt like he’d been dropped into a pool of liquid nitrogen. If that was true... Oh Primus...

“Who is they?” He asked, fuel pump pounding.

“I don’t know.” Gearshock said miserably. “But that’s still good information, right? You’ll still help me?”

“I’ll... see wha’ I can do.” Every word tasted like slag on his glossa. He felt sick to his tank from the heavy swamp of the mech’s chaotic field.

“Thank you! Thank you!” The mech gushed.

Jazz extricated himself from the groveling bot and left the room. Once the door had closed, he suddenly doubled over and dry-heaved, slapping a servo over his mouth and slamming his fist sideways into the wall beside him. A moment later Crossfire’s worried, but blessedly stable field washed over him. She rubbed his upper backplates as he trembled and recovered from the emotional backlash.
“Are you alright?” She asked in concern.

Jazz gulped down a couple of vents and straightened slowly. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m okay, now. Mech let ‘is field go haywire an’ I got th’ brunt o’ it. Primus. Wha’ the frag was tha’?”

“It sounded an awful lot like extortion.” Scattershield’s voice said from behind them. Jazz could feel Crossfire bristling at their superior. He turned, visor flashing angrily.

“Frag off.” Jazz snapped harshly and immediately regretted it. “Sorry, Sir.” He said, chagrined.

The Chief snorted inelegantly. “No. I deserved that. And you gave me the answer I needed. Jazz, go home. I don’t need you falling into EMF shock.”

“But I need to finish the arrest report and the information…” Jazz protested.

Crossfire patted his shoulder strut. “I can finish the report. And I’ll start looking into the new intel. Chief’s right, you’re rattled. Go rest. I’ll comm. you if I find something.”

Reluctantly, Jazz nodded and let her guide him back to their shared desk so he could subspace his things before he left.

He’d made it a few blocks from the station, processor jumbled and racing, when he made the abrupt decision to veer toward the Regent District. He didn’t really know why his tires were suddenly taking him to the root of his problems.

Either the drive was shorter than he remembered, or his processor blanked out for some of it because he found himself in front of the entrance to the sprawling estate before he realized it. Skids greeted him at the door, the butler’s welcome turning worried when he took in Jazz’s unstable field. The visored mech assured him nothing was wrong. A lie about getting a scare from a petro-deer jumping out in front of him during his drive slid easily off his glossa. He made an effort to smooth out his EMF. Though looking dubious, Skids seemed to accept the excuse and ushered him inside.

“Lord Prowl is busy with work at the moment and young Bluestreak is out visiting his cousin.” Skids said apologetically. “But I shall inform Lord Prowl of your arrival and I am sure he will be with you at his earliest opportunity.”

“No problem, mech. I can find somethin’ t’ keep me occupied in th’ music room.” Jazz responded with a cheerfulness he didn’t feel.

“Of course, Sir. Would you like some warmed energon while you wait?”

“Oh, ah, no thank ya.” Jazz wasn’t sure he could keep anything down right now. His tank still felt subtly queasy.

Skids tilted his helm respectfully. “Very good, Sir.” Then he left Jazz in the entrance hall, walking in the direction of Prowl’s office. The visored mech hesitated for a klik and then stepped down into the inner garden. He stared at the spiky circular crystal that Bluestreak had said was Prowl’s newest addition. He was almost certain it was the one from the Helix Gardens. But why? He ran oh-so-careful digits over the spines. His spark gave a flutter in his chest.

Jazz jerked his servo away as if the crystal had burned him. He left the inner garden and made his way to the music room. The old datapad full of his first lessons was still on the synth’s music stand, though it looked to have been moved slightly. Bluestreak must have been practicing.

The synth was still beautiful, but Jazz wasn’t feeling the pull to play it. Instead, his gaze was drawn
to the glass cases full of instruments. More specifically, to the gorgeous vibrolin with a matching bow. Jazz gingerly looked for a way to open the case, half expecting it to be locked. The glass lid opened easily under his servos.

A few moments were spent admiring the instrument that probably cost more than his vornly salary.

He brought the vibrolin to rest under his chin and set the bow, playing a melancholy little tune. The music paused as he vented softly, turning his optical feed off.

Why did I come here? It’s like I’m drawn to him.

Another bittersweet refrain sounded, as he thought of their shared meals and garden walks, then he launched into a swift minor melody that reflected the turmoil in his processor.

Is it just the mystery? The puzzle to be solved? No. I like Prowl. I like the way he treats me. Like something precious. But is that just a front? Am I just something to be won, like a trophy? What could he really want with me? What do I know about him? He and I could be so alike, but are we, really? Is this feeling just from the sympathy I feel for him?

The first theme came back as he played for his confused, aching spark.

He’s so tender. With me. With Bluestreak. His optics… when he looks at me, sometime I feel like my spark is trying to beat out of my chest. But the fear surrounding his name…

The soft motif transitioned again into the rapid air.

What has he done? What is he capable of? How can I possibly knowingly blind myself to his true nature… whatever it is? All of this would just be a farce. A corruption of everything I stand for.

The song gentled and slowed forlornly.

What have I been doing? I can’t keep living in this… fairytale of lies.

Jazz turned his visor back on and found himself staring into Prowl’s optics from where he stood just inside the door. His optics were soft and fond. Warmth bloomed out from Jazz’s spark, only to turn cold as his processor caught up with him. The visored mech turned away and carefully put the vibrolin back in its place in the glass case.

“Hello Jazz. My apologies, I was finishing up some work when you arrived.”

“No. I understand.” Jazz said tightly, still turned from him.

“What’s wrong? You seem upset.”

The Polyhexian faced him with a frown. “I am a bit, yeah.”

“Has something happened?” Prowl’s sensor panels widened fractionally in a protective gesture. He crossed the room reaching out his servos as if to draw Jazz into an embrace. It would be so easy to step into that hold and pretend the outside world didn’t exist.

The visored mech stepped back out of range with a whispered, “Don’t.” He crossed his arms over his chestplates defensively.

The Praxian stopped short, concern and vexation warring in his optics. “Jazz, what is wrong? Talk to me.”
Jazz felt something in him break loose that translated itself to anger. “Ya know what, *sure.* ‘Ow ‘bout we talk.” He paced forward a few steps. “‘Ow ‘bout we talk ‘bout th’ mech tha’ was beggin’ me t’ talk t’ ya so ‘e wouldn’t be hurt by yar ‘new pit demons’?”

“Who?” Prowl’s countenance didn’t change, but something dangerous flashed through his optics. Jazz would have missed it if he hadn’t been paying attention.

“Tha’ doesn’ matter.” The visored mech said brusquely. “Yar missin’ th’ point, *my Lord.* ‘Ow am I supposed t’ react t’ a mech pleadin’ me fo’ more time t’ pay ya b’cause ‘e was scared fo’ ‘is life? Scared o’ ya?”

“Jazz, it is not something you need to concern yourself with.” Prowl said softly, soothingly. “This mech, whoever he is, was obviously just trying to take advantage of you. He should not have bothered you with whatever imagined slight he thought he had made against me. Please think no more about it. I am sure they were just the ramblings of an overactive processor. Trust me.”

“I *can’t!*” Jazz insisted helplessly. “Don’ you understand tha’ I can’t? I don’t even really *know* ya. I know who th’ Viscount of Crystalspire is, bu’ I’ve only gotten glimpses o’ Prowl. Who are ya? Why is everybot afraid o’ ya?”

Prowl came towards him holding out a servo. He gave Jazz a compelling look. “I am the mech courting you. That should be enough.”

Jazz stepped back, arms still crossed stubbornly. “Not when I’m an Enforcer an’ a past body count is involved.”

Prowl’s optics turned icy. “The past is not important.”

The visored mech threw his arms up in aggravation. “Yes it is! Th’ past shapes a bot, whether they like it or not. Ya an’ me both.”

“Jazz, just let it go.” There was a warning tone in the Praxian’s voice.

“Or wha’?” Jazz all but snarled the challenge. “I’ll get ‘deactivated in the line o’ duty’?”

Doorwings flared. “I’m trying to protect you.” Prowl hissed advancing on him. “Don’t you understand that? There are things that you do not need to know. All you need to know is that Praxus is mine and anything within its borders is yours for the having. *Anything.* All you have to do is ask.”

A sort of numbness spread out from Jazz’s chestplates. Prowl still didn’t get it. He probably never would. Jazz’s servos curled into fists. He stepped nimbly around the Praxian and backed up towards the door. “No. I can’t… accept that. Everythin’ you say is just… empty words. Ya keep showerin’ me with crystals an’ grandeur, bu’ ya won’t let me close. Ya don’ trust me… an’ I can’t trust ya. Ya’re hiding behind yar ward and yar position. An’… an’ I can’t let myself keep fallin’ in *love* with a mech I don’ *know.*”

Prowl’s optics flared with revelation, then sharpened keenly. “…What did you just say?”

*Frag me and my runaway glossa. I shouldn't have come here.*

“I… I have t’ go. I’m sorry. I can’t do this.”

Jazz turned quickly and all but bolted out of the music room. He faintly heard Prowl call his name as he crossed the polished tile of the entrance hall and hesitated for just a klik before shaking his helm and continuing out the doors. He transformed hastily, and drove away with an unhappy revv of his
engine, ignoring the miserable ache in his chest as he lost sight of the house in the thick crystalline structures.

Chapter End Notes

The inspiration music for Jazz's vibrolin solo is "Cadence" by KeKo.
He stared at the closed drawer of his desk, visor dim. In it was the box containing the audial horn adornment Prowl had gifted him.

...I should send it back now...

“Jazz?”

...but that means I have to write the rejection letter...

“Cybertron to Jazz.”

...I don’t know if I can… but I had to end it. It… it wasn’t real.

“Jazz!”

“Huh?” His helm jerked up, visor overbright with startlement as he focused on Crossfire. She gave him a concerned look.

“I said we should pack it up for the evening.” Her doorwings perked forward with worry. “Are you alright? You’ve been really distracted lately.”

He hadn’t told her yet what had happened three cycles previous when he’s broken things off with the Viscount. He hadn’t even told his carrier yet. The self inflicted wound was still too fresh.

“I jus’ got a lot on my processor.” He assured her, trying to sound normal.

She covertly glanced around and murmured. “Is it about what happened with Gearshock?”

“Partially.” He said, which was true in a way. Jazz had personally requested that the mech be moved from the Enforcer HQ to a safehouse just in case somebot was actually gunning for him. Whether it be Prowl for money or somebot from the drug ring for the information leak. “We still need t’ see if tha’ info ‘e gave us is accurate.”

Crossfire frowned. “Part of me sort of hopes he was just blowing smoke out of his exhaust, but from
the way he was acting…”

“‘E was too afraid t’ be givin’ false information.” Jazz finished.

“Exactly.” She said grimly.

Jazz sighed, leaning back in his chair. “We’ve got our informants puttin’ out feelers for anythin’ relatin’ to it an’ until they get back t’ us, we got nothin’ t’ go on.”

Crossfire’s engine grumbled tetchily. “I’m going to put in another stake-out request to the Chief. I hate sitting on my aft and doing nothing.”

“Tha’ makes two o’ us.” Jazz agreed. His gaze fell back on his desk drawer and his spark gave a twinge. He grimaced and rubbed his chestplates.

“Are you hurt? You’ve been doing that all day.” Crossfire said optics keen and worried.

Jazz dropped his servo to his side and gave her what he hoped was a convincing smile. “I’m fine, ‘Fire. Nothin’ t’ worry abou’.”

She scrutinized him, unconvinced, but let it drop. She started to gather up her things and made the offer of after work energon. It was on the tip of his glossa to accept, but he hesitated. He knew he wasn’t going to be good company and they’d just end up talking about the case like they’d done the past two evenings rather than relaxing like they were supposed to.

“Not t’nite ‘Fire. I’ve got… plans.”

Her doorwings flicked, though she kept her voice low. “Another date? Is that why your helm’s been in the atmosphere?”

Jazz held back a wince and said, “Somethin’ like tha’.”

“Just be careful.”

“I will be.”

He would write the rejection letter tonight and send it off with the horn adornment tomorrow. For now the adornment could stay where it had been for cycles, safely locked away in the desk drawer.

After bidding the officers left at the station a good dark-cycle, Jazz made his way home. He stood at the entrance after shutting the door feeling restless for a few breems. He knew the reason why: just because he’d made up his processor to write the letter didn’t mean he wanted to do it.

Jazz surveyed his tiny studio apartment with a small frown. He’d not taken the time in the past few cycles to clean, preferring to throw himself into work to distract himself. Not that there was a huge expanse to clean. The door opened into the “living space”. Case files laid on the the low table in front of the ancient creaky couch. Beyond the couch was the kitchen along the back wall. Pots filled the sink. On the other side of the door was a half-wall partition that also doubled as a shelf which held various knick-knacks as well as his vid-screen. Behind the partition was his berth, half concealed under untidy covers. The last corner was walled in to form the small washracks.

It wasn’t much, but then again, he hadn’t gotten this place with long-term habitation in mind. At least he had a nice view. Three large windows ran the length of the living space wall. The glittering blooms given to him be the Crystalspires’ adorned the middle window.
He sighed and set about decluttering. He put the case files on the shelves, and then made his berth. He tackled the pots next; there were only a few and he got them done quickly. Lastly, he measured and mixed a fresh batch of growth material and carefully filled the crystals’ vases. They lit up the windowsill as the crystals absorbed the minerals.

Thusly out excuses to procrastinate, Jazz pulled out a clean datapad and sat down on the couch. He took in a fortifying vent before starting to type.

_To the Viscount of Crystalspire,_
_I regret to inform you that I cannot accept your overtures for courting._

No, no. That sounded way too formal. Like he was writing a report on somebot’s death. He erased the sentence and tried again.

_To the Viscount of Crystalspire,_
_While I have enjoyed our time together, I cannot in good faith continue our correspondence. Our ideologies differ too much and I can only see this relationship ending poorly in the future._

No… just, no. He deleted the last line.

_To the Viscount of Crystalspire,_
_While I have enjoyed our time together, I cannot in good faith continue our correspondence. I truly wish the best for you and your ward. And I thank you for the amazing things you have shown me. Enclosed, you will find the gifted horn adornment. May you find somebot worthy of it and of you._
_Jazz_

Jazz leaned back on the couch with a frown, studying the words over and over. He’d left out his title on purpose. There was no reason to possibly needle the noble with the mention of his occupation.

_His digits lifted of their own accord and typed a last post script._

_Prowl,_
_I wish things could have been different._

His spark surged painfully and he tossed the datapad away from him. It clattered somewhere in the kitchen. He put his helm in his servos with a soft distressed whimper.

_I’m acting like a love-sick youngling. He thought uncharitably._

He wanted to call his carrier, but a quick check of his chronometer put an end to the idea. Polyhex was several joors ahead of Praxus. His carrier was likely already deep in recharge by this point and Jazz didn’t want to wake him unnecessarily. He could make time to call tomorrow.

Jazz switched on his vid-screen and flipped around the networks aimlessly until he found a mindless documentary on the Sonic Canyons. He let the narrator’s voice wash over him and nearly fell into recharge on the couch.

A set of precise knocks on his door startled him from his light doze. He frowned in confusion. Who could be calling on him? Crossfire would have just commed. Maybe it was his landlord?

“A jus’ a breem.” He yelled to whoever it was. He rolled himself up off the couch, turning off the vid-screen. A quick stretch worked the kinks out of his cables from the prolonged awkward couch-sprawl before he reached the door.

Of all the bots that could have been on the other side of the door the very last one that Jazz expected was the Viscount of Crystalspire. He stared at the black and white Praxian in surprise for a klik.
Then his traitorous mouth opened and blurted out, “Prowl, wha’ are ya doin’ here?”

The mech inclined his helm, still managing to look regal even in the hallway of a low-rent apartment complex. “Jazz. May I come in?”

“Oh, uh, yeah.” Jazz stepped back and opened the door wide enough for his unexpected guest to enter. Had any of his neighbors seen the noble? It would surely set all their glossas wagging. As if he needed more “mech-sparrows” in his life. As Prowl entered and looked around the studio apartment, he suddenly was aware of the cramped space and bare accommodations.

He was also acutely aware of the freshly glowing growth liquid in the two crystal bouquets on the windowsill as Prowl stared at them.

Was the Viscount angry? Did he come here to have some sort of last word? It was so difficult to read him. He didn’t seem upset. In fact, it seemed as if the Praxian didn’t really know what to say now that he’d gotten into the room. Jazz broke the slightly awkward silence. “Would ya… like some energon? I don’ have anythin’ fancy, but I’ve got some bismuth sprinkles.”

Prowl’s optics flickered, surprised. And Jazz still took a small measure of pride in being able to wrong-pede the mech.

“…Yes. I… thank you for your hospitality.”

Jazz inclined his helm to the couch as he moved to the kitchen. “Have a seat. It’ll be jus’ a moment.”

He heard Prowl sit on one of squeaky springs as he set some mid-grade to warm and hid a smile. Any amusement faded as his optics caught sight of the datapad with the rejection letter from where it had half-slid under the cabinets. Now would have been the perfect time to give it to Prowl… if Jazz hadn’t left the horn adornment at work. There was no way he could have predicted that Prowl would come to his apartment, but Jazz silently cursed his luck anyway. He watched the heating energon for a few moments before breaking the silence once again.

“So, wha’ brings ya here?” He asked over his shoulder.

He could hear the mech shifting. “You gave me quite a bit to think about after our last conversation.” Prowl said softly. “While it may not have ended so pleasantly, it did bring to light several uncomfortable… truths.”

“Oh?” Jazz said neutrally, busying himself by opening cabinets to retrieve the bismuth. He stilled in shock at the next words out of Prowl’s mouth.

“…You were right. I was not allowing you to get as close to me as I was to you. I was attempting to dazzle you into perhaps… ignoring some of my flaws. I had not realized how like my sire I had become regarding relationships. It was a bit of an unwelcome awakening to have it pointed out to me so plainly, I suppose.”

“Statin’ things plainly is somethin’ I happen t’ be good at.” Jazz said, stubbornly focusing on the fuel as he poured it into two glasses and added the bismuth on top.

“So I’ve discovered.” Was that amusement? It was hard to tell.

With nothing left as a distraction, Jazz mentally steeled himself and turned to face the Praxian. Prowl had an unsure expression on his face. It must have been a novel experience for the mech, not to be in control of the situation between them, but Jazz wasn’t feeling particularly sympathetic. The visored mech carried the two glasses over to where he sat and offered one before taking a seat on the other
end of the couch. There was no telling what Prowl thought of the undoubtedly sub-par fuel as he sipped it politely.

Silence stretched between them. Jazz made no effort to break it this time. Prowl had come to him and Jazz had let him in. Let the Praxian make the next move now.

After a few breems Prowl set down the glass on the low table and reset his vocalizer. “I know you are familiar with some of my family’s history. I am sure you must have concluded that my creators’ marriage was not a happy one.”

Jazz put his nearly empty glass down as well. “Yeah I… picked up on tha’.”

Prowl’s sensor panels flickered uncomfortably. “My sire and carrier would argue when they thought they didn’t have an audience. Something she always said was that she didn’t really know him. That she’d fallen in love with a stranger.”

Jazz mentally winced at the parallel. “I’m sorry.”

“No, the apology is mine to make. I…” Prowl was uncharacteristically hesitant. He vented out a sigh and then locked gazes with Jazz. “I wish to share something with you. Something I have never told anybot. To prove to you that I am serious.”

The visored mech felt as if he were balancing on the edge of a precipice. “…I’m listening, Prowl.”

It took the Praxian a moment to speak. His sensor panels flexed oddly, in a way Jazz had never seen before. “I watched my carrier die.”

Horror froze Jazz’s circuits for a klik. “Wha’...?”

“My creators’ fights would often spill into the physical; it seemed to be the only way for my sire to win. I witnessed many of them. I learned to embody my namesake on those cycles. But on that cycle, it was the worst I had ever seen them. I don’t know what words were exchange between them, just that it ended with my sire throwing my carrier down the stairs. I can still remember her crumpled frame on the stairwell landing. His optics were so empty… I tried to go to her, but he caught one of my doorwings. Told me that she was gone. Told me if I ever told anybot, he would kill me… or Barricade.”

Unable to stop himself, Jazz reached for Prowl’s servo. His field extended out comfortingly. “Oh Prowl…”

The Praxian accepted the offered contact, turning his servo in Jazz’s to clasp it. The edges of their fields meshed. Prowl’s felt stoic with an undercurrent of old pain. “It was that cycle that I swore to myself that no bot would ever harm my loved ones again. I’ve spent my life ensuring it. Bribing, threatening, becoming something I hated…”

But did that include blackmail and murder?

Jazz pulled his EMF back gently. “And yar sire’s disappearance?”

Prowl turned his face away for a klik. When he looked back, his optics were inscrutable. “Another loss, but not one I mourned.”

“Because of yar carrier?”

“I can’t talk about it.” Prowl squeezed his servo imploringly. “Please don’t ask. This is difficult enough for me as it is.”
Can’t… or won’t? Jazz though, but held his glossa. He just nodded to encourage Prowl to continue.

“I spent so many vorns “fighting” to protect my family, but I was always isolated. I wished to shield Bluestreak from the darkness of life. Even Smokescreen and Barricade only saw me as “the Viscount” most of the time. And then you came along, by chance, with your morality and your honesty and your fearlessness.”

The visored mech felt strangely winded. “I ain’t th’ only mech with those traits in Praxus. I’m nothin’ special.”

Prowl leaned toward him earnestly. “But you are. You were the first bot in a very long time who treated me like a mech. That alone was enough to spark my curiosity. But then… then you played for me. I could see that it was your true calling and yet you had given it up to take on a profession for the greater good. Something about your spirit, your mettle, evoked me. I looked at you and I saw a counterpart. I had never felt that way about anybot. I do not believe in love at first sight, but after that dark-cycle at the Cobalt Lattice, I wanted to see more of you.”

Prowl’s thumb tentatively started to stroke the side of Jazz’s servo. “Fortunately for me, I had Bluestreak asking after you and I used it as an excuse to see you again. It pains me to admit that I may have been testing you at the Gardens. Seeing just how far I could push. But you defied all of my expectations and I found myself, to use the colloquial term, smitten.”

Jazz scoffed lightly. “I ain’t th’ paragon o’ virtue ya think I am, Prowl.”

“What makes you say that?” He asked.

Jazz looked away, frowning.

Well, “in for a shinax,” as they say…

“I came very close t’ fallin’ in with wrong crowd growin’ up. If it hadn’t been for Officer Corona… I was gonna shoot th’ mech tha’ killed my sire. I stole a gun, stalked ‘im, nearly pulled th’ trigger. But Corona found me, took me home, didn’t yell at me. Jus’ stayed when my carrier and I needed ‘im. Both ‘e and ‘is mate became th’ kin we didn’ ‘ave.”

“I am very grateful to him, then. But why tell me this?”

“Trust is a two way street, mech. Can’t expect some without givin’ a little.”

“Very true.” Prowl tilted his helm consideringly with an enigmatic smile. “How strange it is that we each seem to be what the other could have become. There’s something… undeniable about that connection.”

Prowl cupped the visored mech’s cheekridge with a gentle servo. “Jazz, you know what is said about me in rumor and whispers. I am not asking you to forget those, but I am asking you for a chance. If you would allow it, I should like to try again.”

This was such a bad idea… But Prowl was trying.

“I haven’ given ya back th’ horn adornment yet, have I.” He said rhetorically. “Th’ consideration orn ends in three and a half decacycles. Wha’ did ya have in mind?”

The genuine smile Prowl gave him made warmth bloom in his chest. “Jazz, would you please do me the honor of joining me for a night at the opera in two cycle’s time? Just the two of us. The Praxus Opera Company is putting on a production of "The Seeker of Iacon" and I would very much like to
see it with you.”

“I’d love to… Uh, ya’re not gonna buy out th’ theater or somethin’ like tha’, are ya?”

Prowl actually chuckled. “I find that there is a certain energy that performers get from having an audience and I would not cheapen their performance by denying them that. However, I trust you would not be opposed to private box seats?”

“I think I can handle tha’.” Jazz tilted his helm consideringly, leaning into Prowl’s servo with a small smile playing on his derrmas. “So, ya like music and crystals. What else do ya like?”

Prowl’s optics turned contemplative. “No bot has ever bother to ask me that before. I like… strategy games, I suppose.”

“Well, maybe we can schedule some time t’ play one.”

“I would like that.”

Jazz’s smile slipped and he turned solemn. “Prowl, ya know I ‘ave t’ ask b’fore we try again. Do ya ‘ave anythin’ t’ do with th’ Noss ring?”

To his credit, the Praxian didn’t look offended by the question. “No. I meant what I said when I called it an infection. I might turn a blind optic to off-track racing, but this drug is a danger. I have my own trusted mech looking into it.”

“Why not help th’ Enforcers directly? Ya ‘ave th’ influence.” Jazz queried, irritation creeping into his tone.

“There’s only so much I can do before certain involvements come to the fore that put my family at risk. Should something be found that the Enforcers needed to be aware of, I would make sure the information found its way to their servos.”

The irritation mellowed a bit. Okay… Jazz could accept that for now. It still wasn’t great, but acceptable. It was on his processor to ask Prowl more questions about what else he might be involved in, but Jazz held his glossa.

_Sparkling steps. Don’t push too hard yet._

“May I ask you something now?” Prowl requested.

“Sure?” Jazz hazarded.

The Praxian moved his servo from Jazz’s cheekridge and clasped both Jazz’s servos in his own. “Did you mean what you said about falling in love with me?”

_Slag, of course he remembered that._

“Ya said it yarself; it’s hard to ignore th’… connection we ‘ave.” Jazz knew he was dodging the question, but Prowl seemed to understand what he wasn’t saying. Especially if that satisfied smile was anything to go by. But wait… did that mean that Prowl felt the same way?

The answer to that appeared to be a resounding yes as the Praxian brought Jazz’s servos to his derrmas, gently kissing the digits. His field pressed against Jazz’s warmly, his doorwings angled forward slightly with the Polyhexian as their focus.

_I… need to say something or I’m gonna do something real stupid._
“It’s, uh gettin’ late.” Jazz murmured, loud in the room. “Ya should probably head home… th’ roads can be dangerous in th’ dark-cycle.”

Prowl gave him a knowing look. “Do you want me to leave?”

“Please don’ ask me tha’.” Jazz entreated. He turned off his optical feed to escape those shrewd optics. The soft press of dermas to his forehelm startled him into turning his visor back on.

Prowl pulled back, engine purring soothingly. “I want you to know I am serious, Jazz, but I won’t take anything you’re not willing to give. I will come pick you up for the opera two cycles from now at the beginning of the dark-cycle. The offer to come to the estate still stands.”

The Praxian stood up, bringing Jazz with him by their still connected servos. He gave Jazz’s digits one last brushed kiss. “Have a good dark-cycle and recharge well.”

“Ya too.” Jazz said weakly.

The noble smiled and left.

Jazz spent a not insignificant amount of time leaning against the closed door wondering what the frag just happened. Every place Prowl’s dermas had touched tingled. In some ways Jazz felt like he was back at square one, while in others he felt as if he’d just gained a great amount of ground.

He finally convinced himself to move and cleaned up the dirtied glasses on autopilot. Then he climbed into his berth and stared at the ceiling. It suddenly occurred to him that they were about to have a very public date for the first time. Rumor was one thing, but Jazz wasn’t sure how the noble population was going to react to the “Lord” of Praxus openly showing interest in a commoner. Considering how Prowl’s adoption of Bluestreak went, probably not well, but they’d be too cowed to make a big fuss about it. At least he hoped.

Jazz sighed, turning over on his berth so he could see his crystals. He mulled over their short conversation about the Noss ring, letting his processor spin and turn. Alright, so if he was telling the truth, Prowl hadn’t started the drug trade, but he was invested in figuring out where it was coming from. Of course, the question then was: if Prowl hadn’t sanctioned it, how had it gotten started in the first place? Prowl seemed to have optics all over Praxus, and he most definitely would have shut such a thing down if he’d know about it. So, why hadn’t he known about it?

He’d said his family would be at risk if “certain involvements” were discovered. Praxus was a big city. Too big for one mech to oversee everything. What if he’d entrusted them with running certain operations. Not Bluestreak, of course, but the others…

Okay, okay, he needed to slow down. He was getting ahead of himself in conspiracy theories. But something was nagging at his processor. He got up and walked around the partition to get to the shelves.

Jazz shuffled through the case files for the illegal racing circuit. He found the datapad with the image captures that the Enforcers managed to get of some of the participants. He flipped through them, absently reviewing the notes he and Crossfire had made about which bots were suspected racers and which were possible sponsors. Most of the pictures were poor quality, taken quickly before the drones were discovered and taken out. But after looking through several Jazz found the one he was searching for, enlarging and enhancing it until he could make out one specific mech.

With a sinking feeling in his fuel pump he quickly pulled up the profile he’d saved from the Hall of Records and identified a familiar looking black and silver form.
Frag my life.
Jazz had not recharged well. Thoughts had circled round and round his processor, disturbing him and
keeping him from settling enough to reach flux-land. He went into HQ the next light-cycle feeling
both tired and wired. His field was saturated with fatigue, but he was also nearly vibrating with the
need to confide his suspicions with Crossfire.

But not in the building. It was too dangerous.

Fortunately, they were scheduled for a patrol today.

“Mornin’ ‘Fire,’” he said with forced enthusiasm as he neared their shared desk. “We’d better get a
move on. Time t’ go out int’ th’ world t’ do our thing.”

The femme opticked him skeptically. Of the two of them, she was the morning bot. “You’re awfully
cheerful. Feeling better?”

“Yes.” He assured. “Jus’ happy.” He finally got close enough to extend his field to let her feel his
tired/anxious/keeness.

Her sensor panels twitched once with surprise before she got them under control. She affected a
grumpy expression and stood. “Are you going to be disgustingly chipper for our whole patrol?”

“Maaaybe.” Jazz sang annoyingly.

“Slagger.” She responded fondly.

She waited until they had left and driven several blocks away before opening the comm. between
them. :Spill. Now.: The words that had been tumbling around and around his processor all dark-cycle started to come
tumbling out.

:Okay… so I was talkin’ t’ Pr- the Viscount last night an’ somethin’ ‘e said made me start thinkin’.
‘E didn’ admit t’ anythin’, o’ course, but ‘e said tha’ ‘e ‘ad somebot lookin’ int’ the Noss ring. An’
‘elpin’ th’ investigation might put ‘is family at risk… So, I don’ think th’ Viscount knows anythin’
abou’ th’ Noss ring. I know ‘e’s supposed t’ be the crime “Lord” o’ Praxus, but this city is too big for
one mech t’ manage. Even one as well connected as Prowl. But ‘e ‘as family, mechs ‘e trusts above all others. Wha’ if ‘e’s placed them in charge o’ th’ runnin’ o’ certain things in th’ city so he doesn’t ‘ave t’ be? But maybe they still answer t’ ‘im.

‘Is nephew, Smokescreen, is a known gambler, righ’?. ‘E’s been caught at an illegal den in th’ past. Wha’ if Prowl put ‘im in charge o’ the city’s gamblin’ dens, both legal and illegal? But maybe now ‘e’s bein’ far more careful not t’ be caught at th’ latter. Barricade, ‘is brother, is a known racer… Wha’ if ‘e’s in charge o’ th’ racin’ circuits? Wha’ if Barricade is th’ mech Prowl’s got lookin’ int’ th’ drugs, an’ ‘e knows somethin’ an’ isn’t tellin’ ‘is brother?:

:He’d be suicidal: Crossfire said flatly. They paused at a light.

:Bu’ would ‘e? If there was any mech in th’ city tha’ could defy Prowl without fear o’ repercussion, it would be ‘is brother, wouldn’ it?:

Jazz recalled the comm. call he’d overheard. What if it had been about that? They had seemed so antagonistic.

Crossfire settled on her tires as they idled. He could almost see the frown on her hidden faceplates. She didn’t say anything until the light changed and they started moving again.

:Do you have any proof?:

:I think I ID’ed Barricade in a holo-capture taken by one o’ our drones. It was blurry… bu’ I’m pretty sure. I didn’ want t’ say anythin’ at HQ b’cause I think somebot there is feedin’ Prowl information. An’ if we got a leak like tha’ th’ info could get out to other bots…: Jazz paused and then said chagrined. :O’ course, tha’ might jus’ be paranoia talkin’. I didn’ recharge too well last night.: Jazz recalled the comm. call he’d overheard. What if it had been about that? They had seemed so antagonistic.

Crossfire hummed, consideringly. “It’s certainly compelling. The problem is, trying to prove it is going to be tricky. And possibly dangerous. Especially for you. I don’t want you to get hurt.: Jazz paused and then said chagrined. :O’ course, tha’ might jus’ be paranoia talkin’. I didn’ recharge too well last night.: Jazz asked worriedly.

Crossfire hummed, consideringly. “It’s certainly compelling. The problem is, trying to prove it is going to be tricky. And possibly dangerous. Especially for you. I don’t want you to get hurt.: Jazz asked worriedly.

:No, no, I get it.: Crossfire hastened to assure. :I’ve suspected some sort of internal agent for a while.: Jazz asked worriedly.

:Ya ‘ave?:

:Yeah.: She sounded grim. :And I’d be willing to bet a large sum of shinax that if we compared “suspect” lists they’d be very similar.: Jazz asked worriedly.

:Frag… so ya think I’m righ’? I’m not jus’ spinnin’ conspiracy theories up in my processor.: Jazz asked worriedly.

Crossfire hummed, consideringly. “It’s certainly compelling. The problem is, trying to prove it is going to be tricky. And possibly dangerous. Especially for you. I don’t want you to get hurt.: Jazz hummed, consideringly. “It’s certainly compelling. The problem is, trying to prove it is going to be tricky. And possibly dangerous. Especially for you. I don’t want you to get hurt.: Jazz asked worriedly.

:I don’ think Prowl’s gonna hurt me.: Jazz asked worriedly.

:He might not, but somebot else might! You’re high profile now, Jazz. And I still trust the “Lord” of Praxus about as far as I can throw him!: Jazz asked worriedly.

:This is a bad time t’ tell ya I ‘ave a date with ‘im tomorrow, isn’t it?: Jazz asked worriedly.

:Jazz!: Jazz asked worriedly.

:I was going t’ call it off, okay?: He said defensively. :I had written th’ letter an’ everythin’, but then he came t’ me. An’, Primus, he was… he was tryin’, alright? He reached out t’ me an’ I jus’ wanted t’ give ‘im th’ chance. Maybe tha’ makes me a sucker fo’ a sob story, bu’ ‘e opened up t’ me an’ I couldn’ jus’ throw tha’ back in ‘is faceplates. ‘E’s gone through so much pain t’ make ‘im th’ way ‘e is.: Jazz asked worriedly.
Shock permeated her EMF then shifted to contemplation as it withdrew. They drove silently side by side for a little while. Surprisingly, Crossfire spoke back up first.

:So… where are you going on your date?:

The sudden conversation shift threw Jazz for a loop for a klik. :Uh, the opera. We’re goin’ t’ see Th’ Seeker o’ Iacon… Why do ya ask?:

She sighed in exasperation, but when she extended her field to him it was warm. :Look, I may not like this or think it’s a good idea, but I support you. Whatever stupidity you get into, I’ve got your backplates, alright? Meanwhile, give me some time to think about your theory and we can try to come up with a plan.:  

What had he done to deserve the best kith?

:Yar th’ best, ya know tha’?:

:I’m aware.: She said smugly.

The rest of the cycle passed normally enough. Jazz took the extra care he always did to assure his reports were in order before his cycle off. He wondered if Prowl had picked the cycle of their date to coincide with his cycle off on purpose or if it was coincidence. It really didn’t matter that much, he supposed. The probability of the Viscount knowing his schedule didn’t bother him as much as it should have. Anyway, having the extra time meant he could prepare properly.

Jazz was fairly certain this date was going to be another “wax and polish” event, but he wasn’t sure what exactly he was supposed to do. For their first dinner together they had not been dating. Also they’d been alone and away from the scrutiny of other optics. Was there some sort of extra thing he was supposed to do for a night at the opera? Jazz had done a quick search while on his lunch break for Praxian formal wear and found himself confused by the dizzying array of cloaks and drapes and meshes. Just how much fabric was a mech supposed to wear? Some of the fashionable layering looked gaudy and complicated.

And expensive.

He called his carrier as soon as he got home.

Dolce answered promptly. :'Ello Jazzy. Everythin’ goin’ alright?:

:Hey ‘Ri. I need some advice, actually…:

:Well, go on. Don’ leave me in suspense.: Dolce teased lightly.

:We’re goin’ t’ th’ opera, uh- me an’ Prowl, I mean. I know I’m supposed t’ polish up fancy fo’ this place, bu’ the Praxian idea o’ dressin’ up is wrappin’ themselves in meshes ‘til ya can barely see their platin’. I don’ think I can afford wha’ it takes t’ look like one o’ them.:  

:So don’: Dolce said simply.

:Huh?:

:Yar not Praxian, sweetlin’, so ya don’ need t’ abide by their rule o’ style. Show ‘em somethin’ completely different. Jus’ be ya, an’ be proud. Tha’s all ya can do.:
Well… that made sense now that he thought about it. And Polyhexian formal wear was much easier. Or, well, not easier, but at least he was used to it. They would stencil complex designs on their plating in fluorescent or glittering paint. Certain placements meant certain things, though designs were left up to personal aesthetics. It was almost a sort of secret language in unto itself.

Prowl would probably love that.

Jazz smiled, feeling his cables relaxing. :I guess I was overthinkin’ it. Thanks ‘Ri.: Affection suffused Dolce’s voice. :Tha’s wha’ I’m ‘ere fo’, Jazzy. Now, do ya need ‘elp plannin’ out yar placements? Maybe somethin’ on yar backplates fo’ loyalty. Oh an’ don’ forget yar forearm fo’ bravery.: His voice turned sly. :An’ maybe a little secret glyph on yar neck t’ let ‘em know yar passionate.: Jazz laughed half amused and half embarrassed. :I think I can figure out my own positions, ‘Ri. I jus’ don’ know if th’ salons here will ‘ave th’ equipment t’ do it righ’: Dolce tsked dismissively. :Any salon worth its name will be able t’ stencil ya. Though th’ ones in Praxus might need some direction t’ get th’ nuances righ’. An’ they may look at ya a little funny.: :Ain’t like I’m not used t’ it.: Jazz sighed. :Somebot been givin’ ya trouble?: He could almost hear his carrier’s plating fluffing out in imagined offence. :Naw. I’m jus’ funny lookin’ t’ most o’ th’ Praxians, tha’s all.: Jazz soothed. Dolce huffed. :Yar a beautiful young mech an’ they’re all blind.: :I think ya might be a little biased, ‘Ri.: Jazz remarked, warmth filling his spark. :Tha’ beau o’ yars better be tellin’ ya th’ same.: His carrier declared. :‘E is, isn’t ‘e? I’ll set ‘em straight if ‘e ain’t!: As amusing as the mental image of his carrier telling off the “Lord” of Praxus was, Jazz flushed with heat as he remembered Prowl complimenting him on his appearance the very first time they met. :Yeah,: he said softly. :‘E does.: Dolce sounded self-satisfied. :Good. Now, I’m givin’ ya some extra shinax t’ make sure th’ salon gets it righ’: Aghast, Jazz protested, :‘Ri ya don’ need t’ do tha’! Ya should spend yar money on yarself.: :Too late!: he said gleefully. :I already transferred it. Ya never let me spoil ya anymore. I gotta sneak it in when I can.: They talked for another joor or so until his carrier had to get ready for recharge. Then Jazz pulled out a clean datapad to brainstorm about the designs he was going to wear.

Early the next cycle Jazz went back to the salon in the Resin District that he’d visited the first time. The glass fronted building was mostly empty at this time of the cycle. The beauticians remembered him and tittered amongst themselves delightedly when Jazz said he was attending another upper class function. He presented Highlight, the mech that had helped him the last time, with the datapad containing the designs he wanted and instructions on where to put them.
Jazz happily fell into the self denial that he totally had not spent way too much time agonizing and continually changing his processor over them the night before. After a quick glance through the datapad, Highlight grabbed two more bots to help him. And though Jazz did get a couple of nonplussed looks, they happily went to work on his requested service. It was nice to get pampered, though Jazz hadn’t planned on coming back to the salon so soon.

They first took him in for a full cleanse to remove any dirt that might interfere with the new paint. They did a few touch ups here and there where the rigours of his light-cycle job had worn away their work from a few decacycles ago.

He didn’t let the coyly veiled questions about his love life bother him, nor did he give the curious beauticians much information. Random mechs knowing he was being courted by the Viscount unfortunately didn’t surprise him any more.

He sat obligingly still as they as they used glitter infused paint to replicate the pictured swoops and swirls of the traditional Polyhexian patterns on his plating. The sparkle would still be noticeable, but more far more subtle than the fluorescent paint. He wouldn’t be glowing in the darkened theater. One design stretched the length of his forearm, another adorned his left shoulder pauldron, and one curled enticingly around his outer thigh. Then, depending on where they were on his plating, the beauticians outlined the designs either with a slightly darker shade of white or a dark gray so the glittering patterns would look embossed against the white and black of Jazz’s paint.

Jazz had to concentrate on tamping down on the awkwardness that wanted to flush through his field as they painted non-traditional chevrons spiralling up his audial horns. He really didn’t want to have to explain to the beauticians that his embarrassment stemmed from the fact that he’d picked the pattern as a subtle acknowledgement of the mech courting him.

The last design was arguably the most delicate. Highlight took nearly a joor to painstakingly etch a stylized Polyhexian glyph for music onto the right side of his neck.

After a thorough check in the mirror to make sure the patterns and glyphs were correct, Jazz approved. The beauticians then lightly sprayed the designs with a temporary clear coat sealant and led him gingerly to the drying booth, instructing him to stand with his arms outstretched. He nearly fell into recharge standing up as the warm air gently washed over him from all sides.

Jazz did briefly fall into recharge when the beauticians laid him on the soft reclined chair for them to rub various waxes and polishes onto his plating.

Okay… he could admit that this could easily become something of a guilty pleasure.

The good feelings lasted until Jazz tried to pay.

“We’ve already charged it to the Viscount’s account.” Highlight said with a smile.

A jolt of shock ran through Jazz’s systems. “Wha’?”

Highlight’s smile faltered for just a flicker. “Oh, we received a call a few cycles ago that any services you requested should be billed to the Viscount. Our manager spoke with the mech, himself. He was very insistent.”

Of course he was.

“I just think it’s so sweet.” Highlight said unexpectedly.

Jazz ire was derailed at the comment. “Sweet?”
“How he’s taking care of you. It’s so romantic.” The beautician said dreamily.

“Huh.” Jazz murmured thoughtfully. Romantic... well from the Praxian perspective it probably was. Prowl knew Jazz didn’t want things, so doing something like this was probably Prowl’s roundabout way of spoiling him and “staking a claim” as it were. If that truly was the case then...

“I suppose it is.” Jazz said giving Highlight a smile. Highlight’s grin turned megawatt again and he pulled out a large steel-silk shawl.

“Here, this is compliments of the salon. It’ll protect your plating until you’re ready to go out.”

“Tha’s not really necessary.” Jazz protested.

Highlight’s optics twinkled with mischief. “It’s for us, really. We don’t want our work to get messed up before it can be seen by the nobles. Please take it? And try not to transform for a few joors.”

Jazz couldn’t really say no to that. He took the soft mesh and wrapped the shawl around himself, tucking it carefully around his audial horns. That caused another wave of pleased chatter from the beauticians and Jazz withheld a chagrined sigh. He merely drummed up a smile and waved as he left the salon.

The appointment had taken longer than he expected; it was now just after mid cycle. He decided to stop at the store to pick up a packet of additives. No one spared him much of a glance. Wearing meshes to protect a newly painted finish was fairly common and the fabric covered all of the glittering markings. Plus, his was a familiar face in this particular store.

As he was reaching for the desired fuel, a servo clamped onto his wrist over the mesh. Jazz startled and immediately tried to pull out of the unrelenting grip. He looked over to see that the servo belonged to a Praxian with dark gray and yellow plating and red optics. The mech smiled charmingly at him and said in an oily voice, “Officer, we should talk.”

“Let go o’ me, and I’d be ‘appy t’ chat.” Jazz responded carefully.

The mech’s smile widened, though he made no move to release the visored mech. “Let’s just go outside, yeah?”

Jazz frowned and covertly readied a mag-pulse in his other servo. He needed to get to a more open area before he sent the mech sprawling to minimize property damage. “Let. Go.”

The mech’s optics took on a worrying gleam and he opened his mouth to reply, but was cut off by a golden colored servo landing with an audible clang on his gray shoulder pauldron. The mech turned with a snarl only to have it die in his throat as a whimper. Sunstreaker loomed over them and growled out. “Walk away. Now.”

The mech quickly let go of Jazz’s wrist and scurried away. They both watched him go until he was out of the store. Then Jazz turned to the golden Kaonite.

“How’s the working out? Still ‘elpin’ wha’ ya’ doin’ here?” The visored mech glanced around to see if the other twin and their charge were somewhere in sight.

“Shopping.” He answered succinctly.

“Shoppin’?” Jazz parroted sardonically. “By yarsel’?”

Sunstreaker smirked. “Blue and Sides are at home. I prefer the shops in this part of town rather than
having to deal with those waspy, noble afts in the Garden Square.”

Jazz crossed his arms, the steel-silk making a soft rustling sound. “So ya jus’ ‘appened t’ be at th’ righ’ place at th’ righ’ time.”

“Of course.” Sunstreaker’s smirk was still in place.

“Thought ya were Bluestreak’s guardian.”

“I am. He’s very fond of you.”

The two of them stared at each other in silent challenge for a moment until Jazz let out an exasperated snort and turned back to the shelf to grab the additives. He walked to the checkout, acutely aware of his new Kaonite shadow.

It made Jazz ridiculously happy when the cashier took his money for the additives, though he frowned when the femme shot Sunstreaker a frightened glance. However when Jazz turned to look at the mech, he wasn’t doing anything except standing behind him.

The visored mech just shook his helm and thanked the femme, deciding the best course of action would be to leave and take his intimidating guard hound with him.

Sunstreaker fell in step with him as they walked down the sidewalk.

“So, tha’ mech… Wha’ was tha’ about?”

Sunstreaker shrugged. “Some sleeze trying to take advantage? Though whether it was because you know his Lordship or because you look like a supermodel is debatable.” The mech gave him an appreciative once over. “Might have to give your salon a visit.”

Jazz pulled the shawl more firmly around his shoulders self-consciously.

“I’m sure they’ll be ‘appy t’ ‘ave yar patronage.” Jazz said dryly.

The gold mech snickered, but said nothing else, merely followed along next to Jazz for the whole length of his walk home. When they reached his apartment building the Kaonite gave the visored mech a courteous helm nod and continued to walk until he disappeared around the corner. Jazz made a conscience effort to shake down his ruffled plating and headed inside.

He spent the latter half of the cycle wrapped up in the shawl on the couch as he sipped some iron laced energon and reviewed case files. Though he’d read through them many, many times already, this time he scoured them for any mention of a mech that fit Barricade’s description at the events themselves. If he could find evidence for at least three separate occasions, he would have enough to request a meeting. Once was happenstance, twice was coincidence, three times was a pattern.

So concentrated was he that the precise knocks to his door nearly had him flailing off the couch like a startled felida. A quick check of his chronometer told him that, yes, the time had passed without his notice and, yes, that was probably Prowl.

Jazz sighed and let the shawl slip off his shoulder pauldrons to pool around him on the couch as he got up. He didn’t want to, but the first thing he was going to have to do was confront Prowl about Sunstreaker.

It was no less jarring to see Prowl standing in the hallway this time, especially with his plating gleaming with new polish and accented with a fashionable jet-black circle cape. He also wore a
scarlet sash that matched a pair of hanging sleeves that had been attached under his shoulder pauldrons and around his wrists which hung down framing his arms. He looked much better than any of the fashion plates Jazz had perused.

It took a klik for Jazz to find his voice.

“Ya look great.”

Prowl seemed to be entranced by the sparkles coming off his audial horns, reaching up to run careful digits down the side of one. His servo hovered lower to brush the glittering mark on his neck.

“What’s all this?” He asked, a note of admiration in his voice.

“Polyhexian formal wear… I ‘ope ya don’ mind.”

“Mind?” That seemed to snap him out of whatever daze he’d been in. “Jazz, you’re stunning.”

He couldn’t stop the flush of bashful pride through his EMF that he knew the other could feel. Prowl’s field answered back with a swell of affection. The noble gallantly offered his arm.

“Shall we, then?”

Okay, the Praxian had bought himself some time… Jazz was going to enjoy this date first and then he was going to yell at Prowl for sticking a bodyguard on him.

There was another wave of emotion in Prowl’s field, this time desire, as Jazz stepped out into the hallway and the Praxian got to see the full range of the markings on his plating.

Prowl led him outside to a waiting transport. It was a sleek white with silver and red accents. The doors were richly accented by a silver and semi-precious stone inlay of the Crystalspire crest. The inside was plushly padded with black cushions. As he stepped into the transport, Jazz could see several pairs of curious optics peering out of windows at them and wondered if they recognized who they were looking at.

The transport rumbled smoothly forward as they got settled in.

“Are you looking forward to the performance?” Prowl asked.

“Yeah, I’ve never seen Th’ Seeker o’ Iacon. Have ya? Is it good?”

“I have not yet seen this company put on the production, but I do believe they will do it great justice.”

“Does it ‘ave a ’appy endin’?”

Prowl smiled at him. “You’ll just have to wait and see, won’t you?”

It didn’t take long to reach the theater. Jazz had seen the Sonorous Theater while on patrol, of course, but this was the first time he’d be going into it. The theater’s eccentric builder has modeled it after the temples of Kalis, complete with minarets, spherical domes, and interior decor even more lavish than its facade.

Prowl exited the transport and held out a servo to assist Jazz to do the same. Elegant and stately mechs and femmes were making their way into the ornate building. Jazz tamped down on the intimidation he felt, leaning his EMF into the steady confident one beside him as they walked into the huge overwhelming lobby. Bots parted hurriedly for them as they strolled through, some bowing or
bobbing curtsies. Excited whispers sprang up in their wake.

A set of stairs led up to a floor with several lounges and a ballroom where at least a score of Praxians were milling about with flutes of high grade. No space, furniture, or hardware escaped some sort of gilt, tile, or geometric design. Lounges, broom closets, and ballroom alike were all emblazoned with intricate plaster, bronze, and painted detail. Yet even with all its excessive ornamentation, the theater somehow retained a sense of tastefulness.

Prowl led him past the gilt and curious optics to a mech standing next to a heavy curtain. The mech said nothing, merely swept the curtain to the side with a bow, allowing the two of them to enter a small, private lounge. It connected to the private box where they’d be seated. Through it Jazz could see the huge auditorium. He let out a sigh as the curtain fell closed behind them.

“Tha’ was a little more stressful than I anticipated.”

Prowl’s field pressed into his apologetically. “Forgive me. I am so used to the stare of optics that it no longer bothers me. I didn’t think about how that might feel for you.”

“Ain’t yar fault they got nothin’ better t’ do with their time.” Jazz said sardonically.

Prowl chuckled and motioned to the box. “Come.”

The chairs in the box were plush without being overstuffed and definitely build with the comfort of a Praxian frame in mind. Jazz was very aware of the optics on him as Prowl guided him to sit in the throne-like chair. The private box already hosted a tray with freshly poured bubbling high grade.

