

## The Ascension

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# The Ascension

by [silberstreif](#)

## Summary

Prowl is the second heir of Praxus and a dutiful creation, but his spark beats for the endless wonders of statistics. Hence, barely out of younglinghood, he is attending the Academy of Statistics and Higher Mathematics as Black Dust. But then his brother, the prime heir, dies and everything starts to fall apart...

## Notes

Beta: Starfire201/ Skywinder (big thanks to her, for answering endless questions and betaing chapters even thrice because I keep changing them)

Also thanks to pjlover for keeping me motivated

The Ascension plays in the same universe as all Radish stories and is Prowl's past. The current timeline is:

- The Ascension
- The Medic: <http://archiveofourown.org/works/2822777>
- Jazz's past (not uploaded yet)
- The Celebration: <http://archiveofourown.org/works/2787491/chapters/6255983>
- Wooing a Grand Duke (not uploaded yet)

# Part One

## Chapter Notes

Picture was created by InMoNoChroMe.

[theparallelwall.tumblr.com/post/129000487652/requested-by-pjlover666-for-silberstreif-a-cover](http://theparallelwall.tumblr.com/post/129000487652/requested-by-pjlover666-for-silberstreif-a-cover) Thank you to pjlover666 for requesting it and Inomochrome for drawing it! :D

## Radishes

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## The Ascension



The grey hood of the cloak hung deep over his face, casting it into shadows. With every step, he swayed together with the high ringing sound of the bells that were fastened to the white cloaks of the priests and the stretcher they carried. The song of sorrows they procession sung mixed in his audios with the quite sobs of his brother, who walked between his creators. He was too young to be here, Prowl thought, but then he himself felt too young this orn.

The funeral procession was a long one, and became longer as the citizens that lined the way joined the procession once the priests and the ruling family had walked past them. Many were carrying small flames in honor of their God and Lord, some even crying. On this black orn, Praxus was mourning the demise of its beloved heir, Prince Brazen.

Prowl's optics never left the stretcher in front of him. The body of Brazen was grey, but besides that his brother could've only been sleeping... the surgeons had really done a wonderful job, he knew. But he didn't find the space in his spark to be thankful. Maybe later, but now he only felt all-encompassing sorrow.

A hand touched his arm gently, and he looked over to his carrier. Grand Duke Black Haze's tears were openly flowing beneath the hood of his own grey, plain cloak, still he looked concerned for his second creation. "Prowl? How are you?" he whispered softly.

"I'm..." Fine. Only he wasn't, and it wasn't even expected of him to be. Because his older brother was dead. "I'm managing."

The concern in the Grand Duke's optics didn't waver, but they both knew that this wasn't the time or place to talk about such things. "We'll arrive soon at the temple. Have you prepared your words?"

Prowl's spark clenched, but a quick glance to the streets around them confirmed that his carrier was right. How had he missed that? "I have," he answered.

The Grand Duke nodded and fell quiet again. At his side, Grand Duke Sparkshimmer bend down and scooped Smokescreen up. The little one was clearly already exhausted, more so in spark than in frame. With a whimper, Smokescreen buried his head in his carrier's cloak and began to cry without restraint. Grand Duke Sparkshimmer kissed his helmet, but for once was unable to whisper soothing words.

Prowl turned to the stretcher again. Even in death, his brother looked like a prince. He had inherited Sparkshimmer's and the Prime line's powerful build, but accentuated it with the sweeping doorwings the Praxian frames were famous for. An open and friendly personality and a genuine smile had done the rest to make all of Praxus fall in love with him.

How was Prowl supposed to replace him as an heir? He knew that others saw as the uncaring, bookish prince and truthfully it wasn't far from the truth. He was an introvert, more interested in formulas than mechs that rarely smiled and had even less friends. Worse, even though he had reached maturity not even a vorn ago, he had continued to do his best to vanish from the public's searching optic. Brazen had even supported his decision, saying that a good education was important and that it was great he did so well. That Prowl could help him rule some orn in the future and ...

A sob escaped his throat. Brazen was dead and all those dreams too.

They had crossed the last streets and had now entered the park that surrounded the temple. Praxian crystals towered left and right of the path, all of them glowing a soft, ethereal white. As more and more of the procession entered the park, the crystals picked up the song of mourning, starting to vibrate with both high and low notes. A hum became audible, joining the song until it transformed into the Grey Hymn. Around them the crystals themselves shined brighter, their glow becoming stronger until it was nearly blinding.

Behind them whispers and chatters of awe started, yet the song never stopped. An old Praxian legend said that the crystals were the expression of Primus's sorrow and that if a good mech died, their light would lead them to the God himself. If it was true, Primus was crying alongside with them today.

The path through the park was winding and long, but to Prowl it felt too short. Far too soon the temple was visible above the crystals, its spires and towers built around the biggest crystal of Praxus – the One-all. For a moment even Prowl could only stare in awe as the One-all started to light up, until a column of pure whiteness cut through the sky into the heavens beyond.

Brazen's way to Primus would be an easy one, not that his wonderful brother deserved anything less. Absently, he noticed that he was crying again, even though he hadn't wanted to on this procession. He wasn't the only one. Barely any optic was dry and even the priests before him had a look of reverence on their faces.

The temple was an old, massive building with needle-like spires, four plain watchtowers and few of the elaborate decorations that new buildings had. The only exception were the richly detailed statues, each depicting one of the legendary Thirteen, standing in a circle around the temple as symbols of protection and strength. There were no windows breaking up the high grey walls. As a youngling, Prowl had learned that the temple had in wilder and more dangerous times once doubled as a fortress. Seeing it today left no doubt that it was as capable of doing so in the future as well.

Now, the temple's heavy iron gate stood wide open, easily five times as tall as the tallest mech Prowl had met and just as wide. Their procession needed all this space and maybe a little more as they continued inside. The bells and their steps echoed in the hall they had entered. Its build reflected the outside: sober stone walls, few decorations, and high above them hung a circle of Primus wrought from the purest and most expensive metals Cybertron offered.

The priests didn't stop, marching straight towards a second gate that was the twin of the first one. It was closed and the procession halted in front of it. The high priest, a thin, tall mech carrying a silver staff knocked with it at the iron gate. A dull sound washed through the hall, vibrating through Prowl's armor, and behind them the singing stopped. Silence descended, as he knocked again, thirteen times in all. Then he raised his voice:

"Let us in! We're accompanying Brazen, Prince of Praxus, Prime heir to throne of Praxus, beloved member of the House of Praxus and of the House of Prime, so that he will be smelted with all honors that he deserves and find his way to Primus! So again I say, let us in!"

Even though logically Prowl knew that there was no chance they wouldn't let Brazen in, old stories of Rejected fluttered through his processor as the voice echoed through the hall. A sparkbeat, then two, and finally the heavy doors opened.

The procession continued down a hallway and finally entered the center of the temple, the square. In its middle the One-all was throned, sending its blazing light to the sky. Before it was a dark hole, the smelter and last stop of every Praxian's life. It radiated such a heat, that the resulting wind billowed their cloaks away, revealing their paintjobs. Prowl hastily caught his cloak again and pulled it closer. While his black and white colors were no secret by any means, a too close scrutiny would reveal that they were less than the usual standard for a mech of his rank. But he hadn't wanted to show up in his green paintjob he wore as the plain, intelligent student at the academy. He treasured the small freedoms his secret life had brought him.

The priests carried Brazen to the smelter, while Prowl's family went to the honor stands just before it. Behind them other mechs followed, all of them hidden by the same grey cloaks. They were other nobles, but also bodyguards. They all had come, Prowl knew, and it felt right.

"Today, we have all come together," began the High Priest, once all had found a place to stand in. The ceremony was old, the words even more ancient. Prowl's thoughts wandered, listening but not really noticing the words. When the Grand Dukes stood up and walked to the front to deliver their parting words, he quietly began crying again, despite knowing full well that he was next in line.