The auditorium itself had a picturesque grandeur that bordered on the ridiculous. It was styled as indoor Kalisian courtyard with a holographic sky full of flickering stars and drifting clouds. A spectacular mesh canopy overhung the balcony seating. The stage curtains depicted a servo-stitched scene of the Sonic Canyons. The interior was a masterpiece of optical illusion. Vents and lighting catwalks were hidden from view by false beams, balconies, and tents. Virtually every practical feature was disguised with artistic fantasy.

“This is amazin’.” Jazz breathed as Prowl settled in the chair beside him.

Prowl offered him one of the flutes of high grade. “I’m glad you like it.”

Jazz’s spark fluttered and pulsed as they softly tapped their glasses together in a mute toast, small smiles playing over their dermas.

The lights dimmed and brightened twice to warn the crowd outside that the production was about to start.

A steady stream of bots filed in to fill the seats for a few breems and then the lights dimmed again. The orchestra started up a sweeping overture. Jazz felt a questing touch on the back of his servo from where it was on the chair arm. He turned it palm up and allowed Prowl to slip his servo into it.

The opera was set in the time of Solus Prime, back when Iacon was not yet the seat of imperial power and at war with Rodion. It opened with the Prime’s greatest general, a femme named Blaze, returning to the city from a skirmish along the border. Along the way she and her army stumbled across an injured seeker femme named Shadowbolt who had been shot down by a Rodion patrol. Jazz vaguely knew the story as it was based on a true one from history.

He admired how the actors had cleverly modded or hidden parts of their frames to make them look like other frame-types. Especially the “seeker”. That was really clever.
The first act revolved around the femmes falling in love with each other. Though both were reluctant to admit it. Blaze had been told by an oracle at a very young age that she would die on the battlefield and she did not wish to bring pain upon the one who would love her. Shadowbolt was harboring the secret that she was no mere seeker but actually one of the Princesses of Vos, trapped between what her spark wanted and the duty to her people. Still, through the act they drew closer and closer to one another. As this was happening, a subplot involving a treacherous commander wishing to take Blaze’s position grew more interesting. The act ended with a still-healing Shadowbolt singing an aria about yearning for Blaze and feeling lost in the “paradise” that was Iacon and what it could offer her.

During the intermission, the mech that had opened the curtain for them came in with a tray of fuel, serving them cold mid grade with thin flakes of nickel shaved on top.

“This come with th’ ticket price?” Jazz teased light-sparkedly when they’d been left alone.

Prowl quirked his dermas into a charming half-smile. “Merely a treat from the refreshment concessions that I enjoy. You do not mind that I took the liberty of ordering for you?”

“Naw, mech. Yar sharin’ somethin’ ya like with me. It’s… sweet o’ ya.”

Relief flickered through Prowl’s field and Jazz made sure to send a curl of appreciation across his own. They sipped their drinks in companionable silence for a few breems. The murmur of mechs and femmes talking below them was a muted backdrop of white noise.

The lights dimmed and brightened twice again to warn that intermission was almost over.

“Are you enjoying the opera so far?” Prowl asked.

“Yeah!” Jazz said enthusiastically. “Th’ music is great an’ I really want Blaze and Shadowbolt t’ get t’gether. They deserve happiness.”

“I agree.” Prowl’s optics had taken on that look that Jazz remembered from two cycles ago as they sat on the couch in his apartment. The Praxian grasped Jazz servo and brought it to his dermas.

Jazz felt winded and glossa-twisted. Fortunately for him, the lights dimmed fully again and the orchestra launched into the prelude for the second act. He gently, but firmly brought their linked servos down to the armrest of Prowl’s chair. He gave the Praxian a small smile and then turned his attention back to the stage.

In the second act, an orn had passed and Shadowbolt was finally fully healed, but unable to leave Iacon because of the danger posed by Rodion. The conflict with the commander came to a head and Blaze was nearly killed. This pushed the femmes to confess their love for one another, but just as they decided to bond, Rodion attacked Iacon with its full force. Blaze knew that this was when the prophecy of her deactivation would come to pass and she begged Shadowbolt to fly to freedom while the Rodion forces were occupied.

They sang a spark-breaking duet, sharing their first and last kiss. Somehow the company putting on the production had figured out a way to make the “seeker” able to “fly” about the stage as she continued the song alone. Watching as her beloved charged into battle, soldiers falling around her until she was left fighting alone. Just as Blaze faltered, Shadowbolt dove into the fray and stood with her chosen mate, though it meant her deactivation. The reprise of their duet was triumphant and joyful even as the other army closed over them.

The final scene was Solus Prime standing over the frames of the two fallen femmes. They laid next to each other holding servos. He sang the rite of bonding to them and the sparks of the femmes
appeared over the bodies, twirling together and into the Well. Bonded in death as they had not been
able to be in life. On the edges of the stage bots in Iacon and Rodion colors alike knelt down
signifying the end of the war.

Jazz felt himself smiling even as his spark twisted painfully. He joined many other bots in giving a
standing ovation to the bowing opera company. Once he sat back down Prowl touched his arm,
concerned.

“Are you alright? Your field’s a bit strained.”

“It was jus’… really beautiful. I still feel like they got a good endin’ even if it wasn’ happy.”

Prowl’s face smoothed into a smile. “Yes. It’s one of the reasons I like this opera. They still find a
way to be together.”

Jazz sighed happily. His mood dampened a little bit as he opticked the crowd still in the auditorium.
“I suppose we’ll wait a bit b’fore tryin’ t’ get t’ our transport?”

The beat of mischievousness in Prowl’s field made Jazz turn to him in curiosity. The mech was
smirking playfully. “I have a better idea.” He held out his servo. “Come with me.”

Mystified, Jazz allowed himself to be pulled out of the box and private lounge. This was the same
kind of enthusiasm that Jazz had seen when Prowl had gifted him access to the estate and it made
him seem so much more carefree.

Prowl towed him down the hallway opposite the way they’d come in from the lobby. They ducked
through a non-decript, if still decorated, door. Up a flight of enclosed stairs and out another door,
Jazz wasn’t expecting to be hit with the warm Praxian air of the outside. He looked around in
confusion at the space.

Tented like the balcony inside, but with a practical application rather than for decoration, it hosted a
small seating area with several couches. Two of the settees had been turned to face one another with
a low table between them. On the table a game of Packs had been set up. Beside the board was a tray
of rust sticks.

“Wha’s this?” Jazz asked looking from the set up to Prowl’s pleased expression.

“My carrier donated quite a bit of money to this theater. In appreciation they made this private
rooftop space for her and her family. When I inherited the title, this space became mine. I decided to
preserve it the way I remembered it from younglinghood.” He
guided Jazz over to one of the couches. “I told you I liked strategy games, so I thought we could
round out our evening with a game and some conversation.

Jazz settled himself into the comfortable seat. “Tha sounds like an idea I can get b’hind, my mech.”

Prowl’s field flushed with happiness. He sat in the other seat and turned on the board. “Do you have
a preference for terrain?”

“‘Ow about Kalis? Ya know t’ continue th’ theme.” Jazz indicated the decor around them.

“I find that agreeable.” Prowl acquiesced.

The Praxian selected the Kalisian terrain, the board lighting up blocks with differing positives and
negatives depending on the map underneath them. Jazz selected the black pieces, admiring the
craftsmanship in each carved turbo-wolf. Prowl took the white pieces and set them up on his side of
the board. The point of the game was to maneuver your pack of turbo wolves to take over the whole
territory of the board, either by “running off” the other pack or subsuming it into your own.

The first half of the game they spent working their way through the rust sticks and discussing the
opera. Favorite songs and moments, some of which they shared and some of which they disagreed
on. As Jazz realized that he was losing the game he decided it was time to bring up the issue from
earlier that cycle.

He idly contemplated one of the pieces turning it over in his digits and casually inquired, “So, did ya
send Sunstreaker t’ keep an optic on me?”

Despite the turn of the conversation, the Praxian barely paused as he moved a piece into an adjoining
square, capturing another of Jazz’s. “Your tone suggests I should say no.” Prowl sounded amused.

Jazz just gave him an unimpressed look, moving a piece. Though it was really just in an effort to
prolong his defeat. “Prowl, ya do know I’m a Metallikato trained Enforcer, right? I can take care o’
myself.”

“I’m aware that you are martially capable.” With a single move Prowl’s turbo-wolf pack was closing
in. “That does not stop one from worrying after your well-being, of course. Bluestreak asked after
you just last cycle. Perhaps he sent Sunstreaker to check on you while the mech was out and about.”

“Clever.” Jazz deadpanned. He only had one piece left; he steered it in a retreat.

Prowl just smiled serenely.

“Also clever ‘ow ya paid fo’ my polish.”

“I knew you’d be likely to return to that salon to get ready for tonight, however I did not expect all of
this. You’re like… a work of art.”

He advanced one last square and the board flashed. He’d captured Jazz’s last turbo-wolf.

“I believe that is a victory for me.”

“Looks like it.” Jazz admitted.

“May I see your designs up close?” Prowl asked, standing. “You said this is ‘Polyhexian formal-
wear’?”

The visored mech shrugged and got up. He stepped clear of the table and couches, letting Prowl
come near. “Yeah, they’re temporary. Different places on yar armor mean different things. Th’ marks
are like… a secret way t’ tell bots somethin’ about yarself.”

“Oh? And what does this one tell me?” A servo was placed on his forearm over the design. Prowl’s
voice had deepened and dropped in volume.

_Uh-oh._

“I-it means courage. Bravery in adversity.”

“And this?” A digit stroked down the mark on his shoulder. A shudder worked its way down his
backstrut.

“Intelligence and wit.”
“This?” The servo wandered low to tap playfully against his thigh.

“A-gility a-and physical prowess.”

“Hmm... And this?” He traced the glyph on Jazz’s neck

The visored mech bit back a whimper. “P-passion, bu’ I used a glyph tha’ means music, so more specifically- my passion fo’ music.”

The questing digits gently hooked around Jazz’s neck to carefully tilt his helm forward. A kiss was pressed between his audial horns. “And these?” Prowl murmured against his helm.

Heat raced through his lines igniting him from the inside out. “They mean… I’m in the middle o’ a consideration orn… an’ th’ designs represent… ya.”

Prowl’s engine rumbled possessively.

“Prowl…?”

The Praxian leaned his helm crest to Jazz’s forehelm. “Jazz, please...” he whispered achingly.

Desire twisted its way through Jazz’s lines. Thought left his processor. He forgot about his earlier annoyance, his worries about the racing circuit... everything as Prowl nearly begged him for... Jazz wasn’t even sure what Prowl was asking for.

The visored mech slowly, hesitantly, tilted his helm and caught the Praxian’s dermas in a tender kiss.

Prowl froze for half a klik, then adjusted the angle of his helm and practically devoured Jazz’s dermas. The visored mech’s optical feed failed as Prowl’s field flared around him swamping him with hungry longing and eagerness. His own EMF met and mingled with it, broadcasting his want. Glossas tangled and tasted. Prowl pulled him impossibly closer, the Praxian’s servos hot brands against the small of his back and the glyph on his neck. Jazz’s servos caught up in the meshes across Prowl’s chestplates.

They drew back from one another after several long breems, vents cycling the same air as they bled heat. Neither of them said anything, either unsure of what to say or disinclined to to break the moment. They just stood pressed close together on the rooftop, one being bathed in moonlight.

Chapter End Notes

Musical inspiration!
Shadowbolt's Aria (End of Act 1)- Evanescence - "Lost In Paradise" (Synthesis)
Blaze and Shadowbolt's Duet and Last Battle- Nightwish- "Ghost Love Score"
Jazz and Prowl on the rooftop- The Great Gatsby OST- "Magic Tree and I Let Myself Go"
Jazz’s world had narrowed down to a small bubble of timelessness; a universe of heat and moonlight. A place where just he and the mech gifting him with kisses existed. Kisses that became progressively deeper and more charged with each exchange.

Prowl’s servos wandered, tracing the patterns on Jazz’s plating by feel. Firey trails that left tingles in their wake. The meshes under Jazz’s kneading digits were plush and supple. Without conscious thought, he slid searching servos under the softness and found heated plating and then a headlight.

Jazz heard a faint whimper, only realizing it came from himself when Prowl answered it with a sultry rumble of his engine. It vibrated through his frame pleasurably. Unfortunately for Jazz, it was almost too much of a good thing. He abruptly became aware of how hot under the panel he’d gotten. He tore his dermas away from Prowl’s, turning his helm to the side, fans spinning helplessly.

“I, uh… W-we shoul’ stop.” Jazz reluctantly, gently, detangled himself from the other mech. “I think it’d be best if ya took me home…” He looked into Prowl’s optics and silently pleaded for time and space to process what had just happened.

Prowl gazed at him for several long breathless breems with a soft look of longing mixed with understanding.

“I apologize if I overstepped.”

“It’s not tha’. I liked it... maybe a little too much.” He admitted sheepishly. “It’s jus’… I don’ wanna go to fast…”

Prowl pressed a kiss to Jazz’s forehelm and gave him a small smile when he pulled back. “Allow me a moment to assure that our transport is ready and then we can depart.”

After the quick check in with the transport driver, Prowl offered his servo to Jazz. They held servos, digits laced and fields meshed, the entire way as they walked through the empty theater.

The ride back was subdued, but pleasant. It was almost a disappointment when Jazz’s apartment came into view. The transport slowed to a stop. Just as Jazz reached for the door handle of the idling transport, he hesitated a klik and then sent a quick databurst.
“Here’s my comm. so ya don’ ‘ave t’ spend so much o’ yar fancy stationary on me.” Jazz teased with a lightness he didn’t feel. The stunned look on Prowl’s faceplates was worth the uncertainty that Jazz felt in his action.

The Praxian composed himself. An answering databurst nearly make Jazz jump out of his plating. He suddenly found himself the owner of a new frequency.

“And here is mine. Thank you.”

“Eh, no problem…” Jazz hedged, awkwardly rubbing the back of his helm.

Prowl tipped Jazz’s chin towards him with a brush of digit tips. “I meant for the trust. I know that’s not easy to give after my previous actions.”

He seemed as if he wanted to say more, but instead used Jazz’s captured chin to bring their dermas together, stealing one last, lingering kiss.

It left Jazz dazed with his fans humming.

“Good dark-cycle, Jazz, and pleasant fluxes.” Prowl said with a pleased smirk.

*Glitch-headed aft.* Jazz thought fondly.


Once inside his apartment, Jazz found his way to the washrack on autopilot only really coming back to himself as he painstakingly scrubbed the designs off his plating. Thankfully the high end temporary sealant had done its job and the patterns came off easily. Glitter dripped down his body and swirled down the drain along with the warm solvent.

After finally getting into his berth he realized he was running too high a charge to recharge properly. The probability of heated and interesting fluxes invading his unconscious processor was very high. He flushed with embarrassment even though there was nobot but himself in the room.

He ran his digits over his own plating in the same spots the Praxian had touched him earlier, teasing himself into overload to the memory of Prowl’s voice in his audial.

But he recharged like a sparkling afterward… so there was that.

Jazz went in to work tired again the next cycle. Though, this time it was due to a late dark-cycle rather than a rechargeless one. He’d been tempted to call out and use some of his built up PTO, but, no, he couldn’t do that in good conscience. Forcing himself up and out of the apartment was both an intrusion on the fantasy and a welcome wake up call. Though it had been nice to forget the outside world for awhile.

The multitude of amused fields in the office confused him when he first stepped through the door for his shift. He also had to tamp down on the urge to freeze like a glitch-mouse when every optic turned to him when he entered.

“Mornin’ everyone?” He said cautiously. “Wha’s kickin’?”

The growing number of grins and gleefully wiggling doorwings only added to his disquiet. Crossfire walked up to him and handed him a datapad. Her dermas were pressed into a thin line and her field
was held tightly, but she got close enough that he could feel that she was warring between worried and amused. The header of the periodical he found himself looking at proclaimed it to be the Crystal Inquirer, which he knew to be one of the biggest gossip rags in Praxus.

Jazz looked at the headline blankly as it took his processor a moment to catch up with his visual center. “Mystery Mech seen with the Viscount of Crystalspire!” It said in bold. Below it was a half page holo capture of him and Prowl walking together at the theater, glittering and regal-looking respectively.

“...‘Mystery mech’?” Jazz said in confusion consternation.

There was a smattering of well-meaning chuckles from his co-workers.

He shot the room at large an unamused look and read down further in the article. “‘Rumors abound about this unknown mech. Is he a foreign diplomat or perhaps a newly immigrated noble?’ Wha’ th’ frag?! A noble? Where did they even get tha’? I’ve been livin’ here fo’ orns!”

“You clean up nice.” Crossfire ribbed.

Well, at least that explained the mirth in the room. Fragging “mecha-sparrows”. There was nothing that Praxians liked more than knowing something that others didn’t… Okay, maybe that was a little harsh on his co-workers. Jazz grumbled, armor flaring, and took the datapad with him to his desk.

“You could have saved yourself the trouble if you’d worn your decals.” Crossfire pointed out, lightly flicking the magnetic Enforcer decal on her own shoulder with a tiny smile.

“Nobot wears their decals off-duty.” Jazz said mulishly, sitting down with a thump. He regarded the periodical in his servo with a frown.

His Praxian partner cycled her optics at his uncharacteristic dourness. “Hey… What’s wrong? It’s just an article in a second-rate periodical.”

Jazz sighed and tried to shake his armor down from where it had fluffed in agitation. “Mechs and femmes are still goin’ t’ read it, second-rate or not. Somebot is goin’ t’ recognize me. I wasn’ actively tryin’ t’ hide my relationship, bu’ I wasn’ flauntin’ it either. Likewise, I wasn’t hindin’ tha’ I’m one o’ th’ leads on the racin’ circuit case, bu’ I wasn’ blabbin’ about it t’ anybot. Bu’ now bots are gonna get curious an’ make it their mission t’ get inta my business. I’ve seen slag like this interfere with cases back ‘ome. This.” he tossed the datapad onto his desk, “is only goin’ t’ make our jobs harder.”

Crossfire sobered. “Slag.”

That was a nicely succinct way to sum up how Jazz was feeling at the moment.

He sighed again. “Wha’s done is done an’ we jus’ gotta move on from it. Any word back from our informants?”

Crossfire nodded and handed Jazz a report. “Gold confirmed the experimentation on the Noss.” She said using the mech’s fake name. “He’s scared to get any closer to the source he heard it from.”

“Frag... alrigh’, tha’s understandable.” Jazz muttered looking over the datapad in depth. While frustrating, he couldn’t fault the mech for being cautious. “Was he able to observe ‘ow th’ new stuff is different?”

Crossfire’s EMF fluxed with concern. “Not without ‘volunteering’ to test it himself.”
Before Jazz could voice his opinion about that, both of their terminals chimed with a message.

“I’ll see what they want.” Crossfire said. It only took her a breem to read over it. She swore with an aggravated twitch of her doorwings. “Primus damn it!”

“What’s up?”

“We need to go meet homicide at the morgue. The officer sent over to check on Gearshock found him deactivated at the safehouse this morning.”

A cascade of colorful and creative expletives flowed out of Jazz’s mouth, some dipping into the melodic, incomprehensible gibberish of Old Polyhexian. The deluge of foul language only came to a stop when he and Crossfire stepped into the elevator to take them down to the morgue.

Jazz pinged her with a private comm. :We need t’ find th’ mecha-mole.: 

:I know.: She responded immediately. :Jazz… do you think it’s possible that the Viscount-?:

:I really don’ want t’ think ‘bout tha’ righ’ now. I don’ want t’ think ‘bout th’ possibility tha’ ‘e might ‘ave sent sombot t’ kill a mech while we were t’gether. Tha’ I might be responsible-:.:

:Stop.: She said imperiously, cutting off his self-recrimination. :You are not responsible for Gearshock’s deactivation.: 

:’I’m th’ one tha’ brought ‘im in.: 

:As I recall, we brought him in together.: 

:’E practically begged me fo’ ’elp an’ now ’e’s dead.: 

Crossfire brushed his EMF with her own sympathetically. :So now we give him justice. It’s all we can do.: 

:….I’ve been complacent. I gotta start takin’ action.: 

Armor flattened in suspicion. :What’s going on in that processor of yours?:

:Nothing yet. Bu’ I ‘ave t’ do somethin’: 

:Can it be something we do together?: She asked archly, :You know, as partners.: 

Jazz said nothing and looked away guiltily.

Her doorwings hiked with worry. ….I know I can’t stop you, but just… have a plan, okay? Don’t just make something up on the fly.: 

:You know me, ‘Fire.: Was his vague response. 

:Yeah., her voice was dry, :exactly.: 

The elevator stopped on the basement floor where the morgue was located. Entering the sterile domain of the coroner always wigged Jazz out, though he didn’t find himself down there very often, thank Primus. It helped that the quirky coroner, Torque, was always strangely cheerful. He sometimes talked to the corpses, carrying on one-sided conversations as he performed autopsies. He also claimed to see ghosts in the morgue and the adjacent evidence labs every now and then. Maybe it was how he coped with his job.
Said coroner was waiting with two homicide detectives beside an occupied slab, tarp draped over a lumpy form.

Torque offered Jazz and Crossfire a welcoming smile and sensor panel flutter. “I know visits down here are never pleasant, but it’s nice to see you two.”

“Same, Torque.” Jazz responded while Crossfire nodded and gave an answering doorwing motion.

The mechs from homicide introduced themselves as Blowout and Gauge.

“We’d like your help with this one because it’s so unusual.” Gauge said to them. “Normally we’d handle it on our own, but not only was he one of your informants, he was killed while in protective custody.”

“We’ll help however we can.” Crossfire said.

Jazz nodded and turned to Torque. As much as he didn’t want to see what was under the tarp, it was foolish to put off the unavoidable. “So wha’ ‘ave we got?”

Torque delicately pulled the tarp back. As much as Jazz had steeled himself, his tank still rolled as he caught sight of the greyed out faceplates of a mech he’d seen alive less than a decacycle ago. Torque sighed. “Poor fellow. He didn’t suffer, at least. Shot point blank in the back with something strong enough to pierce armor. Snuffed his spark immediately. Probably died before he knew anybot was there.”

Blowout took some notes on a datapad. “Professional hit?”

Torque shrugged. “It’s not my job to tell you who or what, only how. But if I were to hazard a guess… yes. Somebot knew what they were doing.”

Blowout gave some sort of meaningful glance at Jazz that he didn’t want to process.

“Time of deactivation?” Gauge asked.

“I’d say sometime after the beginning of last dark-cycle.”

Jazz felt a sick sinking in his tank again and pressed his EMF to Crossfire’s to steady it.

Gauge nodded and turned to them. “Can you tell us what he was helping you with?”

Jazz and Crossfire exchanged a quick look.

“E gave us info ‘bout th’ Noss. Good info, as it turned out. We got confirmation this mornin’.”

Jazz’s lines ran cold as something occurred to him. “Slag. We need t’ get Gold off th’ streets now, b’fore ‘e gets killed.”

Crossfire frowned echoing his worry. Jazz quickly ran through the locations Gold frequented in his processor. If they could find him today, they could warn him. Maybe bring him in. But would it even do any good? Gearshock had been killed in an Enforcer safehouse.

“Another informant?” Blowout queried.

“Unrelated to your case.” Crossfire said shortly with a doorwing flick that indicated they should stop asking about it.

Gauge held up his servos placatingly. “Understood.”
Blowout looked mulish, but didn’t press the issue. He should have known better than to ask; their department was notoriously protective of their informants. They had to be for obvious reasons.

Crossfire sent a quick databurst to Gauge. “Here’s our comms. If there’s anything else, call us. We need to get back to work.”

“One more thing before you go.” Blowout said voice edging toward antagonism. He fixed Jazz with a hard stare. “Where were you at the start of last dark-cycle?”

Crossfire’s doorwings shot up into an offended V shape and Jazz felt his armor fluff out in insult. Gauge frowned at his partner.

For a klik, Jazz oscillated between guilt and indignation before his spark decided that he had nothing to be ashamed of. He gave Blowout his best haughty look and stated. “I was at th’ opera with th’ Viscount of Crystalspire.”

Blowout’s mouth dropped open. “Wait… that’s true?!”

“Alright, that’s enough.” Torque said. “Officers, if you wouldn’t mind taking this spat out of here, I’d rather you not disturb the sparks of the dead.”

Gauge flinched, glancing around. “Sorry.” He grabbed the still gaping Blowout’s doorwing and dragged him towards the elevator. “We’ll call if we have more questions.” It had been directed toward the room at large, so if he’d meant Torque or Jazz and Crossfire, it was unclear.

“I’m sorry Torque.” Crossfire murmured while calming down. “We didn’t mean to upset you or, er… the sparks of the dead.” Crossfire wasn’t one of the superstitious types (unlike Gauge, apparently), but she had a soft spot of Torque.

Torque smiled at her. “Apology accepted.” He replaced the tarp over Gearshock with the gentleness of a creator tucking in their sparkling.

“We’ll get outta yar plating, mech.” Jazz said feeling more and more weirded out by the klik. He liked Torque, really he did, it just felt like tiny insecticons were running over his plating.

The coroner bobbed a nod. “It’s always a pleasure, officers.”

:We need to go find Gold.: Crossfire privately said to Jazz as they got back on the elevator.

:Agreed. I’ll send an excuse to the boss.: Jazz sent a short message to Chief Scattershield, telling him that they were going to check out a lead. They left the building without waiting for an answer.

Jazz waited patiently near the entrance of a small park while, across the street and half-hidden in an alley, Crossfire spoke quickly and plainly to Gold. He was one of their cagier informants. Crossfire had better luck getting him to talk to her because he liked her better than Jazz. The Polyhexian had never really taken any offence to that; each informant had their own idiosyncrasies.

At the moment, he was just relieved that they’d managed to find the mech.

Excited whispers from behind him broke Jazz out of his musings. He turned. Further down the path into the park, a small group of femmelings and mechlings that looked to be nearing their final
upgrades were nudging each other and staring at him. From their polish, he surmised that these were upper middle-class younglings. Inquiringly, he tilted his helm at them and then tapped his fist to his chest in a Praxian greeting.

Their reactions ranged from a paling of frightened optics to nervous giggling. One brave spark tapped their chest in a return greeting. Then, they apparently all lost their nerve at the same time and dashed away in a tittering group.

*Well, that was weird.* Jazz thought. With a distracted shrug he turned his attention back toward the street.

After a few more breems, Crossfire stepped back into view and flicked her doorwings at him in a “ready to go” motion. Jazz stepped into the transforming lane and folded down into his alt while Crossfire did the same. They met up in the middle lane and headed back to the precinct. Her field buzzed with anticipation.

:*He gonna be okay?: Jazz questioned.

Her plating flexed in a shrug. *:He was pretty shaken up, even though he put on a tough-guy act. Says that he’s got a place to stay out of town at a family member’s house. I’ll check in with him in a decacycle. But listen! There’s a race tonight that he was going to attend to try and get us more information. There’s supposed to be a big drop off of Noss. He just got the time and place. If we’re quick:-:*

:*We can set up a raid.: Jazz finished determinedly.

She rumbled a subsonic agreement.

They turned on their lights to get expeditiously through traffic and made it back to the precinct in record time. A quick ping to Chief Scattershield confirmed he was in his office. They met him there and after enduring a grumpy, if short, dressing down about leaving without his approval, they told him about the information Gold had given them.

The older Praxian’s doorwings swept back contemplatively. “We should take advantage of this.” He agreed gruffly. “Go pick a squad from the department, I trust you to pick who you need. Gather them in conference room 12 when you’re done. I have to make a few calls; I’ll join you there shortly.”

Suspicion flared in Jazz’s processor.

As he and Crossfire went back to their desk to ping certain mechs and femmes for the raid Jazz opened their private comm.

:*Cover fo’ me so we both look busy, I’m gonna try t’ listen in on somethin’:*

Her keen optics met his visor. *:Okay.:*

She was one of two bots that knew about his ability. The other was Scattershield himself, but the mech probably didn’t think it was going to be used against him.

Crossfire picked up a random datapad from their desk briskly and stood next to him holding it between them. It had a two-orn-old report on it. She scrolled through it pointing at arbitrary things now and then. Jazz waited until Scattershield had put his digits to the side of his helm in the well-known “I’m on a comm. call, don’t bother me” signal and tuned in to the Chief’s comm. frequency.

:*....:*
:Hello, Sir. It's business, I'm afraid.:

:...:

:No, no. Nothing so dire.: He rushed to assure whoever was on the other end of the conversation. :I just thought you might want to invite your family over for dinner tonight.:

:...:

:Yes. Yes, of course, Sir. I'll make sure he’s kept safe.:

:...:

:I will be.:

:...:

:Good cycle to you as well.:

Jazz pulled his hearing back and muttered a low Old Polyhexian curse. Crossfire looked grim. Though she hadn’t heard what he had, she could guess.

:Anything solid?:

Jazz sighed. :Naw. Nothin' 'e said proved anythin'.: Jazz couldn’t even prove that Scattershield had been talking to the Viscount. :Come on, all we can do is put our team t’gether and ‘ope for th’ best.:
Raid and Evade

Chapter Summary

A raid and some consequences.

:Everybot ready?: Jazz queried in a sotto voice over the special group comm. as he checked his taser one last time. His Enforcer-issued laser pistol was in his subspace and he hoped he wouldn’t need any reason to take it out.

He received a collection of affirmations. Twelve Enforcers from their department plus Chief Scattershield, himself and Crossfire hid in scattered positions around the race site. They’d watched as bots congregated and began to mingle. A bit further away, a couple of Enforcer transports waited unobtrusively in the cover of darkness for the signal to move in. One of their squad was up on the top floor of an overlooking building with a scope and sniper laser-rifle keeping a sharp opic out for the Noss drop. Once the bot had optics on it, the squad would proceed with the operation.

Scattershield was only there in the “official capacity” as Chief Enforcer; Jazz and Crossfire were ostensibly in-charge of the raid. Jazz had wanted to run the operation without the Chief, but neither he nor Crossfire had a good enough excuse or the authority to keep Scattershield from coming along. For one wild moment Jazz had contemplated cornering and confronting the Chief with his accusations. While it would have been satisfying, Jazz didn’t want to blow up that bridge just yet.

:I think I’ve got optics on it.: The mech on lookout said. He sent a quickly snapped holo to Jazz and Crossfire.

Small, unmarked containers being guarded by shifty-looking mechs. Check.

They conferenced quickly; cross-checking other holos they had stored in their data banks of bots that were known dealers. When they got multiple positive identifications back, they knew it was time.

:Let’s move.: Crossfire announced. :Use non-lethal force unless you feel your functioning is threatened. Understood?:

The chorus of :Yes, m’am.: and :Understood.: flowed over Jazz as he began to pace forward, taser out and ready.

They had not yet lined up for the first race. Somebot was outlining the course with a holo projected map of the area. Sponsors were still arguing over where their racers were placed on the starting line and who was racing against whom. The highgrade was already flowing and it was a sure bet that some of the Noss had been purchased and passed out.

Jazz slunk into periphery the drove of mechs and femmes and sent the signal to the waiting transports. He vented out and in. Out and in. He stepped forward aggressively and then roared his engine loud enough to be heard over the milling crowd. He matched voice to engine in volume. “Praxus Enforcers! Everybot drop what you are holding and get down on the ground! Servos where we can see them.”

Several bots did so immediately, merely out of shocked alarm. He heard echoes of his announcement
from the other Enforces around the assembly. The bots left standing in his section of the crowd quickly complied when he flashed his visor and gestured imperiously with his taser.

Overhelm, the Enforcer transports glided into view.

Their appearance caused some of the bots in the crowd to make a break for it. Jazz cursed fluently and put down two of the fleeing bot with quick taser shots. Low level stunning shot- not enough to knock them out completely, but enough to scramble circuits. A clear warning.

He caught sight of familiar-looking dark grey and yellow plating. Red optics locked onto his visor. With a flash of recognition across his faceplates, the mech turned to run. Jazz aimed the taser for him, but his line of sight was suddenly broken by another mech shoving and barreling through the crowd. The Polyhexian re-aimed his shot for the current threat.

His shot hit the mech in the side. The bot lurched as the energy snapped and snarled across his plating, but he didn’t seem to even notice it. With a desperate noise, the mech folded down into his alt-mode and raced away, ducking around the landing transport.

:He’s Nossed!: Somebot yelled over the comm.

:I have him in sights.: The officer on the roof said.

:Don’t shoot! I’ve got ‘im!: Jazz hollered as he transformed and shot off in the direction the drugged bot had gone. The last thing Jazz wanted was for this encounter to turn deadly.

He heard Crossfire snapping out orders over the comm. as he threw his attention into the chase. Jazz caught up with the bot quickly. While the mech was putting all his drugged processing power to running away, he wasn’t very focused on stealth. The racer careened across the road dangerously pushing his engine as if the turbo-hounds of the pit were nipping his tires. The tell-tale green flames indicating Noss in the system escaped from the mech’s exhaust.

Jazz spared a single processor thread to thank Primus that it was so late in the dark-cycle that the streets were mostly empty.

He put on a burst of speed from his reserves and slid up next to the racer. Keeping up with him was an exercise in skill and moxie as the mech took several uncoordinated sideswipes at his pursuer. Jazz just managed to avoid each collision with a mixture of ability and dumb luck. The racer’s EMF broadcast wildly. This usually happened with Nossed mechs, but there was something off about the way it felt.

The usual aggression brought out by the drug was gone. In its place was hysteria.

Jazz firmly put that into the category of Not Good.

The Polyhexian fleetly scanned his surroundings. He needed to stop the racer before he hurt himself or somebot else.

There! A small public garden.

As they blazed along the exterior of the crystal-space, Jazz dropped back just enough to put his front bumper in line with the racer’s back wheel. He braced himself and then slammed sideways into the mech. A grunt of pain escaped him as his headlight shattered from the impact, but it was drowned out by the frightened screech made by the racer as he spun out. The racer overcorrected and ended up flipping himself over into the crystalline structures with a terrific crunch of metal and tinkling shatter of cracking crystal.
Incoherent mumbling intermixed with moans of fright came from the wrecked mech. His wheels spun helplessly, chassis rocking back and forth on his dented roof as if he'd forgotten how to transform. Heatwaves and steam rose up from the underside of mech’s form worriedly. This was different from any reaction to Noss he’d ever seen before.

:Dispatch, I’m gonna need a medical transport at my coordinates. ASAP.: 

:Acknowledged.: 

Jazz changed back to root-mode with a small wince as dented and out-of-place components groaned. He approached the downed mech cautiously. After a moment where the mech made no move to get up or even seemed to notice Jazz was there, he put a gentle servo on the vulnerable undercarriage, weathering the storm of the terrified EMF.

“Hey mech,” He said softly. “I’m gonna need ya t’ transform back now. Can ya do tha’ fo’ me?”

“Gotta run. Have’ta… k-keep running. C-c-can’t stop. Can’t st-t-top. They'll get me. Have’ta… Have’ta.” The mech’s engine gave a desperate rev, wheels spinning in anguish. The heat coming off him increased alarmingly.

“...I’m sorry abou’ this.” Jazz said with a grimace. He hit the specific points on the mech’s frame with mag pulses to trigger a transformation. The mech tumbled into root-mode with a mixed cry of terror and pain, immediately trying to crawl insensately away. Jazz grabbed him and hung on as the mech flailed and struggled, nearly taking a sensor panel to the faceplates. He tried to keep his servos away from dented and cracked plating, but the mech wasn’t making it easy.

“No! Don’t eat my s-s-spark! Help me, please somebot!”

“Easy, mech, easy. I’m not gonna hurt ya. I’m not gonna hurt ya. Hey, hey now. Can ya tell me yar name?”

The mech collapsed sobbing into Jazz’s chestplate bringing them both down to the ground. “...T-T- Towline… I-I-I… Please, please, please.” He begged, muttering. “Help me… Please h-h-help me…” The mech’s vocalizer abruptly rose to a wail. “I’m burning! My lines are burning!”

Heat vapor began to seep out of the mech’s mouth, his frame was a blistering hot furnace against Jazz’s. The Polyhexian helplessly held him tightly and tried to project comfort through his field.

“I’ve got ya, Towline. I’ve got ya.”

:Dispatch, where the frag is the medical transport?!:

:10 kliks from your location.: 

The mech’s overbright optics suddenly cut out and he keened. Then he convulsed.

Jazz’s entire processor froze for half a klik. The mech was going into system shut-down. A type of quickly forced stasis that caused sensory systems to shut down one by one in an attempt to protect the processor from damage. It was usually followed closely by deactivation.

“No, no, no! Come on, don’ do this t’ me, Towline! Stay with me, mech! Yar gonna be alrigh’... Towline? Towline!”

The roar of the medical transport’s engine overhelm was the sweetest music Jazz had ever heard. Suddenly, the spasming mech was being taken from him by two mechs with medic decals. Jazz
forced his vocalizer online.

“System shut-down. He’s taken some sort o’ new Noss variant. Paranoia, hallucinations and overheating. Couldn’t get outta alt-mode without help. I had t’ run int’ ‘im t’ get ‘im t’ stop.”

One of the medics nodded distractedly, optics and servos never leaving his patient. “Thank you, Officer, we’ll take him from here.”

Jazz dipped his helm in acceptance, suddenly feeling exhausted. He hauled himself ungracefully over to sit up against a crystal structure, now laced with spindly cracks from where the racer had crashed into it. It was only after the transport took off towards the medical center that Jazz realized one of the medics, a different one from the first two- a light green femme, had stayed behind. The femme drew near to him attentively.

“Officer, you’re injured. Let me patch that up for you.”

_Huh? Oh right. Headlight._

He sat up a little straighter and she interpreted the motion correctly as his acquiesce. She delicately placed a medical grade precise pain blocker patch on his medical port. It would deaden the sensor net around the wound, but leave him alert. Then she carefully cleaned out the broken headlight and spread some nanite gel on it to jumpstart his own self-repair system. She placed a self-adhering bandage over the wound to keep it clean. After unsubbing a small servo-held dent fixer, she quickly popped out the dent in his front bumper.

“There.” She said with a sympathetic smile. “You’ll want to change the bandage at least once in the next cycle and add some more nanite gel. Your self-repair will take care of the rest.”

“Thanks, doc.” He sighed.

Anything else that might have come out of the conversation was cut off by the arrival of Crossfire.

“Jazz! Are you alright?”

“I’m okay, ‘Fire. The raid?”

Her doorwings swept forward and she frowned, though she did him a favor and didn’t call out his lie. Instead, she sat down next to him in front of the cracked crystal. She opticked the medic, who was still hovering with sensor panels perked in interest.

“Excuse me Medic…?”

“Oh, Medic Lumen.”

“Medic Lumen, would you please go to these coordinates,” a quick databurst, “and assist the officers there. We’ve had a few minor injuries. Tell Chief Scattershield that Officer Crossfire sent you.”

There was a quick flash of disappointment in her EMF. “Oh, um, of course.”

The light green femme folded down into alt-mode and drove away.

Crossfire huffed in consternation when she was out of audial range. “I’m beginning to understand what you mean by mecha-sparrows. Nosy, busybody.”

Jazz gave a weak laugh, but immediately sobered. “There were injuries?”
“Minor, I promise.” She was quick to assure him. “Scuffs and dents. You got the worst of it.”

“No I didn’t.” Jazz whispered. The image of Towline’s black optics and terror-filled faceplates had burned itself into his processor. “I’ve n’ver seen Noss do tha’ b’fore.”

“Hey, it’s okay.” She murmured putting a servo on his arm, field resting against his own in support. “The medics have him now. Their going to take good care of him. And we’ve got the whole Noss drop. Thirty-two mechs and femmes in custody. We’re gonna search everybot and make sure none of them have any of it on them. We did good this dark cycle.”

“This new variant o’ Noss, wha’ever they did t’ tweak it made it so much worse.”

“We’ll get our scientists at the crime lab to dissect it. We’ll get it figured out-”

“’E almos’ deactivated in my arms, ‘Fire. If we ‘adn’t done th’ raid… I think a lot o’ bots woulda died this dark cycle. Th’ new Noss ‘as got t’ be untested. Th’ question is “why?”. A dealer wouldn’ be stupid enough t’ kill off ‘is clients.”

Crossfire frowned contemplatively and switched to their private comm.

:Maybe the payoff is worth the body count?:

Jazz mused, ...If they are tryin’ t’ start an international market, maybe they’re using Praxus as their testin’ grounds b’fore movin’ it out:.

An aggravated flick of doorwings gave away what Crossfire thought of that theory, but she didn’t disagree.

:Though that migh’ mean we ‘ave more time.: The Polyhexian continued tiredly. ’Cause not only did th’ new stuff fail spectacularly, but we may ‘ave jus’ got a majority o’ th’ supply.:  

:We can only hope.: She got up and offered a servo to Jazz. :Come on. There’s only clean up and booking left to do.: He let her pull him up. :The Chief took over evidence collection. I couldn’t contradict him.: She said sourly. :We’ve got suspect processing.: 

:Joy.: Jazz deadpanned.

Arresting and charging the thirty-two bots brought in from the raid took the entire rest of the dark cycle. Some were obstinate pains in the aft, but Jazz almost preferred those to the ones who took one look at him and quailed with fright. Apparently his new reputation as the Viscount’s “friend” had reached the racing ring too. He… really didn’t know how to feel about that and he didn’t have the mental energy to put to the task after what he’d just been through.

Jazz was relieved after collecting the suspects’ personal effects that all the Noss injectors attached to the drop they’d seized were accounted for, including the one used by the mech in the medical center.

The medical center had been refreshingly pleasant when he commed. to check on Towline. He was both relieved and concerned when he was informed that the mech was in stable, but critical condition. The medics had managed to bring his temperature down, but the mech was now in proper medical stasis and they had no idea if he would wake with full processor function.

Concerningly, the mysterious grey and yellow mech was not among the arrested individuals. He’d likely fled when the confusion of the racer’s drug trip had distracted them. Jazz took the time to send
a detailed description to one of their sketch artists. Hopefully after the sketch was completed, they
could get it circulated.

But now Jazz was officially exhausted.

As the city brightened with the new light cycle, Chief Scattershield had fixed both Jazz and Crossfire
(who were the last officers left in the office) with a glare and ordered them to go home and take at
least two cycles off. Preferably three.

The Polyhexian had not been so tired that he couldn’t cheekily remind the Chief to do the same.
Warning to the Viscount or not, Scattershield had been working just as hard as they had, pushing his
mechs to scour the crime scene for evidence. The epic glitch-face Jazz had received had been totally
worth it.

He trudged into his apartment and gingerly laid on his berth. Unfortunately, his pain blocker patch
had worn off earlier in the dark cycle and his headlight and bumper had started to ache a few joors
ago. He had some generic pain blockers in the cabinet in his washrack, but unlike the medic’s
sophisticated patch that blocked specific sensors, the generic ones would just blanket his whole
sensor net and he didn’t like the way it muddied his processor.

He settled down into an uncomfortable recharge only to jerk awake some time later as his processor
replayed his interaction with Towline. Twice more he tried to drift off and twice more he was
wakened by the image of a smoking chassie and black optics.
With a frustrated groan of defeat he got up and retrieved a pain blocker patch. At least his processor
would be too fuzzy to keep him awake. He went to the kitchen to make himself drink some energon
before the patch took hold and then buried himself under the meshes on his berth.

Jazz twitched in muzzy confusion when his comm. went off. He blearily checked his chronometer
and was bewildered when he realized that it was the dark cycle again. He had slept the whole light
cycle away!

Who was calling, anyway? He didn’t recognize the comm. number.

He cautiously answered. : ‘Ello?:

:Hi Officer Jazz!:

:Bluestreak?: He mumbled incredulously.

:Yeah! ‘Tor gave me your comm. because he said you weren’t feeling well and I wanted to call to
cheer you up. What’s wrong? You sound sleepy. Oh no! Did I wake you up? I’m sorry if I woke
you up! Do you have a virus? Draft- that’s our cook- she knows the best soup recipe for when
you’re sick. I could get her to make some and we can bring it to you.: 

It took a moment to parse out the mechling’s chatter, but when he did it made a bloom of warmth
spread through his chest.

:I’m alrigh’, Blue. I’m not sick… I jus’ got a li’il banged up at work, tha’s all.: 

:Oh no, you got hurt?: Bluestreak’s voice trembled.

Jazz crooned soothingly. :Don’ worry, it was jus’ a li’l. I’m feeling better already.: 

Bluestreak gave a spark-warming sigh of relief. :Well, if you’re feeling alright, can you come over
tomorrow? I miss you.: He asked innocently.
Jazz smiled. :Sure, Blue. I miss you too.: 

:You can come over at lunchtime and then we can have another music lesson! Oh! Then I can show you the upstairs and my room. I’ll have to go to my lesson before dinner, but ‘Tor will probably be done with his work by then and you can visit with him. And after dinner we can play games!: 

:Lunch an’ dinner, huh?: Jazz teased. 

:I mean…: The mechling suddenly sounded sheepish. :If you are available for the day, I would very much like you’re presence for lunch and dinner at the Crystalspire Estate.: He requested with hopeful formality. 

:I would be honored t’ join ya an’ yar ‘Tor fo’ lunch an’ dinner.: 

As the mechling cheered Jazz tamped down on the slight flicker of guilt. He wasn’t just going to visit, he was also planning on snooping around the estate a bit. If he could evade cute and clever Praxians, that is. 

He chatted with the mechling for a bit longer, asking about how his practicing and lesson were going, until he felt the return of the ache in his bumper and chest. 

:'Hey, Blue, I gotta go now. My pain blocker is wearin’ off. When I put th’ new one on I’m gonna go righ’ int’ recharge.: 

:Oh! Okay. Feel better and rest well. See you tomorrow!: 

:See ya then.: 

Jazz forced himself out of the berth again to get a new pain blocker patch. He took off the mesh bandage, and examined the wound, pleased that the cracks were already starting to close and that the patches of glass missing already looked smaller. The pain blocker was already starting to work and his digits felt clumsy as he retrieved the nanite gel he kept for emergencies out of a cabinet. He spread it on the tender headlight as carefully as possible and replaced the bandage. Then he grabbed another quick cube of fuel before the fuzzy blanket of sensor dampening completely overtook his processor again.
Visits and Vexations

Chapter Summary

Jazz makes another visit to the estate that will hopefully end better than last time...

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took a while, but I went to a convention and then got the dreaded con-crud. After I got better I realized the chapter I was writing was really two and needed to be split up, so here it is finally. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jazz woke to a chronometer alarm that he didn’t remember setting, with a clear processor and a lessened ache in his chassie. He still moved gingerly as he washed the grime of the previous two cycles off in the washracks. Fortunately, the bandage on his chest was moisture resistant so he didn’t have to take it off and change it 

A search of the kitchen proved it to be nearly bare of fuel. It was a good thing the Crystalspires were planning on feeding him for a couple of meals, he reflected sardonically. There was still half a package of additives, but no more basic energon to add them to. He managed to scavenge some silica wafers from the back of a cabinet that he didn’t remember buying. They were still within the sell date, so he just shrugged and started munching on them.

A quick call to the medical center to check on Towline was both a disappointment and a relief as the mech’s condition had not changed. At least he hadn’t gotten worse, Jazz thought as he instructed the medical center to call him if anything changed.

Jazz still had time to spare before he needed to make his appearance at the estate so he turned on some music and cleaned his apartment. The small space and his darth of personal effects meant that the place could never really get truly messy, but he tidied up here and there. Put the case files away on the shelves in numerical order. Wash the dirty cubes in the sink. Straighten the meshes on his berth. Put fresh growth material in his crystal bouquets.

After finishing his self-imposed chores, he judged that enough time had passed that he wouldn’t be showing up awkwardly early at the estate. Not that it probably would have mattered to Prowl since the mech had given him carte blanche to visit whenever he wanted.

The drive was pleasant, with barely a twinge from his injury. And he soon found himself driving through the arching gate and up to the impressive edifice of the mansion. As he stopped at the entrance the door was opened by the familiar form of Skids. Behind the butler were both the elder and younger Lords of the manor.

Bluestreak was out of the door like a shot. Jazz had barely finished him transformation when the ball of energy shaped like a mechling (gently) crashed into his side for a hug. The youngling clung on tightly.
“Hi Jazz!” He gushed, gazing up at the visored mech adoringly. “I haven’t seen you in forever!”

Jazz chuckled and returned the hug. “Forever, huh? I missed ya too.”

“Bluestreak.” Prowl’s voice was stern as he stepped out of the house. “Be careful. Jazz is still healing.”

The mechling immediately loosened his hold looking guilty. “Oh! I’m sorry! I didn’t hurt you did I?”

“Naw, it’s alrigh’.” Jazz spoke soothingly to both of them. “It was barely a scratch t’ begin with.”

Bluestreak released Jazz and backed up a couple of steps as Prowl approached and stepped into Jazz’s personal space. The visored mech still had mixed feelings about the conversation he’d overheard before the raid. Part of him wanted to be angry that Scattershield, and by extension Prowl, had gotten in the way of an integral arrest. But that part was quickly eclipsed by fondness when Prowl gently placed his servo on the side of Jazz’s hood next to the bandage. The Praxian frowned, examining it with a pensive, unreadable look on his face as if taxing his processor on how to make the wound magically disappear.

Jazz ducked his helm to catch Prowl’s optics with his visor. “Hey… I’m okay.”

Prowl’s optics remained troubled for a moment more. “Do you need anything for the pain? We have a well stocked medical station in the house.”

The visored mech gave him a lopsided smile and shook his helm. “I’m barely feelin’ it now, promise.”

Prowl’s other servo cupped Jazz’s cheekridge. “I do not like the thought of you putting yourself in danger.” He stated.

“It ‘ad t’ be done.” Jazz murmured, meaning more than just the encounter with the drugged racer.

Prowl’s expression soured. “I expect your department to take less risks with their officers.”

Jazz recalled the end of the one-sided conversation and Scattershield’s promise. Put in that context those words could be a very real threat.

“Mech was runnin’.” Jazz said casually, in a roundabout explanation. “I ‘ad t’ do somethin’ t’ stop ‘im or ‘e woulda hurt ‘imself or others.”

“Instead he hurt you.” Prowl’s optics were calculating.

Oh no you don’t. I don’t need you trying to pin the blame on some innocent bot for this.

“I’m th’ one tha’ crashed int’ ‘im. I made th’ choice t’ do it.” Jazz countered.

Prowl frowned mulishly, then leaned forward and kissed Jazz soundly. His field brushed against Jazz’s with a hint of possessiveness. The Polyhexian had to hold back an inappropriate giggle at the Praxian’s attitude. It made him think of a pouting sparkling not getting his way. It also sort of felt like he’d won something.

A happy little squeal from beside them startled them apart. Bluestreak bounced on his pedes, servos clasped together. “Are you and Jazz finally courting?!” He asked, elated.

The visored mech was temporarily glossa-tied as his processor stalled in its attempt to work out a way to explain the intricacies of Polyhexian traditions to a very excited youngling.
“Jazz and I are testing our compatibility.” Prowl answered smoothly for them. He took Jazz’s servo and placed it on his arm. “Shall we go inside? Lunch should be ready for us.”

Bluestreak looked fit to burst with anticipation, but he agreed enthusiastically and led the way into the house. The mechling was definitely intuitive enough to judge his adoptive creator’s mood and knew when to curb his questions.

Jazz let Prowl escort him to the warm-toned breakfast room. The over-large rectangular table was set with three place settings on a crisp tablecloth. Each setting had far too many dishes and glasses than Jazz thought were particularly necessary for a simple luncheon. Prowl held out a seat for him. Since he’d dined with them in here on one previous occasion, he expected the action and was unflustered by it. Unlike the first time.

Prowl sat at the head of the table, Bluestreak on his left and Jazz on his right.

“I know you said you weren’t sick,” Bluestreak said as he settled himself into his own seat, “but I thought the special soup would make you feel better anyway, so I asked Draft to make it for you.”

Jazz gave the mechling a smile. “Tha’ was real sweet o’ ya Blue. I’m sure I’ll like it.”

Skids disappeared into a half-hidden door leading to the butler’s pantry. There was a small hydraulic lift in there that came directly from the kitchen. A few moments later he reappeared with a tray containing a large steaming bowl of hot fuel and a plate of rust sticks. He set the rust sticks within easy reach of Prowl and then carefully ladled out a portion of soup into each of their bowls. It was thick and smooth and colored a dark silver.

An experimental taste had a wash of both familiar and unidentifiable flavors slipping over Jazz’s glossa. It was delicious and warming. The visored mech could see why this blend would be used as a home remedy.

“Do you like it?” Bluestreak asked with cheerful expectancy.

“It’s wonderful.” Jazz answered with a smile. “Yar cook really outdid ‘erself.”

Bluestreak beamed at him and tucked into his own meal.

“I trust you were able to apprehend many of the bots responsible for underground racing and the narcotics trade?” Prowl asked with just the right amount of curiosity mixed with nonchalance as he doled out a serving of rust sticks to both Jazz and Bluestreak.

As if you don’t already know. Jazz thought sardonically, but he replied. “We’ll be goin’ through statements fo’ a while b’fore we know if we got the bots in charge. We got a good number o’ suspects, ya see.”

“Is that how you got hurt?” Bluestreak piped up. “You had to chase down a suspect like you did when we met?”

“Tha’s righ’, Blue.” Jazz shot a covert look at Prowl from the cover of his visor. “Mech was in a bad way an’ couldn’ stop ‘imself, so I ‘ad t’ step in.”

“You’re so brave.” Bluestreak said softly. “I don’t think I could ever be that brave. I was so scared when you saved me.”

“Bravery ain’t ‘bout not bein’ scared.” Jazz said, smiling as he paraphrased something Corona had told him long ago. “Bravery is known’ tha’ yar scared ‘alf t’ deactivation an’ doin’ somethin’
anyway. An’ fo’ wha’ it’s worth, I think ya’re a very brave mech.”

The mechling’s face lit up. Prowl was frowning thoughtfully down at his fuel. Jazz didn’t know what to make of that look. Then Bluestreak was chattering away and Jazz let himself be distracted.

As they were finishing up lunch, Prowl spoke to Bluestreak. “While I know you are excited for Jazz to be here, you do still have your afternoon lessons.”

Bluestreak pouted. “Aren’t Sunny and Sides back yet? I was going to have them switch times with me.”

“No, they are not back from the errands I sent them on.” He gave the mechling a patient smile, “You will just have to endure. Jazz will still be here when you are done with your schooling.”

“We can have another music lesson?” Bluestreak asked, turning his optics hopefully on the visored mech.

Jazz nodded readily, “O’ course. We can learn another song.”

The mechling’s smile lit the room. He dipped his sensor panels politely to Prowl. “May I be excused, ‘Tor? If I start my lesson early, I’ll get finished early!”

The elder Praxian dipped his doorwings in return with a proud smile. “Yes you may, I believe you’ll find Legacy in the reading den.”

Bluestreak huffed. “That’s where he always is.” He lead over conspiratorially towards Jazz and mock whispered. “Sometimes I think he recharges in there.”

Jazz stifled a laugh as Prowl gave another doorwing flick. “Off you go.”

Prowl waited until Bluestreak had left the room before standing from the table himself. He pulled Jazz’s chair out and offered him a servo up. “Walk with me?”

Jazz shrugged and took Prowl’s servo. “Sure.”

They strolled together out on the balcony of the salon and took a moment to drink in the magnificent view of the surrounding gardens edged by the crystal forest.

“I’m afraid I have some work to finish up as well, this afternoon, but I wanted to spend a little bit of time with you first.” Prowl said.

Jazz hummed. “I don’ s’pose this work has anythin’ t’ do with th’ ‘errands’ ya sent th’ twins on, does it?”

“Not directly.” Prowl didn’t bother to deny it.

The visored mech sighed, disappointed. “Yar doin’ tha’ thing again.”

“What?” Prowl lifted an optical ridge.

“Th’ thing where ya don’ trust me.”

“Jazz,” Prowl turned them to face each other. There was a sharpness to his optics and a tightness around his dermas. Anger. But not directed at the Polyhexian. He cupped Jazz’s chin, “you have enough things on your processor to worry about right now. This isn’t one of them.”
“Jus’ wish ya’d trust me more.”

Prowl tipped his chin up and kissed him. It was soft and sweet and it made Jazz’s knee joints go weak.

“I do trust you.” Prowl murmured against his dermas. “I know it may not seem like it sometimes, but I do.”

Jazz really, achingly wished that he could believe that. Would it be so bad to pretend? Just for a little while...

At a loss of how to verbally respond, Jazz answered by tugging Prowl back down into another kiss. The Praxian fell into it willingly, engine rumbling. Prowl coaxed Jazz’s dermas open with tiny playful nips. He maneuvered them until Jazz was pressed against one of the support pillars of the balcony’s overhang. The Praxian didn’t give him a moment to invent. Prowl delved deeply into his mouth, but held him gently, as if he were made of the frailest crystal. After a few heated moments, Prowl reluctantly pulled back.

“You are so beautiful. On the night of the opera you looked like a fey creature out of a sparkling’s tale.” He press their forehelms together, tracing around side of Jazz’s neck where the glyph for music had been with gentle digits.

“Did tha’ make ya th’ prince, then?” Jazz asked mischievously.

Prowl slyly slid his servo down Jazz’s plating to his waist. “I could be if you wished it.”

“Are ya tryin’ t’ seduce me, Lord Prowl?”

“If I said I was?”

Prowl jerked back, startled, when Jazz tilted his helm suddenly and nipped the tip of his olfactory. It was, perhaps, a little payback as well as a playful, silent reprimand. The visored mech laughed softly at the pale-opticked look of surprise on his face. “I’d say I’m not tha’ easy, my Lord.”

“That you are not.” Prowl agreed huffing a laugh of his own. He removed his servos from where they’d found their way to Jazz’s waist and caught up Jazz’s servos from their position on his chest. He kissed the backs of each of Jazz’s servos.

“You’re a temptation…” Prowl breathed. “But I must get to work. I trust you can find something on the estate to entertain yourself with for a joor or so?”

“S’pose I can.” Jazz drawled. “Would ya mind if I climbed up t’ get a closer look at th’ piped synth in the banquet hall?”

Prowl smiled dotingly. “Be my guest, but if you would please refrain from playing, I would appreciate it. I can hear it from my office and will, undoubtedly, become distracted.”

“No problem.” Jazz acquiesced with an easy shrug. If it was close enough to be heard, then it might be close enough for him to eavesdrop. He kept a tight rein on the guilt that wanted to bubbled up through his EMF.

Prowl tugged their linked servos. “Come, then.”

They walked together through the house to the doors of the dining hall. Jazz stole one more quick kiss (outwardly playful, but secretly an apology for what he was about to do) before Prowl continued
The Polyhexian casually made his way through the still-intimidating room over to the beneath the balcony that held the majestic instrument. There was a narrow spiral stair tucked artfully out of sight underneath. He climbed up and spent a few moments actually admiring the piped synth. It was masterfully constructed. Every key of the triple keyboards beautifully made. Every stop intricately carved. Every pipe polished and shining.

Around the side of the instrument up on the balcony was a tucked away, hidden door. Curiously, Jazz opened it. Maybe this was where the back of the pipes were?

No. No pipes. A servant’s hallway with a window at the end of it... that he was fairly certain led in the direction of Prowl’s office. He shot a quick look out into the grand room behind him, saw nobot and ducked into the corridor.

There were rooms here. He tried a door. It opened with a near silent creak. Sheeted objects of all shapes and sizes crowded the space.

Storage?

That seemed to be the correct answer when he gingerly lifted the cover on one of the large objects to reveal an armchair in a faded outdated print. He replaced the cloth and peeked under another. A berth-frame. Along the wall he found some covered paintings. The top one was of Prowl’s sire. So was the next one. The one underneath that was a painted rendition of the family portrait holo-capture he’d seen in the hall of records.

Come to think of it... Jazz hadn’t seen any captures or paintings of the former Viscount anywhere in the house. Not that he’d seen the whole mansion yet. And the furniture? Were these the belongings of the mech? Had they all ended up here or put away in some other part of the back rooms to be forgotten? Considering what Jazz knew about the mech and Prowl’s understandable hatred for him, it made sense.

It still made a frisson of unease skitter down his backstrut to think he might be poking around the belongings of a dead mech. Oh his file might say he was still “missing”, but Jazz had that tank-deep feeling of certainty that Swingline was definitely deactivated.

Jazz raised the sheet on a small square object on a similarly sheeted table. It was a display case holding an ornamental tungsten dagger. Jewels winked and glittered from a beautifully crafted hilt and pommel that had been formed in the shape of a snarling, lunging turbo-wolf. So distracted was he by the fine craftsmanship that Jazz almost missed the strange scorching around the wickedly sharp edges of the weapon.

*What could cause damage like that?*

On a whim, Jazz took a holo-capture of it with his visor. It was just such an interesting little puzzle and the investigator in him was intrigued. He’d send the capture over to his friend from forensics back home. Stepper had a thing for ancient weaponry and the dagger had to be at least older than Jazz. There was probably some really asinine explanation for the strange marks, but considering how he wasn’t really supposed to be here, he couldn’t just ask.

...And on that note. He guiltily recovered the case and concentrated on his audials. Now that he had Prowl’s comm. frequency, he should be able to tune into it... There!

:-all of his assets frozen.: Prowl was saying. :And I am to be informed if he attempts to gain access to
any of the accounts.

:...

:Good. See that you do.: The connection fuzzed out as Prowl cut the call.

Frag. He’d let himself get so distracted that he’d missed something important. Who’s assets were getting frozen? Barricade? Plausible. If he was as entrenched in the case as Jazz suspected, Prowl was likely to be angry enough to cut him off.

Jazz crept out of the first room, stepping lightly past the next closed door to the end of the hallway. He glanced out of the window to the courtyard of the transport dock. Prowl’s office should be right below him, right? He crouched down and upped the sensitivity of his audials, shutting off his visual feed.

*Quiet your systems, even your venting… listen…*

He let his awareness float, the soft barely-there static of the unused comm. and the muffled sounds of the physical world blending together. Sounds of movement that could be somebot moving datapads around a desk. A frustrated sigh. A chair being pushed back. Pacing?

For a while that was it… then the pacing suddenly stopped as the comm. static shifted.

:...

:What is it Skids?: Prowl’s voice was almost a shock after the quiet.

:...

:Send them to my office.: Silence. A door opened.

“Welcome back. Are you injured?”

An only vaguely familiar voice. “It ain’t- I mean, it isn’t ours, Sir.”

“Very well. Report.”

“We didn’t find him, but we did find a couple of his associates.” Jazz definitely recognized Sunstreaker’s voice.

What could only be Sideswipe piped back in. “They’re enjoying Smokescreen’s, heh, ‘hospitality’ at the moment.”

“Good work. I may have you go over to his workspace tomorrow to assist him. Then you can leave what’s left of them in a convenient place for the Enforcers to find. Now, go clean yourselves up before dinner. Use the servants halls. Neither Bluestreak nor Jazz needs to see you like that. I’ll tell Legacy your lessons are cancelled for today.”

“Thank you, Sir.” They chorused.

The door opened and shut again. A door, Jazz realized, that did *not* sound like it lead out toward the main house. The space below him went quiet again except for the occasional sound of a moving
Jazz needed to get out of the servant area. He didn’t want to be caught snooping around. He dialled back his audials and skittered back down the hallway and out of the hidden door… right as Skids was walking into the banquet hall with an inquiring look on his face.

Slagging curse his luck to the bottom of the Rust Sea.

“Sir? What were you doing back there?” The butler asked, concern etched on his faceplates as he made his way towards Jazz.

“Sorry!” Jazz said with an easy cheer he didn’t feel as he made his way back down the tiny spiral stair. “I asked Prowl if I coul’ get a closer look at this beauty an’ I thought th’ rest o’ th’ pipes were back there.” The half-truth slipped off his glossa with sickening ease. “Maybe ya can show me where they are?”

The concern faded to be replaced with an indulgent (and relieved?) smile. “Of course, Sir. Right through here.” He pressed a panel in the wall under the balcony and it slid open to another narrow stair that led up to the maintenance area for the pipes. Primus, just how many secret doors were in this place?

After an appropriately long enough time oohing and ahhing over the (admittedly impressive) system, Jazz told Skids he would see himself to the music room to wait for Bluestreak. The joor was almost up, after all, and he’d promised the mechling a music lesson.

Jazz sighed after he’d made it into the music room and closed the door behind him. It was becoming something of a refuge. His practice pad had been moved to lay on the bench. He picked it up and placed it on the music stand and then sat himself at the synth. For a few breems he stared contemplatively at the instrument. He made a conscious effort to tuck away what he’d just heard in his processor to examine later. His digits found the keys. And just… played.

He wondered for a moment what his life would have been if he’d made it as a trained performer. He would never regret his decision to become an Enforcer, of course. But he did wonder. Music had alway come so naturally to him. It was clean, yet chaotic. Simple, yet intricate. Undemanding, yet inspiring. It made sense. It didn’t cause him to question his morals.

A hushed sound signaled the hesitant opening of the door. His notes trailed off, unsure…

“Jazz?” Bluestreak’s voice was the most tentative the visored mech had ever heard it. “Are you okay? The music sounded really sad…”

Jazz mentally shook himself out of his funk. He smiled, scooted over a bit and patted the bench beside him. “I’m alrigh’, Blue. Jus’ lettin’ my digits wander. Ya all done with yar lessons fo’ th’ cycle?”

The mechling brightened and skipped into the room. “Yes! I studied super hard to have a quick lesson. Legacy said I was “unusually diligent” and that you should come over all the time if it motivated me like this.” He plopped himself down on the bench happily.

Jazz was sure Prowl would be only too pleased by that sentiment.

“Ya ready t’ try another song?”

“Oh yes, please! I’ve been practicing as much as I can, though playing both servos together is still really hard.” His doorwings drooped a little.
“Well, I was thinkin’ we’d play another one t’gether, bu’ this time we’d switch parts. So, ya’d play the left servo part an’ I’d play th’ right servo. How’s tha’ sound?”

“I would like that very much!” Bluestreak said bouncing in place.

Jazz found another simple song on the practice pad and set it up on the music stand.

“So, my part’s a little syncopated- tha’ means it’s not always on th’ beat, an’ yars walk up an’ down on th’ beat, like this,” he demonstrated. “Now ya try.”

Bluestreak diligently copied his previous motion.

“Tha’ means ya get t’ keep out beat while I flit around, alrigh’?”

“I can do that.” The mechling said with a determined sensor panel flick.

“Cool. Let’s go through ya part a couple o’ times first. Ya ready? ...an’ one, two, three, four.”

The mechling played through the arpeggiated music, only stumbling once or twice on wrong notes. Jazz murmured encouragement, correcting a digit placement here and there. After playing through it twice more, gaining confidence with each rendition, the visored mech joined in with the melody.

As they played the together, Jazz felt his spark start to lighten. The youngling was so happy and innocent. If he could give Prowl credit for one thing, it was raising his adopted creation right. He didn’t know how much longer Prowl would be able to protect Blue from the big, bad world, but it seemed like the mech would give his all for as long as he could. And that warmed Jazz in ways that were probably detrimental to his emotional health.

Jazz caught sight of movement out of the corner of his visor and covertly watched the door to the music room open a sliver. Beyond, he could just make out the red and gold of the two bots peeking into the room. Bluestreak didn’t notice, his attention taken up entirely by the music he was tapping out on the synth.

They finished the song. Bluestreak beamed. Jazz smiled down at the mechling and dimmed half his visor in a wink.

“Yes two wanna join us?” He called out into the room.

The young Praxian tilted his doorwings in confusion for the couple of kliks it took for the twins to decide to stop skulking outside the room and opened the door fully to enter. He grinned when he saw them. Sensor panels fluttered happily as he slid off the bench and greeted each of them with a hug and a barrage of words.

“Sunny! Sides! When did you get back? Where did ‘Tor send you? How come you’re not with Legacy? Jazz taught me another song. Did you like it? I was playing the bottom part.”

Jazz ran a critical optic over the two Kaonites while they were distracted, mumbling obfuscated answers in the face of innocent enthusiasm. Only the smallest hints of dents under a new coat of polish. He might not have even noticed if he wasn’t looking for them.

He got of from the bench, himself, seeing that Bluestreak’s attention had been thoroughly taken from the music lesson. The mechling skipped back over to him and grabbed his servo.

“Do you want to see the upstairs, now? I can show you my room!”
“Sure, Blue.”

“Come on.” Bluestreak said gleefully leading him out of the music room.

Jazz made no comment as the twins silently followed along through the grand front hall. The four of them tapping their way up the grand spiraling staircase. The ornate scrollwork bannister wound up and up around a heavy chandelier. Jazz felt a small shudder down his spinal strut as they passed the first landing.

That was where the Viscountess had deactivated.

The top of the first set of stairs opened out into a large, yet cosy sitting room. The expansive space had been cleverly warmed up by a dark red paint color on the walls. Comfortable looking couches and chairs were arranged in conversational groups. In built shelves held a staggering number of games. Another set of stairs continued up to the next floor.

Bluestreak bypassed the room and pulled Jazz to a hallway on the left. He waved a servo back vaguely at the open space. “This is the living room for this floor. ‘Tor’s room is over there. And this is my room!” He opened the first door in the hall excitedly. Jazz looked in.

It was… sort of exactly what Jazz was expecting. A room that was bigger than his entire apartment (though that wasn’t necessarily a difficult feat to achieve), painted a cheery light blue. The berth was made with several soft looking pillows and meshes. A small desk next to the window was cluttered with what had to be Bluestreak’s schoolwork. He had his own small sitting area in the room as well. “Very nice.” The visored mech complimented.

Bluestreak turned to the twins, who were a few paces behind them. “May I show Jazz your rooms?” He inquired politely.

The two Kaonites exchanged a communicative look. Sideswipe arched an optical ridge, Sunstreaker crossed his arms with an amused huff. Sideswipe smirked, Sunstreaker snorted inelegantly.

Jazz felt like he’d just missed an entire conversation. Then the red twin finally spoke. “Sure short-stuff; they’re clean enough.”

Bluestreak thanked them enthusiastically and bounced over to the next door down the hall. He opened the door proclaiming it to be Sideswipe’s. The red twin’s room was simple, if only a bit smaller than Bluestreak’s. The berth covers were messy and untucked. There was a shelf of datapads and small knick knacks. Other than a few polishing cloths on the bedside table, it was fairly clean. Then Bluestreak opened the door to Sunstreaker’s room.

It looked like a bomb had exploded in the room, with painting supplies and canvas as shrapnel. A beautifully painted rendition of the estate’s growing center was propped up on an easel in the middle of the room. “Ya’re very talented.” Jazz commented.

“Oh! You finished it! It looks amazing.” Bluestreak said with a happy doorwing wiggle.

“Eh, it’s pretty okay.” Sunstreaker brushed off the compliments, but he had a small, proud smirk tugging at his dermas.

“It’s great!” The mechling insisted. “I want ‘Tor to hang it in the gallery.”
“I’m not that famous, short-stuff.” Sunstreaker demurred.

“Not yet.” Sideswipe sang out mischievously. “But with a patron like the boss…?”

Something about the room was bothering him. Jazz took a closer look around the space while the twins bantered. Then he saw it. As much as the rest of the room was a disaster, the berth was perfectly made. It was incongruous. He noted the placement of the washrack and mentally compared it to the previous room.

The washrack must have been shared between the two rooms. Maybe it wasn’t the only thing they shared? They were twins.

Another canvas leaning against the wall caught his attention.

“...Is tha’... me?” His hesitant question cutting through the light chatter behind him.

It certainly looked like his profile. His audial horns and visor were a dead giveaway. And it looked like he’d been painted wearing the shawl, glittery glyph on his neck just visible from where it was peeking out from the fabric.

“Yeah?” Sunstreaker wasn’t looking at him, going for indifference, but his field gave away his sheepish nervousness. “I told you you looked like model, so I painted you.”

“It’s really good, mech. I’m honored.”

Sunstreaker side-eyed him measuringly, then he turned to face Jazz fully again. A smirk making its way back to his dermas.

“Thanks, you should be.”

Sideswipe sighed dramatically. “Humble as always, Sunshine.”

“Don’t call me that.”

Bluestreak giggled. He tugged on Jazz’s servo. “Come on, there’s so much more I want to show you!”

What could Jazz do, but follow.

Chapter End Notes

Listening suggestions-
Jazz’s song- ”Fly” by Ludovico Einaudi
Jazz and Bluestreak’s song- ”His Theme” from Undertale (piano version)
Jazz gets to see even more of the estate and gains a few more puzzle pieces.

“Much more” turned out to be two whole floors of the estate. First, they went to another wing of
guest rooms on the second floor. Each room was relatively modest, but still with the best finishings.
Jazz wondered just how many guests Prowl entertained before he realized that the rooms had that
closed-off smell of spaces that hadn’t been used in some time. Perhaps Prowl’s predecessors had
used them in cycles past in their slow social climb.

Then the four of them explored the floor’s living room, proper. The huge shelves of games drew
Jazz’s attention. Some of the games he didn’t recognize. All of them looked servo-crafted and worth
more than his ornly rent.

“Do you like games? We can play one after dinner. I like Houses!” Bluestreak enthused.

“Ain’t one I’ve played b’fore.” Jazz admitted. “You’ll ‘ave t’ show me ‘ow it’s done.”

There were heavy doors on both ends of the living room and Bluestreak explained that those were
Barricade’s room (kept locked when he wasn’t visiting) and Prowl’s suite (not locked, but Bluestreak
refused to go in without permission- smart bitlet).

When Jazz asked about the third floor, pointing up the ornate staircase, Bluestreak just shrugged
saying it wasn’t very interesting. It was laid out similarly to the second floor, except with furniture
and belongings of previous generations. Smokescreen’s room was up there (also locked since he
wasn’t currently visiting the estate), but other than that, there was nothing to see.

The mechling took them past Prowl’s suite down a winding corridor to a nondescript door which
opened onto a set of sturdy, plain-looking stairs.

“These are the secret steps that the servants use.” Bluestreak said in a conspiratorial whisper.

“Where are we goin’ now?” Jazz asked, charmed by the mechling’s attitude.

“The kitchens! And once you’ve met everybot, I’ll show you the rest of the upper basement.”

“Who’s ‘everybot’?”

“All the servants! They’re the best. They’ve been helping take care of me since I was little. They’ve
all been so curious about you, but I haven’t had time to introduce you until now.”

The homely spiralling stairs would have been claustrophobic if they hadn’t had windows letting in
the afternoon light and a view of the transport dock. These stairs must be very close to the hallway
he’d found while poking around the piped synth earlier.

Down two floors, the stairs opened to a sizable passageway. Large double doors lined the side which
opened out to the transport courtyard. Jazz could only assume that this was where they took in the
fuel and necessities shipments for the estate.
An orange and blue mech rounded the corner carrying a pile of dirty cleaning cloths and stopped up short at the sight of them, sensor panels flapping in shock. “M-master Bluestreak! What are you all doing down here?” His optics flicked anxiously to Jazz.

“Hi Locale! I wanted to introduce Jazz to everybot. Jazz, this is Locale, one of the house maids.

Jazz tilted his helm. “Nice t’ meet ya. I’d shake yar servo, bu’ they look a little full.”

“Er, yeah.” Locale chuckled nervously, shifting the meshes into a more secure hold. On one of the moving pieces of cloth, Jazz caught sight of a stain that looked suspiciously like dried mech-fluid.

Sideswipe put one servo on Jazz’s shoulder and one on Bluestreak’s and steered them past the fidgeting mech. “Come on, short-stuff, we’re keeping Locale from doing the laundry. Let’s go to the kitchen.”

Jazz shot the red mech a look, but the Kaonite just smiled in a friendly manner and kept up the persuasive pressure on his shoulder. Considering their young company, Jazz didn’t voice his concerns about what he thought he’d seen. After all, there might be a rational explanation.

There might be. But Jazz doubted it.

The kitchen was full of activity. Several pots bubbled away on a huge stove, watched over by an old Tarnian femme. With a little jolt, Jazz realized that, besides the twins, this was the first time he’d seen another non-Praxian since he’d arrived in the city. There was a Praxian mech scrubbing dishes at the sink, while another carefully ground down a mineral with a pestle and mortar.

“That’s Draft, and Chambers, and Scansnap.” The mechling pointed to each in turn and Jazz was suddenly the focus of several startled pairs of optics.

The Tarnian femme turned from the stove and said in a crackling voice. “What are you doing down here, bitty?”

“Excuse me for the intrusion, Draft,” Bluestreak said brightly with a short bobbing bow, “but I wanted to introduce you to Jazz.”

The aged Tarnian gave Jazz a slow once-over and a sly smile. “Hello, handsome. I can see why Master Prowl likes you.”

“Um, nice t’ meet ya?”

She laughed creakily. “And polite too! Skids said you liked my soup. Just you wait, I’ve got a real treat planned for dinner.”

“I’m lookin’ forward t’ it ma’am.”

She continued warmly. “It’s nice to meet the mech that puts a smile on Master Prowl’s faceplates, Lord Jazz.”

“I’m, um, not a–”

“Hey, Blue, let’s go show Jazz the fun rooms down here.” Sideswipe suddenly spoke up from behind him.

“Yeah,” Sunstreaker put in, “we might get roped into work if we stick around.”

Draft’s dermas twisted down into a frown. She shook the spoon she was holding aggressively. “You
two! Out of my kitchen. I won’t have you stealing the desserts again!”

“That was once, the cycle we got here! We didn’t know better!” Sideswipe protested as Sunstreaker huffed.

“And it will never happen again! Out!” Her tone switched back to friendly as her gaze transferred to Bluestreak. “But you should go on, bitty. We need to get dinner ready. Off you go.”

Jazz was ushered out of the kitchen as quickly as he’d been led into it.

They ran into another femme in the hall, this one a Praxian, that Bluestreak introduced as Callout the Housekeeper. Jazz despaired that he was going to remember none of these names. The femme was formally polite to Jazz, almost painfully so. He could only imagine that having him down in her domain was rather awkward for her, or maybe she was just being careful. Thankfully, Bluestreak and the twins drew him away before the interaction became too strained.

Bluestreak chattered that there was another house maid named Garter who was probably in one of the upstairs rooms cleaning and two grooms name Score and Follow Up who were likely out in the transport dock. Jazz did quick math in his helm. Were there really only nine servants that kept this place running? It seemed like a huge task.

He hadn’t recognized any of the servants from the ones he’d seen at the Gardens and wondered if the two as-yet-seen grooms were the ones who’d served them.

Bluestreak took them through another plain door and into a much grander hallway. This was obviously the divide between the servant’s area of the floor and the family’s. It made Jazz uncomfortably aware of his own uncertainty of where he fell on that social divide.

The first room Bluestreak pulled Jazz into was dark and echoed strangely. The lights flickered on, triggered by their movements and Jazz felt his mouth drop open. It was a full-sized indoor oil pool.

“Do you like to swim?” Bluestreak asked curiously.

“I use’t’ swim all th’ time when I was little. My creators took me ou’ on trips t’ th’ Rust Sea.” He knelt down and tested the temperature with his servo; the oil was warm.

“I’ve never been to the Sea.” Bluestreak divulged.

“It’s a lot different swimmin’ in th’ currents than in a pool. The Sea’s got its own rhythm. Ya gotta respect it, or it’ll drag ya under.”

“That sounds scary.”

“Only if ya’re careless.” Jazz stood back up and gave the worried-looking youngling a reassuring smile. “Wha’ other cool things are down here?”

The worried look melted away. “Across the hall is the sparring room. It used to be locked. ‘Tor says that in the Golden Era it was used for duels, but Sunny and Sides use it now for boxing practice.”

“Boxin’, huh?” Jazz refrained from shooting the twins a disbelieving glance.

“Maybe if you come around more often, you can use it for Metallikato practice.”

Sunstreaker scoffed. “Metallikato is just fancy brawling.”

“Sunny…” Sideswipe said in an exasperated tone.
“Spoken as somebot who has never fought a true practitioner.” Jazz smirked.

“You want to put your money where your mouth is?” The gold bot challenged Jazz mentally checked how his headlight was feeling and then shrugged. “I could do a quick spar, if that’s alright with you, Blue.”

“No, it is not!” Bluestreak said with a stamp of his pede. “Jazz is injured! You shouldn’t ask hurt bots to fight, Sunstreaker!”

“Alright, alright, Primus! Don’t get your vents clogged up, short-stuff.” The gold Kaonite held up his servos in surrender.

“Another time, then, yeah?” Jazz said easily. “Twenty shinax says I’ll win.”

Sunstreaker and Sideswipe looked surprised for a klik, then gave him matching cocky grins. “You’re on.” The red twin agreed.

They walked down a hall of individual washracks, which Jazz assumed was for bots to wash off after a dip in the pool or a particularly taxing spar. The mechling enthusiastically showed him the indoor shooting range where he practiced, because of course they had one.

The next room they saw was what Bluestreak called the “painted room”. It was aptly named seeing as how every vertical surface was covered with colorful collages. The paintings decorating the walls included characters from folklore, a platoon of soldiers, and other imaginative imagery. Bluestreak explained that the room had been painted in his great-great grand creator’s time for a big party for the Festival of Primus. They spent a good amount of time dithering in the room, taking in the vast array of colors and shapes and listening to the twins’ humorous critiques.

The mechling brought them back up to the main floor via a stairwell that ended up coming out just under the grand staircase. And straight into the path of a waiting Prowl.

“Are you done with work, ‘Tor?” Bluestreak asked happily.

“I am.” He answered warmly. “It is nearly dinner time. Did your explorations make you forget the time?”

Jazz checked his own chronometer and was surprised by the amount of joors that had passed. Prowl held out his servo to Jazz, field brushing against his fondly. “Come. Skids has told me they are nearly ready to serve.”

They sat down to an unsurprisingly fancy dinner. Some sort of colorful, layered monstrosity that Jazz couldn’t pronounce the name of. He made the appropriately amazed noises about it so Skids could tell Draft that he’d been suitably impressed.

What did surprise Jazz was that the twins sat down with them in the two seats to Bluestreak’s left. Jazz felt a little foolish for not realizing just how much Prowl was integrating them into his little family unit. They may have been Bluestreak’s “guardians”, but they weren’t servants. With the way he spoke to them, it was almost as if they were favored distant relations that were a couple of rungs lower on the social scale.

They talked mostly about inconsequential things until just at the end of the meal after dessert was served.

Bluestreak sighed happily, “This dinner is so much nicer than when Smokescreen and Uncle
Barricade were here a couple cycles ago. Smokescreen’s great, but Uncle Barricade kept being mean to Sunny and Sides. I don’t like it when he comes over.”

Jazz watched as the twins practically froze in their seats. Prowl took the shift in conversation with far more grace, seemingly unperturbed.

“You shouldn’t say such things. He’s family.” He said with mild reproach.

Bluestreak pouted and poked at his chilled sweet-energon mousse mulishly. “Then he should act like it.”

Prowl’s voice became slightly sharper. “Bluestreak.”

The mechling actually winced. “I’m sorry, ‘Tor.”

The older Praxian’s visage immediately softened. “You are forgiven.” He turned to Jazz. “Apologies. Family politics doesn’t make for pleasant dinner conversation.”

Jazz aimed for a nonchalant shrug. “No problem. Sometimes ya don’ always get along with yar relatives.”

Prowl quirked a small, amused smile at him. “Indeed.”

A couple cycles ago, huh? Jazz thought grimly. The cycle of the raid.

They finished up soon after that. Bluestreak impatiently drew them up the stairs to the second floor living room insisting that himself and Prowl had to teach Jazz how to play Houses.

The twins flopped unceremoniously on chairs in front of the windows and pulled out datapads to read. Jazz sat on the couch that Bluestreak practically shoved him onto. The mechling settled himself next to him. After selecting the game from the shelves, Prowl sat himself on the couch across from them.

Houses turned out to be a game where the player picked a fictional family from a fictional city-state and played event cards to change the fortune of their own family or the families of the other players. Each event card was worth a certain number of positive or negative points. The game ended when one player had elevated their family to rule the city-state. Then, points were tallied to see who won.

He shared a servo of cards with Bluestreak for the first game; the mechling pointing out the best combinations. Considering how his last game with Prowl went, he was actually surprised when they won. For subsequent rounds, he played on his own and Prowl began to rack up wins. He must have been going easy on them that first time.

It was fun, though.

At the end of their latest game, Prowl started to pack the cards away. “I fear, I didn’t realize how late it had gotten. Bluestreak, it is past time for you to be in recharge.”

“Please, just one more game?” The younger Praxian begged.

All at once, Jazz noticed how the mechling’s optics were a deeper, sleepy blue and his doorwings drooped drowsily. A glance over to the twins saw them both already in recharge, sprawled in their chairs. He checked his chronometer.

Primus, how had he lost track of time that badly? The dark-cycle had begun joors ago.
Prowl’s tone was gentle. “No, Bluestreak. It’s time for recharge.” He raised his voice slightly. “Sunstreaker. Sideswipe.”

The twins came awake spitting out a few glyphs of the garble, rusty sounding gibberish that was pitkaonese and fell off their chairs like a pair of scalded mecha-felidas, eliciting a tiny giggle from Bluestreak. Jazz knew enough of the dialect to recognize the cussing for what it was. They scrambled upright at an annoyed flick of Prowl’s doorwings.

“The living room isn’t the place for recharge. Off to your rooms, now.”

“Yes, Sir.” They mumbled in unison and shuffled in the direction of their rooms.

Prowl turned to Jazz. “After we get Bluestreak settled for the dark-cycle, I’ll show you to your room.”

Jazz nearly tripped on his own pedes as he was attempting to get up off the couch. “Uh, wha’?”

Bluestreak gave him a worried, pleading look. “You are staying for the dark-cycle, aren’t you? You can’t drive now. It’s dangerous in the dark, and you only have one headlight.”

“I, ah, wouldn’ wanna intrude. I can jus’ make th’ drive. I’ll be careful.”

“Please, I insist.” Prowl pressed. “It is far too late in the dark-cycle for you to be traveling on those winding roads. We have plenty of guest rooms. And it is really for my own peace of processor.”

Why is it impossible to say no to the two of them!?

“I s’pose. If it’s no trouble…”

Prowl smiled and Bluestreak beamed.

Frag my life. But the thought was fond.

Jazz helped Prowl tuck Bluestreak in. It was so utterly domestic that it made Jazz’s spark flip and pulse warmly in his chest. Bluestreak sweetly wished them a good recharge as Jazz turned out the light and Prowl softly closed the door.

But then Prowl took his servo and led him in the opposite direction from where Jazz knew the guest rooms were on this floor.

“Uh, ain’t th’ guest rooms back tha’ way?” He asked as they crossed through the living room towards Prowl’s suite.

“The normal guest rooms are, but I feel like spoiling you a bit.”

“Ya always try t’ spoil me.” Jazz remarked, dryly amused.

“I would spoil you more if you would just let me.” A hint of exasperation bled through his tone.

“Admit it, ya like th’ challenge.” Jazz quipped.

The Praxian stopped outside a door just down the hall from his own and opened it for him. The door led to an antechamber with the entrance to a washrack on the right. The entrance to the main room in front of them was curtained with a heavy mesh. Prowl pushed through the fabric.

Again, the room was bigger than his whole apartment. It was decorated with gold paint and fabric
curtains with accents of black lace. It had its own fireplace. There was an ornate primping table with a mirror and a richly made secretary desk. The berth (which was more than twice the size of his own), a chair and chaise lounge were all covered with the same black lace as the curtains. Two bay windows were situated across from the berth and another mystery door sat on the left side of the room.

“S’beautiful.” Jazz murmured in wonder.

“No bot has used this room since my carrier deactivated.”

“This… was ‘er room?”

“Yes. All of her things were removed and the room was redecorated after her deactivation… Does that bother you?”

“...No. Jus’ tryin’ t’ wrap my helm ‘round it… where does th’ other door go?”

“It leads to a private sitting room that connects this room to mine.”

Prowl tugged Jazz into a sudden embrace. He cradled the back of Jazz’s helm and gave him a sensor-igniting kiss. Prowl silently asked to deepen the kiss with a questing glide of his glossa. Jazz allowed him in. He also allowed the doorwinged mech to press him up against the wall and run a servo down his side and over sensitive seams.

Charge skittered over his sensor net. Prowl’s engine rumbled against his plating deliciously. The wandering servo traveled up again and grazed against the bandage on his chest. Jazz gasped, more in surprise than pain, though the touch did send a small spike of discomfort through the pleasurable sensations. Prowl stopped what he was doing to gaze at him in concern.

“Are you alright?”

Jazz’s dermas tingled. And… and when had he circled his arms around the other mech’s neck? “F-fine. Jus’ tender.”

Doorwings dipped as remorse flickered through Prowl’s field. “It seems my ardour got the better of me. You should rest.”

Jazz didn’t let him pull away. He softly nestled his forehelm against Prowl’s. He let his field communicate that the Praxian was forgiven. They shared vents for a while in the near-meditative quiet of the room.

Jazz was a little frustrated by the stop of their activities, but he knew it was for the best. He was injured and he had decorum, Primus-damnit. The consideration orn wasn’t over yet. You weren’t supposed to get intimate until after you’d accepted the horn adornment.

Prowl kissed him again with gentle affection and drew away.

“Recharge well. If you need anything,” Prowl quirked an amused smile, “I’m just a room over. Good dark-cycle.”

“Good dark-cycle.” Jazz replied.

The Praxian left through the connecting door, Jazz caught a glimpse of the room beyond for just a klik before the door shut behind him. The visored mech sighed and turned off the light. He made his way across the room to the berth using the moonlight streaming through the windows. He gingerly
laid down on the berth. It was as soft as it was fancy.

As he shifted around to get comfortable, he composed a short message to Stepper with the image of the dagger attached. He asked the forensics mech what the burns on the blade might have been and from when the dagger might have originally been made. Hopefully Stepper would get back to him in a few cycles.

He turned onto his side. There was the small annoyance of the excess charge he still had, but he was too self-conscious to attempt to siphon it off with a quick overload in this place.

He must have been more tired than he thought, though. Even with the extra charge, on a strange berth, in a new room, surrounded by a old cavernous house, he found himself drifting quickly into recharge.

The berth was so soft, it felt like he was floating. At the same time he couldn’t move, weighted down and frozen. It didn’t bother him, though. He saw flashing blue optics and a red chevron. Doorwings arched. Then Prowl was kissing, kissing, kissing… Digits stroked and dipped into seams, searching-

Jazz came awake with a start, his comm. going off instantly.

Primus’ left lugnut. Fragging charge giving me fluxes. Who the frag is calling me?!

It was… Crossfire? Why? Barely a joor had passed, it was practically the middle of the dark-cycle. Was something wrong?

:'Lo?:

:Two!: Crossfire sounded far too awake for this time of the dark-cycle.

:Um, three?: Jazz answered, confusion in his tone.

:What?: Now it was her turn to sound confused. :No. I mean, there’s two moles.: Jazz sat up abruptly, suddenly much more alert. :What are ya sayin’?:

She started speaking quickly. :I couldn’t recharge so I started looking an old cold case. I do that when I can’t recharge. Then I started thinking about what you said about Barricade going behind the Viscount’s back. And some of these details about the case made me realize that if the Viscount has a mole then Barricade probably has a mole, too, to keep him informed of the Enforcers’ movements. But not somebot from our department. That’s why the raid was successful. We moved so quickly and quietly that the knowledge of the raid wasn’t spread to other departments.: :Wait, woah. Slow down. First question. How many stims ‘ave ya taken?:

:...I drank two shots of JetSet.: :Primus! Ya tryin’ t’ stay awake fo’ th’ whole dark-cycle?:

:I started to get tired and I didn’t want to lose my train of thought.: She answered defensively.

:Alrigh’, alrigh’. Second question. What cold case?: She hesitated. :...There was a mech that got involved with the Crystalspires on an intimate level and then tried to end it. He ended up deactivated. A mugging gone wrong.: :Ya don’ believe tha’.:
I never have. This was a case my mentor could never solve and I sort of inherited it when he retired.

Do I wanna know who it was?

Smokescreen’s carrier. He was a judge. And even his elevated position couldn’t save him from the Crystalspires.

Jazz wanted to argue that she couldn’t know that, but he couldn’t deny the large trail of bodies that the Crystalspires left behind them. But from his own research, this mech’s deactivation didn’t fit Prowl’s MO. If Prowl had wanted him dead, he would have died in a tragic driving accident... or something like that. Barricade, however…

This is why ya didn’t try t’ stop me, isn’ it? I admit, I was wonderin’ why ya were so… acceptin’ o’ my relationship with Prowl.

...You were already too deep to go back. I didn’t want you to end up deactivated. She sounded regretful.

Jazz huffed. Well, don’ arrange fo’ my funeral jus’ yet, woul’ ya?

I would never-! Oh, that was a joke, wasn’t it? Sorry. Stims.

S’okay. So, who do ya think is th’ other mole?

Somebot in homicide. I’m pretty sure. I’ve got a list; I just need to narrow it down.

Get some recharge firs’. Ya can run it by me t’morrow when we go on patrol.

I woke you, didn’t I? Slag. What time is it?

As amusing as it was to hear his normally unruffled partner a bit unraveled, it was also unsettling.

It’s late. He admitted. But I’ve woken ya in th’ middle o’ th’ dark-cycle, too, so we’re even, alrigh’? Jus’ try t’ power down fo’ a few joors. I’ll see ya in th’ mornin’.

He’d tell her where he’d spent the night when they were driving around so she couldn’t thwak him on the helm.

She bid him a good dark-cycle and ended the comm.

He wasn’t as comfortable this time as he laid there trying to get back into recharge, his processor spinning round and round.
The next morning Jazz woke to the sound of somebot moving quietly about the room. It took a moment for the sleepy confusion of, *where the frag am I?* to wear off as he remembered how and why he was on a super soft berth in a room that sounded too big to be his apartment. He laid very still and readied a mag pulse in his servo before he covertly powered up his optical feed and looked in the direction of the sound.

There was an unknown blue Praxian mech with green accents, silently laying out folded towels and a small basket of assorted bottles. Like Skids, he wore the decals of the Crystalspire family on his shoulder pauldrons. One of the other servants, then?

The mech turned and startled badly with a squeak when he saw the online glow of Jazz’s visor from the berth.

“I- I’m sorry, Sir. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Ain’t yar fault. I’m a light sleeper.” Jazz sat up slowly as not to spook the mech further, cancelling the mag pulse with a subtle shake of his servo. “Wha’ are ya doin’ in here?”

A confused look passed over the mech’s face. “I’m delivering your bathing accoutrements. I, um, you weren’t supposed to see me...”

Jazz tilted his helm curiously. “I wasn’t?”

“N-no. We’re supposed to do our work without being seen.” The mech’s sensor panels fidgeted nervously.

Was this what everycycle life was like for a noble? Wake up to amenities at your servo-tips while an army of servants ran around, invisible under your floorboards? The thought made Jazz feel weirdly guilty. The small, worried voice of the servant interrupted his musings.

“Um, please don’t tell Mr Skids you saw me?”

Jazz gave the mech a disarming smile. “‘E won’t ‘ear nothin’ from me, promise.”

The mech looked relieved, though his doorwings didn’t relax. Jazz search his memory banks for the names of the servants that he’d heard the cycle before.

“Yar Garter, righ’? One o’ th’ house maids. Blue was introducin’ me t’ everybot yesterday an’ said ya were probably busy up ‘ere.”

Now the mech’s sensor panels eased and his face softened at the mention of the youngling. “Yes.
Locale told me about it, but you had already moved out of the back halls by the time I got back.”

“Well, it’s nice t’ meet ya.”

Garter gave him a timid smile. “It’s nice to meet you too, Lord Jazz. I really need to get back to my duties. Have a good cycle.”

And with that, he executed a hurried bow and then scurried out of the room through the curtained entrance.

“’M not a… Lord.” Jazz said faintly to the empty room. He sighed and got up to examine the “bathing accoutrements”. There was a fancy oil, a wet and a dry polish, and three different waxes. The towels were all the softest shammies he’d ever felt; it was like holding a bunch of clouds. He took the towels and the basket into the lavish washrack, which was decorated to match the main room.

Before he used the shower, he gently took the bandage off his chest. Only the faintest scratches remained in his headlight, the rest of the damage taken care of by the nanite gel and his own self-repair. A quick test confirmed that it was working again with only a slight twinge.

As Jazz luxuriated under the warm cleanser, he checked his messages and found a short answer from Stepper. While the mech was excited about the prospect of looking into the historical context of the knife he also apologetically explained that it would take a couple cycles for him to get to the personal project since he was currently slammed with work. He concluded his message with a promise to get to it as soon as he could. Jazz filed it away to check back in with him later. Then he got back to his shower and used the wet polish to touch up the area around his headlight.

As he dried off with one of the sinfully soft towels, he opticked the waxes dubiously. One of them he was certain he had seen in a high end shop in Garden Square and remembered a price tag that was more than his ornly rent. He didn’t know if they’d been given to him merely as a luxury or if Prowl was subtly trying to tell him something. The Praxian did seem to like seeing him fancied up.

Jazz was going to have to disappoint him this morning, though. One did not wear lavish waxes while on patrol. It wasn’t practical.

He felt a little weird knowing the servants would be coming into the room after he left to clean up after him. He folded up the used towel in the washrack and made up the meshes on the berth even though they weren’t nearly as tidy as they had been before he’d used it.

Maybe if he pretended he was in a hotel, it wouldn’t feel so strange.

The house seemed oddly quiet as he made his way across the second floor living room to the stairs. He wondered if Bluestreak and the twins were up and awake yet.

Jazz reached the landing at the top of the first set of steps on the grand staircase just in time to see Skids hurrying past towards the front entryway. He opened the doors, and though Jazz had only seen the bot in pictures, he recognized the blue and red mech that came swanning through them.

“Good morning, Skids.” The mech’s voice was authoritative, if friendly. “Will you tell Uncle I’m here. I’ve got business to speak with him about.”

The butler was apologetic. “The business talk may have to wait, Sir. Lord Prowl is entertaining a guest at the moment.”

“A guest?” His tone managed to pull off polite interest, though his sensor panels flicked up sharply
Skids glanced up at the staircase and startled when he spotted Jazz. The blue and red mech followed his gaze, optics deepening with calculation. And Jazz was not going to run back up the stairs out of sight like a youngling that had been caught eavesdropping. He afforded a casual air and walked down the steps.

“Mornin’, Skids.”

“Good morning, Sir. I trust you recharged well?”

“Like a sparklin’, thank ya.”

He turned his attention to the blue and red mech, a touch apprehensive when he saw the cunning in the mech’s optics. Before he could even open his mouth to introduce himself the mech began to speak.

“Oh, I didn’t know Uncle’s new friend would be here! I’m delighted to meet you, I’m The Honorable Smokescreen of Crystalspire.” Despite the salacious undertone of his words, and the obvious helm-to-pede optical sweep he made of Jazz’s frame, he did actually sound genuinely pleased. He followed up his words with the traditional Praxian fist-to-chestplates greeting tap.

Jazz returned the gesture. “Nice t’ meet ya. I’m Officer Jazz of the First Precinct.”

“An Enforcer? How interesting.” He gave Jazz a felida-like grin. “You, my friend, have just helped me win a bet.”

“A bet?” Jazz remarked dryly, remembering Somkescreen’s supposed penchant for gambling.

The mech’s confided conspiratorially. “My co-workers and I were taking wagers on who you might be. I knew you couldn’t be a visiting dignitary. Really, we all would have heard about a state visit.” Smokescreen insisted as if it were the most obvious thing on Cybertron. “And you didn’t have the marks of a politician.” He tacked on as an afterthought.

The visored mech was pretty sure he hadn’t meant that as an insult. “Right… an’ wha’ exactly is it tha’ ya do?”

“Oh, I’m a lawyer by trade.” Smokescreen said with a winning smile.

“O’ course ya are.” Jazz muttered sarcastically.

He was saved from sharing his full opinion on that by the echo of pedesteps down the corridor. Prowl walked into the entrance hall from the direction of his office.

“Please forgive my nephew,” Prowl’s voice held a slight sardonic lilt, “he’s yet to learn the delicate art of tact.”

“I’m hurt, Uncle, truly!” Smokescreen sniffed in mock offense, putting a servo to his chestplates. “I’ll have you know I have the tact of a Prime at The Summit.”

Prowl’s doorwings were relaxed, his field indulgent. “You’ll be joining us for breakfast, I assume.”

“How kind of you for the invitation,” The blue and red mech replied faux-demurely, “especially with the promise of such… scintillating company.” He not-so-subtly dimmed his optic at Jazz in a wink.

Prowl’s doorwings flared slightly and a small frown pulled down his dermas. He smoothly stepped
past his nephew flexing his sensor panels up and back. A proprietary servo was placed solidly on Jazz’s back as Prowl slid into Jazz’s personal space, just managing not to crowd him. Prowl dipped his helm, pecking a quick kiss on Jazz’s cheek. “Good morning, Jazz, I was just coming to retrieve you for breakfast. Did you recharge well?”

“Yeah, I did, thanks.” Jazz said with a warm smile.

“I’m glad. I apologize for keeping you up so late. I see you took the bandage off. How is your headlight feeling?”

Out of the corner of his visor Jazz saw Smokescreen’s sensor panels make a complicated series of twitches, and his smile widen with unhidden glee.

“Much better.”

“Good. If you need another pain patch, please don’t hesitate to ask.” He put the lightest amount of pressure on Jazz’s back. “Bluestreak is waiting for us in the breakfast room. Shall we?”

Jazz shrugged. “Sure. I’ve got enough time t’ eat before I ‘ave t’ be at th’ precinct.”

The blue and red mech piped up, slag-eating grin on his face. “Right then, let’s not keep my adorable cousin waiting.” He executed a strangely flamboyant heel-turn, complete with sensor panel flare, and led the way through the corridor. Prowl’s doorwings flickered.

*What did I just miss? What was with all that doorwing flapping?*

Well versed as Jazz was with the overarching motions and meanings of Praxian sensor panels, he could admit that the subtle nuances still usually went right over his helm. All he could glean from the exchange was that Smokescreen was trying to get attention and Prowl didn’t like it.

Prowl’s servo migrated from the small of his back to settle just above his hip as they walked together to the breakfast room, pulling him nearly flush against the other mech. He didn’t comment, but let a little bit of bemusement filter through his field from where it brushed against Prowl’s.

The mute reply of possessiveness was expected, but also shocking in its intensity. The servo on his hip curled its digit-tips gently into a seam. Jazz felt the displacement of air as one of Prowl’s doorwings flared to half-cover Jazz’s back as they entered the room.

“Good morning, ‘Tor! Good morning, Jazz! Good morning, Smokescreen! I didn’t know you were coming today.” The mechling grinned cheerily, hopping up from his chair to give them all hugs.