And then he was already standing there, looking at a sea of cloaks, of whom he knew many were judging him. Trembling, wishing for nothing more than to be able to mourn in quiet and peace, he recited his learned words:

"Brazen was a good brother, the best a mech could wish for. He supported me when I doubted, he brought me a smile when I was tired, he helped me to see my own path and beyond." His voice was wavering, he knew, but it took all his strength to simply continue. "Though I was created just when he reached maturity, he never let this be any distance between us. When I was small, he played with me in the mud, when I grew he brought me swords and books." He had appreciated the books a lot more than the weapons. Though as the second heir it was his traditional role to be the General of the Army, so his family had insisted that he at least knew how to swing a sword and their traditional weapon, a lance. "He was always by my side when I needed him and the mech I looked up to most. My brother, I love you. I will miss you now and beyond time."

He was crying again when he joined his family. Great-uncle Vapor, an imposing old Praxian and brother to the previous Grand Duke, had put an arm around Lord Black Haze, offering strength and comfort. Despite living at the other end of the state of Praxus, all of Vapor's family had come. His bondmate, their three creations and even their grandcreation. This orn, every member of House Praxus was mourning.

One of the other nobles whispered "Good speech" towards him. Surprised he looked up and recognized the red and blue plating of one of the few mechs he dared to call friends.

"Orion," he greeted quietly, glad to see him.

The older mech gave him a weak smile, the deep sorrow clear in his face, then walked past Prowl and out to the stage. Representing the Prime, their absolute ruler, and his line, Orion's speech mentioned duty and Cybertron a lot more, despite Prowl's knowledge that Orion was mourning his best friend. Brazen and Orion had been close in age, and close in position as the prime heir to Praxus and the prime heir to Prime himself. Not to mention that Grand Duke Sparkshimmer was the cousin of Sentinel Prime. When their playdates as sparklings had worked out, the two mechs had been educated together in Praxus. In the sparkling games with Brazen, Orion had been a constant member, laughing and fighting as one of them.

After the speeches, the priests began to sing the holy rite of passing as the grey frame was lowered into the red-hot smelter. Prowl couldn't stop his sobs now, if his spark depended upon it. Black Haze hugged him from behind, offering strength and warmth. For one vorn, the body of his brother would remain in there, melting until the protoform had burned to nothing. The metal left by the process would then be offered to his family.

The ceremony was over. Quietly, Prowl followed his family outside, surrounded by silent, imposing guards, that created a moving wall to keep journalists away. In front of the temple a carriage already awaited them, towed by four truckformers of the guard, to transport them back to the palace as fast as possible.

"Where is Orion?" Prowl asked his sire, when he saw the other noble nowhere around.

"He takes a later carriage," answered Shimmerspark quietly, and put a servo at the back of Prowl, moving him along. "Don't worry."

He nodded mutely, entering the carriage, only too aware of the thousands of optics on him. Inside, he sank back into the cushions, the tension escaping him. Brazen would have taken the time to talk to the citizens, despite his own emotional pain. Brazen would have looked regal during the ceremony and not like a youngling in too big a frame. Not like Prowl.

"He – He is not in pain anymore, right?" asked Smokescreen as the carriage began to move. "I mean..."

"Shh, no," Grand Duke Shimmerspark assured their youngest creation, while his face portrayed nothing but loss. "He's not in pain anymore. Bra-" his voice broke at the designation, but he continued on, "Brazen is now with Primus and at peace."

No creators should have to bury their creations, Prowl suddenly thought. Even stoic Black Haze, his carrier, looked exhausted and older than ever. His creators were maybe suffering the most of them all.

Smokescreen, still clinging to Shimmerspark, his carrier, nodded. "Good..."

Was it? Prowl questioned internally. For an entire vorn the family had hoped Brazen could survive his accident. The medics had fought and they had provided the best care possible, but after only an orn Brazen had lost his fight. The injuries had been too gruesome and painful.

"He's now in the Well, little one," said Black Haze, caressing Smokescreen's little doorwings. "Maybe a bit lonely without his brothers, but surrounded by friends."

"I can't visit him..." Smokescreen whispered.