“Just wanted to make a social call, dear cousin.” Smokescreen’s voice was warm. He nodded to the two seated Kaonites. “Sunstreaker, Sideswipe.”

Smokescreen continued speaking lightly with the youngling, seemingly unperturbed by the presence of the twins at the table. The feeling appeared to be mutual by their relaxed plating.

Ah, right, it was *Barricade* who had a problem with the Kaonites, not his creation.

Prowl pulled out the chair for Jazz in the same place he’d been seated the cycle before. Bluestreak and the twins were also sitting in the same places. The eldest Praxian sat down next to him at the head of the table and then Smokescreen draped himself elegantly in the chair on his opposite side.

The blue and red mech put his chin on his servo, angling himself toward Jazz flirtatiously. “Now, Officer, you simply must tell me all about yourself.”
As the light blend of energon that was their breakfast was served, Jazz hesitantly told the far-too-interested Smokescreen about the circumstances that had led him to being on loan to the Praxian Enforcers. Then, at Bluestreak’s insistence, he told the story of how he’d met the youngling (and by extension Prowl). The mechling added tidbits here and there, much to Jazz’s amusement. Prowl was strangely quiet during the meal, but sometime during the chat his servo found Jazz’s on the table. The blue and red mech saw, of course, and then the conversation took an uncomfortable shift to Jazz and Prowl’s relationship.

“The two of you are having quite the whirlwind romance, if rumors are to be believed.” Smokescreen purred. He spared a glance at Bluestreak who was distracted by something Sideswipe was saying and leaned close to Jazz’s audial. “You must have some interesting tricks if you’ve been invited upstairs already.”

Jazz felt his field flush through with mortification and indignation at the implication.

Unfortunately for Smokescreen, Prowl heard him.

Prowl’s doorwings flicked up sharply into a V, a severe frown marring his faceplates. “Smokescreen!” His biting voice caused everybot at the table to freeze. He continued in a low warning rumble. “I know I taught you better manners than you are displaying. You are being exceedingly rude and vulgar.” Jazz could feel from where Prowl’s EMF brushed against his own, the mech’s aggravated disapproval.

The blue and red Praxian perhaps sensed it as well, realizing a bit too late that he’d pushed a little too far and straightened in his chair, doorwings down and tense. He averted his optics to the side like a chastized youngling. “Sorry, Uncle.”

“I am not the one you need to be apologizing to.” Prowl’s voice was so cold it should have coated Smokescreen in a rime of frost.

Smokescreen turned to Jazz with a rueful look. “My apologies, Officer Jazz. I meant no offence.”

The mech certainly appeared honestly contrite, so Jazz decided to have mercy on him and save them all from Prowl’s displeasure which was radiating across the table like a leaky reactor. He soothingly squeezed Prowl’s servo as he answered calmly. “Ya’re forgiven. I’ve certainly ‘eard worse teasing at th’ precinct.”

The smile returned to Smokescreen’s face as well as some of the confidence to his field. But before he could speak again, Prowl stated, “Seeing as how you’ve finished your meal, you can wait for me in my office, I will join you after I’ve seen Jazz off to work.”

The expression on Smokescreen’s faceplates was too dignified to be called a pout, but it was hilariously disappointed. “Yes, Uncle.”

Jazz checked his chronometer. Yeah, he needed to head out soon if he wanted to make it to his shift on time.

They all vacated the table. Smokescreen heading in the direction of Prowl’s office, while Prowl and Bluestreak escorted Jazz to the front doors with the twins trailing behind.

“I wish you could stay with us the whole day.” Bluestreak said wistfully.

Jazz offered him a warm smile, “So do I lil’ mech, but I gotta job t’ do.”

Bluestreak hugged him tightly. “Come back soon!”
“I will.” Jazz returned the hug and then tweaked one of Bluestreak’s helmvents playfully.

Prowl reset his vocalizer and gave Sideswipe and Sunstreaker a pointed look. Their optics brightened with understanding. Sideswipe gave a grin. “Oh, right! It was nice to see you again, Officer.” He put a gentle servo on Bluestreak’s shoulder. “Come on short-stuff, the adults want some ‘alone time’.”

Bluestreak’s little sensor panels wiggled with happiness and he giggled. “Oh! Okay! Bye Jazz!”

Jazz and Prowl were left in the relative privacy of the entrance hall as the twins ushered the tittering mechling up the grand staircase.

Jazz chuckled, too amused to be embarrassed. He gazed up at Prowl. “Alone time?”

The Praxian huffed. “It seems I need to add etiquette lessons to the twins’ schedule.”

The visored mech put his servo on Prowl’s arm. “Don’ be too ‘ard on ‘em, yeah? They’re jus’ young an’ don’ know any better.”

“Hence, the lessons.” Prowl insisted.

They fell into silence. It seemed like Prowl was waiting for something, but Jazz wasn’t sure what it was, so he awkwardly reset his vocalizer and said,

“Well, s’pose I should head out.”

“Wait, Jazz…” Prowl’s doorwings flickered. If Jazz didn’t know any better, he would have thought the mech was nervous. “I have a gift for you. A small gift.” He quickly amended at the leery look that crossed the visored mech’s face.

“...A’ight.” Jazz allowed.

Prowl reached into his subspace and pulled out a palm-sized, thin, circular container made of glass and rimmed in a silver metal. It contained several fresh crystal trimmings that chimed sweetly.

“I had this locket made for you. There are magnets in it so you may place it wherever you wish on your plating. You can put new crystals in it from the gardens as often as you want. Consider it a part of the gift of accessibility to the estate.”

Affection and appreciation spread through Jazz’s field.

Prowl held the locket out to him, but Jazz just took a step forward. The Praxian looked concerned and mildly uncertain until Jazz asked playfully. “Well? Are ya gonna put it on me?”

Prowl’s optics lit up with surprise and then pleasure. He affixed the locket to the precice center of the the stripes accenting the upper portion of Jazz’s chestplates.

“Do you like it?” Prowl queried.

Jazz pecked a kiss to Prowl’s cheek. “What do ya think?” Jazz murmured saucily in response.

Prowl tipped his chin up and kissed him back. Just a quick, affectionate brush of dermas, though it still managed to ignite several of Jazz’s sensors. The Praxian pulled back and pressed the crests of their helms together. Jazz held on to the quiet moment for as long as he could and then sighed, straightening.

“Ya know I gotts ask… Smokescreen’s not ‘ere fo’ a social visit, is ‘e?”
The mech stiffened. “Jazz… don’t.” He rumbled in low warning.

“No. Ya can’t keep me in th’ dark forever, Prowl. Tell me wha’s goin’ on.”

When the Praxian didn’t say anything for a few breems Jazz’s dermas twisted into a frown. “...Or I can start talkin’ while ya glare at me. Though, tha’ didn’ work out so well last time…”

At Prowl’s continued silence Jazz began to speak. “Wha’ I’m guessin’, is tha’ ya an’ Barricade ‘ad some sort o’ fallin’ out a few vorns back, bu’ Smokescreen still felt an attachment t’ ‘is sparker an’ asked ya for a reprieve. So ya gave yar brother another chance by givin’ ‘im th’ job o’ kept an optic on th’ racin’ communities o’ Praxus. Instead of bein’ appy ‘bout this, Barricade felt patronized an’ decided t’ go b’hind yar back t’ start ‘is own side business. ‘E lied t’ ya, an’ now through wha’ jus’ appened with our raid, ya found out th’ full extent o’ wha’ ‘e was up t’… ‘Ow am I doin’ so far?”

“Perceptive.” Prowl grumbled without malice. He framed Jazz’s face with his servos. “I know I am asking much of you, but please, for this, I need you to trust me. This is family business, so let me take care of it.”

Jazz’s field solidified with stubbornness. “Tha’s not-!”

Prowl kissed him again.

...fair.

To Jazz’s surprise Prowl kept the kiss short and spoke when he pulled back. “Tomorrow.” Prowl uttered into the space between them. “Come for dinner at the start of the dark-cycle and I promise, I will tell you. Just give me that long.”

Shock froze Jazz for a klik. Questions tumble through his processor.

Was Prowl really going to trust him with possibly damning evidence against his family? Were Barricade’s crimes something that could no longer be overlooked or was there a different reason? Was Barricade going to still be functioning by tomorrow at the start of the dark-cycle? Had Jazz finally gotten through to Prowl or was this just another sort of powerplay? A way to tie him further to the Crystalspires?

The visored mech spent a long pause weighing the pros and cons.

“...Okay,” He finally agreed.

“Thank you.” Prowl breathed tracing around the locket with his digits

*Please Primus, don’t let my trust be misplaced.*

Chapter End Notes

Smokescreen turned out way more flirty than I expected... oops.
The precinct was quiet when Jazz arrived around mid-morning. He opticked his partner with concern as he walked towards her from the elevator. It looked like Crossfire hadn’t gotten any more recharge and decided to supplement her lack of charge with more stims. Her sensor panels alternately drooped and then suddenly jerked up twitching, only to sag again after a few breems. Her plating was meticulously clean, yet decidedly matte, which was a change from her usual glossy finish. A couple of the other officers were giving her worried looks.

“Are you ready for patrol?” She asked the moment he made it to their shared workspace.

“Yeah, yeah. Gimme a klik t’ check my messages.” He switched to comms. as he sat down at his desk. :Are ya, alrigh’? ‘Ow many more stims ’ave ya taken?:

:Some.: She said evasively, nudging a trash receptacle with her pede more out of sight under her desk. Her doorwings went- flick, flick, flick. Wilt.

:Are ya okay t’ drive?:

There was a flimsie sitting next to his console. On it was the drawn faceplates of the grey and yellow mech that had fled the raid. With it was a note stating that the sketch artists had gotten it done as quickly as possible and that digital copies were now distributed amongst the Enforcers.

:I got here, didn’t I?: Her tone was defensive. Lift, tremble, flop.

:Okay, ‘Fire: He surrendered with an easy pulse of acceptance through his field as he subspaced the flimsie. :Jus’ checkin’ on my kith.: A small smile tugged at the corner of her dermas. “Your headlight looks better.” She said out loud.

“It definitely feels better.” He answered lightly.


Jazz paused and ran his digits down the smooth glass surface of the locket self-consciously. “...It was a gift.”
“I figured… It’s nice.” :Are you alright with it?:

“Thanks.” :Yeah, it ain’t overt or flashy… I like it.:

“A’ight.” Jazz made a show of getting up from his console and stretching, “I’m all done. Let’s get ou’ there.”

He strolled to the elevator casually, relieved when Crossfire followed his lead and adopted his pace though her doorwings still quivered. They got on the road. Crossfire was quiet until they turned the corner and the precinct was out of sight.

:Here’s the list.: She pinged it over to his HUD.

:A’ight. Let’s give it a look.: 

It wasn’t a long list, but there were still at least a dozen names on it. He perused it with half a processor thread while he concentrated on diving.

*Hmm… Now which of you could be a mecha-mole?*

:Officer Cavalry? ‘E don’t strike me as th’ type.: 

Crossfire’s EMF made the equivalent of a shrug. :Some suspiciously frequent trips to the evidence locker, thought I should include him just to be safe.: 

:Fair enough, though it coul’ jus’ be tha’ ‘e as ‘is own unsolved case tha’ keeps ‘im up durin’ th’ dark-cycle. Officer Puncture? Tha’s not a des I’m familiar with.: 

:He’s new to the Enforcers. Just graduated. It’s unlikely, but he’s an unknown to both of us. I don’t know enough about him not to include him.: 

Jazz moved on to the next name. :Officer Lux. No way in th’ Pit. She barely takes orders from ‘er superior, no way she would let a noble push ‘er around.: 

:…You’re not wrong. But her insubordination makes her a good candidate for rule bending, at least.: 

:Yeah, a’ight, I’ll buy it.: 

*And next is …wait a klik-! Jazz nearly swerved into oncoming traffic. :Officer Gauge is on this list? As in th’ Officer on Gearschock’s case?:* 

:…Frag, I forgot about that!: Crossfire cursed. 

:Why is he on th’ list?: 

:He’s been reprimanded by both the head of his department and the Chief for embellishing reports in the past. It wouldn’t be much of a stretch for him to progress to falsifying information.: 

:It ain’t much t’ go on…: 

:And he was one of the Enforcers on Judge Messenger’s case.: 

:Judge Messenger? …Smokescreen’s carrier?: 

:Yes. He was the first on the scene. I think he may have tampered with evidence.:
Jazz let that process for a full breem, outrage swirling in his chestplates until it burst forth from his dermas: ...Fraggin’ Unicron-rusted end o’ a pipe cleaner!: A traditional Polyhexian hex followed, said in the old language.

...Do I want to know what you just said?: Crossfire asked, amused despite the conversation.

:I... might ‘ave jus’ cursed ‘is tailpipe t’ be infested with a thousand scraplets.:

She actually laughed. :What?:

:It makes more sense in Old Polyhexian!: It sounded prettier too.

:Right.:

He skimmed the rest of the list. :Hey, ‘Fire, Why isn’t th’ Chief on th’ list?:

She sighed. :Look, it’s pretty obvious he works for the Viscount, but I don’t think he works for his brother. We need to know who Barricade’s mecha-mole is, not Lord Prowl’s.:

:Point.:

Before they could go over the rest of the names, a call from the dispatch came over their comms. reporting a theft in Garden Square. Seeing as how they were less than a few streets away, they answered and shifted direction to address the call, putting the list away for later.

They arrived on the scene and took statements from the flustered shopkeeper and his employees. The thief had broken into the high end equivalent of a convenience store and when they’d discovered that the register was empty had taken wax, cleanser, edible crystals and, perhaps strangest of all, spark tests to check for conception. Eighteen of them.

Weird, but not the most unusual theft Jazz had heard of. Nope. That honor went to a mech back in Polyhex who broke into bots houses just to steal shower heads from their washracks. And nothing else.

The proprietor of the shop was distinctly not impressed when Jazz shared that little tidbit, though several of the employees smothered badly stifled laughter.

While Crossfire was in the middle of soothing the ruffled plating of the shopkeeper, promising to get to the bottom of the robbery as soon as possible, a genial call sounded half a block from where they were standing.

“Officer Jazz, how lovely to see you!”

It was Smokescreen, walking with a small group of polished mechs and femmes. They tittered to one another and flickered their sensor panels as they drew near. The blue and red Praxian led the gaggle of bots with a casual confidence, a fetching yellow sash that matched his chevron pinned at his shoulder with a red crystalline brooch.

Caught slightly off-guard, Jazz covered his confusion by tapping his chest in greeting. “Uh, ‘ello, Sir. I wasn’t expectin’ t’ see ya out an’ about.”

Smokescreen returned the greeting. “Oh, my business with Uncle didn’t take very long, this morning. And please, Jazz, you simply must drop the “Sir”. Just Smokescreen, will do.”

The visored mech suppressed a sigh when that set the group off whispering to each other excitedly.
"If ya like."

The blue and red mech smiled charmingly as he turned his attention to Crossfire who had finished with the shopkeeper and stepped up to Jazz’s side. “And who, may I ask, is this beautiful femme?”

Instead of being flattered, Crossfire bristled slightly, though she kept her armor smooth. “Officer Crossfire. I’m Officer Jazz’s patrol partner.” Her doorwings flared in a protective gesture. After a klik she tacked on almost as an afterthought. “Sir.”

The blue and red mech’s doorwings perked in interest, an intrigued smile lit his dermas. “A pleasure, Officer. The Honorable Smokescreen of Crystalspire, at your service.”

*Oh Primus, this isn’t going to end well.*

A green femme with a blue mech on her arm spoke up. “We’re going to be late for our reservation, Smoky. Perhaps the Officers could join us?”

“Oh yes, they should!” Somebot else in the group said.

“I’m ‘fraid we’re on patrol righ’ now.” Jazz said carefully.

Smokescreen’s doorwings shrugged cavalierly. “I’m sure Chief Scattershield won’t mind sparing the two of you for a few joors if I ask him. Just a moment.” He put his digits to his audial, apparently activating a comm. to the Chief of Enforcers.

The group of what could only be lesser nobles, swarmed around them and began to ask coy, inaine questions as they waited for the blue and red mech to finish his call.

“How long have you been in Praxus, Officer Jazz?”

“What made you want to be an Enforcer?”

“Is it very exciting, Officer Crossfire? Do you get to catch many criminals?”

“My brother is part of the Constabulary of the Regency District, he says is it rather boring.”

“The Constabulary is not the Enforcers, Shimmer, there’s a difference. Isn’t that right Officer Crossfire?”

Crossfire commed Jazz. :I feel like I should blame you for this, but somehow I don’t think either of us really had a choice.: Her voice was grumpy, though her outward demeanor stayed calm and cool as she answered questions.

:Well, I feel like I shoul’ say sorry, so I guess we can call it even?:

:Maybe. Also, when did you meet Mr. shiny, blue and pushy?:

:Um, when I was at Prowl’s this mornin’ fo’ breakfast.: 

:::

“There now.” Smokescreen said brightly. “You’re both approved to play hooky with us for a few joors.”

Jazz suddenly received a message on his HUD from the Chief himself, confirming the mech’s words. He valiantly kept the grimace off his dermas and out of his field. From the shadow that flickered that
across Crossfire’s faceplates and the aborted sharp flick of her doorwings, she must have gotten a similar message. Three joors for a “lunch” was just a little much.

“We appreciate th’ invitation.” Jazz responded diplomatically, keeping a tight rein on the annoyance that wanted to lash through his field. They were wasting time playing nice with spoiled nobles when they could have been doing their jobs!

Smokescreen took up position on Jazz’s side opposite Crossfire. “We were just on our way to a lovely open air cafe. I’m so glad that we ran into the two of you.”

Did you? Or was this little encounter planned?

It was obvious that Smokescreen delighted in being seen with his “entourage”. He strolled down the sidewalk in no particular hurry, inquiring after Jazz’s health and asking about the theft they had just taken statements for. To which Crossfire replied rather stiffly that they couldn’t talk about an ongoing investigation. This seemed to amuse Smokescreen.

They reached the outdoor cafe and sat at a large table under a pavilion. Smokescreen picked the choicest seat between the two Enforcers. After they’d settled, the server had hurried over to take their order. Having never been to the cafe before, Jazz just asked the server to recommend his favorite. Several of the other bots at the table followed his example. How the poor server nearly tripped over himself at the sudden influx of requests had the visored mech holding back the impulse to facepalm.

Primus dammit, he wasn’t trying to be trendy or in vogue. He just wanted some energon.

After the server had left to put in their order, Smokescreen leaned over and placed a servo on Jazz’s arm, “I do wish to apologize again for my… crass insinuations this morning. It’s not very often that I get to tease Uncle and he is… quite taken with you.”

There was a subtle warning behind his tone.

One of the nobles rather inelegantly squealed like a sparkling, “Ooooh! You must tell us what is it like to be courted by the Viscount!”

“The picture of you at the theater was just stunning. Was your finish the Viscount’s idea?”

“Oh yes, you must tell us what has he given you.”

Jazz servo went unconsciously to the locket. Of course, all the bots at the table zeroed in on it like a pack of turbo-wolves.

“He gifted you a few crystals?” Jazz could hear the incredulity and a hint of disdain in the voice of the mech that had spoken up.

“Careful now, Exodus.” Smokescreen chided mildly. He looked deceptively bored, but Jazz could see a tenseness to his sensor panels.

The so-named Exodus apparently did not pick up on the undertones. He scoffed, “It’s so paltry.” Smokescreen’s gaze sharpened.

Before that could devolve, Jazz spoke up. “The crystals’re from th’ private gardens at th’ Viscount’s estate, which ‘e gifted me th’ ability to visit whenever I wish. It’s a symbol ‘o sorts t’ represent th’ larger gift.”

The mech’s attitude took an abrupt 180 and he cooed about how romantic that was, then pouted at...
the femme escorting him and asked why she’d never done a gesture like that for him. While the femme scrambled to placate her suddenly petulant date, Jazz privately wondered in amusement and dismay if he’d accidentally started a trend.

Jazz also tried to ignore the pleased look that crossed Smokescreen’s faceplates.

The server reappeared with a large tray containing everybot’s orders. What followed was one of the most awkward, uncomfortable meals Jazz had ever had to sit through. The group kept peppering him with acutely keen questions about his relationship with the Viscount. Strangely enough, Smokescreen seemed to be helping him dodge some of the more invasive queries. It was almost protective in a strange way.

Of course that didn’t stop the blue and red mech from leaning to his opposite side to flirt with Jazz’s partner. Crossfire sat stiffly; her answers were short and frosty. She was careful not to outright snub the lordling, but she made it clear that she was not impressed by his overtures. Instead of putting the mech off, it just seemed to make him more determined.

Unfortunately, it seemed as if those stims she’d taken were starting to wear off. Her optics were overbright and every once in a while her doorwings would slowly dip low, only to jerk upright.

Jazz needed to wrap this up and get them both out of this situation before one of them accidentally said something offensive to the mercurial whims of the nobles or Crossfire lost the battle with her frame and slipped into forced recharge at the table.

By the end of joor two he was contemplating exit strategies.

A work emergency? No. Smokescreen could just contact the Chief again.

Could he pretend there was a call from dispatch? That was more plausible. And Crossfire would be more than willing to go with whatever he came up with. Hmmm... but what kind of “crime” to draw them away? Nothing too terrible. He knew from experience that, morbidly, gruesome stories only seemed to intrigue bots.

He was waffling between another theft and noise complaint when his comm. actually went off, startling him. He put a servo to his audial and quickly excused himself from the table. Several pairs of perked doorwings followed his movement.

Primus, they aren’t even trying to be subtle about it, he thought uncharitably.

:’Ello?:

:Officer Jazz?:

:Yeah, speakin’.: 

:I’m Medic Stopgap with the Praxus Medical Center. You asked to be informed when the patient named Towline woke from stasis.: 

:’E’s awake?: Jazz didn’t care that the relief washing through his field could probably be felt by all the bots within a mechanometer of him.

:Yes Sir!: The medic sounded cheerful. :He’d lucid and appears to be recovering normally.: 

:That’s wonderful t’ ear. Is ‘e stable enough tha’ my partner an’ I can come by t’ ask him some questions regardin’ th’ investigation?:
I believe so, Sir. We just ask that you not overtax his systems.:

We’ll do our very best not t’. Jazz promised. We’re on our way now. Thank ya.:

You’re welcome. We’ll see you soon, Officer.:

He turned back to the table to find himself to focus of every optic. He ignored the uncomfortable prickly feeling it gave him.

“Crossfire. Th’ witness at th’ medical center jus’ woke up. We ‘ave to go.” He directed the next bit at Smokescreen. “My apologies fo’ leavin’ so suddenly.”

The blue and red mech waived off the apology. “I understand that duty calls. Our Praxus is a safer place thank to your diligence.” He sounded sincere, but there was really no way to tell if he actually meant what he said.

“Oh this is so exciting! Just like Iacon Confidential.” One of the bots at the table gushed.

Jazz refrained from pointing out that the show was a gross exaggeration of actual Enforcer work. Crossfire looked like she wanted to say something, but clenched her jaw as she stood. Smokescreen stopped her before she got too far by catching her servo and bringing it to his dermas to place a swift kiss on the back of it. “It was lovely to meet you, Officer Crossfire.” He offered her an inviting grin.

She gave him a tight smile in return. “Likewise.”

He let go of her servo. “Well, don’t let us keep you. And don’t worry about paying. Uncle would have my sensor panels if I let you pay for a meal I invited you out for.”

“Thank ya very much.” Jazz inclined his helm. “Gentlebots, I ‘ope ya ‘ave a lovely cycle.”

They left the cafe and transformed, driving towards the medical center.

Once they passed out of the Garden Square Crossfire snorted. :What a bunch of sycophantic fools.: :Been holdin’ tha’ one in fo’ a while, huh?:

:And his honorable pain-in-the-aft was the worst of them.:

:Ya knew ‘e was gonna be like tha’:.

:No I didn’t!:

:Ain’t ya th’ one lookin’ int’ ‘is carrier’s case?:

:Yes, but all I have are clips and statements from him when he was a youngling. He’s not like the mechling from my case files. He’s… he’s…:

:Grown up?: Jazz said dryly.

:Infuriating!: Crossfire snapped.

The visored mech nobly choked down a laugh. His kith was cranky, tired and stressed and he didn’t want to antagonize her. He sent calm through his EMF to try to soothe her ruffled plating.

When they reached the Praxus Medical Center, Jazz took a moment after they transformed to inform the Chief that they were chasing down a lead on the Noss case, but he didn’t specify exactly what
they were doing.

The medic seated at the front desk greeted them. Jazz recognized the mech’s voice as the one who’d called him.

“Medic Stopgap?” Jazz introduced them. “Officers Jazz and Crossfire. We’re here t’ speak with Towline.”

The red mech smiled at them, sensor panels flexing welcomingly. “Of course. He’s up in room 1206. His conjunx is with him.”

“Thank ya.” Jazz responded.

The visored mech didn’t like how easily the medic had given him the information. Jazz had specifically requested in his reports that Towline be treated as a witness. There should have been more hesitation from the medical staff to grant them access; granted he and Crossfire were Enforcers. But now he was worried. Somebot was getting rid of bots who talked about the Noss case. Somebot who might be among the Enforcers. He had that tank-deep feeling of certainty again that Towline was in danger. Especially if the mech decided to give them pertinent information.

The door to room 1206 was ajar. Jazz knocked lightly before pushing the door open. The dark blue form of Towline was laid on the mediberth with a light blue mech seated beside him. Their servos were clasped and their helms were nestled together. They both looked up as the two officers entered the room.

“’Ello, gentlemechs. I don’ know if ya remember me, Towline. I’m Officer Jazz an’ this is my partner Officer Crossfire.”

“My sparkeater.” Towline rasped, vocalizer sounding glitchy from disuse.

The light blue mech let out a choked laugh that sounded halfway to a sob.

Jazz and Crossfire exchanged a look. “Ya wanna run tha’ by me again?”

Towline chuckled weakly. “Sorry. When the drug—” his optics surged in brightness and his vents rattled. “...W-when I was hallucinating. I thought you were a sparkeater trying to kill me. Turns out you saved my life.”

Jazz smiled. “I’m glad ya’re alrigh’.”

“And you are?” Crossfire asked gently of the light blue mech.

“Diffuser. I’m this idiot’s conjunx.” Despite the words Jazz and Crossfire could both see how tightly they held onto each other.

“I’m sorry.” Towline whispered. “I was stupid.”

Diffuser put his helm down on Towline’s shoulder pauldron. “Yeah, you were. And you almost—” the mech choked on the word.

“I’m never going back to another track.” Towline promised. “You’re worth more to me than that.”

It felt so intrusive standing there, witnessing the moment. Jazz reset his vocalizer softly.

“Towline, if ya’re up fo’ it. My partner an’ I ‘ave some questions fo’ ya.”
“Am I under arrest?” He asked with resigned acceptance.

“No, mech.” Jazz answered, watching with a sort of satisfaction as Towline’s optics brightened with surprise. “Ya’re a victim. We need yar witness statement.”

Towline was quiet for a moment and then his faceplates hardened with resolve. “Alright. I’ll tell you what I can.” He had his conjunx help him adjust the medibерт until it was in a position where he was sitting upright.

Jazz pulled over the unoccupied visitor’s chair and sat near the two mechs, while Crossfire took out a clean datapad from subspace to take notes on and leaned against the wall.

“A’ight, Towline. Wha’ do ya remember ‘bout tha’ night? Go as slow as ya need.”

Towline laced his digits with Diffuser and hesitantly started speaking. “I’ve been going to the circuit for a few orns, but I’d never touched the Noss. But that dark-cycle, there was a huge prize of shinax. We… we both want sparklings, but we can’t really afford them and I thought… I’m pretty fast already, but I thought if I just had a bit of an edge… I could win.”

Diffuser looked stricken.

“I… I talked to one of the mechs that brought the Noss in and he gave me a hit. Told me I could pay for it when I won.”

“Wha’ did ‘e look like?”

“Dark grey plating, red optics.”

“Then wha’ ‘appened?”

“I… I was nervous, so I went ahead and took the dose, just to get myself in-processor for the race. And that’s when you showed up.”

Jazz reached into his subspace and pulled out the flimsie with the artist sketch. He showed it to Towline. “Is this th’ mech ya talked t’?”

“…Yeah. Yeah, that’s him.”

Jazz nodded, both to himself and to Crossfire. He turned back to the two mechs.

“I don’ know what th’ medics ‘ave told ya, but tha’ Noss ya took wasn’t th’ normal formula. It was an experimental variant. Probably why it was “free” until after th’ race.”

Diffuser leaned into Towline’s side whispering, “Oh Primus.”

“I’m sorry tha’ this ‘appened t’ ya, but thank ya fo’ talkin’ t’ us.” Jazz offered them a sympathetic smile. “I ‘ave one more question fo’ ya… Did ya ever see Barricade o’ Crystalspire at any o’ th’ illegal racin’ events?”

Towline froze for a klik. Then gave a short, spasmodic nod.

“Jazz.” Crossfire said to get his attention. She jerked her helm towards the door.

“Excuse us fo’ a breem.” Jazz got up and followed her out of the room to the hall. As they loitered just outside the door they had a hurried, commed conversation.
He’s in danger here.
Tha’ was my thinkin’.
What do we do? Who can we trust with his safety?
I don’ know.
Crossfire’s doorwings trembled with fatigue, her field saturated with exhaustion.
Jazz put a servo on her shoulder pauldron. ’Ey, ‘ow ‘bout this. Ya go ‘ome an’ get some recharge, an’ I’ll stay ’ere t’ guard ‘im an’ ‘is conjunx. Ya live righ’ around ‘ere, righ’?
I don’t want to leave you here by yourself. I’ve… got a bad feeling:
I’ll be a’ight. You need rest. Ya can rejoin me ’ere after ya’ve gotten a couple joors o’ charge. Then we can put our helms together an’ figure out a team o’ Enforcers tha’ we trust.
She hesitated for a couple of kliks, but the demands of her frame apparently overcame her stubbornness. She sighed. Alright. Just a couple of joors. And you can’t go anywhere without me. You stay right here.
I will.
And if anything happens, you comm. me immediately.
Promise.
...Okay. I’ll comm. you when I’m on my way back.
Jazz nudged his partner towards the elevator. Go on. I’ll be ’ere when ya get back.
He went back inside the room to tell the mechs that he’d be hanging around to keep them company while his partner took care of some things. He didn’t outright say that he was going to be guarding them, but he got the distinct feeling the both of them knew the real reason why he was staying.
The next several joors were spent charming the medics into letting him stay, talking with Towline and Diffuser, remotely adding Towline’s witness statement to the official report of the incident and meditating. It was sort of nice, actually. He’d gotten out of his daily meditations when he’d come to Praxus. Though such a long amount of contemplative alone-time meant his processor could wander and review some of his most recent choices in life.
He could never regret saving Bluestreak. And he didn’t regret meeting Prowl. He just wondered if his spark had really even stood a chance once the driven Praxian had set his sights on him.
It was far past the time when he thought Crossfire would have been back, but she had been near falling into recharge on her pedes, so she’d probably zonked out hard. One of the medics had been very sweet and brought him some energon from the cafeteria at the start of the dark-cycle. He’s moved his chair out into the hall when the same medic had suggested the Towline needed more recharge.
He was leaning his helm against the wall, gazing at nothing in particular when a sound off to his right drew his attention. Lazily, he glanced out of the side of his visor without moving his helm. And nearly stalled out in shock. He whipped his helm to the side to confirm what he was seeing.
The grey and yellow mech smirked at him, dimming one of his red optics in a wink and then
disappeared through the door of the emergency exit.

It was so obviously bait, but…

Jazz got up to follow. He tried to comm. Crossfire and got nothing but static.

Frag.

He cracked open the door to Towline’s room. Diffuser looked up at him curiously from where he had scooched himself into the mediberth next to his conjunx.

“Bar th’ door.” He whispered urgently. “Ya don’ open it fo’ nobot unless it’s me, Crossfire or Chief Scattershield. Understand?”

Diffuser looked frightened, but nodded quickly.

Jazz shut the door again and moved toward the stairs drawing his taser. He eased the door to the stairwell open and paused. There was nobot in sight, but he could hear the tapping sound of pedes on stairs from below him.

He followed, catching flashes of grey when he glanced down every now and then.

The door to the outside opened and shut.

Jazz cursed under his breath. He made it down the last two flights of steps at a sprint and wrenched open the door.

Somebot stepped out from his blind spot and shoved what felt like a blaster into the gap of his dorsal plating. He froze.

“Drop the taser.” Came a growl from behind him. He slowly put his servos out and let go of his weapon.

There was soft chuckled from the shadow in front of him. Out of the dark stepped a black and silver form. Behind him trailed the grey and yellow mech looking smug.

“You are a very difficult mech to get a hold of, Officer Jazz.” The mech rumbled in a pleasant voice. He strolled forward and took hold of one of the visored mech’s servos. He placed a kiss on the back of it as if he was meeting Jazz in some grand function and not menacing him in a dark alley. “The Honorable Barricade of Crystalspire, at your service.”

Chapter End Notes

...Yeah it's a cliffhanger. Ipromisetopostthenextchaptersoon! *dodges*
Jazz trampled down the shock of icy dread that ran through his lines. Even as his anxiety ratcheted up, his Enforcer training took over and he activated a remote app in his hud that he hadn’t used since coming to Praxus. As he carefully attempted to reclaim his servo, his visor began to record a copy of what his optical center was seeing.

In Polyhex, it was a standard for Enforcers to install and use the recording app. It was a quick way to gather data, evidence and statements. It wasn’t something used by the Praxian Enforcers (Crossfire had almost seemed incensed when he’d mentioned having it, at the time he’d chalked it up to some sort of privacy thing) and so he’d refrained from using it to not upset his co-workers. But now, that instinct that he trusted so much was screaming at him to have it on and documenting the encounter.

“I… can honestly say I neva’ expected t’ meet ya like this.”

Barricade smirked and allowed him to pull away.

Jazz chanced a glance behind him and was distressingly unsurprised to find Officer Gauge standing at his back him. So far, there were only three assailants. He thought over the odds of his ability to take them all out. Some of his mental calculous must have shown on his faceplates.

“Behave now.” Barricade warned in a pleasantly sinister voice. “We don’t want to disturb the lovely couple in room 1206, now do we?”

Jazz grimaced and turned his full attention back to the noble. “Wha’ do ya want?”


Jazz shifted uncomfortably, both at Barricade’s blatant gaze and the gun still digging into his backplates.

“I’d be a little more accomodatin’ if ya told yar mech t’ get ‘is blaster outta my spinal strut.”

Surprisingly, Barricade smiled indulgently and made a careless motion with his servo. The pressure from the gun disappeared, though Gauge stayed close to Jazz’s back.
“There now. Is that better?”

“...Much. Thank ya.”

“Good. I’m sure the continued health of your friends upstairs and the little comm. jammer we have going will keep you on your best behavior, yes?”

The visored mech nodded carefully.

The Praxian gestured. “You know Gauge and myself, of course, but let me introduce you to my chemist, Slate. I understand you’ve been looking for him.”

*A chemist.*

“Tha’s righ’.”

The so-named Slate gave the visored mech a bow full of mock officiousness.

“A pleasure, Officer. We could have been introduced much sooner if you’d taken my invitation at the market.”

“Yar th’ one experimentin’ with th’ Noss.”

Slate looked smug. “I’m the one who made the Noss.”

Jazz gave the grey mech a once over. He was very unassuming for the mech that was supposedly the processor behind the most dangerous drug in Praxus’ recent history.

“That little raid of yours put quite the dent in my carefully made plans, you know.” Barricade said, bringing Jazz’s attention back to him. “It took me ornz to arrange the debut of the new product.”

“I ’ope ya’re not expetin’ me t’ apologize.” *Your “new product” would have deactivated a lot of bots, you fragger.*

“Of course not. You were just doing your job, no?”

“Somethin’ like tha’.”

Barricade reach out and brushed some invisible speck of dirt from Jazz’s shoulder pauldron. “Have you ever considered a career change, Officer?” He asked nonchalantly.

The Polyhexian tensed under the touch. “I’m ‘appy with my current job, thanks.”

The mech’s servo landed as a leaden pressure on his shoulder strut. “Really? You certainly have the connections if you wanted to move up in the world.”

“If yar talkin’ ‘bout my association with th’ Viscount, tha’s really non o’ yar business.”

“‘Association’?” The black and silver mech leered. “Is that what it’s called now?” The heavy servo reeled Jazz in close to the noble. “There’s better company to be had than that ivory-towered fool. Maybe you and I could make an ‘association’.” The suggestive tone was unmistakable.

*Not even when the Chaos-bringer darkens the sky, you rust-infested spawn of a glitch.*

Jazz fearlessly met the red optics with his gaze, visor gone icy blue with offense. “No, thank ya.”
The servo moved to cup Jazz’s chin. “Maybe I’ll just steal you away from him, then.”

Jazz stepped away from Barricade’s touch, nearly stepping on the traitor Enforcer behind him, and said sardonically. “I’m not a sparklin’ toy t’ be fought over, Sir.”

Barricade’s optics flared from scarlet to crimson, dangerously.

*Carrier was right, one day my mouth is gonna get me into trouble that I can’t get out of.*

“Hmmm, I think I can see why big brother likes you so much. I knew you were a beauty to look at, but that fire burning in you is the real allure, isn’t it?”

Why was that a draw? Weird-aft Praxians. Or maybe it was just the Crystalspires.

Barricade continued talking, running a digit down Jazz’s cheek. “The two of you are quite close now.” His optics dropped down for the briefest moment to the locket on Jazz’s chest. “Maybe big brother even started telling you all the family secrets. Like what’s buried out in the garden.”

“If ‘e did tha’ would be between me an’ ‘im.”

“Perhaps that’s a no then. Surely an upstanding bot as yourself wouldn’t be so quick to associate with him if you knew all the things he’s done in the name of family.” The last glyph was sneered.

“Ya don’ want t’ make an enemy o’ ya brother.”

Barricade hissed softly. “My brother already is my enemy.” The noble’s digit continued to trace Jazz’s facial features. “I could tell you all the family secrets. Everything you would need to take him down for what he’s done.”

“In exchange fo’ wha’?” Jazz growled, batting the servo away from his faceplates. “For ya to do wha’eva ya please? Ya’re th’ one puttin’ bots lives at risk. I ain’t gonna let ya run rampant through Praxus endangering innocent mechs and femmes fo’ a pit-demon’s deal!”

Barricade growled at being denied and grabbed Jazz’s chin again. This time in a harsh, unrelenting grip. “Praxus? This city is just a blip on the map. I have a bigger objective in mind. Something my brother is too short-sighted to even consider. He may own Praxus, but soon I’ll own the entire Noss trade on Cybertron. Then we’ll see who has the most power.”

Alarms were ringing shrilly in his helm. He and Crossfire had been right. Barricade was planning on taking the drug out to new cities. But why was Barricade openly telling him information? Unless… unless Jazz wasn’t expected to survive this encounter. But just as that thought crossed his processor Barricade’s grip gentled and he stroked Jazz’s chin with his thumb.

“And you’re going to help me. I had hoped that you could be swayed, but it was always going to be a long shot that you would come with me willingly. I was going to eventually approach you, but Prowl,” his voice snarled on the name, “got to you first.”

They only warning Jazz got was a quick flicker of Barricade’s optics before Gauge suddenly had him in an unbreakable grapple. Jazz spat out some choice curses in old Polyhexian. Barricade’s grip transferred to the visored mech’s neck cables.

Slate came at him from the side and pressed a hypo to his neck. The *hiss* and prick of the hypo discharging into his lines sent a flash of panicked anger through him. He struggled against the servos holding him.
“Th’ frag you jus’ inject me with!?”

“It’s my latest version of Noss.” Slate said proudly. “I tweaked it after that whole raid fiasco. And I added a little bit of a sedative, just for you.”

Oh Primus, he could already feel the cold-hot sensation of the foreign substance in his lines. His vision was beginning to static around the edges.

“Wha’-?”

“I can’t very well just show up to the underground circuit in Altihex claiming to have a speed enhancing wonder drug without proof of its abilities, now can I? You, my dear, are going to become one of my champions. I’ll sponsor you in every race. And in return for winning, I’ll keep you well supplied with Noss, so you never have to experience the nastiness of withdrawal.”

“I’ll fight ya every step o’ th’ way.” Jazz snarled.

“I’m fairly certain you’ll do just about anything I ask when you’re begging for a fix.” Barricade answered confidently.

They were trying to get him addicted? Just to cart him around to win races? There were so many holes in that plan that Cybertron would have slipped through.

“Ya can’t jus’... s-spirit me away.” Aw frag. His vocalizer was starting to glitch. The world swam slightly around him. “Bot’s’ll be... looking fo’ me.”

“Oh don’t worry, we’ll be picking up your partner next. That femme is perfectly modded for the track.”

*Oh, the frag you will!*

“As for my brother, well, very soon he’ll be receiving a data pad with a kindly written rejection letter and a box with a returned audial horn adornment. You really should have a better lock for your door, you know. I added a little postscript about how you ran off with your partner, the real love of your life. While he’s too busy nursing a broken spark, we’ll be off to our new life together.”

Several thoughts crashed into a jumbled pileup in Jazz’s processor at once.

*He was in my apartment- That’s the wrong horn adornment, Prowl’s is still in my desk- Scattershield will know that’s absolute slag- Prowl’s not that stupid- I have to warn Crossfire.*

It was getting all muddled and hard to think. The harder the Polyhexian tried to keep control, the more quickly it slipped away from him. Desperately Jazz mentally reached for that calm, quiet place inside him from his earlier meditation. In his detachment he noticed that his armor was lightly rattling with excess charge. Just under the fog of lethargy trying to settle over him was a faint zinging current of hot energy. A thrumm of sound. Go, go, go, it whispered, fighting the torpor of the sedative. He felt like if he could tap into it at just the right moment, it could overcome his inertia.


He sagged against Gauge and Barricade’s hold. He was suddenly out of the grapple, Gauge shifting his hold to one where he merely held Jazz’s arms behind his back.

Barricade smirked and kissed him.
Jazz bit him as hard as he could.

Wait...

The black and silver mech jerked back with a curse, finally releasing Jazz’s neck, only to slap him hard enough to send his helm to the side. He equilibrium algorithms glitched. The world spun and wavered. Colors were beginning to melt together.

“Looks like I may need to get a muzzle for you, my dear.” He sneered wiping at the mech-blood dripping down his dermas. “No matter. You’ll be more obliging to my advances once you’ve missed a few doses.”

The thrumming under his plating was getting louder. More insistent.

Wait...

“My lord, we should leave.” Jazz could see Gauge’s anxious energy billowing out from behind him, trying to envelope him. A sickly green-yellow nervousness. It battered against the pale-electric blue of his own tightly reigned tension. His servos warmed imperceptibly as he brought his mags online and opened them from their curled positions at the small of his back.

“I suppose you’re right.” Red, ambitious optics. A face and frame made of shadows. A monster, but one made of gossamer. There was a bigger monster waiting to eat him. “But first… Slate. That locket. Bring it to me. I don’t want to see my brother’s mark on my new champion.”

The chemist, greyed out like a corpse, reached for his chest.

Now! Act now!

Jazz braced himself and unleashed a fully powered mag pulse with his left servo into Guage’s pelvic plating at point blank range. The mech didn’t even have time to make a sound as he was blown back into the wall of the alley with a sickening crunch.

Go, go! Run! Escape!

The visored mech swung his newly freed right arm up and blasted the two remaining mechs with the readied pulse. It caught Slate nearly full on which hit him with enough force to send him tumbling into some crates, but it only glanced off Barricade making him stumble back in shock. Jazz reversed the polarity of the mag in his outstretched servo to retrieve his taser. He shot a few wild shots in Barricade’s direction.

Get away! Not safe! Have to go! Go, Go, GO!

Jazz threw himself down into alt mode and tore out of the alley as if a horde of pit-demons were after him. Lights fractaled past his vision. The world around him was nothing but sound and confusion. Hot. Heat. Lines burned.

Crossfire. He had to warn Crossfire.

He didn’t remember turning on his comm., but suddenly her recharge-disoriented voice was in his helm.

:Jazz? Frag what time is it?:

His relief felt molten. Another lava flow through his frame. :’F-fire! “Fire ya gotta… g-gotta hide.
Hide. Not-t-t-t s-s-s-safe.:  

Safe. Need to be safe. Where? Where?  

Her voice was immediately more awake and alarmed. :Jazz? Is that you? What’s wrong? What’s going on?:  

Talking was becoming really difficult. He was being consumed by flame. Tires set ablaze. Something appeared out of the blur that was his vision. Large, looming and loud. Jazz swerved to miss it. :B-barricad-d-de. D-d-dosed! Nosssss…:  

:What!?:. Her voice rose with panic, ringing in his processor above the clamor. :Where are you?! What’s happening?!:  

:Can’t st-t-t-top! C-c-can’t… Can’t!:  

Go, Go! Drive!  

His engine roared deafeningly as a surging shock tore through his lines lurching him forward even faster than he was already going. There was a thunderous BOOM. Glass shattered. Or maybe that was just in his mind.  

A scream ripped itself from his vocalizer. :PRIMUS HELP ME!!:  

:JAZZ!: Crossfire’s yell was cut off as his comm. screeched with static and went dead.  

The there was nothing but tires squealing, swirling colors and the squall of his own engine.  

He didn’t remember stopping or transforming, but the next thing he found himself focusing on was his own servo in front of his face. All around him reaching up, up, up were walls of color shifting crystals. Some of the crystals had faces. Or was that his face being reflected in them? One floated close to him and he put his servo through it. It wisped away.  

Not real.  

A wheezy rattle of vents startled him. Was somebot here? Oh. His vents. Real.  

The faces. Not real.  

It was all in his helm, he had to keep reminding himself. Hallucinations. Noss.  

Thrumming sound. Maybe real?  

There was a another sound. An increasing tap-tap-tap. Pedesteps? Was it real?  

Probably not.  

Those hovering steam mecha-animals weren’t real, either. That creeping animate crystal wasn’t real. The glowing avatar of Primus with Prowl’s face floating toward him wasn’t real. Suddenly avatar-Prowl was crouched next to him. Sound faded in and out.  

“Jazz! Ja...zz, can you he... me?”  

“Not real…” Jazz moaned trying to push his servo through the image to shatter it as he had the first. His servo hit metal. Huh.
The image of avatar-Prowl wavered in front of his static-filled visor. A cold servo laid itself on his cheek. He forced himself to look past the blinding glow onto avatar-Prowl’s optics.

“Here’t’ take m’ t’ th’Well?” He slurred.

A swirling blue and silver form rose up behind avatar-Prowl- like a ghost. Sorta familiar.

“Off...er Ja...!?"

Prowl’s voice. Sudden and face-paced like laser fire, but it faded in and out like somebot was adjusting the sound on a vid screen.

“Skids, call a med… me a cooling blanket… NOW! Hold on Jazz.... stay with me...”

More ghosts flitted in and out of his vision. Then he was being wrapped in some sort of blissfully cool cloud. Wait… cloud? No, that couldn’t be real.

“...you’re going to be ...right. The medic is… way.”

Jazz leaned into the chill touch, sighing, unable to bring forth the amount of concern he should have been feeling. “...kay.”

Voices continued to float over his helm.

“Cooling… barely making a dent…”

“...move him... house.”

“We need to... temperature down.”

“Use... pool in my washracks... cold cleanser…”

The cold touch of avatar-Prowl’s servos stroked his helm.

Then he was being lifted.

Avatar-Prowl stayed close to him as more ephemeral mechs and femmes danced in and out of his wavering sight. He raised a trembling servo towards the mech and with monumental effort managed to get the data cable in his wrist to spill out.

“What… doing?”

Important. So important. He needed…

“Ev’dence.” He forced past his uncooperative dermas. “Hav’ta. Ev’dence t’ Crossss... C-Crosss...f-fire. P-pleassse…”

Avatar-Prowl caught his servo gently.

“Alright.” He soothed.

Jazz nearly sobbed in relief when his cable was connected to an empty data pad and he downloaded the recording from his visor app. When he was done, the mech carefully disconnected him and tuck his cable away back in him wrist.

“There now... rest.”
Then he was floating again. Colors and shapes shifted above him. Confusing and sickening. He shut his visual center off.

His audials picked up a frightened, young, familiar voice.

*Bluestreak. I have to let him know I’m okay.*

“What did you say?” Prowl’s voice again. Jazz tried to online his visor, but it refused.

“Gotta’... tell Blue… I’m ‘kay.”

A cold servo stroked his helm again.

Then comforting arms were around him.

Then...

He arched up with a ragged cry as the cold fire of icy liquid invaded his plating. The comforting arms held him down and he was torn between sinking into the embrace and fighting to escape the freezing prison that trapped his body. Gradually, out of the white noise surrounding his audials, a soothing murmur of words rose above the static. He weakly clutched the arms secured around his torso, still unable to convince his optical feed to turn on.

Prowl’s voice murmured over and over in his audial, “I have you, Jazz. Stay with me, love. Stay with me.”
Chapter Summary

Jazz wakes.

Chapter Notes

Chapter's a little shorter than usual, but someone just wanted fluff rather than plot
*glares at Jazz-muse*
*Jazz-muse hides behind Prowl-muse and sticks out his glossa*

Jazz came out of recharge in slow stages.

His plating pressure sensors were telling him that he was surrounded by a soft, silky cocoon, though some of his plating was strangely numb in some places. He couldn’t move, but it didn’t alarm him. It was so comfortable that his sleepy processor contemplated just following the heaviness of his frame and sinking back down into unconsciousness.

But something was niggling at him to wake up. Something he should be remembering… Something… Something important…

His audials picked up a muted sound of tapping and the smooth purr of somebot’s systems next to him. Familiar in a way that comforted and put him on edge at the same time. When his visor finally decided to boot up, he found himself looking at a rich, red fabric canopy. The canopy was attached to the large soft berth that currently cradled his chassie, more matching red meshes swathed around him.

Floating above him, out of place and sterile-looking in the sumptuous surroundings, was a suspended container of energon that had the distinctive glow of medical-grade. His optics lazily followed the attached tube down to where it was spliced into one of the lines in his arm.

The soft sound of movement drew his attention next, but his attempt to turn his helm towards it was somewhat hampered by the fact that it felt like it weighed five times what it should. He accomplished a lazy loll, cables and struts sore and aching in a way that left him fuzzily nonplussed.

Seated next to the plush berth was Prowl, tapping a stylus quickly across a datapad in a way that could only be typing. A severe frown marred his faceplates, his doorwings twitched in agitation, though his field was placid- strong and steady. His optics had the overbright sheen of a bot that had not recharged in a while.

So handsome. But he looks better when he smiles...

Confusion fogged Jazz’s processor. His memories were fragmented and corrupted. He set a thread of his processor to defrag and clean up his latest cashe of memories. How had he gotten here? And… where was here?
He gazed around as best he could without moving his helm again. They were in a large room with muted light coming in from curtained bay windows. Matching dark metal and crimson furniture grounded the space while its walls were covered in tapestries and molding. There was a desk off to the side of the bay windows that was covered in bright flimsies and crystal blooms, datapads and plush toys. The cheery mess was so incongruous with the opulent setting that Jazz actually didn’t know what he was looking at for a breem.


Jazz’s gaze was drawn back to the Praxian who hadn’t seemed to have realized that he was awake. He should say something to let the other know, but words were hard. Unconsciously, Jazz reached out his EMF to brush along Prowl’s inquiringly.

“’rowl?” he croaked out, surprised by his own slightly strained vocalizer.