Shimmerspark kissed his helmet. "Not for a long time, Smoky."

Prowl looked away and out of the small window. The citizens were walking home on foot, a few of the richer ones had an altmode and could drive. The palace at the center of the city was a sight to behold. It was a statement of power and might, and as big as richly decorated. Above all flew the blue and gold flag of Praxus.

"Prowl?" Black Haze's tired optics rested on him. "You need to come into my office tomorrow."

It was an order. His creators, despite their status, rarely ordered him or his siblings – sibling – around. Not at least, when it wasn't important. He nodded, "As you wish."

Shimmerspark looked up. "Orion might want to visit you later."

"He's welcome to." More than that, Prowl really could need the distraction of a friend right now. "And you, my Lord creators?"

"We will see after Smokescreen, and stay in our own chambers," answered Shimmerspark.

Black Haze nodded in agreement and glanced at his youngest creation, who seemed to have fallen into a fitful recharge. "If you want to join us, we would be glad to have you."

"I know." Because he was now an adult, he had his own quarters away from his creator's and Smokescreen's room. He had been overjoyed to finally have them, but since his brother's death two orns ago, they felt lonely.

Still, when they entered the palace, he didn't follow the rest of his family, but went to his own apartment. It was spacious, and full with shelves of datapads and various furniture that just invited a mech to sit down and read. In front of a window leading to the courtyard stood his desk, and on the other side of the room was a small fireplace with armchairs for the rare occasions he had a guest in his chambers. A nearly hidden door led to his berthroom.

For a long moment, he contemplated simply falling into his berth and bidding the world good-bye, but the hope of Orion coming over let him seek out the reading material. The largest part of the datapads were about statistics, higher mathematics and physics. But mostly statistics. He was a student at the Academy of Statistics and Higher Mathematics after all, secretly or not.

He didn't have to wait for long until someone knocked. "It's me. Orion."

"Come in, your Highness." Relieved he put his datapad aside, not able to remember if he had been reading about analysis or a theorem, and stood up as his friend came in. "Some energon?"



"I have taken the liberty to have ordered a servant to bring us some." Orion tried a smile, failing miserably. "The usual. A coppery one for me and an acidic one for you."

"Thank you." Prowl sat down again and Orion copied him in the other armchair. "How are you doing?"

Orion sighed. "Same as you, I guess. Trying to continue." He looked away. "My Lord creator and carrier, Sentinel Prime, is sending his apologies that he couldn't be here today."

"Really?" It was rare that a Prime could leave Iacon. He was a ruler, but also the guardian of Cybertron's flame and as such it was frowned upon when he left the city too often. "I... I'm sure that he would've come, if he could."

"Maybe." Orion sounded less sure, but then he always had been a bit of a rebel. Like Brazen, really.

"I'm sure," said Prowl. "Lord Prime loved Brazen."

"Yes, he did." There was absolute certainty in Orion's words. "When he wasn't irritated beyond reason. He wanted the two of us to bond, you know?"

"You ar- were compatible?" Prowl hadn't known that.

"Quite so. 84 points." Orion sighed, blue optics looking somewhere Prowl couldn't follow. "But we didn't want to... commit to anything. We were still so young and wanted to wait, until we had to have heirs." There was nothing but regret in these words. "Now... I- I miss him, Prowl. I thought we had time!"

"I miss him, too," he answered quietly. It would've been a huge power shift if the Grand Duke of Praxus had bonded to the Prime, but it also would've made both their reigns much easier. No wonder Brazen had never really actively searched for a bondmate, when he had already the Prime Prince willing and compatible!

Orion had both hands in front of his face now, crying quietly. A servant knocked, but Prowl stopped him at the door, trying to spare the Prime heir's dignity.

"Here," he said, giving Orion the warm energon cube. "It's okay to cry. I- I've done nothing else since he passed." It still felt wrong to say that he died.

Gratefully, Orion took the cube. "Thank you."