The Praxian’s helm jerked up immediately, doorwings snapping up in tandem. It reminded Jazz so much of a turbo-hound that he almost giggled, but couldn’t find the energy for it. The frown on Prowl’s faceplates was instantly replaced with a soft look of relief and concern. The datapad and stylus were swiftly put down on a berthside table. His EMF bloomed with warmth and brushed against Jazz’s in a gentle caress.

Hello to you too.

“Jazz.” Prowl got up. He tenderly pressed the back of his servo to Jazz’s forehelm and then to a cheek ridge, both checking for heat and seeking reassurance in one motion. “How are you feeling?”

“I-” Jazz winced as his vocalizer glitched.

Ouch. Why are the components so raw?

Prowl picked up a small cup from the table. “Here. Coolant will help. Drink slowly.” He cradled Jazz’s helm and helped him sit up enough to take a few sips of the fresh liquid. Oh that did help. It cooled and soothed strained parts. As Jazz laid back again Prowl murmured, “I’ll call the medic now that you’re awake.”

“Um? ’Ow did I-?”

And that’s when the memories finally unscrambled themselves and crashed in. The medical center. Diffuser and Towline. The mech in the stairwell. Barricade. A blaster to the back. Noss. Then heat, light and sound.

Jazz’s visor blazed, nearly incandescent for a breem. He tried to heave himself up, panicked, but Prowl swiftly placed a restrictive servo on his chestplates, holding him down with light pressure. All Jazz managed was a feeble little thrash, weak as a newly protoformed sparkling. “Are Towline an’ Diffuser safe? Wha’ ‘bout Crossfire? Where-?”

Prowl gently hushed him. “Easy. I had a comm. sent to your partner as soon as the medics stabilized you. Once she saw that… recording, she insisted on being near to protect you, so I had a guest room opened for her. She’s probably in recharge at the moment. As for the mechs at the medical center, Chief Scattershield set a guard on them-bots that he trusts implicitly.”

Jazz relaxed back onto the berth with a sigh of relief. “Oh thank Primus.” He flicked a look at Prowl with a tired smile. “Heh, ‘Fire ‘insisted’, huh? Sounds like ‘er. Oh frag, she’s gonna be so mad at me.”
The ghost of a smile flickered over Prowl’s dermas, though it quickly dropped. “Considering her language when we spoke earlier, I am predicting that to be a very reasonable possibility.” Prowl picked up Jazz’s servo in his own as if it was a fragile, delicate thing, likely to break at any klik.

“However, the anger will more than likely be a cover for how scared she was… Not that I blame her. You gave us all a great scare, Jazz. In your… altered state, you drove into the Regent District, off the roads. We found you not far from the estate in the crystal forest. You were burning up, so we had to bring you here and keep you in a cold bath to get your temperature down.”

Jazz cycled his optics in confusion. “We’re… at your estate?”

“Yes, this is my suite. The medics didn’t want to move you.”

It was now that Jazz mutely took stock of his aching chassies. Mesh bandages criss-crossed his frame. He belatedly connected that the numb parts of his plating were the parts that were covered by said bandages. Including three of his tires. Ow? Well, at least he couldn’t feel them at the moment.

“But… ‘ow did ya find me? Did I comm. you? I… I think I remember my comm. goin’ out an’ tha’ was righ’ after I called Crossfire.”

Prowl hesitated, looking almost... abashed?

“The locket I gave you…”

*He fragging didn’t*…

“It ‘as a tracker in it, doesn’ it?” Jazz’s voice was flat and resigned.

“In any other circumstance I would apologize.” Prowl said as agreement.

“In any other circumstance I woul’ tell ya t’ go frag yarself,” Jazz sighed, “but seein’ as ‘ow ya probably saved my life, I’ll give ya a pass on this one.”

The Praxian gave a choked off laugh and leaned forward to press their helms together. He immediately sobered and vented deeply. “Your pumps were so weak, I was afraid they would stop at any moment. The heat was so intense. At some points you didn’t even recognize me. I could do nothing but hold you as you cried out.”

Jazz crooned soothingly. “It helped, I promise. I remember yar arms ‘round me.” He lifted an unwieldy servo to unsteadily stroke Prowl’s helm.

“Barricade will pay dearly for this,” Prowl promised darkly into Jazz’s audial.

“Ya saw th’ recordin’, too, huh?” Somehow Jazz wasn’t surprised.

The Praxian’s engine rumbled ominously. “Yes. I saw.”

Jazz pressed his EMF against Prowl’s pleadingly. “Please don’.” He whispered. “Don’ use this as an excuse t’… I don’ want ya t’ kill fo’ me. Let th’ Enforcers handle this. We ‘ave more’n enough evidence against ‘im.”

Prowl pulled back and gave him a long sombre look. He placed his servo on Jazz’s cheekridge, stroking a (unexpectedly) tender spot with his digit. And Jazz remembered.

*That… that’s where Barricade slapped me.*
But just as Prowl opened his mouth to answer, there was a brisk knock at the door. The noble straightened upright, pulling out of contact and called out to whoever it was to enter.

A cream and pink Praxian femme with medic decals strode into the room. She offered a reassuring smile as she walked to the berth. Jazz could feel the tingle of medical scans skittering across his plating.

“Officer Jazz, my designation is Medic Clear Coat. I’m very happy to see you awake and aware, you had us all quite worried. How are you feeling?” She quickly checked the energon drip, unsubbing a new container and switching them out.

“Tired. Sore… Confused.”

“I’m not surprised. You’ve just been through a very traumatic ordeal. You were unconscious for two cycles.”

Two cycles!?

Jazz steeled himself. “A’igh’, doc, wha’ am I lookin’ at?”

To her credit, she didn’t try to downplay his injuries or talk around them. “You suffered several abrasions and dents along your frame and three of your tires were shredded. Your headlight, which wasn’t fully healed from your previous injury, shattered again.”

“Wha’ caused all tha’?” I don’ remember getting injured.”

Granted, I don’t remember much of anything, but still…

“From what we’ve gathered, you were driving at high speeds off-road in the crystal forest. Most of the damage seems to have come from that. Fortunately those will heal up just fine with daily applications of nanite gel and some rest. As of now, we have you on a couple of localized pain blockers.”

She bent to examine some of his bandages as she continued to talk. Jazz twitched as she poked and prodded here and there. “Unfortunately, your comm. unit burned out. Some of the components are half melted.”

Ah, that was probably from attempting to use his comm. when his frame was dangerously overheating.

“You’ll need surgery for it to be completely replaced, but we don’t want to do that just yet because the drugs you were given have messed with your frame’s gyro-stabilizers and your ability to auto-regulate temperature.”

Apparently the bandages were still attached to her liking and she straightened again pulling a datapad out of her subspace to make a few notes. “Those effects should wear off after a few cycles of medical-grade energon. Just don’t move around too much and keep a thermal mesh with you to avoid discomfort. Luckily, you don’t seem to be exhibiting any other signs of withdrawal. Either the sedative that was mixed with the Noss changed the chemical make-up just enough to alleviate the addictive properties, or your frame is just better at processing the stuff.”

Eh, or possibly a little of column A and column B.

She gave Jazz an attentive look. “Do you have any other questions for me?”
While he couldn’t say that he’d gotten off “easy” by any stretch of the imagination, Jazz couldn’t help but think that it could have been worse. He didn’t care to examine how much worse it could have been too closely because that was not a place he wanted his processor to wander.

“‘Bout ‘ow long do ya think my recovery is gonna take?” He asked shifting slowly in the meshes as a wave of chill stole over his exposed plating. It looked like she was about to lean back over, but Prowl beat her to it and tucked the meshes around his chestplates. An amused smile twitched her dermas up for a klik.

“At least half a deca-cycle before we can even think about your surgery and then another full deca-cycle after to make sure the new unit integrates properly. For now all you can do is rest and let yourself heal.”

Jazz sighed. “Got’cha.”

Prowl stroked a servo over Jazz’s helm, doorwings flared protectively. “Thank you Clear Coat.” He said.

“Of course, Lord Prowl. If you need anything, I’ll be on the premise for three more cycles, unless you feel as if you need me here longer.” She bowed, though Jazz wasn’t sure if it was directed at him or Prowl. As she was slipping out of the door, something made him stop short. She murmured lowly to whoever was out in the hall and then turned back to ask softly.

“Jazz, are you feeling up to other visitors?”

Jazz craned his helm to see who was there and caught a glimpse of hopeful blue optics under a small red chevron.

“‘Eeeey, Blue.” An unbidden smile broke out on his dermas. He snaked a still-uncoordinated servo out from under the covers and beckoned the mechling in.

Bluestreak scooted through the door as Clear Coat quietly left. He was carrying a large crystal bloom in his two servos which he offered Jazz over the edge of the berth. “I was so worried! I picked this for you to help you feel better. What happened? How did you get so hurt? Was it your work again?”

Prowl helped Jazz cup the crystal in his unsteady servo while the visored mech murmured comfortingly at the mechling. “I’m feelin’ much better with ya ‘ere. Thank ya fo’ th’ crystal.”

“It was your work wasn’t it?” Bluestreak said fretfully with anxious flutters of his little sensor panels. “I don’t like it that you keep getting hurt.”

Blue had seen him all banged up, hadn’t he? Jazz had a vague recollection of the mechling’s frightened voice. Poor bitlit. He shouldn’t have had to see that.

“I’m gonna be fine, sweetspark. Especially since I’ve got ya an’ yar ‘Tor ‘ere t’ take care o’ me.”

Prowl’s grip on his servo tightened ever-so-slightly and Jazz flickered his gaze over to the older mech as Prowl’s EMF warmed with pleasure. Jazz quirked an amused half-smile. His visor flickered with drowsiness.

“You should rest.” Prowl murmured, gently extricating the crystal from Jazz’s servo. He walked over to the crowded desk and set the crystal down with the other items.

“Wha’ is all tha’?” Jazz queried, curious.
“Gifts.” Prowl answered absently, coming back to the side of the berth. “I think everybot at the First Precinct sent you some sort of token.”

Oh. The flimsies and datapads were get well messages. Huh. Well, he wasn’t sure what he was going to do with (he counted quickly) five plushies and twelve bouquets. Though that one plushie felida was unfairly cute. He wasn’t even sure if they’d all fit into his apartment.

His apartment…

He reached for Prowl’s servo in agitation. “Prowl, my apartment. He broke into-”

“I know.” Prowl said briskly, though not unkindly, gaze moving to Bluestreak for just the barest moment. He caught Jazz’s servo and laced their digits together. “Chief Scattershield is looking into that as well. You’re welcome to stay here for as long as you like. Now, please, get some more recharge. It will only help.”

“Bu’ I jus’ woke up.” Jazz protested, though it sounded weak to his own audials. “An’ I need t’ talk t’ ‘Fire.”

Prowl shook his helm, fond amusement in his field. “Your frame is taking all your energy to heal. You’ll fall into recharge before we can even rouse her.”

“Yes,” Bluestreak piped up. “Lady Crossfire said she would stay until you felt better, so she’ll be here when you wake up.”

Jazz let out a soft chuckle, wondering what his kith would think of being referred to as such. He also wished he could have seen her first encounter with the youngling… Actually, upon reflection, that meeting probably hadn’t been as funny as he was imagining. He focused on Bluestreak for a moment. The mechling’s sensor panels were jittery with distress, he was venting quickly and he hadn’t taken his optics off Jazz even once as if he was afraid he’d disappear.

The visored mech patted the meshes beside him. “Would’ya stay with me fo’ a bit, then, Blue? I’ll ‘charge better.”

“Oh! Yes, of course.” Even as he said it, his optics flickered to his creator.

Prowl nodded.

Once given permission, Bluestreak clambered up onto the berth. His movements were at the same time eager and comically careful. He settled on his side, snuggled up under Jazz’s arm. Bluestreak sighed, little engine smoothing out into a contented purr.

Prowl made as if to settle back into the chair he’d been sitting in (and recharging in if Jazz was to judge the depth of the indentations in the cushions), but Jazz tugged lightly on their interlinked servos.

“I don’ wan’ t’ keep kickin’ ya outta yar own berth. There’s enough room… Please?”

Prowl only hesitated for a klik before laying down on his opposite flank. Their linked servos rested between them. He reached up with his other servo and pulled a cord. The canopy drapes closed around them, cutting off the light from the windows. Jazz let himself sink into the softness of the berth meshes, the feel of Bluestreak cuddled up to one side and the insubstantial weight of Prowl’s watchful optics on the other.

Jazz drifted back into recharge surrounded by the innocent affection of Bluestreak’s EMF and the
heavier, yet no less comforting, press of Prowl’s regard.
Chapter Summary

Jazz tries to stay awake and connects another puzzle piece. And he gets a welcome visitor.

Chapter Notes

Writing a slightly loopy Jazz is fun.

Jazz woke again when the warmth encompassing his left side lessened and the familiar EMF pressed to his receded. An involuntary sound came out of his vocalizer as he muzzily tried to follow.

“No, no. Just rest.” Prowl’s voice rumbled above him. “I will return.”

He fell back into a half-aware state. Some indeterminate amount of time later (it could have been a klik, it could have been a joor, he wasn’t sure) a shiver of his own plating rattled him fully awake. The questioning, hesitant nudge of a restless EMF had him looking down to his side where he met the online optics of Bluestreak. The mechling’s helm rested on an unbandaged patch of Jazz’s chestplates and his doorwings twitched up and down.

“Are you feeling better?” He whispered.

The visored mech ached all over. His plating felt strange over his protoform, numb in some places and overly sensitive in others. But he felt more alert than before.

Jazz didn’t want to lie to the youngling, so he settled on, “A lil’ bit, Blue.”

The heavy crimson drapes of the canopy enclosed the berth, cutting it off from the larger room. It was dim and cozy, inviting Jazz to just fall back into recharge. But his Polyhexian reflex had him instinctively upping his audials to listen past the curtains. His frame was still out of wack, however, and he turned them up too much, ranging out past the walls of the suite.

“-free to avail yourself of the diversions one the first floor and basement, but Jazz is not awake for visitors right now.”

“I understand that, my Lord, but I need to speak with him. It’s urgent.”

“I will not have you disturbing him.”

Prowl and Crossfire.

And Prowl was playing obstinate gatekeeper.

Whelp, time to nip that in the bud.
He couldn’t comm. them so, up it was. Jazz sat up and immediately had to pause as his wonky stabilizers made his processor spin.

“What are you doing?” Bluestreak asked worriedly, sitting up with him.

Jazz smiled reassuringly at him. “I’m not sleepy anymore. Thought we coul’ go see where yar ‘Tor got t’.” He managed to untangle himself from the meshes and shuffled to the edge of the berth. He pulled on the cord he’d seen Prowl mess with. The curtains opened letting in a wash of cool air that translated to chills over his plating. He shivered as he swung his legs down over the side of the berth.

Bluestreak hopped off the berth and put a steadying servo on Jazz’s side, letting him lean on the youngling for support as he stood even though he was half Jazz’s height. A slight tug on his arm reminded Jazz that he was hooked up to a medical drip. He carefully snagged the hovering tray that the energon cube was suspended from and brought it with them as he took a slow step forward.

His youngling-shaped crutch fretted. “Jazz, this seems like a bad idea.”

Yep. It probably is.

His plating clattered as he shivered.

“Blue… can ya grab the thermal mesh?”

Jazz did his best to not wobble dizzily in the three kliks it took Bluestreak to grab the mesh. The mechling set it over his shoulder pauldrons with only a little bit of difficulty. Immediately, the heat-radiating mesh helped stabilize Jazz as his shivering ceased.

Okay. Gotta get to the door. One pede. Now the other one.

The door wasn’t too far, though the floor stretched out in front of him mockingly. Fortunately, Jazz was stubborn. It was slow going, but as long as Jazz was careful with his pede placement he avoided overbalancing. It wouldn’t do to fall over and accidentally take Bluestreak and the floating medical grade down with him. He’d definitely get sent back to berth.

The door proved to be another obstacle. It was heavy. Way heavier than it had any right to be. Jazz had not patience for obstinate doors.

When Jazz managed to get the door open he was immediately confronted with the sight of the two Praxians in a standoff. Jazz didn’t know what part of the conversation he’d missed in the time it had taken to get himself from the berth to the door, but Crossfire had that set to her mouth that meant she was exercising every bit of her restraint not to go off on the mech she was talking to and a tenseness to her frame that betrayed her nervousness.

Prowl’s back was to him, so he got to see up close the moment those sensor panels pinpointed him. The noble looked over his shoulder in surprise at the same time that Crossfire’s optics brightened.

“Jazz, what are you doing?” “Jazz, you shouldn’t be up.”

The Praxians’ optics met for a brief moment, sensor panels communicating silently, before zeroing in back on him. Then they both moved in tandem to support him. Oh good, it looked like an accord had been reached.

Just call me an ace diplomat… or something.

That shouldn’t be so funny. They must have put him on the good pain patches.
“Bluestreak…” Prowl’s voice was undertoned with a reprimand as the mechling skittered back to make room for the adults to take over as Jazz’s crutches.

“‘Ey, ain’t Blue’s fault. I was bein’ stubborn an’ ‘e was just makin’ sure I didn’ ‘urt myself.” Jazz countered before anything else could be said. He leaned gratefully on the strength of the two full grown bots.

“Can we go t’ th’ couch?” Jazz requested (pleaded) when it seemed like they were heading back through the door into Prowl’s suite.

*If I lay back down I know I’ll fall back into recharge.*

After another quick, silent communication over the top of his helm by the two Praxians, Prowl murmured, “Very well,” and they ushered him into the living room. Prowl guided the floating attached medical drip.

Jazz sighed gratefully as he sank down into the couch cushions. He pulled the thermal mesh snugly over his shoulder pauldrons, cocooning his upper body. His legs were still uncovered, so another small shiver worked its way through his frame.

Prowl frowned. “I’ll have another thermal mesh brought up for you.” He took a half step back and placed two digits to the side of his helm, using his comm. to contact Skids (or one of the other servants).

Crossfire seated herself in the chair across from them as Bluestreak sat himself on the couch nearly plastered to Jazz side. Her optics darted to the youngling for just a klik. She clearly wanted to speak about what happened, but with Bluestreak (and Prowl) there and Jazz’s comm. down, there was no way to talk openly.

“So, did’ya manage t’ catch any o’ th’ bots tha’ did this t’ me?” Jazz put out the vague inquiry.

“One suspect was found at the medical center,” she said carefully. “He was so injured that he had been unable to escape before the Enforcers showed up.”

“Who was it?” Jazz questioned, though he was pretty certain he knew. A full power mag pulse at point blank did quite a bit of damage.

She frowned and confirmed. “Gauge. The other two… suspects were nowhere to be found. We have a city wide APB out for them.”

The lack of title glyphs on Gauge’s name made Jazz wonder if he’d already been fired from the Enforcers or if Crossfire was just being derisive.

Prowl’s frame settled next to Jazz’s other side. “There is only one mech that the Enforcers should be looking for.” His voice was deceptively friendly, but Jazz could hear the cold blade edge beneath it. A chill laced down the visored mech’s backstrut that had nothing to do with his internal temperature.

Crossfire’s doorwings shot up. “If you have pertinent information, my Lord, I need to know it.”

Prowl put his arm around Jazz’s shoulders. The warmth of his chassie seeped through the mesh, warming Jazz further. “I will be happy to speak with you later, of course.” He deferred smoothly.

*What do you know?* Jazz wanted to yell.

More doorwing movement happened and, unfortunately, Jazz was not at a good angle to see
Prowl’s. However, Crossfire’s answer was suspicious acceptance.

Fragging secret doorwing language. What the frag was that?

The Housekeeper bustled into the room at that moment with a small pile of folded meshes. What had been her name? Callout? She tutted in a disapproving manner as she tucked the meshes around him and Bluestreak, though Jazz wasn’t really sure what she was disapproving of. It could have been the fact that he was out of berth or it could have been him in general, it was hard to tell. She then announced briskly that she would be bringing up some fresh ener-tea from the kitchens and left after a short bow.

“I don’ think she likes me much.” Jazz stage whispered to Bluestreak.

Bluestreak looked up at Jazz’s face from where he was attempting to imitate a space-barnacle against Jazz’s plating. “She likes you! Callout’s just always like that.”

“If ya say so…”

A somewhat awkward silence fell over them. Jazz stubbornly fought the pull of recharge. He had just gotten up, damnit. But he was surrounded by warmth on all sides, both from the thermal meshes and the Praxians at his sides, and he was in the presence of bots he trusted. All those things were telling his subconscious that it was safe for his processor and frame to power down.

He shook his helm slightly, trying to rattle his processor back into awareness. “Hey, ya’ll want t’ play a game or somethin’?” He said, hoping that with something to focus on, he’d be able to stay awake.

“I would not be opposed.” Prowl murmured, the lightest edge of amusement in his field. He had probably felt Jazz’s struggle not to konk out.

Crossfire had startled at his unanticipated words. “…If you’d like.”

“What do you want to play?” Bluestreak asked earnestly, already carefully getting off the couch to go to the massive shelves of games.

“Uh…” Jazz fumbled for a klik. “Ya got Helix?”

“Oh yes! I’ll get it.”

As Bluestreak turned to the shelves to look for the requested game a sudden thought hit him like a jolt.

“Where are Sunstreaker an’ Sideswipe?”

“I sent them to help Smokescreen with a task I have given him. I expect they will return in time for dinner.” Prowl answered rubbing a soothing circle on Jazz’s shoulder.

...A task?

And just like that the conversation he’d overheard came back to him:

“We didn’t find him, but we did find a couple of his associates.”

“They’re enjoying Smokescreen’s, heh, ‘hospitality’ at the moment.”

“Good work. I may have you go over to his workspace tomorrow to assist him. Then you can leave
what’s left of them in a convenient place for the Enforcers to find. Now, go clean yourselves up before dinner. Use the servants halls. Neither Bluestreak nor Jazz needs to see you like that.”

And Prowl’s own words from less than half a joor ago:

“There is only one mech that the Enforcers should be looking for.”

His fans spun up, his visor brightened with realization. Smokescreen was holding somebot for Prowl. Possibly torturing them for information with the help of the twins.

“Prowl,” he gasped. His voice was caught somewhere between despair and outrage.

Crossfire half-rose in her seat at his obvious distress. “Jazz?”

It had to be Slate. Gauge was accounted for in the medical center and if Prowl had gotten his servos on Barricade, the mech would be dead already. But any accusations he might have made withered and died on his glossa because Bluestreak was right there and he didn’t want to scare the youngling.

Even more distressing was the tiny part of his processor that cheered at the thought of the grey mech getting his comeuppance for his blatant disregard for Cybertronian life. What was wrong with him?

Prowl wrapped him up in a full embrace. “Easy. It’s alright,” he whispered into Jazz’s audial.

No, it’s not!

“Jazz, are you okay? Is something wrong? Are you hurting? Do we need to get Clear Coat? ‘Tor, we should get Clear Coat!” Bluestreak’s voice rose with panic at every sentence. He clutched the game box he was holding to his chestplates, nearly vibrating with worry.

Jazz forced himself to vent slowly, helm swimming. “I’m okay, Bluestreak. I’m sorry, I jus’… started thinkin’ ‘bout th’ accident.”

What can I do? How do I get the information to Crossfire? Do I dare?

Prowl’s arms tightened around him infinitesimally, attempting to reassure without causing more pain. Or maybe he knew what Jazz was actually thinking and was giving him a warning. It was into this scene that Skids walked from the hall to the grand staircase.

“Master Prowl?”

Very reluctantly, Prowl released Jazz to turn and look at his butler. His optics were like chips of ice. His voice wasn’t much warmer.

“What is it Skids?”

If Skids felt any discomfort from the treatment, he hid it very well beneath a stoic exterior.

“Sir, there are guests downstairs.”

“I am a bit busy at the moment.”

The butler’s optics slid to Jazz for a klik before focusing back on the noble pleadingly. “Please, Sir, I would not have bothered you if it wasn’t so important.”

It was only because Jazz was pressed up right against him, that he felt the faint flicker of surprise in Prowl’s field.
“...Very well.” Prowl got up, cupping Jazz’s chin briefly. “I will return shortly.”

He followed Skids out of the door, pedesteps only a muted tap that faded quickly as they made their way down the stairs.

Bluestreak nearly threw himself back into his seat after dumping the game on the table. He burrowed under the meshes until he reached Jazz’s plating again, hugging him. Crossfire sighed faintly and settled back down as well.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” The youngling asked, concerned. He reached up a small servo to feel Jazz’s forehelm. Jazz saw Crossfire cover her mouth with a servo, but her optics gave away the fact that she was smiling.

“I’m alrigh’, Blue.” He assured, leaning over to tap their helms together softly. “Jus’ overestimated ‘ow much my processor coul’ take righ’ now.”

It wasn’t even a lie. Jazz laid back against the couch cushions regulating his vents, processor turning over on itself.

Crossfire’s faceplates turned contemplative as her servo lowered back to the arm of the chair. “Do you want to go back to the berth so you can recharge more?”


Muffled voices drifted up from the stairwell. Something about one of them niggled at Jazz’s processor. He wanted to range out his hearing, but he was afraid he still didn’t have the control. He patiently waited for the sounds to get clearer.

“-we will happily open a guest room for you so you may stay here close to him while you are in Praxus.” Prowl was saying.

“An’ I’ll ‘appily take ya up on tha’ offer.”

Jazz sat up abruptly, making himself dizzy, as he recognized the voice.

“‘Ri?”

An achingly familiar and welcome sight was suddenly standing in the doorway to the living area.

“Jazzy!” Dolce gasped. Relief and joy laced through the harmonics of his voice.

Jazz knew the two of them looked very similar to each other. Both duo-toned with black, though where Jazz had white plating, Dolce’s was blue. And though their helms were the same shape, Dolce didn’t have a visor; Jazz had taken after his sire in that feature.

Dolce was across the room in a klik and sat next to his creation. His servos fluttered over Jazz’s mesh encased frame as if he didn’t know where to touch, but wanted to offer comfort.

Dolce was across the room in a klik and sat next to his creation. His servos fluttered over Jazz’s mesh encased frame as if he didn’t know where to touch, but wanted to offer comfort.

“Oh sweetspark, I was so worried! Yar Chief over ‘ere called me ‘cause I was yar emergency contact. ‘E said ya were in an accident an’ yar comms. got burned out, but ‘e couldn’t tell me ‘ow ya got ‘urt. I took off from work an’ come over as fast as I could, bu’ when I got t’ th’ address ya gave me, th’ apartemnt was blocked off. Enforcers everywhere! Yar Chief was there an’ ‘e brough’ me ‘ere. Oh Primus! Ya’re all bandaged up! Why aren’t ya at a medical center?”

Jazz’s spark flinched in remorse. He could only imagine the terror that his carrier had felt. “I’m sorry,
Ri. I didn’t mean t’ worry ya. I’ve been gettin’ all th’ medical attention I need righ’ ‘ere. They’ve got a medic on standby jus’ fo’ me.”

Jazz leaned into his carrier’s frame like he used to as a youngling, mutely telling him that an embrace was fine. Dolce wrapped him up in familiar arms and EMF, careful of the hovering drip that was attached to Jazz’s arm. The visored mech could feel the rhythms of his systems syncing with those of his carrier even after so many vorns of being fully grown. Then Dolce noticed the youngling peeking out at him from under the camouflaging lump of meshes. His faceplates smoothed into a gentle smile.

“Ello, lil one. Ya must be Bluestreak. ‘Ave ya been takin’ care o’ my Jazzy fo’ me? ‘E’s told me so much ‘bout ya.”

“Yes Sir,” Bluestreak said, oddly shy. “Tor and I have been doing our very best.”

“Ya an’ yar ‘Tor, huh?” Dolce’s helm turned to give the black and white Praxian an appraising look. Prowl seemed to be as composed as ever, but Jazz fought the urge to snicker at the tense set of those proud doorwings as the mech withstood the sudden laser focus of a suspicious carrier’s optics.

Belatedly, Jazz realized that Chief Scattershield was standing behind Prowl.

“Ey Chief. Thanks fo’ escortin’ my carrier.” Jazz greeted with a grateful nod.

For the briefest moment Scattershield’s optics trailed over Dolce’s form before snapping to Jazz guiltily. “Of course. It was my pleasure, Officer.”

...what was that look?

Jazz frowned, subtly glaring at his superior dubiously from behind his visor.

Fortunately, his carrier was oblivious to the once-over, more occupied with whatever silent battle of wills was going on between him and Prowl. The Praxian appeared to pass Dolce’s carrier test because he took his attention off the mech and smiled at the femme sitting across from them.

“An’ ya must be Crossfire.”

“Yes, Sir. It’s lovely to meet you, though I wish the circumstances could have been better.” Crossfire said warmly.

“Oh, none o’ this ‘Sir’ stuff,” the blue mech said optics bouncing from Crossfire to Bluestreak. “Jus’ Dolce is fine.”

Scattershield stepped over to the couch and removed a datapad from his subspace. He offered it to Jazz. “While I do not want you actively working, this is linked to your console at the precinct so you can check your messages manually until your comm is replaced.”

“Thanks.” Jazz moved to snake an arm out of the meshes, but Dolce lightly slapped his servo and intercepted the datapad.

“Ya stay put!” He smiled sweetly at the chief enforcer over Jazz’s protests. “Thank ya, Scattershield. Ya’ve been so helpful.”

"You are very welcome." Scattershield’s doorwings fluttered.

I know what that means!

With the pain patches impeding his decision making, Jazz though now would be a great time to tell
the Praxian to in no uncertain terms to back off. Fortunately, before Jazz could unleash his sharpened
glossa at his boss, Skids, Callout and Locale entered the room with several polished platters.

The trays held a full ener-tea service; a lavish display. The biggest one was a three-tiered tray set out
on the middle of the table between them. Another platter held a large ener-tea pot. Locale went
around with another dish filled with delicate cups. One cup was placed in front of each of the seated
bots. Two more cups for the bots still standing were placed on a side table.

“My lord, gentlebots,” Skids said with a smile, “we’ve prepared a zinc ener-tea for this afternoon.
Jasper-scones with silver cream. Prime cakes and crystal berries. And digit sandwiches filled with
quartz mousse. Please enjoy.”

The three servants bowed in tandem and left.

Dolce trilled in admiration. “Oh, ‘ow fancy! Those treats are so pretty. I don’ even know where t’
start.”

Bluestreak emerged from his mesh burrow. “It is usually recommended that you begin with the
bottom tier and work your way up. So you eat the sweet things last. I can pour your ener-tea for you,
Sir. I-I mean Dolce. And Jazz. And Crossfire!”

“O’ course.” Jazz encouraged. “Ya can show us ‘ow it’s done.”

As Bluestreak opened the ener-tea pot to check if it was completely steeped, Prowl spoke.
“Scattershield, a word.” He turned to the rest of them and offered a graceful bow. “Please excuse us,
I must speak with the Chief of Enforcers in a more official capacity for a few breems, we shall return
shortly.”

When the two of them had turned their backs to leave Jazz caught Crossfire’s optics across the table
and shared her concerned look. Bluestreak picked up the heavy ener-teapot with little difficulty and
began pouring. First, for an intrigued-looking Dolce, and then for the rest of them.

His carrier rearranged the meshes so that Jazz could put his servos out for his cup. “Ya sure do know
‘ow t’ pick ‘em, don’ ya, Jazzy.” Dolce teased gently.

Jazz only grumbled bashfully, much to his carrier’s amusement.

The four of them ate the dainty treats and sipped the warming drink. Despite his best efforts to stay
awake for when Prowl and Scattersield returned, Jazz drifted back into recharge in the sunny sitting
room sandwiched between his carrier and youngling with his kith keeping watch.
Scattershield had left by the time Jazz cycled back into wakefulness, which left him distinctly miffed. He’d wanted to have a very specific conversation with his boss about appropriate behavior. Fortunately, his carrier didn’t know the nuances of doorwing and didn’t seem to realize that the mech had been flirting with him.

Which was good in Jazz’s, self-admittedly, hypocritical opinion.

Over the next few cycles Jazz recovered and regained his strength. Since he was able to fuel himself, Medic Clear Coat took out the medical drip. His frame slowly recalibrated itself, by cycle two he could stand without getting dizzy and by cycle three he didn’t need to be wrapped up in thermal meshes. The dents and scratches healed up.

Still, Jazz was rarely left alone. Dolce hovered in that comforting way that only carriers can. Bluestreak flat out refused to recharge anywhere but at his side. The twins, when they were around, were always keeping watch at the edge of his periphery. And Prowl spent much of his time sitting within EMF range of Jazz, even if he kept an “acceptable” distance while in sight of Dolce. Though in the instances that Dolce wasn’t present, he stole chaste kisses at every opportunity.

Crossfire had to return to work, though she continued using the guest room at the estate at Prowl’s insistence. With Barricade still at large and the very real threat he’d made against her, extra precautions were being taken. She took to the enforced accommodations with only a few protests (she wasn’t stupid, after all), but she remained wary of her noble host.

While Jazz couldn’t tell his carrier everything about the case, he had told Dolce about the circumstances that led to his injuries and the dangerous mech that caused them. After which, Dolce had levied an impressively viperous curse at the mech in the old language. If the angry-carrier-intent ever reached its target, Barricade was going to have to watch out for crystals, ditches and mecha-aves for the rest of his functioning.

Jazz managed to catch some time alone with Crossfire when Prowl was busy and Dolce volunteered to take over Bluestreak’s music lessons. They had arranged themselves on the first floor terrace because Jazz was tired of being cooped up inside.

The youngling had seemed reluctant to leave his side, but with Jazz’s gentle persuasion, into the
music room he went. As the faint sounds of the synth echoed from inside, they’d had a whispered, hurried conversation about Jazz’s suspicions. About how Smokescreen might be in charge of rounding up Prowl’s enemies and leaving them to the mercy of the twins. Crossfire quietly promised to look into it. Cautiously.

It wasn’t all secrets and sneaking, though. Jazz had a front row seat most cycles to Prowl’s entertainingly careful posturing around his carrier.

“Please make yourself at home.”

“Allow me to pull the chair out for you.”

“Jazz and I can show you around the gardens when he’s recovered.”

“Do let me know what type of energon you prefer and I will have my chef prepare it for you.”

The Prime himself wouldn’t have been shown so much respect. And Dolce knew it. But his carrier was far too good-natured to take advantage of Prowl’s open-ended hospitality.

Though Prowl seemed to be doing his best to win as many energon-goodie points with the blue Polyhexian as he could. He made sure Dolce was present when he gave Jazz back the glass locket (filled with fresh trimmings, of course). The medics had removed it while tending to his injuries.

Any snarky comments Jazz might have made about whether or not the tracker was still in it were circumvented by his carrier’s curiosity behind the meaning of the gift. Which he then had to explain.

Of course, Dolce had loved it.

Clever fragger.

The recharging arrangements hadn’t changed, even after Dolce had shown up. Jazz still shared the big berth in Prowl’s suite with the elder and younger Lords of the manor. The medic said recharging surrounded by the familiar EMFs would only help his recovery. Clear Coat was confident that they’d be able to schedule the surgery to repair Jazz’s comm. in the next few cycles. The quicker the better, in Jazz’s opinion.

His carrier had seemed awfully okay with his creation sharing a berth with the mech ostensibly courting him, but Dolce had just smiled when Jazz brought it up and explained. “Firstly, ya’re a grown mech, much as I still think o’ ya as my sparklin’. Second, I know there’s nothin’ goin’ on wha’ with ya still recoverin’ an’ Bluestreak bein’ there. Thirdly, I don’ think there’s anywhere safer fo’ ya t’ recharge than beside that mech. I’ve seen th’ way ‘e looks at ya. Pretty sure ‘e be willin’ t’ do a whole lotta damage t’ keep ya safe.”

It was ironic how right his carrier was, though the blue Polyhexian couldn’t know it. The truth of that sentiment was… both reassuring and concerning.

Headway on the case was slow. They still hadn’t found Slate or Barricade, though Jazz was betting that the chief wasn’t really looking for the chemist anymore. Gauge had woken and willingly given them several locations to raid, though he’d apparently done so with a tone of foreboding resignation (apparently he’d told Crossfire that he was a dead mech walking anyway). He’d also confessed to the murder of Gearshock almost as an afterthought.

The locations had yielded shinax, drugs and other mechs that Barricade had hired, but not the mech himself.
If Prowl was frustrated at the lack of progress by the Enforcers on the case, he masked it well. As much as Jazz was afraid the mech was going to take Barricade’s “punishment” into his own servos, he was pretty sure Prowl still didn’t know where his brother was any more than the Enforcers did. He certainly wouldn’t have insisted that Crossfire stay at the estate if the mech had been eliminated as a threat.

On the fourth dark-cycle of Jazz’s recovery, Stepper sent him a message.

It was getting late. He’d been checking his messages on the data pad, propped up by pillows on the big red berth. Bluestreak was already snoozing at his side. Prowl was using the desk across the room, checking an expense report from the latest shipment of supplies to the estate (or so he said). The copious amounts of get-well presents had been moved out into the second floor living room.

Jazz froze when Stepper’s message popped up with the heading, Found cool info about that knife! He glanced up at Prowl from under his visor. The mech seemed to be engrossed with what he was doing. Bluestreak was still recharging.

Jazz opened the message.

Hey Jazz,

Sorry to hear about your accident, mech. Chief says your comms. got trashed. That’s harsh. Rumors flying around the precinct are wild. You’ll have to tell me the true story when you get back in town.

Anyway! I found out some nifty info about that knife. It’s a late Silver Era piece. It’s easy to date because that’s the time period when they still made small blades like that out of metal, but also made super intricate handles. Later innovations made it more cost effective to make dagger blades out of lasers or hardlight. They still make swords and other long blades out of metal even today, though!

Sorry, I’m rambling.

This particular one seems to be one of those Ceremonial daggers usually given to Praxian nobles who did some distinguished service for the Ruling Lord. The turbo-wolf iconography is usually used to denote protection, so maybe whoever it was made for was protecting the mech in charge? Not sure about that; it’s just mostly my conjecture. Was there a second one? Because they were usually made in a set of two.

About those burns on the blade. That’s the most interesting part! They’re Spark Flare. You usually only see that on ancient executioners tools. Back when they would do spark executions, they would drive a spike of metal into the convict’s spark chamber with a hammer. The spark would literally explode leaving burns on those old spikes. Those same type of burns are on the blade. That dagger of yours has seen some deactivation, mech.

Is this for a case or something? I’m dying to know, but if you can’t tell me, I understand.

Whenever you get back to Polyhex, hit me up, we should grab a drink and catch up!

Get well soon,

Stepper

Jazz closed the message app. He stared ahead, processor spinning.

Spark Flare. That was something a bot only read about in histories now. Spark executions had been outlawed at the beginning of the Golden Era, the “enlightened” elite finally seeing them as barbaric.
That dagger, hidden away amongst Swingline’s belongings, could potentially tell a damning story.

Prowl tapped the data pad he was working on one last time with his stylus and set it and the writing implement down. He looked up catching Jazz’s visor and the blank expression on his face.

“Jazz? Are you alright?” The question was spoken quietly as not to disturb the recharging youngling. He got up and made his way over to the berth; sitting on the edge to face Jazz.

The visored mech vented softly and murmured. “Jus’... tired. Thinkin’.”

Prowl reached out and plucked the data pad out of Jazz’s servo. The visored mech let it go without a fight and Prowl turned it off and laid it on the berthside table. Then Prowl cupped Jazz’s cheekridge.

“What are you thinking about?”

“My sire.” Jazz lied. “Wonderin’ wha’ e’d think o’ all this.” He made a vague gesture around the room with his servo.

Maybe Prowl was distracted, or maybe he just respected Jazz enough to not call him out on the falsehood, but he smiled slightly. “I would hope he would approve of me.”

Jazz forced out a small smile. “Pro’lly not. Yar sire pro’lly wouldn’ ‘ave approved o’ me either.”

The smiles slipped from both of their dermas. “I suppose not.” Prowl admitted. He stroked Jazz’s cheekridge with his thumb. “Not that I would have cared much about what he did or did not approve of.”

Jazz swallowed, steeling himself. He looked Prowl in the optics, EMF entwined, and whispered. “Wha’ ‘appened… t’ yar sire?”


“I know wha’ th’ reports say,” Jazz pressed, “Bu’ I want ya t’ tell me yar story. Please?”

Please trust me.

Prowl glanced down at Bluestreak, but the mechling was still in recharge. (Youngling ‘charged like he was in stasis.) He was quiet for a long time, but he didn’t pull away in field or touch. Just the barest hint of what he was feeling tinged his EMF. Indecision and… apprehension. And when he finally spoke, the careful, near-silent words chilled Jazz down to the spark.

“The dark-cycle Swingline disappeared… he tried to kill me.”

Jazz put a servo over the one laid on his cheekridge. “Why didn’t you tell the Enforcers?”

“I couldn’t.”

Prowl’s frame was tight with tension. Jazz tugged lightly as he lay back against the plush pillows. Bemused, Prowl followed his gentle urging and let Jazz cradle him in the inviting circle of his arms. When the Praxian was settled against his chassie, Jazz reached up and pulled the cord to close the curtain of meshes around the berth, leaving them in the dim, warm illusion of a safe cocoon.

“What ‘appened?” Jazz asked.

Prowl sighed, doorwings sagging slightly. He rested the crest of his forehelm against the side of Jazz’s helm and spoke lowly into Jazz’s audial.
“First, you need to know that the laws of Praxus state that if the landed mate of a noble pair deactivates, the estate and holdings of the family line go to their creations rather than the mate tied into the family by marriage. I’m sure you noticed that Swingline took on my carrier’s family name. Before they married, she was his superior in station.”

“As the first creation, after her deactivation, I had the rights to the estate and wealth of the Crystalspire line, not Swingline. Oh, he’d keep his title, but as soon as I had gained my majority, all the power and money was going to be taken from him. And he despised me for it. He knew I would kick him out as soon as I had the ability.”

“On the dark-cycle after I had been given my final upgrades, he attacked me. Hoping, I’m sure, to catch me weakened as I adjusted to my new frame. He almost succeeded.”

Prowl partially opened and shifted aside some of his shoulder armor. A jagged, silver scar shone starkly against the matte of his protoform between his neck cables and chestplates. Jazz made a soft sound of sympathy, brushing his digits across it carefully. Prowl shuddered allowing him to touch.

He put his arm over Jazz’s waist; EMF following, warm and protective. His servo reached far enough to lay softly on Bluestreak’s back. The mechling’s doorwings flicked in his recharge, but he didn’t wake.

“But I was no helpless youngling anymore. I was able to fend him off. When he staggered out of the house after our confrontation, that was the last time he was seen. Barricade witnessed the end of the whole mess, but he didn’t understand. Didn’t care to know my reasoning, even with the mech-blood running from my obvious wound.”

“You see, Swingline had realized early on that I would not bend to him. I’m too much like my carrier, I suppose. So, he picked Barricade as his ‘favored’ creation and fed him lies to mold him into the perfect successor. One who wouldn’t question him.”

“It was that dark-cycle that our relationship cracked and fractured. I thought, perhaps foolishly, that it could be mended, but as the vorns passed and Barricade grew up, he just became more and more angry and destructive. All I could see when I looked at him was Swingline. He got into trouble all around Praxus. We barely spoke to one another. But still I hoped.”

“When Smokescreen’s carrier was killed, I knew I had to step in to raise the mechling, or Barricade’s hatred would be passed along to him.” Another sigh. “He’s one of the few good things my brother brought into this world. He was the reason I gave Barricade another chance. Brought him back into the family.” Prowl’s voice turned dark. “I should have guessed he would throw it back into my faceplates.”

“You couldn’t have known.” Jazz averred. “Ya were tryin’ t’ do righ’ by ‘im, but sometimes th’ turbo-wolf still bites ya.”

Prowl raised his helm a fraction to give Jazz a puzzled look. “What does that mean?”

Jazz smiled slightly. “Polyhexian proverb. ‘Th’ tame turbo-wolf may still bite th’ servo o’ a beloved master.’ It means tha’ despite yar best intentions, bots are gonna be who they are.”

Prowl let out a ghost of a laugh, “Hmp. Are such pearls of wisdom common in your culture?”

“Oh yeah. ‘Ave I told ya th’ one ‘bout mecha-sparrows?”

As they lay there together, letting the topic shift to something lighter, Jazz’s processor spun out a thread of thought. He contemplated the thread, twisting and turning it in his mind’s-eye. It painted
him a mental picture of a newly upgraded mech, perhaps not quite steady in his new plating yet.

The mech, conceivably, could have been in the library or some other favorite nook and been caught unawares by an angry, jealous mech pushed to the breaking point. Then he would have had to fight off an unexpected attack by a mech he should have been able to trust.

He’d been injured by something sharp, but clumsy. Something like a poker from the fireplace, or one of those ornate candlesticks. Maybe this young mech had, dizzy and in pain, blindly reached for the nearest weapon. A dagger, perhaps. Meant to be displayed and decorative, but still wickedly sharp. Possibly, he’d desperately struck out at the places he knew were vulnerable. The faceplates... or the thin plates covering the spark on the chestplates.

And had struck true.

It was a believable story. An accident. An act of self-defense.

So why wasn’t it the official story on record?

But… there was a lot Prowl hadn’t said that spoke volumes. Odd phrases and glossed-over details.

Prowl’s first blow might have started as self-defense, but maybe the fight hadn’t ended that way. An opportunity for justice (or vengeance) was hard to pass up. Jazz knew that on a personal level. And with the severity of the incident and the high profile of the mechs involved, it would have skipped over the auspice of the nobles’ Constabulary and gone to the Enforcers. Who had still been under the leadership of a dirty Chief.

And what had happened after Swingline had “staggered out of the house”? Where had he gone? Why had he never (even as a deactivated frame) been found?

Jazz stroked the back of Prowl’s helm meditatively as the Praxian relaxed, sinking further and further into his embrace. Maybe Prowl’s insularity and lies made more sense than Jazz was comfortable with.

And maybe he was far too willing to forgive him for them.

Chapter End Notes

Oh lordy, this chapter fought me so hard. I wanted to get back to the plot, but my muse decided to pull out more of Prowl’s tragic backstory. I promise the plot will be back in the next chapter.
Confrontations and Confessions

Chapter Summary

The time has come for the final faceoff.

Chapter Notes

The plot has returned!

The next morning after breakfast found Jazz, Dolce, Bluestreak and Prowl back out on the veranda again. The twins had disappeared off on another “errand” and Crossfire had gone into the precinct to work on the case.

Prowl had instructed the servants to bring out two of the couches from the lounge for them to sit on. They’d done that, as well as bringing out a plethora of extra cushions and several of the low tables. The atmosphere outside was fresh and clear. Jazz could see the riotous colors of the mecha-made forest stretching out around them for miles. He knew, intellectually, that other nobles lived amongst the crystals and the city was hidden just over the hills, but sitting in the peace and quiet of the estate, it was easy to imagine that they were far removed from everything.

Bluestreak had wedged himself between Jazz and Dolce, data pad in servo, studying for his next lesson. After an invitation form Prowl, Dolce had taken an electro-sitar out of the music room and was strumming a soft aire into the quiet atmosphere. His carrier had been the one to teach him to play after all, finding time and borrowing instruments to pass on his knowledge and love.

Jazz was holding his own data pad, idly scrolling through a news site, absently humming along to the drifting melody. On the other couch across from them, Prowl sat with a stack of data pads on the table beside him. The data pads ostensibly held investment reports and other things Prowl couldn’t simply leave undone while he spent most of his time attending to his guests.

Jazz’s data pad pinged with a new message. Thinking it might be from Crossfire, the visored mech subtly angled it away from the other two sharing the couch with him.

Jazz felt all of the armor plating on his back rise in alarm as he read the message. At the same time he clamped down on any negative emotion before it could leak into his field.

[Your visor is the same color as your carrier's optics. -B]

Which meant Barricade had seen Dolce… or could see Dolce right now.

...If that fragger is anywhere near us right now, I’ll shoot him, myself!

A nice thought, but Jazz suddenly remembered that he didn't have his weapons with him. Jazz scanned the area he could see from beneath his visor. It was all crystal trees and gardens. There were enough shadows and nooks to hide a bot with Barricade’s coloring.
He pretended that nothing was wrong and sent a quick message to Crossfire.

[Trouble. I think Barricade is here. Come quick!]

His data pad pinged with another message. Prowl’s doorwings perked up at the repeated noise and he looked over with a frown on his faceplates. Dolce was looking too, curious. He pause in his playing for a klik.

Jazz attempted a disarming smile, not sure if he’d succeeded. “Work,” he said lightly, glancing at the message.

[Don’t ignore me, my dear. -B]

Now, he tapped a short note back.

[What do you want?]

His carrier sent him a look, obviously thinking that Jazz should still be resting rather than working, but nonetheless satisfied with the answer, Dolce went back to playing.

Prowl opened his mouth, likely to ask what was going on, but paused, doorwings flicking up sharply, and then excused himself to take a comm. As Prowl stood, turned, and walked a few pillars away from the couches, a feeling of disquiet grew in Jazz’s tank and he turned up his audials. Though he had no comms of his own at the moment, he could still tune in to somebot else’s frequency to listen in.

Back to the group, Prowl answered his comm. :Barricade.: He hissed, voice icy with cold fury.

“Quite an idyllic scene you have there, dear brother. How domestic you have become.” Venom dripped off Barricade’s every word. “Let us hope nothing terrible befalls your new little family.”

Jazz was so startled at hearing a reply that it took him a moment to parse out what hearing a reply actually meant. It meant Barricade was close enough that Jazz could hear his side of the conversation, not from his comm frequency, but from his actual vocalizer. He had to be somewhere in the immediate treeline or gardens.

Way too close for comfort!

:Touch any of them and there will not be enough of you left to feed a scraplet.: 

“Is that so?” Barricade said mockingly.

Prowl’s voice turned grim. :Mark me, Barricade. This is my city. Praxus will no longer shelter you. You will have no respite. No place you will be able to go to ground. You will be hunted down and you will pay for your crimes.: 

“Not to worry, dear brother. I will not hide any longer. Come to the quartz garden. We settle this now.”

:And why would I do such a thing?: Prowl asked dryly. :Do you honestly think me so ignorant as to fall for such an uninspired trap?:

Barricade’s next words made Jazz’s fluids freeze in his lines.

“Of course not. But if you wish for Smokescreen’s spark to remain unguttered, you will come.”
“And he had been very useful.” Barricade said coldly. “The quartz garden, Prowl. You have 10 breems.”

Prowl didn’t move for a couple of kliks after his comm faded to static. The only sign that he’d been affected by the conversation was one of his servos which had been curled into a fist at his side. Slowly he unclenched his fist. He turned to the seated bots, face placid.

“I do apologize, something has come up that I must attend to. I shall endeavor to be done with it by lunchtime. Please excuse me.”

Prowl walked passed them to the end of the veranda toward the gardens. Jazz watched him leave. The moment those proud doorwings disappeared around the side of the mansion, the message app pinged again.

Jazz glanced down at the data pad.

[You’ll find out soon. -B]

Frag!

Jazz forced himself to slowly count to ten, then he turned to Dolce and spoke softly and urgently, “’Ri, Blue, I need ya t’ go inside an’ get Skids. Tell ‘im t’ call Crossfire.”

Dolce and Bluestreak looked up at him from their individual tasks, visor and optics flickering in startlement.

They both spoke at the same time. “What’s wrong, Jazzy?” “Why do we need to call Lady Crossfire, Jazz?”

He got up, urging them up as well. “Please, there’s no time t’ explain. Quickly now!”

Dolce took in his earnest expression. “Whatever ya’re doin’, ya shouldn’t go by yarself.” Dolce whispered. “Let me come with ya, or wait fo’ yar partner.”

“I need ya t’ stay with Blue. Please, ‘Ri. Trust me.”

Dolce frowned with worry, field flaring with anxiety, but relented. “Be careful, my Jazzy.” Then he turned to Bluestreak, serious, but gentle. “Come on younglin’, where can we find Skids?”

“He should be downstairs. We can take the secret way.” Bluestreak said sounding slightly frightened. He turned nervous optics on Jazz. “What about you, Jazz? What about ‘Tor?”

Jazz crouched in front of the mechling. “I’m gonna go get ‘im right now. We’ll be back soon. I need ya t’ do me a favor an’ take care o’ my ‘Ri fo’ me, okay?”

“...Okay.”

Then the youngling took Dolce’s servo in his own and the two of them went quickly through the door into the house.

Jazz felt a stab of guilt at his carrier’s distress, but he steeled himself and followed the Praxian around the building. He couldn’t see Prowl anymore, the mech having already crossed the side courtyard and passed the open air pavilion to vanish into the mazes of cultured crystal gardens. Fortunately, he remembered the way to the quartz garden. Prowl had shown it to him that very first visit.
He quieted his steps as he entered the towering crystals. Sneaking and darting from structure to structure. Straight down the path. Right. Go past one, two, three statues. Then left.

The quartz garden was filled with towering crystalline structures of the material in all different colors. Amethyst and citrine; blue, milky, rose and smokey quartz; prasiolite and carnelian. Jazz caught sight of two figures (one mostly white and the other mostly black) as he flitted through the confusion of crystals. He crouched behind a row of the gray-brown colored quartz and crept closer on silent pedes. Their conversation drifted through the formations to his audials.

“You came unarmed?” Barricade queried with vicious glee. “You really are disgustingly overconfident.”

Prowl’s voice was toneless in return. “I see no weapon on you either. I wonder how you plan on “settling” this? You always were abysmal at your unarmed combat training.”

Angered, the black and silver Praxian growled, “Now isn’t the time to be insulting me!”

Jazz stole closer, bit by bit.

“Where is Smokescreen?” Prowl cut through the irate bluster.

“Here, Uncle.” The blue and red mech stepped forward from behind a blue quartz formation. The Polyhexian stalled, frozen by shock and dread. Smokescreen was holding a blaster trained on the elder Praxian and wearing a small secretive smile. He had betrayed Prowl?

Prowl looked unsurprised. He gazed impassively at the younger mech, then transferred his optics back to his brother.

“I see. So you sought out Smokescreen to turn him against me. Interesting play, if somewhat predictable.”

The formation Jazz was using as a hiding place extended almost all the way to the three mechs. It was a miracle none of the Praxians’ extra sensors had picked up on his presence, but the crystals must have been masking his approach. Or maybe they were just distracted. That would also explain why Prowl hadn’t been able to sense Smokescreen until he’d come out from behind the crystal. Jazz was so close to Barricade now that a single good lunge would put him on top of the other mech.

There had to be something he could do to divert their attention long enough for Prowl to get away. Then they could hole up in the house until help arrived.

Except…

Except Prowl didn’t seem worried in the slightest. Like he had some sort of plan and was just waiting for the right moment to set it in motion. And something about the way Smokescreen was moving and holding the gun gave Jazz pause. It was too relaxed; nonchalant. His digit wasn’t even on the trigger. The realization stayed Jazz from taking action.

“Oh yes,” Smokescreen answered blithely for Barricade, moving towards Prowl. “I was almost expecting his call, really. A chance to reconcile in return for help in luring you out here. A cut of the profits on the world’s stage.” He gestured theatrically with his unoccupied servo. “It was quite a grand offer; full of bravado. An erasure of the past, if you will.”

Jazz was too far away to see if there was some sort of nonverbal exchange that happened between them, but Smokescreen suddenly swung around resettling his aim on Barricade. This time with his digit on the trigger.
“Which is why I called Uncle at once to inform him of your plan.” He finished with a cruelly cheerful expression that made him look all-to-much like his sire for a moment.

Barricade’s poleaxed expression only lasted for a klik before it descended into dark rage. “You little whelp! You would betray me?! I am your sire!”

Smokescreen sneered at him. “You lost the right to that title when you killed my carrier.”

Barricade’s silence was damning, but then he loosed a mean chuckle sending a knowing look at Prowl. “So much for the sanctity of family secrets, eh?”

“As if I would keep such a thing from him.” Prowl said scornfully. “Besides, he discovered your crime on his own.”

Smokescreen scoffed at Barricade’s shocked look. “Your attempts to hide your activities were laughable.”

Silence reigned in the quartz garden for a moment.

“Are you going to kill me, brother?” Barricade asked.

Prowl looked as if he were considering the question carefully. “...No. I’m going to let the Enforcers arrest you. And then I and Smokescreen are going to make sure you remain in jail for a very long time.”

“How novel.” The black and silver mech sneered.

“What can I say. Jazz has been a good influence on me, I suppose. And keeping you trapped alive, but powerless, is a far greater punishment than deactivation, wouldn’t you agree?”

Barricade’s servos were clenching and unclenching spasmodically. “You think you’ve won, don’t you? Not this time. No. I won’t let you have a victory. One of you will have to pull the trigger. And I will take you with me, Prowl!”

Barricade unsubbed a small pistol. He swung it towards the pair.

“Smokescreen, get down!” Prowl grabbed his nephew by his shoulder pauldron and shoved him protectively behind one of the quartz structures as Barricade fired. The laser shot zinged over Prowl’s ducked helm.

And Jazz moved.

The black and silver mech finally sensed him as he left the cover of the crystal. But he was not quick enough to turn around in time to face his sudden attacker, caught sideways. Jazz’s first palm strike hit Barricade’s vulnerable doorwing. He roared in pain and attempted to bring the pistol up. Jazz discharged a mag pulse with his other palm into the mech’s vambrace, sending the gun flying out of his servo. It skittered off into the surrounding crystals.

Barricade managed to faced him fully. The arm attached to the servo that had been holding the gun hung uselessly at his side. He snarled and sent a wild punch at the visored mech with his other servo, but apparently Prowl’s jab at his unarmed combat skills hadn’t just been a slap to his pride. Jazz was easily able to dodge out of the way.

The Polyhexian roundhouse kicked him while he was off-balance by the failed punch. He stumbled back flailing. Jazz grabbed his overextended arm with both servos; twisted himself, putting his back
to the mech; and threw Barricade over himself so the mech landed flat on his sensor panels.

Jazz placed a pede on the tip of a flattened doorwing. The slight pressure a threat of painful weight should Jazz simply shift his frame a certain way. “Don’t try t’ get up. Servos where I can see ‘em.”

Dented, scuffed and defeated, Barricade complied with a hateful glare.

“Well, that was impressive.” Smokescreen declared.

The visored mech looked up at the other Praxians as they emerged from behind the quartz. “Are ya two alrigh’?”

“We are unharmed.” Prowl’s faceplates were impassive, but after a moment he spoke again. “I assume the Enforcers have been called?”

“My ‘Ri an’ Bluestreak should ‘ave found Skids by now, so yeah.”

“Good.”

Smokescreen conveniently pulled some titanium rope out of his subspace. He’d planned ahead, it seemed. Or maybe Prowl had. In any event, the blue and red mech had his sire bound quickly and with far more skill than Jazz wished to think about. He volunteered to escort Barricade to the main house to await the Enforcers, pushing his soon-to-be-disgraced sire in front of him out of the garden.

When Jazz made to follow, Prowl wordlessly place a servo on his arm to hold him back for a moment.

They stared at one another for a few breems and finally Prowl spoke, doorwings dipping with weariness. “I would be very interested to know how you knew anything was amiss.”

“Barricade sent me a couple o’ suspicious messages.” At Prowl’s sharp look Jazz murmured, “Th’ rest was… a hunch.”

Prowl huffed in amusement. “A hunch…” Then, unexpectedly gave him a small, rueful smile. He leaned close to an audial. “You were gorgeous when you took Barricade down, you know.”

Embarrassment blushed through Jazz’s field. The visored mech aimed a light shove at the noble’s shoulder pauldron.

“Ya’re a menace, ya know tha’?”

Prowl caught the servo against his frame and pulled Jazz into a loose embrace. He tucked his helm into Jazz neck cables.

“I never wish to see you come to harm again.”

“Ya know tha’s gonna be a possibility.”

“…Yes. But I do not want to be the cause. You know me, Jazz. In a way that no bot else has. You know my sins. And I cannot fathom why you would put yourself at risk for me.”

Jazz suppressed a sigh.

_Fragging idiot._

“It’s because I love ya, Prowl. I thought tha’ was obvious.”
The Praxian froze for a klik and then tightened his arms and whispered, “And I, you.”
The case is finished.

I did not mean to go so long between updates, but mix together holidays, illness and good old fashioned writer's block and time gets away from you.

It took a staggeringly short amount of time for a transport with both Crossfire and Scattershield along with a small contingent of Enforcers to arrive at the estate to formally arrest Barricade and take him away. Jazz and Prowl watched from the covered porch of the transport dock as he was cuffed and put into the vehicle. Smokescreen stood closer, poised at the bottom of the short flight of stairs to the porch, arms crossed over his chest and mouth pulled down in an uncharacteristically solemn frown. He was doing all of the talking, giving a detailed (if slightly edited) statement to one of the officers.

Dolce was inside somewhere watching over and distracting Bluestreak. Jazz hoped that Prowl was planning on telling the youngling the truth of what happened. Preferably before he found out about it in some news or gossip column. Keeping Barricade’s actions a secret from him would only harm him in the long run.

Jazz sighed and leaned against Prowl as the window shutter where the disgraced noble sat closed, cutting off the sight of Barricade’s glaring optics.

Crossfire walked up to them. She gave a deferential nod to the nobles, but addressed Jazz. “I’ll send you a message when we’ve got him processed. And then we’ll need all of you to give your statements, though we have more than enough evidence to put him away from that recording you gave us.”

Jazz nodded tiredly, “’Opefully tha’ll be tomorrow. Tha’ fight took more outta me than I was expectin’.”

Her doorwings shot up. Consternation and concern streaked through her field. “Fight?! You fought him?!” Her optics swept his frame looking for new injuries.

Jazz winced. “Uh, did I say ‘fight’? I meant, um, encounter.”

“You’re still healing, you glitch!” She snapped. “You haven’t even gotten your tires replaced yet!”

“I’m waitin’ t’ get those done when I get my comm surgery. Jus’ do it all at once.” He said defensively.

Crossfire’s optics sharpened and she opened her mouth, no doubt to give him a piece of her
processor, when Smokescreen reset his vocalizer politely to get her attention.

“Officer Crossfire,” he began respectfully, voice and body language devoid of all the teasing and flirtation of their previous meeting, “I wish to thank you.”

Her sensor panels canted back suspiciously. “What for, Sir?”

He smiled painfully. “It is because of you and your mentor’s continued interest in my carrier’s case that led me to the discovery of Barricade’s involvement in it. It is because of you that it will finally be closed. And for that I will be forever grateful.” He gently grasped her servo and brought it to his dermas to place a short, courteous kiss on the back of it.

Poor Crossfire didn’t seem to know how to respond to that sincerity. Doorwings flickered up and down with embarrassment, optics bright and dumbfounded. Fortunately, she was saved from having to say anything by the Chief bellowing for her to join the rest of the Enforcers so they could get going back to the precinct. She easily reclaimed her servo.

“I’ll talk to you soon, Jazz.” She nodded again to the nobles, first to Prowl, “Viscount Prowl,” and then after a klik of hesitation to the younger, “...Lord Smokescreen.”

They watched the transport take off.

Prowl lightly steered Jazz towards the entrance. “It would put my spark at ease if you would rest for a while, my Jazz.”

“Ain’t gonna argue with tha’ idea.” Jazz said, letting himself be led.

“And on that note I think I shall head to my office to begin preparations.” Smokescreen excused himself from their company with a ghost of his usual charisma.

Prowl frowned, uncharacteristic hesitance in his field.

Jazz had a sudden flash of insight. Saw the spark-breaking parallels between Smokescreen and Prowl.

He pulled away from Prowl lightly and walked down the short set of stairs to the younger mech. Smokescreen gave him a questioning look. And there it was. Jazz saw the vulnerability in his optics. Oh-so-carefully masked. Despite his brave words from earlier, the confrontation had shaken him.

Unhesitatingly, Jazz circled his arms around the blue and red mech’s shoulders and pulled him into a gentle embrace; field open and comforting. Smokescreen froze for several kliks, hardly even venting. Slowly, he returned the hold and put his helm on Jazz’s shoulder pauldron. Sorrow and betrayal rippled off of him like waves. His engine hiccupped.

Jazz felt Prowl’s approach, the concern in his field buffering against Jazz’s. Smokescreen half-raised his helm to look at his uncle warily, but Prowl only placed his servo on Smokscreen’s helm. It was done with a sort of familiarity that only came with repeated gestures. Jazz would have bet his visor that Prowl must have shown his affection that way when the blue and red mech was a youngling.

After a few breems, Jazz felt Smokescreen pull away and let him go, but he smiled up at him and said coaxingly. “Ya’ll be back fo’ dinner, righ’? After ya get yar work done?”

Smokescreen shot a glance at his uncle but found only approval in his optics.

“Oh, y-yes, of course.” He stammered.
“Good, Blue will be glad t’ see ya.”

The blue and red Praxian managed a small smile and stepped back to transform.

Prowl watched him drive away with a flash of concern in his optics. Doorwings flicked slowly up and down, faceplates set in a far-away gaze of rumination.

Jazz nudged him softly. “‘Ey. Ya can always check up on ‘im later in th’ cycle. ‘Ope I wasn’t overstepping by th’ dinner invite.”

Prowl gave a small, thankful smile to the visored mech. “No, I am glad you did. I was a little… out of my depth.”

“Ya jus’ ‘ave t’ be there fo’ ‘im. Jus’ like ya’ve been in th’ past.”

Jazz leaned up and gave Prowl a quick kiss. The noble caught him around the waist before he could step back. “You are right, of course. I’ll have Draft make some of his favored dishes tonight. Come, let us go inside.”

With a sigh, Jazz rested against Prowl’s steady frame. “Now I gotta jus’ figure out ‘ow t’ explain this t’ my carrier. ‘E ain’t gonna be ‘appy with me.”

“I will leave such explanations in your capable servos.” Prowl remarked dryly.

“Ha! Ya jus’ don’ want t’ get blamed.”

“Indeed. Your carrier’s curses would bring ruin upon my house.”

About a joor later, after a proper scolding from his carrier, Jazz had been settled onto one of the couches in the second floor living room. Thousands of vorns past his final upgrades, and all it took was the brush of his carrier’s worried, anxious field to make him feel like he was both newsparked again and about the size of a mini-con. He took the chiding with field radiating guilt while attempting to surreptitiously hide behind Bluestreak. Both he and his carrier knew that given the scenario again, Jazz would take the same actions without hesitation.

During that time, the twins had made their reappearance. They were doing their best to entertain and distract Bluestreak by (intentionally badly) playing a board game with him and Dolce. It didn’t take long for the four of them to start coming up with their own rules. Tentative giggles and laughter slowly relaxing high strung doorwings and tense cables.

Jazz was dozing, half-reclined across the couch cushions and half-sprawled against Prowl’s side, not that the Praxian seemed to mind. The noble was without his signature datapads for once, seemingly content to just sit and hold onto his injured paramore in a protective embrace.

Beside them on the side table, the message app on Jazz’s work datapad pinged. The Polyhexian stretched out a lazy arm and retrieved it. Once he opened the app, he saw that there were actually two messages waiting for him. One was from Medic Clear Coat, giving him the date and time of his comm. suite replacement surgery (with additional tire replacement). He sent an acknowledgement, glad that he’d finally get back his comms. in two cycles. When he read the second message though, he was fully awake and on guard in an instant.

It was from Crossfire.

And news that he hadn’t expected.
The Enforcers had found Slate. Or more specifically, they’d been called to a small nondescript hotel at the edge of the city and found his greyed frame in a room next to a bottle of engex. He’d shot himself in the spark, but not before making a recorded confession of his and Barricade’s involvement in the Noss trade.

Jazz… didn’t know what to feel.


It all muddled in his processor.

He closed the app and put the data pad down. His hidden optics snapped over to the twins, still obliviously playing an innocent game with his carrier and the youngling. His thoughts cycled back to the epiphany of what they likely did for the Crystalspire patriarch in whose arms he was currently cradled. It was like any icy bucket of cleanser had been poured over his helm.

Prowl must have felt him tense up becaused the mech brought his dermas to Jazz’s audial and murmured lowly as to not disturb the other four. “What’s wrong, my Jazz?”

Jazz saw Dolce’s helm tilt slightly towards them. Knew his carrier could hear. Dolce likely hadn’t meant to eavesdrop, but, well... he was Polyhexian. And his carrier was probably still hyper vigilant for anything that might cause his creation distress.

“Nothin’ tha’ can’t wait.” He answered just as softly. “We shoul’ talk ‘bout it after dinner.”

Prowl made a considering humming sound that brushed pleasantly against Jazz’s audials. “As you wish.”

And fortunately, that satisfied Dolce and he turned his attention back to the game.

The cycle passed.

Smokescreen reappeared in time for dinner, delighted by the sight of his favorite fuels on the table. They moved to the lounge after the meal to enjoy the sunset. It was a pleasant and welcome respite from the earlier events. And Jazz held onto the calm, warm feelings for as long as he could until he quietly asked to speak to Prowl privately.

With a reassuring smile, mostly for his carrier and Bluestreak, he tugged gently on Prowl’s servo and led him out to the back terrace. The Praxian let Jazz lead him. Their destination was the pavilion at the end of the side courtyard. Far away from sensitive audials.

Once there, Jazz didn’t let go of Prowl’s servo, but he did turn to face him. The visored mech fidgeted for a klik. He decided not to dance around with words; Prowl was much more skilled at it than he was anyway.

“Prowl… did ya kill Slate?”

The Praxian didn’t seem perturbed by the direct question. Or surprised. “No. But I am likely the reason he is deactivated.”

Well, at least he’s sorta being honest.

“Wha’ do ya mean?”

“He was given his choice. Both he and Barricade would be found guilty, regardless, but he knew the
consequences should he be put in the same prison system as my brother. He chose the easy way out. A coward to the end.”

Jazz shuddered at the cold, unfeeling tone in Prowl’s voice.

Prowl noticed, of course, and drew Jazz into his arms. When he spoke again it was with warm affection. “He hurt you, Jazz. He doesn’t deserve your regard.”

“Yeah, well, I don’ know if ‘e deserved a blaser t’ th’ spark either.”

The arms around him tightened. Prowl’s voice was a bare whisper. “If I could have had my way I would have had him dosed with his own drugs and dumped in the middle of the crystal wilds to deactivate.”

The sentiment was vicious, petty and cruel. “… but you would have been very cross with me then.”

“Was tha’ a joke?!” Jazz demanded weakly, though that small, recently discovered, terrible part of him agreed that it would have been a fitting punishment.

“I apologize if that was in bad taste.” Prowl said with infuriating calm and a tiny, sly smirk.

Jazz was seriously tempted to kick him.

He ended up kissing him in a sort of helpless fury.

Jazz’s comm replacement surgery turned out to be the most mundane part of the deca-cycle. He went to the main medical center of Praxus. Medic Clear Coat put him into a light stasis to switch out the damaged parts and he woke up good as new. With a replaced comm. suite, and fresh new tires. (Made of the highest quality, of course. Prowl spared no expense, despite Jazz’s protests.)

And with the restoration of his comms. came the orders to return home to Polyhex. The source of the drugs had been found and Jazz’s expertise and speed were no longer needed by the Praxian Enforcers, at least according to his Polyhexian chief.

He had a deca-cycle and a half to pack up his apartment and get any “business” finished up in Praxus before he was expected to report back to the Polyhexian Enforcer headquarters in Precinct Four.

Unfortunately, Dolce had to get back to work and so needed to leave Praxus the cycle after Jazz had gotten his surgery.

Jazz, Bluestreak, Sunstreaker and Sideswipe accompanied Dolce to the international transport dock. Dolce fretted as he hugged Jazz again. “I don’ feel righ’ leavin’ ya while yar still recoverin’.”

“I’m gonna be ‘ome in a deca-cycle, ‘Ri.” Jazz tried to reassure his anxious carrier.

“I’m allowed t’ worry.” Dolce said almost too sharply.

Bluestreak stepped forward and tapped his fist to his chestplates gaining the adults’ attention. Guileless faceplates solomon and sincere he said, “I promise we will take the best care of Jazz for you.”

Behind him Sideswipe muffled a snicker in his servo. Sunstreaker thumped the back of his twin’s helm with a dull clank.
Dolce’s faceplates softened. A warm smile coming to his dermas. “Will ya, now? I s’ppose I don’ ’ave anythin’ t’ worry ‘bout, then.”

Bluestreak did his best to stand at attention, though his posture immediately dropped when Dolce leaned down to give him a hug goodbye. The Dolce straightened and made optic contact with each of them. “Ya mechlings watch out fo’ each other, yeah?”

The twins nodded while Bluestreak said enthusiastically, “We will!”

“Travel safe, ‘Ri. I’ll be back in Polyhex soon.” Jazz said with one last hug. “Comm. me when ya get in.”

Jazz hoped his carrier wouldn’t worry himself into a state on the long flights. There was no straight route from Praxus to Polyhex, the transport was heading to the much bigger hub of Altihex. Dolce would have to change over to a smaller transport that would take him the rest of the way to Polyhex, leaving plenty of time for his processor to wander.

“I think tha’s s’pposed t’ be my line.” Dolce chuckled.

He kissed Jazz’s forehelm and then boarded the transport. They watched it take off, waving to the smiling figure in the viewport until the vehicle turned to the proper direction for its journey, cutting off their view.

Jazz was honestly astonished at the number of drooping doorwings when he came in for his last cycle at the First Precinct. He hadn’t realized just how much of an impact his presence had been on his division. He was going to miss them all too. All of the other officers came up to him at least once to wish him well. Even Torque came up from his basement lair to say goodbye in his quirky way.

Crossfire was oddly quiet, but her doorwings were the lowest he’d ever seen them. He reassured her that he was planning on keeping in touch with his kith as he unlocked and opened his drawer to start cleaning out his desk. There, sitting innocently, was the box containing the audial horn adornment from Prowl. He’d nearly forgotten about it in the past cycles.

Contemplatively, he opened the box. He had only gotten a good look at it once when it had been delivered to him, and then he’d shoved it out of sight. It was so different from the interlocking geometric shapes and small, blue gems of the adornment his carrier had made him. While cast in a silver metal like the other, this one’s filigree swooped and curled with tiny red gems dangling in a glittering cascade.

“What are you going to do with it?” Crossfire asked, optics both pointed and curious.

Jazz gave her a half-smile. “’Bout time I started wearin’ it, I think.” Despite the softly spoken words, he closed the box and tucked it away in his subspace. They were interrupted from more conversation when Chief Scattershield entered the main room and said,

“All right, everybot gather round.”

He waited until they had assembled in front of him. “Now, we just had a major victory. The mechs behind Noss are now in custody or gone. Office Jazz, we couldn’t have done it without your assistance. We are sad to see you leave Praxus. The department all pitched in to get you a small token of our appreciation.”

The chief handed him a small, flat box. Inside was a thin piece of metal artwork, etched with the
shield of Praxus and below that, a mecha-sparrow. Every officer’s designation glyph was carefully carved into the blank spaces around the main art.

“Something to remember us by.” Scattershield said clapping him gently on the shoulder pauldron.

:I insisted on the mecha-sparrow.: Crossfire subtly dimmed her optic in a wink.

Jazz held back a laugh as he profusely and sincerely thanked his coworkers for their thoughtful gift. Scattershield let them mingle and chat for a bit before shooing them back to work.

“You’re not leaving right away are you?” One of the other officers asked.

“Nah, I’m gonna be in Praxus fo’ at least another deca-cycle. Packin’ up my apartment didn’t take very long.”

“But if you’ve already packed up your apartment, where are you staying?”

Jazz just smiled enigmatically. “Don’t worry ‘bout me. I’ve got a place.”

Driving up the long path to the estate still didn’t feel normal by any stretch of the imagination, but it had become familiar. As was Skids opening the door for him.

“Ah, Jazz, Master Prowl informed me to direct you to his office when you arrived.”

Well, that’s new.

“A’ight then, lead th’ way.”

Skids ushered him down the hall past the indoor garden and the doors to the banquet hall. He opened a smaller door, behind which was a more formal gaming room. The walls were painted a dark brown making the space seem heavy. There were different types of game boards already set up on several small tables, but the whole room had a much more stuffy vibe than the cosy living room upstairs where they had spent most of their time playing games. This space must have been for more “social” functions.

An adjacent door led through a similar sized room as the first though it was longer and painted a cool light grey. The walls were lined with display cases holding a variety of weaponry and old pieces of showy armor. Jazz remembered Bluestreak telling him about a weapons gallery. This could only be it. As they passed through, a familiar object in one of the display cases caught Jazz’s optic.

It was a tungsten dagger inlaid with jewels. The hilt and pommel formed in the shape of a snarling, lunging turbo-wolf.

A twin to the dagger tucked away from prying optics.

Jazz wished he could tell Stepper that he’d been right.

Then they reached the door on the other side of the room and Skids politely knocked. Prowl’s voice called out an invitation to enter. The butler merely held the door open for Jazz as he walked in before shutting it behind him leaving the visored mech alone with Prowl.

The noble sat behind a dark metal desk. The two chairs for visitors and the bookshelves along the walls were made of the same nearly black material. The accent color of the office was a deep shade of midnight blue, displayed by the cushions on the chairs and the walls. All in all, it was a space
designed for intimidation. Prowl’s white plating stood out against the dark background, an imposing centerpiece. Though, once Prowl stood and stepped around the desk to greet Jazz with a gentle kiss, the illusion of the oppressive room lessened.

“Hello, my Jazz.” The Praxian picked up a small box from the desk and presented it to Jazz. “I believe this is yours.”

His spark lifted when he saw that the box contained the horn adornment his carrier had made him. It had been missing from his apartment. He knew that Barricade had mentioned sending it off to Prowl to make it appear as if Jazz had rejected him (even though it was the wrong one), but he thought it might have been lost. Apparently, it had made it to its intended destination via post.

He took the adornment out and attached it to his audial horn. Then he removed the box he’d gotten from his desk from subspace. Silently, he fastened the second adornment to his other horn.

Prowl went very, very still.

“You… put on the horn adornment I gave you?” He sounded ridiculously tentative and hopeful.

“Yes. Do ya know wha’ acceptin’ th’ adornment means?”

“You are… accepting my suit to become conjunx.”

“It means I chose ya. Do ya understand? I can’t stay in Praxus forever, bu’ I can give us this.”

Any other words he might have said were swallowed by Prowl’s dermas covering his own. The Praxian kissed him long and deeply. The empty box fell from Jazz’s servos. Prowl’s servos, meanwhile, were everywhere as if he couldn’t decide where to touch. Slightly overwhelmed, Jazz tried to step back, but Prowl followed refusing to let him out of the circle of his arms giving him kiss after kiss.

Prowl pushed him up against a solid surface. Or, well… semi-solid as it turned out. He felt Prowl scrabble at something behind his back and the wall they’d been leaning against gave way sending them stumbling through a secret door. He had a moment to recognize the enclosed space of a servant’s passage, and then the Praxian was urging him up the small staircase.

“I-hey, slow down, mech. I ain’t goin’ anywhere yet.” Jazz framed Prowl’s face in his servos halting their near frantic pace.

Prowl pressed their forehelms together with a shaky vent. “Apologies. I have been waiting for this moment since the first time you came to the estate. I want you like I have never wanted anybot else.”

Jazz smiled and stroked Prowl’s helm vents, “Tha’s real flatterin’, lover, bu’ ‘ow ‘bout we take this nice an’ slow?”

Prowl huffed, near pouting. “Forgive me if I am tired of going slow.”

With a chuckle, the visored mech tapped Prowl’s olfactory with his digit. “I didn’ mean we shoul’ stop. Jus’ meant maybe we coul’ find a nice berth t’ continue on.”

The Praxian’s optics brightened with understanding and a small amount of embarrassment. He took Jazz’s servo and guided him up the steps. “Oh, of course. That was my thought process, I just became… distracted. We can get to my suite from here.”

Amused, Jazz asked, “Any particular reason we’re sneakin’ up th’ back way rather than takin’ th’
main route?”

Prowl turned his helm away, a blush of sheepishness blooming over his field, “I wish to have you to myself for a while. We are less likely to run into younglings this way.”

“Tha’s one way t’ avoid awkward conversations, I guess.”

The servants passage ended at a door that let out into the corridor of storage rooms Jazz had found previously. But instead of taking them out where the piped synth was in the banquet hall, Prowl went through another door that opened out onto a narrow balcony. They passed by a set of windows where Jazz could see the interior of the banquet hall.

Jazz fought down a youngling-like giggle as they re-entered the house into another part of the servant’s corridors. There was something just fun about sneaking through the back passages. It felt a little naughty. Prowl sent him a smile as he felt the levity bubbling through Jazz’s EMF.

They finally emerged into a hall that was part of the “family’s” part of the house, down it, Jazz could see the second floor living room, but only for a moment. Prowl pulled Jazz through the door into the yellow-gold room he’d stayed in before, then through what looked like a private sitting room, then, finally, into his own dark metal and crimson suite. They were both venting hard, not realizing that they’d been nearly running the whole time. Slightly breathless laughter tumbled from their dermas.

Prowl left him for a moment, going to a wardrobe and pulling out a capelet made of fine, glittering, silver mesh. “I hope you will not mind, but when I saw this in Garden Square I had to buy it for you. I thought it would look stunning on you.”

Jazz snorted fondly, but let Prowl wrap him up in the stupidly soft garment. “‘Ow long ‘ave ya ‘ad tha’ stashed away?”

“I might have had it since our date at the opera.”

“O’ course ya ‘ave.” Jazz murmured sardonically.

Then Prowl kissed him again. The frenzied energy was tamped down, but the passion was no less intense. Longing washed over him from Prowl’s EMF and Jazz’s fans whirled to life.

Caresses were exchanged; cable housings coaxed open as they found the berth and sank into it while losing themselves in each other. Jazz was surrounded by opulent softness at his back and delicious heat at his front. After a moment of fumbling they had their cable connectors clicked into place. Sensory data circled through their circuits.

Jazz mapped out as many hot spots as he could with his digits, though it was hard to concentrate with the way Prowl was using his dermas and glossa to trace the spaces between the filigree of the adornments on his audial horns. It sent distracting patches of feedback to his neural net.

So, he fought dirty. He set the mags in his servos at their lowest setting and found the hinges of Prowl’s doorwings. At the first pulse, Prowl made a soft gasping groan and froze, helm thunking down onto Jazz’s chestplates. The Polyhexian chuckled, but his amused victory was short lived. Prowl’s helm lifted slowly, his optics locked on Jazz’s, lit with a sort of hot challenge.

Jazz suddenly found the data packet with the sensory feedback from his own mag pulse looped back into his connection. Pleasurable fire lit up his back and raced down every neural wire in his frame. He mentally and physically grabbed onto Prowl; locking their connection open so that Prowl was dragged into the sensory overload with him and digging his digits into sensitive seams.
Writhing snarls of static whitened out his visual center for a bit. When he came to, he was still cocooned in the silver capelet with Prowl curled around him. He’d disconnected them at some point and politely put away their cables. He’d also closed the berth curtains around them.

The Praxian was in recharge.

*It's really unfair how innocent he looks.*

He spent a few silent breems studying Prowl’s faceplates, maskless and unconcerned in repose. The dim languid atmosphere made him drift towards recharge himself.

His comm. went off.

Bluestreak’s voice chirped out happily the moment he answered. :Hi Jazz, are you coming over today?:

*Romantic interlude over.* Jazz thought with a soundless snicker before replying to the youngling.

Chapter End Notes

And we're finally nearing the conclusion!

Things are going a little too well, don't you think...?
Bluestreak was thrilled to bits that Jazz was going to be staying with them for the whole deca-cycle he had left in Praxus. The youngling excitedly planned out activities in an overflowing stream of happy words.

The first venture Bluestreak suggested was taking all of Jazz’s gifted crystals and planting them in the gardens. Which was how Jazz found out that Prowl had given him his own private garden on the Crystalspire Estate. Jazz had truly been unable to speak for a few kliks when they’d presented him the enclosed patch of land that had been cleared for him.

He, Bluestreak and Prowl spent most of the next cycle carefully planting the crystals into crushed minerals and growth material. All except for one carefully selected bouquet that Jazz had wrapped up and shipped back to Polyhex.

Score, one of the grooms, also doubled as the estate’s gardener and was on servo in case they needed him. Not that there was much for him to do in the gardens, usually. Most of the pruning and cycle-to-cycle maintenance was done by small non-sentient garden drones. Score only had to intervene if something went very wrong.

According to Prowl, there had been an ancient mech that had been the groundskeeper and gardener back when he’d been a younger mech, but the oldster had passed away some vorns ago. He’d been quite close to the old gardener and had been hesitant to replace him with anybot who didn’t know the estate like the old mech had. For a while, Prowl had hired in different companies to keep up the gardens. Eventually, though, he’d tired of the strangers on the grounds of the estate and he’d gotten the drones and offered the overseeing of the gardens to Score.

After the work was done, they’d spent some time appreciating the glittering colors of the transplanted crystals. As young bots do, Bluestreak had soon become bored and declared an impromptu game of hide and seek and appointed himself the seeker. It was a youngling’s game even for Bluestreak, but neither Jazz nor Prowl refused. Jazz had hurried off as soon as the mechling had started counting without looking to see if Prowl had followed him or gone off in a different direction.

His pedes unconsciously led him back to the quartz garden.

For a moment he forgot about the game as he entered the space and gazed over the jagged crystalline
structures. Contemplatively, he made his way over to the spot where Barricade had been standing. The position was in front of one of the larger growths of smokey quartz. The piece had an interesting blush of color in the middle of it; the expanse of grey broken up by red and black clouds in the crystal. The black wasn’t too unusual, but the red hue didn’t naturally occur in that type of quartz. Jazz wondered if the colors had been intentional.

What had made Barricade choose this place for his final confrontation? Did it hold some significance for the brothers? It must have. He’d been very specific in naming it. A favored place to play as younglings, perhaps? Or perhaps the site of some unforgivable trespass.

What made this place so special?

Jazz had a half a klik warning as his plating prickled with the sudden awareness of another EMF just before Bluestreak’s smaller form glomped into him with a happy laugh. Jazz yelped involuntarily in shock.

“I found you!”

“Ya sure did, Blue.” Jazz wheezed, spark pounding with fright. “Gave me a righ’ scare.”

Bluestreak looked up at him with worried optics. “Oh! I’m sorry!”

Jazz patted the mechling’s helm soothingly. “Naw, don’ apologize. I should’a been payin’ more attention. Are we off t’ find yar ‘Tor now?”

“No need.” Prowl spoke up from behind them.

Jazz’s spark gave another lurch.

_Damn silent-moving Praxians!_

The mechling pouted, “Aww, ‘Tor! You didn’t go hide!”

Prowl smiled apologetically, “I’m afraid I looked at my chronometer and realized I must cut playtime short. It is time for your lessons.”

Bluestreak groaned in disappointment.

“You’ve put them off all cycle,” Prowl chided, “and it isn’t polite to keep your tutor waiting for joors. Also, while I’m sure Sunstreaker and Sideswipe are happy to switch times with you, you mustn’t take that for granted.”

The mechling huffed a put-upon sigh. “Alright.” He bounced up on the tips of his pedes and gave Jazz a kiss on the cheekridge. “I’ll see you both at dinnertime!” Then he sprinted off down the path towards the house.

“Such a sweetspark.” Jazz murmured.

“He is.” Prowl’s arms wrapped around him from behind. The Praxian pressed a kiss against the audial horn to which his gift was attached. “What are you doing in here? I would have thought it a place you would avoid.”

Jazz leaned back into the embrace. “Jus’ wonderin’ wha’ made Barricade choose this place.”

“Some sort of poetic irony, I suppose,” Prowl mused. He said nothing more about it and Jazz itched to ask for specifics.
“Come inside.” The Praxian murmured in a coaxing manner against his audial. “I do believe we have a couple of joors to ourselves.” His servo trailed over the closed cover of one of Jazz’s ports with intent.

“’Aven’t gotten ‘nough o’ me?” The visored mech teased. He knew that Prowl was changing the subject and distracting him on purpose, but nonetheless, he coyly slipped out of Prowl’s hold to begin meandering his way back towards the house. After all, Prowl had a legitimate reason he might want to eschew this part of the garden.

Doorwings fluttered as Prowl caught Jazz’s servo to hold as they walked. “Never, my Jazz.”

Later that evening Jazz called his carrier to check in with him, stepping out onto the loggia for privacy. Old habits died hard.

Dolce was in high spirits, and not just from Jazz feeling better, it turned out.

:Oh, it was so nice.: Dolce nearly gushed over the comm. :Yar chief from Praxus commed. me t’ make sure I made it ‘ome okay. We exchanged comms. b’fore I left. ‘E’s was so sweet. I thought I might seal up some goodies an’ send ‘em t’ ‘im as thanks.: Jazz was thankful that his carrier couldn’t see his full-body twitch.

:Uh, sure, ‘Ri… Ya do know tha’ ‘e’s flirtin’ with ya, righ’? Tha’s why ‘e nearly flapped ‘is doorwings off when ‘e was with ya.: Maybe it was unkind of him to call out Scattershield like that, especially if he’d been trying to be subtle, but his carrier deserved to be informed.

:I wasn’t protoformed last cycle, ya know.: Dolce teased, :I know when a handsome bot is flirtin’ with me.: :

:...Righ’.:

His carrier laughed. :I’m sorry, is it weird fo’ ya?: Apparently, Dolce had know and had been fine with being flirted with. And apparently Jazz’s discomfort was audible even over the comm.

:...A little, yeah. Um, ‘sweet’ ain’t th’ word tha’s usually used t’ describe ‘im.: :Oh? An’ wha’ word would ya use t’ describe ‘im?:

:Brusque.: Jazz deadpanned.

Dolce laughed again. :Oh, sweetspark, bots tend t’ act a lil’ different ‘round bots they like.: Abruptly he sobered. :Unless… unless yar uncomfortable fo’ ‘nother reason? Ya know tha’ no bot coul’ replace yar sire.: Warmth and guilt wared for dominance in Jazz’s spark.

:No, no! I know tha’!: Jazz hastened to assure him. :I know ya still love sire. But ‘e’s been gone fo’ a long time. I wouldn’ try t’ keep ya from meetin’ somebot new because o’ tha’. I jus’ wish it was somebot besides my hard-aft chief.: He mumbled the last sentence.
And Dolce was back to chuckling. :So, I’m assumin’ tha’ means ya don’ want t’ know when ‘e contacts me.: 

:Yeah, no. I don’ need those updates, thanks.: 

*Just like you don’t need the update that I spent the last dark-cycle in Prowl’s berth.*

The twins hadn’t forgotten Jazz’s offer for a spar.

The next cycle found him in the training room with them. Bluestreak was sitting off to the side waiting to cheer him on. Though he did make sure that Jazz didn’t mind that he might also cheer the twins on.

Sideswipe faced him first. The Polyhexian bowed to the Kaonite formally. He flexed his servos, activating his mags at a low level and then fell into an easy stance, waiting for the other mech’s first move.

The red mech gave him a cocky smirk. He didn’t have any sort of specific stance, merely stalked forward with the grace and aggression of a practiced brawler.

Jazz dodged the first two punches. Then pressed an offensive with two palm strikes of his own which Sideswipe blocked with his arms. The Kaonite hissed in discomfort as his forearms went slightly numb for a few kliks from the active mags. He shook his arms trying to quickly get the feeling back into them. He growled and aimed a kick at Jazz’s helm. The Polyhexian caught his leg and overbalanced him causing him to fall over onto his aft with a surprised yelp.

Sunstreaker snickered as Sideswipe rolled back up to his pedes.

“Shut up, Sunny.” Sideswipe said without sparing his brother a look. He focused, instead, on Jazz, who waited patiently for the red mech’s next move.

They circled each other. Jazz saw a tell-tale flicker of Sideswipe’s optics to up over Jazz’s helm, and without stopping to think, he turned just in time to see Sunstreaker coming at him from behind. Jazz ducked the gold mech’s swipe at his helm. Then he got a good grip and mag lock on Sunstreaker’s midsection and threw him over his shoulder pauldron.

Right into Sideswipe.

The clangs and vicious swearing in pit-Kaonese was worth the slight annoyance that they had ganged up on him without warning.

“Hey! That wasn’t very fair!” Bluestreak yelled indignantly.

Jazz smiled at his young defender. “It’s all righ’, Blue.” He directed his next words casually at the twins struggling up from their tangle on the floor. “Is tha’ ‘ow ya took down opponents in th’ rings?”

“Usually,” Sideswipe said grudgingly.

Jazz crossed his arms, though he kept smiling. “Fight fair, or this sparrin’ session is over.”

The twins grudgingly agreed after Bluestreak gave them a good guilting about playing fair. They fought for a few more rounds. Jazz didn’t win every match, of course, but he kept the twins on their pede-tips
After Jazz had called a halt, Bluestreak sweetly asked for another music lesson. So Jazz spent the afternoon in the music room with the youngling. They started at the synth together, playing easy duets in the warm light streaming in from the windows. True duets with separate parts for both of them. Bluestreak had practiced enough that he could handle both servos on the keys. There were still wrong notes here and there, but they both just laughed them off and kept going.

After a joor or so the mechling asked, “Hey Jazz? Can we play a duet where you use the vibrolin with me accompanying you on the synth?”

“Sure, Blue. Wha’ did ya ‘ave in mind?”

With Jazz’s agreement, Bluestreak hopped up from the synth bench and went over to a small cabinet.

“I was looking at the other instruments and things in here and thought there might be more instruments in here, but I found these instead!” He opened the cabinet to reveal several sheafs of bound flimsies and pulled out a thin set, happily carrying it back to Jazz.

“I think I can play this one! And it has a vibrolin part. Look.”

Jazz quickly ran an optic over the written notes. It was a simple melody with a simple accompaniment. He was pretty confident that they could play it. He got up from the bench and carefully removed the vibrolin from the glass case.

“A’ight, Blue. Let’s see if we can do this piece some justice, yeah?”

They found a music stand for Jazz to put his part on. He spent a few breems getting the instrument in tune with the synth. Then they figured out the tempo. Bluestreak ran through the synth part, just to make sure it wasn’t too hard for him. Then they tried to play together. After a few false starts with accompanying giggles, they managed to get their rhythms in concert.

Bluestreak played running, arpeggiated chords up and down on the synth while Jazz played the lilting, sweeping melody over top of them. It was a light and gentle song.

They reached the end and just spent a happy moment in silence smiling at each other with accomplishment. Jazz flipped the last page of the vibrolin part over and stalled for a klik. At the bottom of the page was a small servo-written note that read:

To Rhodium, my beautiful creation, I hope you like the song I wrote for you. Love, Carrier.

The music had belonged to the late Lady of Crystalspire. And apparently so had the vibrolin he’d been playing. For a moment he imagined the femme that he’d seen in so many paintings and holographs playing in this rich room, swaying gracefully to the music. His train of thought was interrupted by the youngling asking for another song to play. Jazz just smiled and told him he’d help look for more music.

Prowl seemed distracted at dinner. He barely ate any of his meal, optics distant. Bluestreak didn’t appear to notice, chatting away about the day’s activities, but Jazz covertly glanced at the twins, noting their tenseness.

He reset his vocalizer during a lull in Bluestreak’s talking. “Is somthin’ wrong Prowl? Ya’re awfully quiet.”

The Praxian looked at Jazz, nonplussed for a klik before covering it under a veneer of ease. “I was just contemplating what we might do tomorrow. I feel a little guilty for not being able to spend much of this cycle with you.”
It was a lie. And not even a good one, but Prowl was counting on Jazz not pressing him on it in front of Bluestreak.

The youngling, of course took the opportunity presented to him by his adopted creator and jumped back into the conversation. “We could go to the museum! There’s a miniature display of the entire Crystal Gardens and-”

“I would rather do something here, Bluestreak.” Prowl interrupted unexpectedly.

That struck Jazz as strange. It was the first time he’d seen Prowl both interrupt his creation and refuse to show Jazz some Praxian cultural icon.

“O-oh, okay.” The youngling floundered for a klik. Seemingly disconcerted by his guardian’s abrupt shutdown of his idea. “Um, we could go swimming in the pool? I remember that Jazz said he knows how to swim.”

Bluestreak look at him for confirmation and Jazz nodded his helm with a smile. “I’d like tha’ Blue.”

So they spent a good deal of the next cycle in and around the indoor pool. It was fun, but Prowl continued to display his quiet, intense behavior. To Jazz, it came off as almost… guarded, but when Jazz tried to ask about it when they were alone, Prowl distracted him. With his frame.

In fact, as the deca-cycle went on, Prowl would entice him to interface often and in different parts of the house. Between leisurely drives through the estate’s crystal forest, ener-tea parties and games with Bluestreak, they’d christened many rooms in their snatches of private time.

Jazz was pretty sure Prowl’s sudden insatiable appetite was a mix of honest lust and an attempt to stop Jazz from asking questions.

And frag it, he fell for it every time.

They’d taken to recharging in the same berth after the first cycle Jazz had put on Prowl’s audial adornment. The cycle before Jazz was scheduled to go back to Polyhex, he woke halfway during the dark cycle to Prowl clutching his frame.

“Prowl?” he murmured in sleepy confusion, twisting in the Praxian’s arms to face him.

“My Jazz…” The Praxian whispered achingly against his audial horn. “…I would give you anything. Everything… I don’t want you to leave me.”

Jazz’s spark twisted painfully in his chest. He caught Prowl’s dermas in a kiss, answering him in the only way that felt right.

Prowl was already out of the berth the next morning when Jazz came out of recharge. A feeling of unease settled itself into Jazz’s spark as he got up.

His flight back to Polyhex was in the early afternoon. He’d preemptively booked it from the public transport station because he was sure Prowl would have done something stupidly excessive like book him a private transport if he’d let him.

The feeling of disquiet only grew when the noble was also absent from breakfast. At least it meant that Jazz could focus all his attention on the pouting youngling sitting across the table from him. Bluestreak poked sullenly at his fuel, doorwing drooping sadly. And most telling, he wasn’t talking.
Jazz gave him a soft smile. “‘Ey, wha’s with th’ long faceplates, Blue?”

“I wish you could stay here.” He answered despondently.

“Jus’ ‘cause I’m goin’ back t’ Polyhex don’ mean ya can’t talk t’ me. I know ya still got my comm. frequency. I would love t’ get a call from ya, anytime.”

Doorwings perked, and optics lit up hopefully, “Really?”

“O’course! I may not be able t’ answer ya immediately all th’ time, ‘cause o’ th’ time difference, but I promise I will always call ya back jus’ as soon as I can.”

Bluestreak hopped up from his chair and raced around the table to give Jazz a hug. “I was so scared that you were going to leave and be gone forever! I didn’t even think about comms. I feel so silly! I just don’t want to lose you.”

Jazz hugged back. “Ya ain’t losin’ me, sweetspark. I’m no farther than a comm. call away whenever ya need me. An’ I’ll try t’ visit as often as I can.”

Bluestreak sighed, relieved, burying his faceplates into Jazz’s chestplate. “I’m glad.”

Jazz let the youngling hold onto him for a while longer before encouraging him to eat some more. Which he happily did.

When the mechling finished up, he headed to his lessons in the reading den off the library. Jazz was then left to his own devices and decided to get to the bottom of whatever was bothering Prowl.

He would not be distracted by interfacing this time, damnit!

He had a suspicion that it might have something to do with his departure, but he also had a foreboding sense that there was something more going on. He wasn’t sure where exactly Prowl was, but he had a pretty good guess, considering how often he’d been told that Prowl sequestered himself in his office.

After finding the nearly invisible, small door between the breakfast room and the banquet hall, he cut through the grand, imposing space to the other nearly hidden door that took him through the formal game room and the weapons gallery. He steelied himself and knocked shortly. Without giving the mech inside a chance to grant or deny him access he opened the door just wide enough to slip in.

Prowl had his helm down reading a datapad as Jazz entered. “Skids, I told you I was not to be disturbed.” He said in a dangerously icy voice.

“Good thing I’m not Skids, then.” Jazz said in an even tone.

Prowl’s helm and doorwings both shot up in shock. Jazz suppressed the smirk that threatened to take over his dermas. It always sort of felt like a victory when he was able to sneak up on or surprise the Praxian.

“Jazz… I was not expecting you.”

“Obviously.” The Polyhexian walked further into the imposing office. “I missed ya this mornin’.”

“...Apologies, I am busy.”

Jazz moved to stand between the two visitors chairs in front of the desk, but didn’t sit.
“Ya want t’ tell me why ya’re spending my last day in Praxus holed up in yar office?”

“I assumed you would wish to spend your remaining time with Bluestreak.” Prowl deflected.

“E’s in ‘is lessons righ’ now.” Jazz mentioned nonchalantly.

“Ah… I can tell Legacy to—”

“I didn’ come in ‘ere t’ put off Blue’s lessons, Prowl.”

Prowl stilled for a klik then spoke. “Then why did you come here?”

“I came t’ spend some time with ya b’fore I left.” Jazz said gently. “An’ t’ ask ya wha’s been botherin’ ya. Or maybe why ya’ve been distant fo’ th’ past few cycles?”

Unfortunately, Prowl’s optics became closed off and cool. “That’s none of your concern.”

Jazz frowned, “Tha’s slag an’ ya know it!”

“I don’t have to tell you my business.” Prowl’s voice was getting lower and more intense.

In contrast, Jazz’s vocalizer began to rise with his anger. “I’m gettin’ some pretty mixed signals ‘ere, Prowl. Last dark cycle ya ‘eld me so tight I could ‘ardly vent, an’ this morning ya’re actin’ like I’m yar enemy. Why are ya pushin’ me away?”

“Because to keep you safe I’ll end up caging you. You’re going to end up hating me for something, but I don’t want it to be for that!” Prowl said sharply.

“Why are ya convinced tha’ I’m goin’ t’ end up hating ya?!” Jazz yelled back.

Prowl suddenly rose with a roar of his engine. “Because everybot else I love either hates me or is dead!” His fists were clenched on top of the desk. His voice dropped back down. “And I’d much prefer the former than the latter.”

Jazz was stunned silent for a moment, anger deflated, but he found his voice again, “I don’t hate ya. Bluestreak doesn’t hate ya.”

“It’s only a matter of time.” Prowl muttered.

“Well, with tha’ attitude, yeah it is,” Jazz said sarcastically.

Prowl sighed and sat back down. “…It would be safer if you don’t contact me again.”

“Why?” The visored mech demanded.

The Praxian pushed the data pad he’d been reading over to Jazz. “Barricade has escaped custody and killed the corrupt officer he had on his payroll.”

Jazz felt a momentary flash of loss at the news as he skimmed the report. Not for Gauge, the bot, but for the loss of potential. Who he might have been without the Crystalspire’s influence.

He also felt momentary annoyance that he hadn’t been notified of Barricade’s escape, but then he remembered that he was no longer part of the Praxian Enforcers and they probably wanted to keep the escape on the need-to-know basis.