It was a quiet evening that followed. Full of stories that contained Brazen, and the two mourning him. When it came to sleeping, Orion decided not to leave Prowl's chambers and took up half of the huge, soft berth. Prowl could have listed a hundred reasons why this was improper beyond words. If the gossip papers ever discovered this, they would have a field day. Yet Orion didn't seem to care at all, and truthfully Prowl didn't mind as well. As long as Orion was there, he was less lonely.

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The next orn, Black Haze sent a servant to invite Prowl to his office. Yellowstripe was already there, sitting at his desk, correcting some report. He was a small Praxian with a classic civilian frame, and nearly hidden sensor horns he inherited from a grandsire that had lived close to the Helex borders. As Prowl entered he gave the younger mech a warm smile. "Good morning, my prince. How are you?"

Prowl couldn't help but return the smile. Yellowstripe had raised him as much as the Grand Dukes had, and had always encouraged and supported his studies. "I'm coping. Do you know why carrier has called me?"

The smile abruptly vanished, and Yellowstripe put the stylus aside. "Yes, but it might be better if you let your carrier explain. It's... delicate."

Prowl's tanks felt cold. "More bad news?"

"I'm afraid so." Yellowstripe sighed. "It's a dark vorn for the House of Praxus."

Prowl only nodded as he sat down in the visitor's chair in the middle of the room. It was a spacious office, with two desks. The bigger one was nearly empty of datapads, but had an expensive green and gold lamp and belonged to Grand Duke Black Haze. Yellowstripe's desk was smaller and filled with datapads. Prowl could still remember a time when Grand Duke Shimmerspark had his own desk here. But an infamous argument that had destroyed half the furniture and had been in hindsight completely pointless had led to them deciding to divide matters of the state between them. From then on, Shimmerspark's office was in the second wing and he took care of all relations of the Praxian state with other states, while Black Haze cared about Praxus itself.

"How are your studies going?" asked Yellowstripe. "I've heard that some consider you having Talent in statistics."

He nearly blushed. Talents were rare, treasured, and only appeared among civilians. Nobles most often considered their status of being noble a Talent in itself. "It's just a rumor, nothing more."

"Really?" Yellowstripe leaned back, looking amused. "Quite some rumor then, to reach me. They still do not know you're a prince?"

"Most haven't even noticed I'm a noble," said Prowl proudly. "My disguise as Black Dust is working out very well."

"I'm glad to hear that. You were a bit doubtful..."

"Yes." He had been. To disguise himself as a poor noble had made him nervous. After all, what if he wasn't good enough? What if he couldn't fool anyone? But his concerns had proven unfounded. Instead, what Yellowstripe had always said – that he was good at statistics – had proven true. "I have managed to skip the lower levels at the academy by only taking the exams. I'm now in the senior class and a professor has mentioned that I might be able to claim the Master title in less than two vorns."

Yellowstripe looked astonished. "That's amazing."

"I'm working hard for it naturally, but I love it!" Prowl's doorwings lowered. "Of course, I do not know if my Lords and creators will let me return now."

Yellowstripe sighed. "I cannot answer that question either, my prince. Forgive me."

It was only moments later that Black Haze entered the office with heavy steps. If he had recharged at all, it wasn't visible and his black doorwings had not moved from their position of deepest mourning. "Good morning, my creation. Yellowstripe, I'm sorry to have to ask you to leave us alone for a moment."

"No problem, my Lord." The secretary bowed, then hurried out of the room.

Prowl frowned. There was no mech outside the family more trusted than Yellowstripe and the secretary had already confirmed that he knew what Black Haze wanted to talk about. The only possible reason to send Yellowstripe away was that the Grand Duke expected this conversation to go less than smoothly.

"I have just spoken with Orion," said Black Haze, while walking towards his desk and sitting down. "He is much better today."

Prowl nodded. "That's good to hear. We stayed the night together and Orion said Brazen and he had wanted to bond some orn..."

The older noble shrugged. "They were compatible and liked each other, but both showed precious few signs of real interest. Still..." He shook his helmet. "It's in the past. How are you doing?"

"Better as well. Orion has helped me a lot."