“Holo-captures taken by security cameras show him boarding a transport to Kaon. He’s most likely
is heading to their underworld to hide.” Prowl continued. “As long as he lives, he will try to undermine me and hurt the bots I love. I won’t let that happen.”

“So wha? Yar plan is t’ send me back t’ Polyhex an’ never speak t’ me again? Jus’ a ‘so long an’ thanks fo’ th’ interfacin’? ‘Ow is tha’ goin’ t’ do anythin’?”

Prowl’s dermas twisted down into a grimace. He stood again and walked around the desk to Jazz putting his servos on the visored mech’s arms. “It will keep you off his radar while I hold his attention. He’ll be too busy running from the bounty hunters I send after him to even think of coming near you.”

“An’ wha’ about us? We jus’ stop bein’ t’gether?”

“There can’t be an ‘us’ with him running around as a threat!”

“I can take care o’ myself, Prowl! I think I’ve proven tha’ many times now!”

“There’s more than one way that he could get to you, Jazz.” His servos tightened on Jazz’s arms for a klik. He bowed his helm, guilt leaking out of his tightly held EMF. “I shouldn’t have dragged you into this life.” He looked back into Jazz’s optics earnestly. “I know I shouldn’t have pursued a suit with you, but I couldn’t help myself. You’re everything I’ve ever wanted in a mate. I love you, Jazz.”

They stared at each other in silence, the words hanging in the air.

“Yeah,” Jazz agreed sadly, “bu’ ya still don’ trust me. An’ love without trust is hollow.”

“Jazz… I-”

The visored mech put his digits over Prowl’s dermas, cutting him off.

“Don’t… please.” He managed a pained, tremulous smile. Jazz replaced his digits with his own dermas. All he could do as he reigned in his twisting spark was pour his love and regret into that final kiss. He pulled out of Prowl’s hold before the Praxian could react and backed up towards the door.

“…Goodbye, Prowl.” He whispered.

Jazz left the room and walked through the corridors that suddenly seemed cloying, overwrought and claustrophobic despite their palatial open space. He thought he heard the sound of something shattering behind him, muffled by walls and doors, but he made himself keep walking.

Made himself push open the grand front doors.

Made himself transform.

Made himself leave the estate behind without looking back.

Chapter End Notes

So Prowl's being stupid when it comes to emotions... and we're almost done! One more chapter to go.
Chapter Summary

Jazz goes back to Polyhex and a youngling grows up.

Chapter Notes

Once again, I vastly underestimated how much I was going to write and had to split what I was doing into two chapters. So, good news, I guess? One more chapter after this. Unless there another word explosion...

After his “escape” from the Crystalspire estate, Jazz had gone to Crossfire’s place to hide and nurse his aching spark as he counted down the joors until his transport was scheduled to leave. She’d been justifiably angry at his state, ready to drive to the estate on his behalf and give the Viscount a vitriolic piece of her processor, but he begged her to just leave it alone so he could leave the city in peace.

At that moment, his emotions couldn’t take any more of a beating.

As he fiddled with the small cube of high grade Crossfire had given him, his comm. went off unexpectedly.

It was Bluestreak.

:Did you already leave?: He sounded distressed.

Guilt flooded Jazz’s spark and he flinched. In his rush to flee the house, he’d forgotten about the mechling. :I left while ya were in yar lesson, Blue. Yar ‘Tor an’ I… we, uh, ‘ad an argument. I’m sorry I didn’t get to say goodbye properly.: 

Bluestreak’s voice was small. :What did you argue about?: 

:Nothin’ fo’ ya t’ worry ‘bout,; Jazz said gently. :Bu’ wha’ I said earlier still stands, ya can call me anytime ya like.: 

:Okay,; he replied, voice brightening. :Listen, I’m going to see if Sunstreaker and Sideswipe will bring me to the transport station to see you off, okay?: 

:Tha’s sweet o’ ya, Blue, but ya don’ ‘ave t’: 

:I want to.; Bluestreak said firmly. 

:Alrigh’, then.: Jazz smiled for the first time since leaving the house. 

:See you soon.: 

“What was that about?” Crossfire asked when he’d gotten off the comm.
“Blue’s decided ‘e’s gonna come see me off t’ Polyhex.”

A small smile quirked her dermas. “That mechling’s going to be a sparkbreaker after he gets his final upgrades.” The smile slipped away quickly. “But let’s hope he doesn’t take after his guardian.”

Jazz just sighed.

Crossfire went with him to the transport station a joor before his flight was scheduled to depart. Of course, because it was the Praxus transport station, it was far more ornate than most cities; including Iacon. Jazz remembered his first impression of the fancy, overwhelming space with a slight pang of something that felt like nostalgia. How very naive he’d been stepping into Praxus for the first time.

The grand, old elegant architecture of the building outshone the more modern city blocks around it. It was not simply a transportation hub. It was also a shopping, dining, and cultural destination for the city. Its vast, interior majestic spaces revealed extraordinary attention to the smallest design detail. Metal and mineral carvings, including ornamental inscriptions, decorative flourishes, and sculpted symbols of both welcome and safe travel adorned every wall and lintel. Attached restaurants and stores hosted similar vaulted ceilings to the main transfer area.

Crossfire insisted on treating him to a meal at one of the little, attached cafes as they waited for Bluestreak to show up. As the joor began to wane, Jazz started to wonder where the youngling was. They finished up their energon and slowly made their way towards the terminal where Jazz’s transport would be departing. He wasn’t looking forward to the long flight and lay over in Altihex and then the nearly as long flight to Polyhex proper.

Just as he was about to voice his concern about the youngling’s whereabouts to Crossfire, he spotted the mechling scurrying through the large lobby looking about himself wildly. Following behind him at a brisk, but seemingly unhurried pace was Smokescreen, of all bots.

Jazz and Crossfire both waved to get his attention. His faceplates lit up with relief and he all but ran over to them throwing his little arms around Jazz’s midsection.

“I was so worried we wouldn’t make it here in time! I don’t understand. I tried to ask Sunny and Sides to bring me, but they said they couldn’t! And then Skids said ‘Tor was too busy to see me. I had to call Smokescreen and, and…” he lowered his voice, “…sneak out. I just didn’t want you to leave without saying goodbye.”

Smokescreen had caught up to his kin, a soft, serious look of concern on his faceplates. “Once Blue contacted me, I felt the need to step in.”

“I ain’t gonna get ya’ll in trouble am I?” Jazz asked leerily.

Smokescreen offered a small smirk, “Nothing I can’t handle, I assure you.”

Jazz almost believed him.

Bluestreak tightened his embrace and hid his faceplates into the plates of Jazz’s midsection. “I don’t want you to leave. I know you have to, but I don’t want it.” He said waveringly and muffled. “I love you.”

“Aw, Blue,” Jazz murmured. He knelt down and gave the mechling a proper hug. “I love ya too, sweetspark.”

Bluestreak pulled back in the circle of Jazz’s arms with a solemn look, “You promise I can call you?”
“I promise.” Jazz affirmed.

“Every cycle?” He asked hopefully.

“Ev’ry cycle.” The Polyhexian tapped the mechling’s olfactory playfully.

Bluestreak finally smiled, doorwings wiggling.

The four of them sat together in the comfortable plush seats at the terminal waiting for Jazz’s flight to be called. Bluestreak held his servo and asked him questions about what he was going to do when he got back to Polyhex. He told the mechling some vague plans about catching up with old friends. Truthfully, Jazz wasn’t really sure.

They were stopped mid-conversation by the inevitable announcement of Jazz’s flight beginning its boarding. Bluestreak’s servo tightened on his for a klik, doorwings fluttering twitchily.

“Ya want me t’ call ya when I get in t’ Polyhex?” Jazz offered, sympathetic to the youngling’s distress.

“Yes, please!”

They stood. Jazz gave Bluestreak a hug. Then asked if Crossfire wanted one. Praxians were more tetchy about personal space than Polyhexians. She snorted good-naturedly and pulled him into a quick embrace with a softly spoken, “I suppose you’ve earned it.”

He shook servos with Smokescreen fully expecting some sort of glib comment or flirt, but the mech was strangely solemn. “Take care of yourself, Officer.”

“I will. Y’l look after Blue an’... ‘is ‘Tor fo’ me, yeah?”

“You have my word.” The blue and red mech answered formally. For a moment, it looked as if he would say more, but seemed to decide against it and stepped back.

Bluestreak hugged Jazz again, dermas trembling as if he were trying not to cry.

Then Jazz boarded the waiting transport. He settled into his seat and looked out the window, spotting the three Praxians watching the shuttle as it began its departure. He waved even though he wasn’t sure they could even see him. Though, they must have been able to because Bluestreak waved back enthusiastically, with Crossfire and Smokescreen giving more sedate waves.

He kept his visor on them as the transport pulled out of the depot; until they were only small specks in the distance.

Polyhex seemed both strangely foreign and nostalgically familiar when Jazz returned. His home city was much more vertical than Praxus. Since the city state was nestled deep in the Sonic Canyons, much of the architecture went up, framed by the canyon walls, or down into the depths of the underground. It was smaller than the other city by about half, but it housed just as big of a population. The tangle of aerial highways criss-crossing through the high rise buildings looked like wires connecting the struts of a huge spiked mecha-beast from afar.

Dolce had welcomed him back into his younglinghood home while Jazz searched for a new apartment to rent. He’d had to give up the lease on his old place when he’d gone to Praxus just because he hadn’t known how long he was going to be gone. His things were still in storage. He was
determined to get his own place again despite his carrier’s not-so-subtle hints that he wouldn’t mind having Jazz live with him for as long as he liked.

The evening he returned and after his promised call to Bluestreak, Corona and his mate Brightside came over for a ‘welcome home’ dinner. They lived just a few floors down from Dolce in the same highrise. Jazz was happy to see them; they’d always been like extended kin to him and his carrier after Corona had solved Jazz’s sire’s case.

They were just as he remembered. Corona, calm and steady, with his dark blue and silver plating offset by a silver visor complimenting Brightside’s amber coloring, yellow visor and bubbly personality. They both hugged him hard and fussed over him.

Brightside pipped up cheerfully, “Oh, Dolce told me somebot caught yar optic in Praxus. Tha’ horn adornment is georgeous. Ya’ve got t’ tell us all ‘bout them.”

Jazz froze for half a klik. He’s completely forgotten that he was still wearing the horn adornments.

“I, er… ‘e’s… that is, I mean…”

Brightside chuckled, mistaking his hesitance for modesty, “Keepin’ secrets, lil’bit? I’ll get it outta ya eventually.”

Corona nudged his mate. “Leave th’ younglin’ alone, Brights. ‘E’ll tell us when ‘e’s good an’ ready.”

Jazz fought to keep the smile on his face and pain out of his field as the reality of never seeing Prowl again crashed into him.

Thankfully, Dolce picked up on Jazz’s distress, and stepped in to usher their guests to the table for the meal. And while his EMF brushed up against Jazz’s conceredly, he didn’t say anything, for which Jazz was unspeakably grateful for.

Dolce got Brightside talking about what had been going on with them in the time Jazz had been away. Corona, retired from the force, had begun the hobby of making wind chimes out of scrap metal and bits of discarded crystal. Brightside, who still worked with Dolce at the dispatch office, was only too happy to brag on his mate for the beautiful creations he’d crafted. In fact, all of their surrounding neighbors had commissioned him and now had wind chimes on their balconies after having heard Corona’s first creations chiming sweetly on his own balcony.

Jazz regaled them with stories of the sights in Praxus and what it was like working with the Praxian Enforcers. But he didn’t mention the Crystalspires at all.

Dolce noticed, of course. And after they’d bade their adopted kin a good-dark cycle, Dolce waited patiently with an expectant look on his faceplates.

Jazz crumbled after only a few breems.

The story came tumbling out. Though he left out any mention of the Praxian’s supposed criminal activities. Jazz cited Prowl’s social status as the barrier between them.

Dolce was incensed. Unconsciously slipping between neocybex and old Polyhexian as he ranted about the mech’s insensitivity.

“An’ I thought ‘e was so nice. It was a load of fake smiles, wasn’t it? Trill, click, chirp, click. Oh, I shoulda known better! ’Ow dare ‘e think ‘e’s better than ya! Noble, indeed! Click, click, trill, TRILL,
snap, click! I’m gonna give ‘im somethin’ t’ think ‘bout for the next two millennia!

Jazz had to quickly talk his carrier down from boarding a flight to Praxus to confront the mech that had hurt his creation and then talked him out of calling Scattershield to lodge a complaint (not that it would have done anything anyway) and then talked him out of laying a curse on the Praxian. His carrier spent the rest of the evening showering him with affection and spoiling him with homemade energon treats. When Jazz went to recharge that dark-cycle, he felt wrung out and tired. The horn adornments along with the glass locket were stowed away in the back of a drawer. Out of sight, if not out of mind.

He really needed to get back into the rhythms of his old life. Even if he felt a half-step out of sync with them now.

The crystals Jazz had shipped home had stopped growing after only a few cycles back in Polyhex. They’d lost their luster and became truly fragile and brittle. The atmosphere of Polyhex was different than Praxus. More acidic. The growth material could only do so much.

It figured. They were doing a good job reflecting what his spark felt like.

Not to say he was miserable. His carrier did his best to keep Jazz’s spirits up. He met up with old friends and kith. And Bluestreak kept good to his word and called him nearly every cycle. Those calls were quickly becoming the highlights of Jazz’s cycles.

It was during one of those calls that Jazz had lamented his crystals’ imminent demise. A few cycles later a package shown up at the door of his carrier’s house (he still hadn’t found a good place to move to yet). Bluestreak had sent him a mini growing house with environmental controls to keep his crystals in. They started to strengthen in structure and shine back up almost instantly.

He happily reported the improvement to the youngling; thanking him profusely. The youngling’s pleasure at being able to help was audible over the comm.

He returned to work at Precinct Four. Chief Redshift and the other officers welcomed him back warmly with a small impromptu breakfast reception on his first cycle back. Redshift congratulated him on a job well done and then slyly asked if he was planning on bottling his charm because the Chief of Praxus, who had originally been firmly against the idea of an outsider coming in to help the Praxian Enforcers, had nothing but praise and adulation for him now. She laughed at his gobsmacked expression.

Then Ricochet had greeted him with a hard, but friendly thwack to the backplates. The orange-visored mech was his previous patrol partner and a bot he considered kith.

Redshift would likely pair them up again. When Jazz had first met him, Ricochet had the unfortunate reputation of being quick-tempered and very easily provoked. Which, of course, lead to him having a hard time maintaining friendly relations or even conversations with his fellow officers. Until he’d been paired with Jazz. Somehow, Jazz had gotten past his prickly exterior and saw that Ricochet had an uncommonly strong sense of justice. They’d become close comrades. And through Jazz, Ricochet had been able to open up to some of his fellow officers. The other officers sometimes joked that they should have been sparked brothers, and their spookily opposite color schemes didn’t help the teasing.

Ricochet goaded him into a race around the Enforcer’s track at the end of their shift to “make sure he hadn’t gotten slow in Praxus”.
For the most part Jazz was happy with his return to the Precinct.

In between trying to find an apartment, he kept an optic on the news from Kaon to see if he heard anything about a certain fugitive Praxian. But most networks that he found running news from the southern city were filled with stories of unrest and outspoken gladiators. Kaon was a very different world from the glittering gem of Praxus. Jazz hoped that Barricade had unpleasantly figured out that he was actually a very small cyberfish in a much larger sea than he could handle.

When not at work, Jazz puttered around his carrier’s house or went out into the city to refamiliarize himself with his home. A deca-cycle after his return, he was invited out for drinks with Stepper, his friend from forensics, and Ricochet.

He, Stepper and Ricochet met at one of their old haunts, Jazz being greeted warmly by the bar staff and regular patrons who remembered him. The bartender even insisted on treating him to his first drink of the dark-cycle. They clustered together in a corner booth, Stepper’s orange plating standing out in contrast to Jazz and Ricochet’s black and white.

Stepper wheedled and cajoled until Jazz gave in and told them how he’d gotten injured. He left out the details of his recovery. They moved on from that subject and chatted about the current Precinct gossip. Apparently, Chief Scattershield of Praxus had given Jazz such a glowing review of service that the department heads were already in talks with other cities to attempt more “exchange programs”.

The first city that had showed interest in the program was Iacon, the capital city, itself.

“Can ya imagine an Iaconi convoy class tryin’ t’ keep up with us?” Ricochet joked.

“There are more than jus’ convoy sized bots in Iacon, ya know.” Stepper interjected, yellow visor flashing in exasperation.

Jazz sipped his engex contemplatively. “It ain’t a bad idea. Bots from other cities could bring perspectives tha’ we ain’t though o’ t’ certain cases. I know tha’ from experience.”

Ricochet snorted, “They’re gonna make ya a ‘cultural ambassador’ if ya ain’t careful an’ send ya from pillar t’ post all over Cybertron.”

Jazz actually took a moment to mull that over. “Eh, it’d be entertainin’, right?”

Before his foray into Praxus, he might’ve been resistant to the idea. But now, travel to other cities seemed kind of interesting. And distracting.

Ricochet gave him a look. “Who are ya, an’ wha’ ‘ave ya done with Jazz?”

Jazz chuckled, but his spark wasn’t in it.

He thought going out would distract him from his own processor, but his gaze kept being drawn to couples dotted around the bar. He felt an envious little pang before crushing it ruthlessly. What did he have to be jealous of? Prowl probably wouldn’t have stepped pede in a place like this even if they had been together.

He pushed his half-finished drink away, annoyed at himself for becoming maudlin.

“Ya a’ight?” Stepper asked, concerned.

“I gotta go. It was fun hangin’ with ya for a bit. Jus’ not feelin’ th’ outside world like I thought I
was.” Jazz excused himself.

Stepper looked slightly worried, but didn’t try to cajole him into staying, for which Jazz was very grateful. Ricochet was unreadable, but said, “I’ll walk ya out, ‘kay?” Then said to Stepper, “Make sure nobot steals our table, I’ll be right back.”

Outside the bar Ricochet caught his arm before he could step into the transforming lane. “Ey, wha’s up with ya?”

“I’m jus’ not feelin’ like I’m good company righ’ now. Don’ let me be a killjoy fo’ yar dark-cycle.”

The orange-visored mech crossed his arms. “Don’ give me tha’ slag. Wha’s goin’ on?”

Jazz sighed, knowing Ricochet wasn’t going to let it go until he’d gotten an answer. He was aggravatingly persistent that way. “I met a bot in Praxus... it didn’ work out. Tha’s all.”

“Che, obviously it ain’t if yar still mopin’ ‘bout it.”

“I’ll be a’ight.”

“Ya need a punchin’ bag?”

“Naw, I ain’t angry.”

“...bet ya can find a willin’ bot fo’ th’ dark-cycle t’ take yar mind off it.”

Jazz huffed and poked Ricochet in the middle of his forehelm. “Reboundin’ is yar way t’ deal with spark ache, not mine.”

“Made ya smile, though.”

The smile widened just a fraction. “Ya did. I jus’ need time, Rico.”

“...A’ight. Jus’... don’ let it stew, ‘kay?”

Jazz stepped into the transforming lane and threw over his shoulder. “Again, not my way o’ dealin’ with spark ache.”

“Frag ya!” Ricochet said laughing.

They bade each other a good dark-cycle and Jazz left. He played soft music on the drive home, trying not to let his thoughts wander too far.

Maybe he should have been angry. Maybe the righteous indignation of Crossfire or even the disappointed affront of his carrier. But all he felt was a numb sort of sadness whenever he thought about Prowl.

At least the calls from Bluestreak helped.

The next cycle, the mechling called him a little earlier than he usually did. Jazz was in the middle of cleaning the kitchen for his carrier after their latest batch of goodies. He still hadn’t found an apartment and wanted to earn his keep even if Dolce had flat out refused to let him pay rent while he was staying with him.

:Legacy told ‘Tor I was ready for my final upgrades.: He blurted out the moment Jazz answered.
Tha’s great! Congratulations: Jazz applauded. He quickly finished wiping down the counter and headed to the living room to sit down.

Is it? I-I’m really nervous. We’re going for my medical assessment soon. ‘Tor’s already given me a list of advanced courses to choose from for my next level of education. A-and he’s given me several frame specs to look over and he keeps talking about who to invite to my debutant ball and- and-:

Easy, Blue.: Jazz soothed. Vent slowly. In an’ out on th’ count o’ four, ‘kay? In- two, three, four. An’ out- two, three, four. In… an’ out… Better?:

Y-yes. That helped, thank you. I… it’s just so overwhelming. And ‘Tor is so busy planning and working... I don’t want to bother him. And Sunstreaker and Sideswipe keep getting sent out on errands so that I haven’t really seen them much in the past cycles.:

Jazz felt a flash of annoyance at Prowl for leaving poor Blue to make those decisions on his own.

Ya don’ ‘ave t’ decide this cycle, yeah? When are ya goin’ t’ th’ medic for yar assessment?:

After all, even if Bluestreak was intellectually ready by his tutor’s standards, the medic might stop the whole process if his frame wasn’t ready.

At the end of this deca-cycle.: A frisson of anxiety shivered through his words.

Then ya’ve got some time: Jazz assured him. ‘Ow ‘bout this, ya send me a copy o’ those lists an’ specs an’ we’ll go over ‘em t’gether. Talk ‘em over t’ ‘elp with yar decision.:

Oh! Yes, please! Thank you!: He sounded so relieved that Jazz hurt for him.

No problem at all, sweetspark. Let’s see wha’ ya’ve got, shall we?:

A moment later Jazz received a message containing a packet of data that he downloaded from his HUD to a datapad. The packet contained a file of academic and elective courses as well as a program for designing and customizing upgraded frames that included several premade options. Jazz settled himself a little more comfortably in his chair, opening the frame program.

‘Kay, I got ‘em, Blue. We can start with th’ fun stuff first, yeah? Let’s take a look-see at these frames. ‘Ave any o’ th’ designs caught yar fancy?:

Um, I only sort of peeked at them. Then I got too nervous.: Tha’s a’ight. Why don’ ya look at ‘em now with me an’ we’ll see which ones ya like. An’ remember, it’s no pressure. Ya ain’t gotta decide this cycle.:

Okay.: He sounded more sure and steady.

They spent several joors talking. First about the frame options, and then the class selections. By the end of the conversation, Bluestreak was calmer and even started to sound a little excited about the prospect of getting his final upgrades.

They were interrupted when Skids came and got him for dinner. For Jazz it was late into the dark-cycle due to the time difference between the two cities; Dolce had gone to recharge several joors ago. Bluestreak bid Jazz a good dark-cycle. Then the mechling hesitated and tacked on before he ended the call,

Jazz… can I… can I call you Cree?: 
The glyph was one of the shortened forms for creator. Obviously, Bluestreak already called Prowl by the other glyph. It made Jazz’s spark warm with happiness that the youngling was still including Jazz in his small family unit. Prowl might feel differently, but at that moment Jazz didn’t really care what Prowl thought of it.

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By the time of his consultation at the end of the deca-cycle, Bluestreak was confident in his choices of frame and education thanks to using Jazz as a sounding board. The medic gave him the all clear to schedule an appointment to undergo the procedure to receive his final upgrades.

He and Jazz spoke over comms. every cycle leading up to the procedure date. Jazz wished there was something more that he could do to support the youngling. Bluestreak told him that just talking to him helped.

The cycle of the operation came. They weren’t able to get a call in that cycle, but late in the dark-cycle for Jazz, he received a message from the former youngling with an image attached. It had probably been taken by the medical staff. Bluestreak was standing next to Prowl who had a stabilizing servo on his shoulder strut. Prowl had a soft look of pride on his faceplates that made Jazz’s spark ache. The now-upgraded young mech was smiling slightly unsteadily. Jazz knew from his own experience that the new upgrades would take some getting used to.

Still, though looking slightly off balance, Bluestreak had chosen his final frame well. There would be no mistaking him for anything other than Prowl’s creation now, adopted or not. His frame was nearly identical to the older mech’s. He’d kept his primary base color the original silver of his youngling frames, but had added white for his arms, legs and doorwings, and more red accents that matched his chevron. Bluestreak was fully upgraded and recognized as a grown mech.

And that’s when the trouble began.

He called Jazz every other cycle or so, just as before, though Jazz joked that Bluestreak’s deeper voice was going to take some getting used to.

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Jazz chuckled, though not unkindly. :It’s gonna be like tha’ fo’ a few cycles. Jus’ be sure yar next t’ somethin’ tha’ can cushion yar fall fo’ a while.: 

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It was almost like… Huh…
Jazz felt a smile take over his dermas and couldn’t help but tease. :Ya like ‘em, don’t’cha?:

:What?! No! I mean, yes, but- uh… They’re just, very sweet to me, that’s all, and handsome…:
Bluestreak trailed off.

Jazz chuckled gently. So the young mech was infatuated with his guardians. That was bound to be a development.

Turned out, Jazz was right, but not in a way that he expected.

A few cycled later, Bluestreak called him, upset and worried. With a bot’s final upgrades came the outer changes of frame, but often times bots forgot that final upgrades also expanded new neural pathways in the processor, allowing a bot to expand to more difficult education and critical thinking. In Bluestreak’s case, he started to notice the secrets that lived in the halls of the Crystalspire estate that he’d been oblivious to for so long. He fretted over the comm. about how it felt like Prowl was keeping things from him. He’d also noticed that the twins were sometimes coming back from their “errands” with injuries.

Jazz ached to tell him the truth, but he warred with himself silently that it wasn’t his place.

:I know they’re hiding something from me,: Bluestreak said. :It’s driving me insane. Do they think I’m stupid?:

:No, sweetspark. They’re just not used t’ ya bein’ so observant. Ya need t’ talk t’ ‘em if it’s really botherin’ ya. Otherwise it’ll just fester.: 

:...You know, don’t you.: It was more hurt than accusatory, and that somehow made it worse.

Jazz sighed. :I know wha’ I suspect, but I don’ ‘ave any proof o’ wha’ I suspect. I don’ want t’ tell ya somethin’ an’ be wrong. Ya don’ deserve tha’.:

:I don’t deserve to be lied to, either,: he snapped.

:No, ya don’. Jazz agreed, :An’ for wha’ it’s worth, I’m sorry.: 

Bluestreak was quiet for a while, then, :You’re forgiven. I don’t blame you, I just wish I could get a straight answer.: 

Jazz believed him. :Listen, sweetspark, all I can give ya is a lead t’ follow. Wha’ ya do with wha’ ya find is up t’ ya.: 

:Alright. I’m listening.: 

:Go t’ th’ Hall o’ Records. Look up yar family. An’ keep an open processor.: 

:I will.: Bluestreak sounded determined.

Jazz hesitated and then added, :An’ maybe don’ tell yar ‘Tor wha’ yar doin’.:

:...I understand. Thank you, Cree: 

And that was just the beginning.

Their next few conversations didn’t reveal if Bluestreak had yet gone to the Hall of Records, but a deca-cycle later the little drama that was unfolding between the young noble and his guardians got a bit more complicated.
I talked to Sunstreaker and Sideswipe about coming home with injuries. Bluestreak said after they’d exchanged hellos. I told them I was worried about them. They told me they couldn’t tell me what they’d been doing. I got upset. I-I yelled at them for putting themselves in danger. And for keeping things from me. They said they were just trying to protect me. Then I… I kissed Sunstreaker.

What?

Ya kissed Sunstreaker?:

And then I kissed Sideswipe.:  

…Ya kissed Sideswipe…:

I didn’t want him to feel left out!: Bluestreak blurted out.

There was an awkward silence for a breem. Then Jazz couldn’t help but snicker.

Are you laughing at me?: The young mech didn’t sound upset, in fact he actually sounded a little relieved.

No, sweetspark. Just imaginin’ th’ look on their faceplates. Wha’ did they do?:

They got a little awkward and said that they liked me, but they were commoners. I told them I didn’t care. After that we just cuddled for a while and watched some holo-movies. Well… I told them to sit with me and that if it was my idea they wouldn’t get in trouble. I think they were okay with that because Sunny sort of smiled at me and Sides said I had the best ideas.:  

As long as noone forced anybot to do somethin’ they were uncomfortable with, then ya’ll’re a’ight.: Jazz smiled, but felt a stirring of unease.

Youngling crushes were harmless, generally, but Jazz couldn’t help but feel a niggling worry. Sunstreaker and Sideswipe were unerringly loyal and had openly cared for Bluestreak as a youngling, that much was obvious. But anything more serious between them now might cause trouble down the road. The twins were loyal, yes, but they were also former gladiators being trained by Prowl to do his dirty work. What would happen if they were forced to choose between their affection for the young mech and their employment by his very powerful creator.

Prowl wouldn’t hurt his creation like that… would he?

I think they liked it just as much as I did.: Bluestreak broke Jazz out of his contemplations.

Good. Ya’ll jus’ be careful, a’ight? Go slow.:  

Cree! I don’t need advice like that!: 

Jazz replayed what he’d just said in his processor and began to laugh so hard his vocalizer started to spit static.

You’re laughing at me again!: 

I didn’t mean it like that, Blue!: Jazz managed between giggles.

Oh. I mean, I wasn’t thinking- er, that is… I just thought, uh-: The young mech stammered until he gave up and started laughing too.

That particular conversation was sort of over after that.
Unfortunately, their next few calls became more somber in tone. Bluestreak spoke less about his burgeoning relationship with the twins and more about how Prowl didn’t seem to realize that his creation was an adult now. Able to make his own decisions and beginning to resent how his creator would summarily decide things for him.

It was most apparent with the plans for Bluestreak’s debutant ball. All noble Praxians held a coming of age party after a youngling received their final upgrades. Prowl had taken it upon himself to organize the whole affair and seemed to have forgotten that Bluestreak should have some sort of say in the matter. From decorations to party guests, Prowl made all the arrangements and told Bluestreak the result rather than asking him his opinion.

It seemed appropriate that Bluestreak finally broke and called Jazz to openly vent his frustrations when there was a storm rolling through Polyhex. Outside thunder rumbled and growled, counterpointed with the hiss and drum of acid rain. Jazz sat curled up in “his” overstuffed chair facing the balcony doors watching the riotous storm beat against the buildings and aerial highways designed to rock back and forth with the high winds while providing a sympathetic audial to the young mech ranting stormily against his overbearing creator.

The final crescendo of Bluestreak’s tirade came. :He’s still treating me like a sparkling. Sometimes I hate him!: Bluestreak spat.

:Oh Blue,: Jazz sighed sadly, finally interrupting the young mech, :ya don’ ‘ate ‘im. Ya’re jus’ frustrated with ‘im, righ’ now. Ya gotta give ‘im some time; ‘e ain’t used t’ ya bein’ a grown up yet. Jus’ be patient an’ forgive ‘im fo’ ‘is failin’s. It’s… it’s wha’ ya do when ya love somebot.:

:Is that what you had to do when you left?:

Jazz shut off his visor and curled up tighter on himself as old pain flared. :...Yeah.: There was a far too perceptive pause. :Do you still love ‘Tor?:

:Yeah, Blue, I do.: More timidly. :...And me? Even though I’m his creation.:  

:O’ course!: Jazz answered right away visual center snapping back on. :Ya’re yar own bot, even if there was nothin’ ‘tween me an’ yar ‘Tor, I’d still love ya.: Bluestreak let out a gusty sigh through his vents. :I’m glad.: Jazz smiled. As much as Bluestreak had matured due to his upgrades, it was conversations like this that reminded him that Blue was still the bot he’d been as a mechling.

:Hey, Cree. I would really like it if you could come to my debutant ball. I… I don’t want to ask if it will make you unhappy because… because of ‘Tor. But maybe-?:

:I wouldn’t miss it fo’ anythin’, sweetspark.: Jazz cut in gently already checking his calendar and marking off a few days of leave.

:Yes! I’m so glad. I’ll get Skids to put you on the guest list. ‘Tor doesn’t need to know I’ve added you. You should get your invitation in a few cycles. I can’t wait to see you.:  

:I’m lookin’ forward t’ it, sweetspark.: Jazz gazed out of the glass doors of the balcony again as Bluestreak started talking about the lighter topic of the different traditions of the ball, warmth and hurt swirling together in his spark.
At least th’ storm’s passed. He thought, gazing out at the slowly clearing sky.
Friends and Formals

Chapter Summary

Jazz gets ready for the ball.

Chapter Notes

I'm just... not going to try to predict how many chapters are left anymore because it makes me into a liar. The muse just loves description in this 'verse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Jazz’s formal invitation arrived for Bluestreak’s debutant ball, a data pad from the mech came with it. There were instructions for a few traditional Praxian dances along with a brief rundown of what to expect and a list of etiquette that, apparently, was never spoken about, but that the aristocracy just sort of knew.

Some of the “rules” were, quite frankly in Jazz’s opinion, ridiculous.

One is never to knock at a door to gain admittance. Instead, a visitor may use the tip of a digit to scratch on the door frame.

When promenading a gentlebot must always acknowledge an acquaintance.

Bots walking together must take care not to walk more than two abreast so as to not block the way for others.

When standing it is considered well-mannered to have the left pede in front and the legs slightly bent.

One must never make or accept a comm. call in the presence of their host.

One can never immediately turn their back on their superior. If one is to leave the presence of a superior it is customary to bow and take a few steps backwards while still facing the superior. Then one may leave.

And that was just a few of them.

He wondered at the reasoning behind some of these customs. There was always a story behind a rule, an instance where a line was crossed or some sort of protocol was broken. He just wanted to know what sort of petty slights could have been the impetus for some of them.

According to his “cheat sheet”: the first few joors of the ball would be about the guests meeting and greeting each other and their hosts. This was when gifts would be presented to the debutante and introductions made. Fuel would be available during the whole event, but this was also the time for the host to show off an expected wide and dazzling array of treats for their guests. Opulence and extravagance were the name of the game. If you couldn’t provide the very best treats for your guests, well then, what kind of a host were you? Jazz had no doubt that Prowl would spare no expense for
his creation.

At some point the host would decide to begin the dancing. The opening dances were ceremonial and always performed in a very specific order. If these traditional dances were not performed, it was considered ill luck for the debutante. Meanwhile the dancers would be scrutinized thoroughly on their form by those who did not dance.

And that brought him to the dances. He was grateful that Bluestreak had sent him the steps because he would have been very lost otherwise. They were all much more structured than any dances he’d seen in Polyhexian tradition.

The first type of dance in the document he’d been given was a branle; danced by couples in a circle. Then there were the longways dances, called Country Dances. Partners face each other in a line, and danced a sequence of elaborate figures as they worked their way from the top of the dance to the bottom and back again. And last of the traditional dances was the Cotillion, where four couples danced in a square formation. And fortunately for him, the Cotillion for Bluestreak’s ball would be performed by a group of professional dancers.

After those were done, the dancing would turn to more relaxed, modern styles that Jazz had at least heard of. Dances like the waltz and the foxtrot.

Jazz downloaded the list of noble rules and traditional dance steps (along with a few more modern dances) to his processor for quick reference. He’d have to keep track of his mouth and his pedes, of course, but he wasn’t going to eschew the extra help.

It was customary to offer gifts to the new debutante, either to ensure old alliances with the family, or offer new ones. With Prowl’s status as the unofficial “Lord of Praxus”, something that probably bothered the actual Lord of Praxus now that Jazz thought about it, Bluestreak was likely to receive gifts that bordered on the extreme.

Fortunately, Jazz didn’t much care about the social structures and vying for attention and power that the Praxian nobles were worried about, and knew immediately what he wanted to give Bluestreak. He contacted Corona and commissioned a personalized wind chime for the young mech.

While his mentor worked on the gift, Jazz was busily booking himself a hotel room in Praxus; just to avoid any awkward offers from Bluestreak to stay at the estate. Jazz would be flying out a cycle before the event and leaving a cycle after. He’d end up terribly jetlagged, but didn’t want to spend anymore time in Praxus than he had to. He called Crossfire to let her know he’d be in town and why. She worried over him and promised to pick him up from the transport station even though he told her she didn’t have to go to the trouble.

He also called the same salon in the Resin District for his formal wear. Highlight, the main beautician, was delighted to hear from him again. Apparently, they had a large upswing in business after his appearance at the opera. Jazz sent them a full 360 degree spec rendering of his frame with the embellishment markings that he wanted. The overall effect was quite different and much more elaborate than his last look. For this event, he planned on full formal wear in the newest Polyhexian style.

He also sent them the payment in advance.

His carrier had approved of his choice of ornamentation with a hug and the aggressive words; “Ya’re gonna roll up t’ ‘is door lookin’ finer than a triple-shined Seeker an’ knock ‘im on ‘is aft. Literally, if ya have t’.”
Corona dropped off the completed wind chime just a few cycles before Jazz was going to leave on his trip. It was beautiful and exactly what Jazz had envisioned. He hoped Bluestreak was going like it.

He wrapped the wind chime carefully and placed it securely in his subspace, it would travel with him rather than in his luggage. He packed his essentials. Then he pulled out the two audial horn adornments and paused. He set them on his desk and just looked at them for a while, contemplating.

He didn’t *have* to wear them… He’d been courted and the courting hadn’t worked out.

He could wear neither. In Polyhexian tradition, not wearing either of them meant that he wasn’t ready to date again.

Or he could wear just his original one. Doing so would technically mean he was single again.

Or… he could wear both, but reversed from their previous orientation. It would show that, though they’d broken it off, he still held a place in his spark for the mech that had gifted the adornment to him.

Of course, these were all symbolic gestures that Polyhexians who still practiced the tradition knew. The Praxians he’d be sharing space with wouldn’t have the first clue what his horn adornment placement meant.

They *would* understand showing up unadorned by gifts from his “beau”. And he really didn’t want that kind of attention. Though, he didn’t know if the ending of their courtship was common knowledge in Praxus by now. If he wore things given to him by a mech that was no longer courting him, would that be weird?

He ended up packing both adornments, as well as the locket and the capelet Prowl had gifted him.

Stepping off the transport back in Praxus made Jazz’s spark do an apprehensive little lurch. The station was just as ornate and elaborate as the last time he been there, but something made it less impressive this time.

Maybe he’d just gotten a bit more cynical.

He spotted Crossfire coming towards him with a servo raised in greeting. They clasped vambraces, exchanging hellos and then Crossfire pulled him into a short, unexpected hug.

At his questioning EMF nudge, she huffed a laugh, “Maybe I missed my kith.”

That warmed his spark right up. “I missed ya too, ‘Fire.”

They decided to go to “Oil and Gel” for lunch together. With a little bit of a jolt, Jazz realized that he hadn’t been to the cafe since his delve into the Crystalspires’ public records. It was still as cluttered and cozy as he remembered. And Extruder, the cafe’s owner, certainly remembered him.

“Officer Jazz!” He said with a warm, welcoming smile. “Lovely to see you again. Rumor from the other officers was that you had returned to Polyhex.”

“I did. I’m jus’ visitin’ fo’ a few cycles.” Jazz returned with a smile of his own. “It’s nice t’ see ya again. ‘Ow’s business?”
“Oh, I can’t complain. Please, you and Officer Crossfire sit! Would you like a hot or cold cube? Some treats?”

“I’d like a hot cube and whatever the treat of the cycle is, please.” Crossfire said amicably, seating herself in one of the plush chairs at a table situated in the corner of the room.

“Same, mech.” Jazz responded, also sitting down. “Ain’t gonna turn down some o’ th’ best fuel in Praxus.”

Extruder’s doorwings lifted high proudly. “You flatter me, officer. I’ll be right back.”

He trotted happily away behind the counter to make up the cubes.

Jazz leaned back into his seat with a smile at his kith. “So, ‘ow ’ave ya been?”

“I’ve been learning the fine art of patience.” Crossfire said sardonically.

“Wha’ fo’?” He asked curiously.

“A select detachment of Enforcers have been contracted to watch over the proceedings of the upcoming event. For some reason, The Honorable Smokescreen of Crystalspire chose me to be his liaison for all of the planning.” Her voice grew more and more exasperated with each word.

“Familiarity?” Jazz ventured with a lightly teasing tone.

Crossfire just gave him a flat look that made him chuckle.

“So ya’ll be there?”

“Yes, we’ll be patrolling the grounds, but we can’t get too close to the house or guests.” Sarcasm dripped from her vocalizer. “We wouldn’t want them to think anything might be wrong, you know.”

“Ah, so I won’t be seein’ ya, then.”

“Oh, I’m allowed to go near the building because I get the honor of escorting a certain visitor to the ball.”

It took him a klik. “Wait… Me?”

“Of course. Chief Scattershield insisted that I bring you in the Precinct’s fanciest transport.”

“Tha’ isn’t really necessary.” Jazz protested. “I can jus’ drive.”

“Not to this party, you can’t.”

“Crossfire-” He started.

She interrupted him. “Look, it’s all arranged, okay? And… it’s partially to ensure your safety. No, no, we don’t suspect anything,” she hastened to assure him at his concerned glance, “but a lot of us at the Precinct got rattled after your attack. We’re just trying to take care of our own. Even if it’s a little belated.”

“I don’ blame any o’ ya, ya know? No bot knew ‘bout wha’ Gauge was up t’.”

“That doesn’t keep some of us from feeling guilty. And with the expulsion that just happened-” She abruptly stopped talking and pressed her dermas together.
Dread coiled in Jazz’s tank. “Expulsion?”

She hesitated, then gave in with a sigh. “Several organizations, including the Enforcers, just suffered a massive upset. Certain individuals all suddenly had a plethora of evidence of misconduct piled against them. They had a choice; conviction or removal.”

“Let me guess.” Jazz uttered dryly. “It all came from reputable sources that somehow have ties to a certain noble family.”

“Their influence runs deep,” Crossfire agreed without saying. “My theory: it was time to clean house after a betrayal that close.”

Jazz opened his mouth to reply, but was interrupted by Extruder appearing at their nook with the hot cubes and two delicious looking oil cakes covered in a gelled energon sauce.

“Hot cubes and my newest treat creation.” He said grandly setting the plates and cubes down in front of them.

Jazz smiled at the old mech. “Thank ya, Extruder. This look amazin’. If ya ain’t chargin a pretty shinax fo’ this, ya’re sellin’ yarself short.”

Extruder just patted Jazz’s shoulder pauldron and said blithely. “You don’t need to worry about that. Friends of the Viscount don’t pay, remember?”

What?

Jazz’s jaw dropped, agast. “But I—”

“I insist, Officer.” Extruder waved off the protest.

Jazz looked at Crossfire bewilderedly after Extruder bustled away without concern.

“Bu’ I’m not…”

“Somebot obviously thinks differently.” Her undertones indicated that she wasn’t talking about the cafe owner.

“But ‘e said… I don’ understand. ‘E broke it off t’ keep me ‘safe’. ‘Ow would ‘e expect tha’ t’ work if th’ rest o’ Praxus still thinks we’re t’gether.” He muttered helplessly, ruthlessly ignoring the way his spark was jumping around in its chamber like an overexcited petrorabbit.

Crossfire shrugged her doorwings. “I don’t know what to tell you. I can’t even begin to guess how the Viscount’s processor works.”

“Ya an’ me both.” Jazz said picking up his cube and taking a drink.

They finished their meal in a leisurely fashion. Crossfire drove with him to his hotel and promised to be there in the transport to pick him up at the start of the dark-cycle the next evening.

After he waved her off and was turning towards the doors of his accommodations he caught a flash of red in his periphery. A familiar shade of red. His helm snapped quickly to the side, searching for a Kaonite frame amongst the doorwings.

Nothing.

Maybe he was just paranoid.
He shook it off and entered the building. He was tired and his frame-chrono was still stuck in Polyhex time.

*Why would Sideswipe be here, anyway?*

The cycle of the ball came early the next morning. Jazz grabbed a quick cube of fuel on his way to the salon. He knew the appointment was going to take most of the cycle. Full formal wear took a lot of time and attention to detail. Jazz acknowledged that the beauticians at the salon knew their craft, but a small part of him wished that he could have had another Polyhexian doing his marks.

Highlight, the head beautician received him upon his arrival with something that resembled excited glee. Jazz was immediately hustled to the back for a full cleanse and massage.

He hadn’t *ordered* a massage, but he wasn’t going to complain.

Then Highlight and three assistants began the long task of painting him. This time he had a greater number of far more intricate designs trailing all over his plating. It had gone from a fancy evening out to nearly the full kit a bot might wear at their bonding ceremony.

Jazz had also decided to wear the latest fashion of markings that had recently become popular in Polyhex. Subtle glitter and neon paints were on their way out and silver was the newest trend. (Though the new style actually stemmed from a very old tradition.)

As the beauticians painted designs from servos to shoulders and pedes to hips, Highlight asked, “So, I didn’t get to ask you this last time, but do these designs have meaning?”

“Yeah,” Jazz answered, “All’a th’ symbols we put on our frames ‘ave meaning. They tell th’ stories o’ the wearer, like a... visual language, I guess. Most designs ‘ave a traditional base, but new designs are created all th’ time t’ be used alongside th’ old. Different places mean different things.”

“So a design on your arm would mean something different if it was on your back?”

“Somethin’ like tha’. Extremities are used t’ express things ‘bout the bot’s attributes.” Jazz wiggled the digits on his right servo. Enough to gain attention, but not interrupt the beautician’s work. “Right arm: social skills.” He wiggled the digits on his left servo, “Left arm: mental acumen.” Then lightly tapped his pede tips up and down, “Legs are for physical prowess. Chestplates are fo’ lineage an’ family. Backplates are fo’ expression. Face an’ helm are an exhibition o’ self an’ things tha’ are important t’ ya. In Polyhex, th’ orthodox believe th’ helm is th’ most sacred part o’ th’ frame.”

Jazz chuckled softly, “O’ course, tha’s all traditional, but nowadays it ain’t beyond th’ pale t’ sneak in secret glyphs all over yar frame. Some might even call it fashionable.”

“What do yours mean?” Highlight quired curiously, looking intrigued.

“Ya want th’ whole rundown?”

The head beautician quirked a smile and flicked his doorwings, all while not taking his optics from his work. “We have the time.”

Well, it couldn’t hurt to pass the time. Jazz decided not to delve too deeply into the gritty details of the certain glyphs and patterns he’d chosen for each position and settled on describing the overall message of each spot on his plating.
His right forearm boasted the same markings from his trip to the opera for bravery in adversity, but his right shoulder was also embellished with a motif that represented charm. His left shoulder, as well, had the same design for intelligence and wit, however it now stretched down to his left forearm to showcase symbology for curiosity.

Both of the backs of his servos displayed delicate, yet complex emblems. Honesty on the right and intuition on the left.

The pattern on his right leg fractured up from greave to thigh, like shattered glass; the pattern a nod to all the accidents and injuries he’d survived; representing the strength and stamina he possessed.

The left leg had a stylized racetrack pattern spiraling and looping around it to show his speed and agility.

Each glyph on his chestplates represented one of the bots that raised him. Dolce and Quicktime, his sire, down the right side. Corona and Brightside, his mentors and adopted kin down the left. In the center of his chestplates between his blue stripe accents, was a number glyph for the Precinct he worked at in Polyhex.

He slightly changed the glyph on his neck from the first time. Now, instead of a single glyph for music he’d chosen an old Polyhexian glyph for crystal. Though he demurred from telling the beauticians that.

For his back, he’d asked Brightside to draw out a stylized pair of folded wings, though it was very abstract, so he wasn’t sure everybot would get it upon first glance. Brightside was far more gifted with line art than himself and had been delighted to help him. Musical notations interwove amongst the lines and sweeping strokes of the pinions.

The last design he explained was the one for his faceplates. It curled around and under his visor and across his cheek on the left side of his face, opposite the glyph on his neck. It meant adaptability and improvisation; a play on his own name.

The beauticians listened with fascination to his descriptions, though kept up a professional demeanor as they painstakingly painted the designs they now knew held personal meaning. If anything, they became even more attentive and focused to get each line perfectly placed from the specifications they’d been given.

All in all, with the intricacies of the embellishments and taking a few breaks to give both the workers and Jazz time to relax, it took about six joors for the beauticians to finish the paint work.

It was a bit of a relief for Jazz when they finally declared him perfectly painted and took him to the room to spray him with the temporary clear coat sealant and then led him to the drying booth.

It took another joor for Highlight to be satisfied with the waxes and polishes they rubbed into his frame.

As Jazz checked his reflection in the salon’s 360 degree mirror, he reflected that the silver marks made him look like those old holos of Polyhexian warriors from the time of pre-unification Cybertron. He was a set of heavy armor and one traditional spear away from being a reenactor.

But he had to admit… he looked amazing.

He pulled the shawl he still had from his previous appointment out from subspace and wrapped it around himself to protect his frame much to the pleasure of the beauticians. The walk back to his hotel was full of questioning and awed stares. Jazz tried not to feel self-conscious.
All that was left for him to do before Crossfire arrived to escort him to the party was the final finishing touches to his formal wear. He clasped the silver glittering capelet so that it draped over his left shoulder pauldron leaving most of the marks uncovered.

He affixed the glass locket to the end of his bumper just under the glyph that represented the Polyhexian Enforcers. It was filled with trimmings he’d collected just before he traveled to Praxus from the crystals now thriving in his mini growing house.

The two horn adornments were set out and given a good, long consideration. Jazz looked at the adornments and then in the mirror and then back at the pieces of jewelry sitting innocently on the table. He’d left his horns bare of markings…

He took in a deep, fortifying vent and put on the horn adornments, but switched their orientation to the opposite of the way he’d worn them previously.

After all, there was no use denying his feelings.

Crossfire arrived promptly at the beginning of the dark-cycle piloting a modern, sleek and shining Enforcer transport. She gave him a once-over as he stepped into the transport and took a seat.

She smirked. “As I’ve said before; you certainly do clean up nice. If you were my type, I might try to court you.”

“Thanks, I think.” He said dryly to cover up his nervousness.

Her smile softened. “Look, I don’t know if you need to hear this, but, remember that you’re not doing this for him.” The glyph was said with just the edge of disdain. “You’re doing this for that sweet mechling. And yourself.”

And that… helped, actually. He managed a small half-smile. “Yeah, I’ll remember.”

All too soon they were flying up to the estate grounds. Crossfire ignored the line of transports crowding the estate’s dock and landed in front of the main doors. At Jazz’s incredulous look, she just shrugged and said she had permission.

The house was aglow in the deepening dark-cycle. The grounds were alight from hundreds of crystalline lamps and spotlights. Warm, welcoming light blazed from every window. Glossy and polished mechs and femmes were waiting in a line to enter the house. His entrance was going to be seen by an inordinate amount of bots.

For some reason, Jazz felt the need to blame Smokescreen. His spark whirled with anxiety.

Crossfire must have sensed something from his field because she gave him a comforting brush with her own EMF and offered, “If you need an out, just call me. I assure you I can make up a very convincing emergency if I have to.”


“Anytime. Now, go show off and say hello to Bluestreak for me, okay.”

“Will do,” he nodded.

With a final flare of gratitude across his field for Crossfire, he stood from his seat and walked to the door of the transport. He took a couple of kliks to vent in and out, then straightened and rolled his
shoulders back so that he stood as tall as he could. Schooling his faceplates to a placid aloofness, he fell back on the meditation technique for Metallikato.

*Remember to vent. Be calm. Focus.*

He pushed the button to open the door and stepped out gracefully into the glow of the outdoor lighting. The silver paint picked up more of the ambient luminosity than his, still rather glossy plating, creating an extra shine to the markings.

A murmur rose up from the gathering of bots waiting to enter the house. Most of the mechs and femmes were so covered in expensive meshes that they could have started their own fabric stores. Though, interestingly, Jazz caught glimpses of intricate markings embossed on some of the bots’ plating underneath the meshes, not unlike those that might be found in Polyhex.

Callout, the housekeeper, was greeting guests at the front doors. Or, more specifically she was carefully checking a datapad while opticking each guest dubiously; imperiously requesting their invitation. No bot who was not supposed to be there was getting past her.

She looked up as the transport door closed behind him. An actual small smile crossed her dermas and she beckoned him forward passed the line.

“Ah, Officer Jazz. Bluestreak will be so pleased you’ve arrived. Please come in.”

A louder babble rose from the crowd outside along with some protestations which were quickly shushed by others. Whether it was because they were being quietly informed of his identity or they didn’t want to cause a scene that would potentially get them removed from the party before they even had a chance to enter it, no bot actually tried to stop him from bypassing them.

“It’s nice t’ see ya again, marm.” Jazz said politely as he passed through the doors.

“And you as well, Officer. Have a pleasant evening.”

“Thank ya.” *I doubt it.*

He was hit with that same feeling he’d gotten in the transport station as he walked into the achingly familiar main hall, though it was decorated far more lavishly than any time he’d seen it previously. Garlands of different colored meshes intertwined with tiny twinkling lights lined every doorway and arch. Great crystal sculptures spiralled up to the ceilings in every room. It seemed like every floor and metal trimming had been polished until they gleamed. The air in the house was warm and subtly laden with the warring buzz of many EMFs.

As he passed by the indoor garden sudden movement from in the room caught him up short. It was nothing more than a young mech, covered in meshes and dripping with gems, approaching him at a fast pace. He had no time to worry; the unknown mech took his arm, smiling widely, EMF open and inviting.

“You *must* be Officer Jazz. I’ve so wanted to meet you!”

“Oh, good evenin’,” Jazz managed without verbally stumbling. “I don’ believe we’ve been introduced?”

“Oh no, but I’ve heard so much about you. Oh, and your accent is just so lovely, just like I imagined. I’m The Honorable Marcher of the Glowfall family. Please, you must come and chat with us.” He gestured to the small assemblage of aristocrats surrounded by the indoor crystals.
“I’d certainly be pleased t’ later, but I should go present my self t’ th’ debutante first.”

Marcher waved that off with one servo while keeping the other on Jazz’s arm. “Oh, but there’s plenty of time for that. Why you’ll be able to speak to him all dark-cycle. Ah, I’m so excited. I will be hosting my own social gathering at the Glowfall estate at the end of the decacycle and I would be most honored if you could be in attendance, you see.”

“I’m ‘fraid my time in Praxus is limited. I’ll be needin’ t’ get back t’ my hotel t’night so I can catch my flight back t’ Polyhex t’morrow.”

The mech looked aghast, “The Crystalspires didn’t offer you a room for the dark-cycle? Well that just won’t do! You must come back to the Glowfall estate tonight, then. We’ll happily host you.” His optics turned coy, doorwings fluttering. He stroked Jazz’s vambrace. “We could even arrange for a tour before your flight.”

That’s wasn’t what I said!

Before he could go to the trouble of correcting the mech or figuring out how to politely decline, a huff sounded from behind him. A femme somehow managed to get between them, gracefully detaching the mech hanging onto him.

“Really Marcher, must you make a spectacle of yourself? Let the poor bot alone. He’s here to see young Bluestreak, not indulge advances from a lesser family.”

And with that she towed Jazz away from the clingy noble.

She tisked. “He’d better hope none of our esteemed hosts saw him acting so foolish. And maybe if he’s lucky, or does me a favor, I won’t tell them.”

Jazz wasn’t really sure why any of them would care, but perhaps it was some sort of social climbing thing.

His confusion must have bled into his field because she explained in a sotto voice, “He was trying to poach you from the Crystalspires’, quite clumsily, I might add. You’ve become something of a commodity and symbol of power due to your position amongst our city’s most powerful. I would be cautious if I were you. Those who don’t want you as some sort of trophy are likely to be irredeemably jealous and petty.”

As they walked towards the large open doors of the banquet hall, Jazz finally realized that he recognized her. Though it took him a moment. She’d been in the flock of nobles that made up Smokescreen’s entourage.

“Shimmer, wasn’ it?” He asked cautiously.

She beamed. “I’m pleased you remember, Officer.”

“...Ya’re much cleverer than ya let on, ain’t ya?”

“Oh, do keep it to yourself, won’t you?” She said lightly with no malice. “I’ve worked very hard to cultivate this facade, you see.”

“Ain’t my place t’ give away a bot’s secrets.” He murmured.

She released his arm at the big double doors, gave him a respectful bow, which he returned, and walked away towards the lounge. Skids was standing in the doorway greeting guests and
announcing them to the room at large. After doing so he would make a notation on a datapad.

Skids smiled warmly when he saw Jazz. “It is good to see you again, Sir.”

“Good t’ see ya as well.” Jazz rejoined.

Skids slightly turned into the room to announce him. Some of the guests caught sight of Jazz standing in the doorway, foreign and exotic; painted markings swirling and accentuating his form. Something of an expectant hush fell over those closest to him. Skids’ voice flowed over the bustle of the banquet hall. “Enforcer Jazz, of the Fourth Precinct of Polyhex.”

Jazz steeled himself again and stepped into the room.

Chapter End Notes

Jazz’s markings were inspired by Maori tattoos.
Oh and the aristocratic “rules” were inspired by the rules of the court of Louis the XIV.
Promenade and Profusion

Chapter Summary

Let the dance begin.

Chapter Notes

Me: *Glares at Jazz-muse* "Are we almost done?"
Jazz-muse: *Dances away* "I'm so pretty, oh so pretty..."
Me: "Get back here!" *Facepalm*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the banquet hall, lit garlands draped down from the top edges of the walls, sweeping back up to meet at the centermost point of the vaulted ceiling around a glittering crystal centerpiece that hung down like a mech-made stalactite. Floating glow-orbs gleamed from mathematically precise placements along the walls lighting the room with a warm, rich radiance. Between each glow-orb fabrics of white and gold sewn with hundreds of tiny red crystals cascaded all the way down to the floor. Framing the grand fireplace were two great spiraling crystal structures.

On the opposite side of the room a live orchestra played soft, unobtrusive background music. Next to them was the synth from the music room. Jazz supposed it had been moved in for the evening, though he couldn’t imagine why they would do such a thing. Maybe to show off?

Multiple tables along the back wall were covered in a staggering spectacle of delicacies, both sweet and savory. Multiple types of eclairs stacked in a pyramid. A blue, purple and pink swirled mousse served on thin wafers. Jasper chips. Silver macarons. Triple stacked mille-fueille, delicate cream puffs, tiny oil cakes. There was a large, ornate, tiered tray with rows upon rows of the dreaded sapphire crab (but at least Jazz didn’t have to eat it) next to a veritable mountain of fancy rust sticks. They had even installed an energon fountain, though the tables already held a rainbow of liquid energons to choose from.

Drones carrying trays with assorted delicacies and high-grade unobtrusively weaved through guests, attentively catering to requests and taking away empty cubes and plates.

Groups of brilliantly colored bots milled on either side of a seemingly agreed upon path where mechs and femmes promenaded up to a slightly raised dais to present themselves to the young debutante. They would nod their helms, tap a servo to their chestplates or dip a doorwing every now and then and Jazz’s processor pinged him with the reminder of the “always acknowledge an acquaintance when promenading” rule. Bluestreak was seated in the centermost seat with two empty chairs on either side of him and Smokescreen sitting in a chair to the right of one of the empty ones. Sunstreaker and Sideswipe both stood just behind the dais in the position Jazz categorized as “the unspoken threat”.

Bluestreak wore a resplendent red cape with curling, swirling black patterns. His wrists were covered by black, delicate cuffs and he had a black sash. Smokescreen was also wearing a sash in a golden
color that matched his chevron, but instead of a cape he had open, flowing sleeves that hung off his shoulder pauldrons made of the same material as his sash. The fabric glittered and shone in such a way that it looked like actual gold. And what did Jazz know, maybe it was actually made of the stuff.

They made a stunning display. Jazz wondered for a moment where the Viscount was, but in the next instant Bluestreak saw him across the room.

Though he’d already been smiling, when he saw Jazz the young mech’s face lit up with a truly happy smile and he was up and out of his seat in a (graceful) flash. He seemed to have gotten his stabilizers under control; he glided through the bots trying to get his attention. He clasped their servos together when he reached Jazz.

“I’m so glad you could make it!”

Jazz felt some of the tension bleed out of his frame at the familiar and joyful greeting press of Bluestreak’s EMF. The Polyhexian favored the young mech with a warm smile. “O’course. I wouldn’t’ ve missed this fo’ anythin’. Now, let me get a look at ya. Gotta see what a handsome bot ya’ve become.”

Bluestreak beamed and preened a bit, doorwings lifting proudly to show off. Jazz chuckled, tempted to tweak one of the young mech’s helmvents, but he didn’t know how that might be viewed by the other nobles.

After a moment Bluestreak lead him to the dais. “You look wonderful as well! That paintwork is amazing. Come sit. How was your journey?”

Jazz let himself be led, attempting to ignore, but painfully aware of the envious faces they were passing, telling the silver mech that his flights had been uneventful. He was seated in the chair between Bluestreak and Smokescreen. He exchanged hellos with the older mech wondering just how many of the bots around them were trying to listen in.

“Would’ ya like yar gift now?” Jazz asked the young noble.

Bluestreak’s doorwings twitched excitedly. “Oh, yes please! But you didn’t have to get me anything, Cree. Your presence is enough of a gift.”

Jazz chuckled, pulling the wrapped box out of his subspace. “I ’ad t’ get ya somethin’, Blue. Ain’t every cycle ya get yar final upgrades.”

With all the enthusiasm of his younger self, but enough restraint to not just rip into the package, Bluestreak opened up his gift.

“Oh wow.” He murmured in awed appreciation.

The chime made a pleasant tinkling sound as he carefully lifted it out of the box, letting it hang to its full length freely. Thin, colored crystals hung interspersed with round metal tubes. Each crystal piece had a hole drilled into it and every bit of the chime was polished to a soft shine.

Murmurings broke out around them.

“Watch this.” Jazz prompted. He tapped a digit on one of the tubes to make it ring and then blew gently on one of the crystals causing it to sound a harmony as his venting passed through the hole. The tone of the murmurings lifted with surprise and appreciation.

“It’s a singin’ wind chime, servo-crafted by my mentor.” Jazz explained. “In Polyhex, they’re
s’possed t’ ward off bad luck an’ invite good fortune. I ‘ope ya like it.”

“I love it Cree! I’m going to hang it on the loggia right outside the music room so I can see and hear it every time I practice.”

Bluestreak carefully put the chime back in its box and then put the box in his subspace. He turned to talk to Jazz again, but Smokescreen spoke up, chiding him gently. “You shouldn’t ignore your other guests. You will have plenty of time to speak with Jazz later, right now you need to be greeting every one.”

“But Smokey…” The complaint was on the verge of a whine.

“’E’s right, ya know,” Jazz cut in, not wanting to cause potential trouble. “Don’ let me distract ya. We can chat all ya want, later.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Alright.” Bluestreak turned in his seat and beckoned another set of nobles waiting for his attention forward with a smile not quite as warm as the one he’d given Jazz.

“And on that note, I think you and I should avail ourselves of some refreshments,” Smokescreen said standing and offering Jazz his arm.

“Please bring me back a phosphorous eclair.” Bluestreak requested as Jazz stood to take Smokescreen’s proffered arm.

“Of course, dear cousin.” Smokescreen affirmed with an indulgent smile.

They walked in silence for the amount of time it took to get out of Bluestreak’s hearing range, then Smokescreen murmured, “You realize he has positioned you in the seat reserved for the debutante’s carrier.”

...Oh.

“Is… tha’ a problem?” Jazz asked warily while attempting to keep his faceplates serene.

His escort chuckled softly. “Only for the covetous. He’s just reminding some of the other nobles who might have designs on you that you are still in the Crystalspires’ protection.”

“Is Blue…?”

“Bluestreak is still mostly unaware of what Uncle does in those meetings of his,” Smokescreen answered his unasked question, “but he’s not unintelligent. He recognizes the power of his family and is willing to exert it to protect those he loves.”

Jazz almost couldn’t get the next question past his dermas. “...An’ where is th’ Viscount this evening? I would think ’e’d be close t’ Blue at such an important event.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’s in his office with some important official or another making certain the family’s control is secure,” the noble said breezily with shocking honesty.

A flare of annoyance escaped into Jazz’s EMF before he could stop it. “ ‘E should be with ‘is creation righ’ now.” Jazz muttered tightly.
Smokescreen gave him a half appraising and half approving look as they reached the tables of fuel.

“Wha’ tha’ look fo’?” Jazz quired guardedly.

“Hmm, just realizing that I might be the tiniest bit jealous of my dear cousin. My upbringing would have been very different if you had been present earlier in mine and Uncle’s lives.”

Jazz didn’t know what to say to that, so he busied himself by selecting a few treats. And avoiding the sapphire crabs. Blech.

He was left largely alone as they perused the fuel selections. That may have been because it was still early in the party and the other nobles were gauging him, or it might have been because Smokescreen was with him. Just some compliments on his “exotic” finish and questions as to which salon he’d used. And a few odd nobles who not-so-subtly followed him and Smokescreen around the tables of fuel picking up the same treats they chose.

After getting a plate of treats (including the eclair for Bluestreak) and some blue-colored engex, they made their way back to the dais. As they approached, Jazz saw the current pair of nobles that Bluestreak was interacting with grandly open a thin filigree covered box. Inside was an elaborate collar necklace made entirely of rubies. Bluestreak nodded his helm gravely in gratitude and made a small motion with his servo. Sideswipe stepped forward and accepted the box, closing it carefully and placing it in a large subspace generator behind the dais that Jazz had failed to see until that moment.

He and Smokescreen sat back down. Bluestreak happily accepted his treat, eating it with far more grace than Jazz thought possible. Jazz very carefully consumed his own fuel (the last thing he needed was to spill something on his plating) and covertly watched the next group of nobles approach from behind the safety of his visor.

The group of five all greeted Bluestreak with a choreographed tap of a servo to the chestplates. The oldest-looking amongst them spoke. “We of the Rain Shadow family do congratulate you on your attainment of majority. We offer you this gift to strengthen our ties.”

The youngest one stepped forward with a small, square box held between her servos. She ceremonially opened the top of the box to reveal an iridescent tunic that seemed to shift colors in the light.

“It is made from a specialized, proprietary fabric imported from Tetrahex.” The femme said.

Bluestreak nodded politely, “Thank you kindly for your generous gift. Our family will remember yours.” He made that same servo motion, this time to Sunstreaker, who came forward and took the box from the femme. It too went into the subspace generator.

After the Rain Shadow family had bowed, backed away and dispersed Bluestreak leaned over to Jazz and whispered into his audial. “I have so much apparel and jewelry now, I don’t know what to do with it all.”

“Ya’ll jus’ ‘ave t’ be fancy every cycle.” Jazz murmured back.

Bluestreak stifled a giggle, then motioned the next group forward.

This continued for a while. Bluestreak received several more pieces of apparel and jewelry with some artwork thrown in every now and then, all of which he had one of the twins accept for him and place in the large subspace generator. Skids’ voice rang out at regular intervals introducing more guests. It could have become processor numbing, but Jazz was so hyper aware of the judgemental
optics watching his every movement that boredom seemed like an unachievable state of being. His plating continually prickled and he stealthily caught the stares leveled at him. Thank Primus for his visor.

Just as a joor passed, there was a sudden shift among the nobles pomenading. Without seeming to consciously coordinate, they parted to allow through a mech with dark garnet and byzantium plating and bright, jovial optics the color of scarlet. Behind him trailed a least a dozen attendants.

With a start, Jazz realized that he knew the mech. Well, not personally.

This was Duke Bellicose, the Lord of Praxus. The actual Lord of Praxus. He was the most richly dressed yet. A shining silver tunic encircled at the waist with a dark purple belt. The same dark purple material made up tippets that hung down from his upper arms and trailed nearly to the floor. A silver headdress spilled out from behind his dark red chevron, embroidered with red and purple gems. If the mech tried to transform, he’d end up hopelessly tangled in fabric. Of course, he was a noble, and nobles had transports to take them wherever they wanted rather than their own wheels.

Jazz found himself subtly urged to his pedes by Smokescreen’s servo on his arm as the noble and Bluestreak both stood. They bowed (which Jazz was able to gracefully follow without giving away that he wasn’t quite sure what was happening).

“Good evening, Lord Bellicose.” Bluestreak greeted pleasantly.

The Duke spread his arms and tilted his helm with a smile. “My congratulations on the attainment of your majority, young Bluestreak. The house of Starrise offers you this gift in celebration of this grand event.”

Two of the Duke’s retinue came forward carrying what looked like a covered lumpy table between them. Jazz couldn’t figure out what it was. The Duke grandly removed the covering with a fancy flourish. A rippling murmur of awe broke out among the watching nobles. The “table” was actually a perfect scale model of the Helix Garden. Every aspect of the gardens was replicated in exacting detail. From the Great Crystal in the center, right down to the teeny tiny cyberfish “swimming” in the miniature energon garden.

“I heard that this was a favored place, so I commissioned the best crafters to replicate it for you.” Duke Bellicose remarked.

“This is beautiful, Lord Bellicose. I love it.” Bluestreak said bowing again. “Our family will remember yours. Perhaps we could display it in front of the fireplace tonight so everybot may see its amazing detail.”

The Duke’s smile widened, doorwings lifting proudly. “An excellent idea. Absorber, Indulgence.” He motioned the two bots to take the display across the room. As they quickly, yet carefully, moved to comply, the Duke turned back to the three mechs on the dais. His optics fell on Jazz, smile still in place.

Jazz didn’t trust that smile.

“I understand I have you to thank for making our city safer, Officer Jazz. I apologize that I haven’t been able to thank you in person yet.” He held out his servo.

“Jus’ doin’ my job, Lord Bellicose.” Jazz demurred. Sadly, he’d misinterpreted the Duke’s outstretched servo and so had to hide his jolt when, rather than shaking it, the mech kissed the back of it instead.
“What a lovely locket.” He said appreciatively when he released Jazz’s servo, optics trailing over Jazz’s chestplates.

A red flag went up in Jazz’s processor. “Thank ya, it was a gift.”

“Yes, of course. Beautiful crystals you have chosen to display. They’re from the Crystalspire gardens are they not? If one were to come to my estate, I’m sure they would find a similar array to choose from.”

_Was that supposed to be a subtle invitation? Do I correct him? Urk! What am I supposed to say?!_

“I’m sure they would,” Jazz said cautiously. “bu’ as wonderful as the crystal gardens ‘ere are, it was the music room tha’ drew me.”

The Duke’s optics shone with interest. “Really?”

“Oh yes, Jazz is an amazing musician! Oh that reminds me!” Bluestreak spoke up (thank goodness) and turned eagerly to Jazz. “Please won’t you play for us, Cree?”

Jazz smiled, unable to stop himself. For a klik he forgot their audience, “‘Course, Blue. I’d love t’ play fo’ ya.”

The young mech turned to the Duke and inclined his helm, sensor panels moving back and forth. The Duke merely smiled, doorwings spreading out and up in a relaxed fashion. Bluestreak smiled widely back and took Jazz’s servo to lead him to the synth.

_…fragging doorwings._

Several bots trailed behind them including the Duke and his entourage and Smokescreen. The orchestra conductor saw them coming and smoothly ended the song the ensemble was playing.

Jazz sat himself at the synth with Bluestreak’s encouraging gesture. Was this why they’d moved the synth?

“Oh, you’re going to play for us? How quaint. It is going to be one of those little jigs Polyhex is known for?” One of the femmes that had followed them smiled smugly. It wasn’t a very nice smile.

Quaint? Well that was a thinly veiled insult against him _and_ his home city. He wasn’t from some no name backwater. Polyhex was its own center of culture and wealth. One of the ancient cities; legend had it that it was one of the primordial slumbering cityformers. It had roots that ran just as deeply as Praxus.

Without dropping his pleasant attitude, Jazz said, “I thought I’d play somethin’ a bit more modern. It’s by a Polyhexian composer named Cadenza. I’m sure ya’ve ‘eard o’ ‘im.”

The femme’s doorwings twitched up sharply in surprise and then made an aborted flutter of embarrassment as she recognized the name of the Polyhexian-sparked world famous composer.

“Er, of course.” she fumbled.

Jazz turned away from the femme to adjust a few settings on the synth, mutely dismissing her. Then placed his digits lightly on the keys and began a deceptively simple sounding piece. That simplicity, even sparseness of texture, encompassed a gently undulating passage that Jazz played slightly faster
or slower to increase the music’s dramatic tension.

At the climax of the piece the passage subtly transformed from a meditative study of melancholy to a moment of exaltation by lifting the melodic material higher in the synth’s range where it seemed to take flight. Following on from this, the opening theme reappeared, entering more softly and descending gradually to more lush and subtly darker harmonies. Jazz finished with a gentle ending flourish.

Jazz hadn’t realized that he’d turned off his visor until he took his servos from the keys. The mechs and femmes around him all broke out in applause. Some of them looked impressed, some a bit bored (music wasn’t for everybot, obviously), while others were giving him appraising optics, and still others were hiding ill-concealed jealousy.

Jazz didn’t like the attention.

“Masterfully preformed.” Duke Bellicose complimented as he clapped.

Smokescreen, who had been mildly surveying the room, suddenly touched Bluestreak’s shoulder pauldron gently. “It seems as if we should start the traditional dances, don’t you think dear cousin?”

“Oh, yes please.”

Smokescreen raised his arm into the air and declared. “Let the dancing begin!”

Wait a breem, wasn’t the host supposed to make that decision? Where the frag was the Viscount? Had he just given some sort of hidden signal to Smokescreen?

Jazz stood from the synth, casting his gaze around the room while trying to look like he wasn’t searching the riot of colors and faces. All he could see was a forest of doorwings as bots began to move and create several circles. Praxian frames were bigger than Polyhexian. Every bot in the room had at least half a helm on him. Even Bluestreak was taller than him now.

In other words, Jazz couldn’t see anything. Especially when Bluestreak grabbed his servo again and towed him into one of the forming circles.

A quick cross reference to his processor told him that this was going to be the Branle. Jazz readied the steps to scroll across his HUD and prayed that he could keep up. The orchestra played a soft wandering beginning strain, waiting for the bots who were choosing to dance to find a place amongst the circles. He found himself sandwiched between Bluestreak and Duke Bellicose.

The dance began. First they danced left for four steps, then back to the right for four steps. Left for four steps, right for four steps again. Every other bot and their “partner” turned to one another; the partner on the left bowed followed by the one on the right. Then they danced left for four steps clapping their servos, right for four steps, and left for four with claps again. Every bot spun 360 degrees. Then the steps started over again.

It was fairly simple, except for the fact that every succeeding set, the orchestra increased their tempo, going faster and faster. Despite the pressure to not make any mistakes, Jazz found himself having fun. Jazz saw a couple of bots stumble every now and then. The volume and excitement of the music built with the tempo until it ended with a triumphant stinger. Beside him, Bluestreak laughed breathlessly. And somehow through the will of Primus, he’d not missed a single step.

At that point, bots shifted from the circle formations to line up several sets of parallel lines facing each other. Jazz’s partner was a bot he didn’t know who smiled coyly at him. Fortunately, this was a simpler format than the Branle. Walking and knowing the difference between left and right was all of
the basic knowledge needed. Most of the movements were based simply on a walking or skipping step. There were a number of specific "figures" known by the dancers. The conductor acted as a caller, so that each figure and movement was called in time to the music. Jazz was glad for his internal “cheat sheet”. And though his dance partner shamelessly flirted and wiggled their doorwings at him, he managed to get through it as well.

Thankfully, the last of the traditional dances, the Cotillion, was going to be performed by a professional group. Jazz gratefully took his seat beside Bluestreak back on the dais as the party guests cleared a space in the middle of the room.

As the eight dancers took their places, Jazz noticed the insignia on the matching sashes they were wearing. They were from the Praxus Opera Company. In fact, if he wasn’t mistaken two of those femmes were the bots that had played the main characters from The Seeker of Iacon.

The music began. And Jazz recognized that too. It was an instrumental version of one of the love songs from said opera. The dancers spun and stepped gracefully. Switching partners and formations at a frankly processor boggling pace.

*Yeah, glad I didn’t have to dance that one.*

Their beautiful rendition of the Cotillion was met with enthusiastic applause. They all bowed to Bluestreak and wished him fortune in his majority.

Then the *normal* dancing commenced.

And the Viscount was *still* suspiciously absent.

For nearly the next joor, Jazz was approached by nobles asking for a dance. Of course Bluestreak and Smokescreen were approached as well, but it felt like an undue amount of attention was being paid to him. He quickly lost track of names and families, inane small talk, and innuendo. The best he could do was be as polite as possible to the current bot he was dancing with and fend off any advances. It was exhausting.

They didn’t wait for the end of a particular dance either. Cutting in was, apparently, perfectly acceptable and seemed like some sort of show of dominance. Right when his helm gave him the first inclination of an ache behind his optical feed, Bluestreak stepped in (literally) to give him a break.

The smile didn’t waver from the young mech’s face, but it deepened, becoming warmer and his EMF brushed apologetically. “Thank you for coming” He murmured. “I know this must be uncomfortable for you.”

“It ain’t so bad.” Jazz lied.

Bluestreak chuckled, seeing through him. He dropped his voice lower. “Truthfully, I’m going to be very glad to see them all out at the end of this. Being pleasant to all of them is quite demanding.”

Jazz knew their conversation was likely safe from prying audials. Doorwings could pick up vibrations and EMF’s, but not quietly spoken words. So, most of the bots close enough would know they were talking, but not what they were talking about. Praxians weren’t known for their sensitive audials, after all.

“Well, if it’s any consolation, yar handlin’ it like a pro.” Jazz praised.

Bluestreak grinned. A few breems later as Bluestreak spun Jazz under his arm, Jazz saw the flash of blue, red and gold in the moment he was turning that could only be Smokescreen.
And true enough, the mech tapped Bluestreak’s shoulder pauldron and spoke. “Might I cut in, dear cousin? Jazz?”

They acquiesced, Bluestreak bowed to Jazz and stepped back only to be immediately offered a dance by another guest.

Jazz picked up the dance with Smokescreen. For a breem or so they danced in companionable silence. But, of course, it didn’t last. Just as Jazz was getting comfortable, Smokescreen said silkily, “Your presence has been missed, you know.”

And Jazz was immediately back on-edge. “I know,” He said carefully, “Blue calls me most cycles t’ talk.”

The noble inclined his helm. “True. But that wasn’t what I meant.”

“Wha’ did ya mean, then?” It wasn’t quite a snap, but Jazz was just beginning to reach his limit of handling clever word play.

The mech smiled widely as if he’d told a funny anecdote. “I’ve always liked that you are unafraid to speak your processor plainly.”

“Smokescreen…” Jazz muttered warningly.

“Hmm, let’s just say certain other mechs have been quite… moepy since your departure.”

“Facinatin’.” Jazz said dryly, gamely ignoring the tiny leap his spark made in his chest.

Something must have shown in his face or EMF because Smokescreen’s optics softened just slightly. “If I may offer my opinion?”

“I ‘ave a feelin’ yar gonna offer it no matter wha’ I say, so sure.”

Smokescreen gave an amused smile. “Certain other mechs may be a bit slow when it comes to relationships, but they know when a once in a lifetime kind of bot shows up. They might also be the type of bot who will grab a second chance with both servos.”

“E already got a second chance.” Jazz said churlishly.

“Another chance, then.” Smokescreen corrected himself smoothly.

“Ya don’ say.”

“I know it may not seem like it, but it is true. Please do me a favor and give a certain mech like that at least one more chance to explain himself. And please don’t be too mad at me for this.”

Before Jazz could get, “For what?” past his dermas, Smokescreen spun him under his arm and straight into the arms of a new partner.

It was fortunate that Jazz was as trained and graceful as he was, because he just stopped himself from stumbling over his own pedes as he locked visor to achingly familiar icy blue optics.

Chapter End Notes
If you want some music for this chapter, I recommend Clair de Lune for Jazz's song, the Korobushka for the Branle and The Boston Pops "Unforgettable" album for the "normal" dancing. ;)}
“Hello Jazz.” Prowl murmured, beginning to lead him through the steps of the dance.

The Praxian was resplendent in a midnight cape that was speckled with glowing pinpricks of light, making it seem as if a night sky cascaded down his back from between his doorwings. Red cuffs on his wrist matched a belt and sash that met in an intricate knot at his left hip and trailed down his side, flowing around him as they danced.

Jazz tore his gaze away from the mech’s optics, glossa-tied for a klik. Then he smoothed his face into a neutral mask and greeted back, “Viscount.” And he honestly didn’t know what to say next. He, instead, focused on the sprightly waltz they were currently engaged in.

Prowl didn’t seem inclined to say anything either. The mech just gazed at him adoringly, as if drinking in Jazz’s features. The air caught in Jazz’s vents.

They swayed and spun; glissaded and whirled. Prowl’s movements were smooth and confident, covering any hesitations on Jazz’s part. Step, slide, step. Step, slide, step. Turn under, reach out. Draw close, arms closing around each other again. Push and pull. Black on white on black. Step, slide, step. Step, slide, step.

The music swelled.

Jazz turned under the noble’s arm. Prowl released his hold, executed his own graceful spin. Held out his servo. Jazz reached; clasped it. Was spun once under Prowl’s arm. They clasped their other servos together. Again, Jazz was spun, this time under the other arm. Prowl brought him around. He was caught securely in Prowl’s warm hold; dipped backwards and back up as the music crescendoed to its end.

For a few kliks they stared at each other, so close they were sharing vents.

Then, sudden applause broke Jazz out of his reverie. It felt like he was waking from a recharge flux. He looked around and realized that they were the only two left on the dance floor surrounded by a ring of observant nobles. Embarrassment flushed through his field.

The Viscount flicked his doorwings and another song started up. Before Jazz could protest, he was being led through another dance. Though this one was a bit more of a relaxed pace. Other couples
moved to join them on the dance floor.

“I am quite happy you were able to make it this dark cycle.” Prowl broke the silence between them.

And now, apparently, Prowl wanted to talk.

“Blue invited me.” Jazz answered shortly. It probably sounded rude, but dammit, he had the right!

Undeterred, Prowl continued, “I know. You look stunning.”

Of course he knew. Jazz though sarcastically, ignoring the warmth that bloomed in his spark from the sincere compliment. “Ad t’ look my best fo’ Blue’s big cycle.”

“You are even more beautiful than usual.” Prowl’s optics wandered, catching on each audial horn by turn, then the capelet, then the locket. A quick flash, there-then-not, of possessiveness flickered through his field.

“Thank ya fo’ th’ compliment, Sir.” Jazz returned neutrally, keeping a tight hold over his EMF and resolutely staring at a point on the mech’s shoulder.

Prowl sighed sadly. “Have I done such irreparable damage to our relationship?”

“Wha’ relationship is tha’?” Jazz asked stiffly.

The next steps of their dance brought them nearly flush together and the Praxian took the moment to lean his helm close to Jazz’s audial and whisper. “Jazz, please.”

Jazz vented deeply as they moved back again. He finally looked back into the mech’s optics. “What do ya want me t’ say, Prowl? Ya made yar stance on our ‘relationship’ very clear th’ last time I was ‘ere.”

“Will you allow me to apologize for my actions?”

“Do ya really want t’ get int’ tha’ in th’ middle o’ th’ hall with everybot watchin’?” Jazz’s voice was so dry the ambient moisture in the air around them should have evaporated on the spot.

Prowl managed a very small self-deprecating smile. He paused their dance and held out his arm. “Perhaps you are correct. Would you do me the honor of accompanying me to the terrace?”

Don’t cause a scene. Don’t cause a scene.

“...A’ight.” Jazz gingerly placed his servo on Prowl’s arm and let the noble take the lead.

This is such a bad idea.

Prowl strode in no particular hurry through the sea of frames, doorwings held out proudly. Jazz felt the press of too many optics on him; again, he’d never been so grateful for the security of his visor. Bots instinctively gave way before them, many bowing or inclining their sensor panels or helms. The doorway of the banquet hall cleared for them, allowing them to leave the room unimpeded. They passed through the indoor garden and the main hall to the covered outdoor loggia that led to the terrace. It felt like nothing less than Prowl showing him off to the other guests.

The loggia was empty. It was a startling shift from the brightly lit clamor of the interior as they stepped out into the dimmer hush of the outside. Though light blazed from the windows behind them, the darkened crystal forest surrounding the estate allowed the glimmering stars to be seen shining in the dark-cycle sky. And there, just visible in the distance, was the tippy-top of the Grand
Crystal at the Helix Gardens.

They walked out past the back of the house to the terrace and the open air pavilion where Prowl had “gifted” Jazz the open invitation to the Crystalspire’s personal gardens. They stood in silence for a moment when they reached their destination, looking out over the gardens. During their travel, Prowl had laid a restive servo on Jazz’s, keeping him from removing it from where it lay on Prowl’s arm.

The Viscount spoke first, “I apologize for surprising you earlier, but I thought approaching you that way would mitigate the ire I have surely brought upon myself.”

It took Jazz a klik to parse out the sentence. He turned his helm to look at the mech next to him, incredulous stare on his faceplates.

“...Did ya seriously jus’ ambush me in th’ middle o’ a dance so I wouldn’t yell at ya?”

“I will admit it was a hasty plan and not one of my better ones, but it was the best I could come up with after attempting to ascertain the best way to approach you since your transport arrived.”

Jazz was caught between the urge to laugh and the urge to slap Prowl across the faceplates. He managed to reign in both impulses and asked, “‘Ave ya really been skulkin’ around tryin’ t’ figure out ‘ow t’ say hi?”

Prowl made a huffing noise that was too elegant to be called a snort, but it came close, “I wouldn’t call it skulking. I was working for some of the time.”

“Ya shoulda been out there with yar creation. This is when ‘e needs yar support th’ most.”

Prowl’s doorwings flicked and flexed casually. “I was giving him my support in the best way I could. By ensuring the Crystalspire’s position in the hierarchy. Besides, you and Smokescreen have been with him.”

Ah, here was the anger Jazz had been expecting to feel for so many cycles. Perhaps his processor had just been waiting until it had an appropriate target to unleash it upon. He pulled away, but Prowl kept a hold on his servo so that they ended up facing each other with Prowl clasping Jazz’s servo between his own.

Jazz spoke through his gritted denta. “I woulda thought it was quite obvious tha’ I don’ know wha’ I’m doin’.”

Prowl smiled in a proud sort of way. “On the contrary, you have been handling the evening with remarkable grace and aplomb. And that song you played was just… exquisite.”

It was the same word Prowl had used the first time Jazz had played for him. But he wasn’t going to fall for it this time.

“Oh, stalkin’ and skulkin’.” Jazz said sarcastically, ‘Ow attractive.”

“I couldn’t help but observe you. I have missed you terribly.”

The naked admission took him aback for a klik, anger temporarily stalled, spark spinning dizzily. Jazz broke optic contact, focusing somewhere in the vicinity of Prowl’s chestplates. “I missed ya, too.” he whispered.

Ever so gently, Prowl tipped Jazz’s chin up with his digits. Jazz couldn’t look away. Prowl’s optics were so tender; full of regret, hope and love.
“Jazz…”

Jazz’s optical feed skittered away from Prowl’s faceplates. “So, wha’ ‘ave ya been up t’?” He asked, trying to sound casual.

“Cleaning house.” Prowl said bluntly. He stroked Jazz’s chin with his thumb.

Jazz frowned looking back at the Viscount. “Crossfire mentioned an ‘expulsion’.”

“Yes. It was time to scrub out the corruption that had been allowed to grow and fester.”

“Funny ya call it tha’.”

Jazz’s audials picked up the sound of somebot’s pedesteps. He tore his gaze from Prowl’s. Coming towards them was the recognizable form of Duke Bellicose.

The Duke smiled that wide smile at them. “Ah, here’s where you went off to.”

“Lord Bellicose.” Prowl greeted cooly with a slight inclination of his helm. He removed his servo from Jazz’s faceplates and turned to face the incoming mech.

The Duke stopped just outside of the pavilion. “I’m not interrupting anything am I?”

Jazz opened his mouth to answer, but Prowl beat him to it.

“Jazz and I were catching up. We’ve had yet to speak to each other this evening.” There was a pointed edge to his voice despite the mild tone that Jazz interpreted as Prowl telling the Duke that, yes, he was very much interrupting and to frag off already.

It was something the Duke either didn’t recognize or ignored.

“Oh? Just a friendly chat or something more?”

Jazz frowned. “I don’ see ‘ow tha’’s any o’ yar business.” he said without thinking.

“I tend to make everything in Praxus my business.” The Duke said with a flare of his doorwings. His smile was still pleasant, but the motion had been aggressive.

Prowl smiled back blandly. “That is true. It is a wonder that the Spritehollow family has not heard anything about your interests.”

If he hadn’t been hyper focused on the Duke, Jazz would have missed how he froze for a fraction of a klik. “Of course they know, I am in charge of their profiles now, after all.”

“Yes, you are. Interesting turn the market has taken lately, don’t you think? But, please, Lord Bellicose, I do not wish to get into more business right now, please excuse us.”

“...Of course. Forgive me for the interruption.”

“Not at all,” Prowl said briskly, and edge of triumph in his field. “I was just about to suggest to Jazz that we move our conversation to my office for more privacy. I’m sure you were just wishing to observe the gardens; don’t let our departure deter you. We will speak on this at some point in the future, Duke Bellicose.”

Prowl gave a perfunctory bow, which Jazz hurriedly copied. Jazz could just make out clenched fists before they turned away from him. Then Prowl was leading him again back towards the lights of the
house, leaving the Duke standing alone in the dusky courtyard.

The trip back inside past curious nobles was a blur as Jazz tried to suss out what had just happened. He barely kept his questions from tumbling out until they reached the “safety” of Prowl’s office.

“Ya want t’ tell me wha’ tha’ was all ‘bout?”

Prowl didn’t even glance about the room; bypassing it to the hidden door that led up the servant’s passage to the second floor. They passed by the overlook into the banquet hall where mechs and femmes spun gracefully around the dance floor in a whirl of colors.

“Just power play.” He said dismissively. “Unfortunately for him, I had mastered that game while he was still a sparkling. Bellicose thought to trap me in a corner, but he underestimated how well his extracurricular activities had been covered.”


“No,” Prow said sharply. Then more soothingly, “No, he’s been gambling with the investments of his betrothed’s family; the Spritehollows. They most certainly will not go through with the political match if they knew of such.”

“Do I want t’ know ‘ow ya foud out ‘bout it?”

A slight smile, “I have many connections.”

“Right. As if I coul’ forget.” Jazz grumbled.

They emerged into the second floor living hall. Jazz let go of Prowl’s arm, heartily tired of being dragged from one place to another.

It was quiet, the bustle of activity and music from downstairs just a murmur in the distance. There was a new addition to the room. A familiar picture now hung between the large curtained windows. Sunstreaker had added more detail and dimension to it, but is was, unmistakably, the painting of him from the opera.

“Interesin’ choice o’ artwork.” Jazz said dryly, “I woulda thought th’ sight o’ my faceplates woulda been th’ last thing ya’d want t’ see.”

“You know nothing could be further from the truth.” Prowl answered softly.

Jazz turned to look at the Praxian guardedly. “Wha’d ya bring me ‘ere for, Prowl?”

Prowl was suddenly in his personal space, his optics focused on the top of his helm.

“Prowl?” Startled, Jazz took a half-step back.

“I did some reading while you were away,” the noble said, seemingly out of nowhere. “I wanted to familiarize myself with your traditions. And I just realized… your horn adornments…” Prowl reached up. Jazz froze, confused and unsettled. He felt one horn adornment detach and then the other. Then they were gently refastened.

Jazz could feel the tiny cascade of gems on the adornment Prowl had given him, gently tapping on the opposite horn he’d been wearing it on. Prowl had switched them.

“Why...?” Jazz whispered helplessly.
“Because I didn’t want to end things between us.” Prowl’s optics were close and intense.

“Why th’ frag are ya sayin’ tha’ now?” Jazz demanded. “The last time we spoke ya said—”

“I know. And I have never regretted anything so quickly as those words, but my stubborn pride wouldn’t let me take them back. I’m sorry for the pain I caused you. Forgive me.” He paused for a moment and gathered Jazz’s servos in his own. “Jazz, I… I’m not a good mech. I’m selfish, greedy and vengeful… and apparently very foolish. But you make me want to be better. You bring out the good in me. Let me… let me prove it to you? I want you in my life, Jazz. My lover, my companion, my partner in all things.”

Jazz’s processor fully stalled for three complete kliks.

“...are ya proposin’ t’ me? Really? After all th’ scrap ya put me through?”

Prowl was calm and sure in the face of Jazz’s incredulity. “I am.”

“Wha’ th’ frag? Ya ‘ave some nerve, ya know?” Jazz hissed. “Ya can’t jus’ expect me t’ fall back int’ yar arms after jerkin’ me around like a—”

Strong arms encircled him and Prowl kissed him like a starving mech who’d just been offered energon. Jazz’s EMF was battered by Prowl’s, enveloping him in a thick blanket of regret/love. He was too stunned at first to even try a token struggle of protest as Prowl deepened his kiss to strut-meltingly intimate.

But indignation still simmered just under the surface. Jazz managed to break the kiss, turning his helm away. “Damnit Prowl, this ain’t a romance novel! Ya can’t fix everythin’ with a bondin’ proposal an’ a kiss. We ‘ave t’ actually talk an’ communicate!”

The visored mech tried to escape the noble’s grasp, but Prowl just held him tighter.

“Listen to me! We can talk right now! ...Please.” The Praxian sounded breathless, dermas so close that they brushed Jazz’s audial with every word.

It was the honest plea that stilled Jazz’s movements and cooled his ire. And as they stood in the quiet, dim room, Jazz suddenly realized that Prowl was trembling. As if he were afraid.

When the Praxian was sure Jazz wasn’t going to bolt, he slightly relaxed his grip and looked at Jazz with optics that were several shades paler than they usually were.

No, Prowl wasn’t afraid. He was terrified.

“I trust you, Jazz. I… There are things that I want to tell you, but I need to start at the beginning of it.”

Jazz searched his optics deeply for a breem seeing only honesty and agitation. The Polyhexian slowly nodded. “A’ight. I’ll listen.”

“Thank you.” Prowl vented out gratefully. “Please, if you don’t mind, come into my private sitting room, I do not want anybot to happen upon us during this.”

They entered Prowl’s private sitting room. It was decorated in much the same way as Prowl’s suite, but instead of red accents, the dark metals were complemented by warm amber. They sat next to each other on a small, cosy couch.
“I’m sure you have already figured out, yourself, that what I told you of Swingline’s disappearance was… only partially true. But please listen to the whole story before you pass judgement on me.”

“Are ya so sure I will?”

“Yes.” Prowl sighed. “Swingline… was deactivated. By my servos.”

And there it was. Out in the open. It felt almost… anticlimactic in a way.

“I… suspected.” Jazz said carefully. “But… ya were scared. Ya defended yarself from a much older an’ stronger bot.”

“No.” The Praxian shook his helm. “I was angry. He killed my carrier and then he tried to kill me. And I took my revenge.”

“Wha’ d’ya mean?”

“When Swingline attacked me, we were in the weapon’s gallery. We had been quarreling and the commotion drew the attention of one of the servants and… and Barricade. The servant managed to grab Swingline and pull him off of me. The fight could have been over then, but I knew he’d just get the Enforcers to sweep it under the rug. Maybe even somehow shift the blame to me or the servant. All of these terrible futures passed through my processor, and all I could see was him getting away with the murder of my carrier again and again… So I acted. I grabbed one of the daggers on display…”

“An’ ya stabbed ‘im through th’ spark.” Jazz whispered.

Prowl’s servos tightened on his, a small flash or surprise flickered through his EMF.

“I saw it. Th’ dagger.” Jazz answered the unasked question. “I went lookin’ fo’ the pipes on th’ grand synth when I was explorin’. I found th’ storage room. Th’ dagger still ‘as th’ Spark Flare on it.”

“And yet you stayed.”

“I only ‘ad a puzzle piece. I didn’ know exactly wha’ it meant, but yeah, I stayed.”

“Barricade witnessed the whole messy event and as I told you before, Swingline had already begun warping his processor to his whims. I sent Barricade to his room and forbid him from speaking of what he had seen. I was young and overconfident that I could get him to see my side in the conflict.”

“Then I called in the old gardener. I couldn’t think of any other place to hide the body where it might be discovered. The old mech didn’t ask any questions, just did as I asked. He’d loved my carrier like the youngling he’d never had; her deactivation had devastated him almost as much as me, and I think he knew who was to blame for it.”

Jazz’s vents caught in his throat as a sudden clarity hit him. “Th’ quartz garden. Th’ off color structure. Tha’s where ya buried him.”

Prowl actually smiled. “You are very observant.”

“Tha’s why Barricade picked it fo’ ya showdown.”

“I think he was trying to rub it in my faceplates that he was our Sire’s creation.”

Prowl fell silent, letting Jazz digest what he’d heard.
So now he knew the truth. Was there anything he could or should do? Anything he wanted to do?

Technically Praxus was out of his jurisdiction now. And even if he took the information to the Praxian Enforcers, Prowl owned them. Not that he had any plans to do such a thing. From everything he’d read and found out about the deceased Crystalspire, Swingline had categorically not been a good mech. Jazz might even go so far as to say that the mech had had it coming and deserved what he got.

At length Prowl spoke again.

“So, now you know. It’s up to you what you wish to do with that information.” He echoed Jazz’s thoughts. A small, amused hum buzzed from his vocalizer, “And yet somehow I feel strangely… unburdened.”

“It’s called ‘clearin’ th’ air’.” Jazz’s tone was just a shade too serious to be teasing, but it was close. “Speakin’ o’ clearin’ th’ air, ya feelin’ magnanimous enough t’ talk t’ me ‘bout why ya’ve got a reputation as th’ crime lord o’ Praxus?”

“Ah, yes. I suppose most bots see it that way. I deal in secrets. There are very few things that bots aren’t willing to give in return for keeping their private affairs from becoming public knowledge.”

Prowl gently cupped Jazz’s cheekridge and leaned their forehelms together. “...I have so many secrets, Jazz… but I want to trust you with them. I want to make this work.”

“An’ wha’ ‘bout Barricade?” Jazz brought up. “‘E’s th’ reason ya gave me for pushin’ me away.”

“I have a contact in Kaon from when I purchased the twins’s contracts. For the right price she agreed to keep an optic on things for me.”


Prowl chuckled weakly. “I am not idealistic enough to think that. I know you have a life in Polyhex and I wouldn’t even attempt to take that from you.” His voice gained in strength and conviction. “But I hope that you would perhaps find it in your spark to share some of your time with me. I know it will take effort to maintain a happy relationship, especially one across such distance, but I am willing to spend as much effort as necessary to see it succeed.”

Jazz felt the shell of hurt around his spark crack and the love he still felt for the mech poured out and into his EMF. His field washed out and pressed against Prowl’s like waves meeting a shore where he sensed a love just as deep echoed in the other mech’s field.

He looked deeply into Prowl’s optics and whispered, “I forgive ya.”

And he did. For the hurt, the lies. For Prowl’s sins.

He didn’t say anymore than that, but Prowl seemed to realize the enormity of those three simple words.

Then they were kissing again. Jazz didn’t realize they were moving until his back met the cushioned seat of the couch. Prowl covered his frame, mapping his markings with gentle digits, dermas and glossa.

So much for not being a romance novel. Jazz thought dazedly.
As they lay together on the couch, plating cooling, Prowl nuzzled Jazz’s audial.

Long breems of silence ticked by and then Prowl murmured, “Was that a ‘yes’ to my proposal?”

“Ya glitch.” The visored mech laid his helm on Prowl’s shoulder and whispered affectionately. “Tha’ was a ‘I missed ya more than anythin’, bu’ ya’re still an unmitigated aft so I’m thinkin’ ‘bout it’.”

“I see,” Prowl’s voice was fond and amused. His thumb brushed gently back and forth across Jazz’s chestplates. “I shall have to endeavor to convince you, then.”

“Ya’ll ‘ave t’ come visit me in Polyhex.” Jazz asserted with more confidence than he felt. “Ya an’ Blue an’ Smokescreen.”

“I look forward to seeing your home.” Prowl agreed.

Jazz continued, “Though ya’ll ‘ave t’ do some mighty impressive grovelin’ t’ get back int’ my carrier’s good graces.”

“Perhaps I will send in Bluestreak first to put in a good word for me.”

Jazz snorted inelegantly.

“Speakin’ o’ Blue, we should get back down t’ ‘is party.” Jazz checked his chronometer, they’d been away for a while, but not enough time to be overly suspicious about what they’d been getting up to. And, he remembered, multiple bots had seen them enter Prowl’s office. He wondered with some amusement how many audials were straining to try to get a single murmur from the empty office.

Prowl gave him one last squeeze before releasing him to get up. “Yes, you are correct, of course. I hope he can forgive my selfishness.”

“Ya jus’ gotta spend th’ rest o’ the evening makin’ it up t’ him.” Jazz said accepting Prowl’s servo to help him up. He quickly examined his finish, but the high-end sealant hadn’t even been smudged by their activities.

“Shall we make out way back to my office? While I would not mind about any rumors regarding the nature of our relationship that would erupt from our appearance from the upper rooms, I would rather keep suspicious glossas from waggling about hidden passages in my house.”

“Ya don’ care if they think we’re ‘facin’, bu’ ya don’ want ‘em t’ start lookin’ too hard fo’ secret doors?” Jazz translated.

“Just so. After all,” Prowl pulled him close again by the waist, purring against an audial horn, “we are “‘facing’” Prowl nuzzled him, amusement suddenly replaced by sincerity. “I have missed you,” he reiterated.

Jazz kissed Prowl gently. “I’m willin’ t’ try. Bu’ this is yar last chance, ya get me?”

“I understand. I promise I will not squander it.”

“Ya better not.” Jaz said half teasing- half warning.

They made their way back through the servant’s passages to Prowl’s office and back out into the world of socialites, shinax and power. The nobles around them would have had to be blind not to
notice their linked servos as they stepped through the crowd side-by-side. Bots parted and bowed to them. Jazz paid them little notice, more focused on getting back to Bluestreak.

When they entered the banquet hall, Bluestreak and Smokescreen were again seated on the dais. Bluestreak looked up as they approached. Surprise lit his features and then an almost unconscious, little hopeful smile unfurled on his dermas. Jazz returned it gently as they stepped onto the dais with the other two bots. They took the seats on either side of him.

Prowl leaned slightly towards his creation, speaking softly, “Please forgive my earlier absence. Jazz was quite cross with me for my behavior. I did not mean to make you feel isolated, Bluestreak.” His field brush lightly full of pride and love.

Bluestreak’s doorwings flicked up and down, happiness suffusing his EMF. “I’m glad you’re here, ‘Tor,” he murmured.

Jazz reached over and gave Bluestreak’s servo a quick squeeze. He ignored Smokescreen’s slightly smug field on his other side.

He knew it wouldn’t always be like this. There would still be tension; still be a million ways for all of it to crash and burn, but at that moment, Jazz felt the stirrings of contentment and hope for the future.

If nothing else, Jazz had hope.

Chapter End Notes

I FINALLY FINISHED.
There might be small snippets in this universe flushing out characters and side stories later.

Hope you liked it. :)

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