The Grand Duke scrutinized him, and whatever he saw must have supported Prowl's claim, because he nodded. "Good. Especially good, because the next few vorns will not be easy on you, or the House."

Prowl balled his hands. "You want me to take over Brazen's duties." He had known that it would come, yet all he could think about was the Academy, his other life he had built so carefully.

"Yes, you are now prime heir. Vapor will continue leading the army in place of a true second heir, until Smokescreen has reached his 200<sup>th</sup> vorn." Black Haze sighed deeply. "But it's worse than that."

Prowl blinked and looked up. "Worse?"

"Quite so." For a long moment, Black Haze struggled for words, then said: "There is no gentle way to tell you this, I suppose. Your brother, my beloved creation, didn't die in an accident." Prowl's optics widened. "The plant he visited did explode, and for the first orn we really thought it was an accident. But Enforcers at the site have found tampering and a remote control for a small explosive that started the chain reaction."

Prowl stared at his carrier as if he had just started speaking in a foreign language. What was he saying? He couldn't mean... "Brazen was murdered?" he whispered.

"Yes." Black Haze's sorrow was stark. "Someone wanted him dead and succeeded."

Prowl leaned back in his chair. "But... who? Why?" Everyone loved Brazen.

"We do not know yet. But many clues point towards a noble, maybe even a House, from the east of Praxus."

Anger sprang forth within Prowl's spark. "Someone betrayed us, and killed my brother?"

"Yes, but Prowl..." The Grand Duke tried to calm his upset creation down.

He shook his head, not willing to listen. "What are you planning to do when you have found them?"

"Your sire and I don't know yet," admitted the Grand Duke.

"They have to be punished!" he exclaimed and jumped up. "We have to do something!"

"No we don't."

"Yes, we do! If it's a noble, we hunt him. If it's a House, we have to take the army...!"

"Prowl. Sit down," ordered his carrier sharply. The voice left no room for arguments. Prowl obeyed quietly, still fuming inside. "I know we raised you as the next general of our armies, but there are other solutions besides violence."

"Other solutions? They killed Brazen!"

"Yes, they did." He sounded tired. "But we're rulers. That means not behaving like vengeance fueled killers. We have to look at the big picture and consider all angles before acting. And war always means that the civilians will suffer. That everyone will suffer. Can't you see that?"

"But with this act, they're traitors." He had studied the laws, he knew he was right.

"Maybe. Or it's a lone madmech. We know nothing yet."

The argument of his carrier was true as well. Prowl bit his denta, and tried to think about it all logically. "Even then, if this gets out they will think our House weak, if we do nothing."

"Prowl..." The Grand Duke had walked around his desk and now petted Prowl's trembling doorwings. "You're still so young that you can't see the possible damage of acting rashly."

"But doing nothing!"

"We will investigate and bring the culprits to justice," assured the Grand Duke. "Yet now is a vorn of mourning and it clouds our thoughts. No blade swung in sorrow can be just."

"Quoting Prima's scripture, my Lord?" Prowl wanted to argue more, but he knew when his creators had made up their mind. "I suppose I just don't want them out there longer than necessary."

"We feel the same," Black Haze said with an undercurrent of dark anger, doorwings twitching at his back. "But I do not want to punish the wrong mechs, you understand?" He looked Prowl in the optics.

"Yes, my Lord." He understood. But his training said differently.

Black Haze nodded. "I'm proud of you, Prowl. Never doubt that. There will be a time for your skills as well." Prowl doubted that. He was an average swordsmech and a good statistician. When did a ruler need such skills? But Black Haze carried on: "To other matters then. After the vorn of mourning, you will be officially inaugurated as our prime heir."

"...I know." It was not a thought he was relishing.

Black Haze gave his creation a sad look. "I'm sorry to say that this means you have to leave the Academy after this vorn. The prime heir has too many duties to become a scholar."

"Brazen managed to have free time anyway," Prowl pointed out, only to have his spark clench with a sudden avalanche of memories. To see his creator flinch at the name only made it worse.

"He also called his free time public relations." The Grand Duke gave him a broken smile. "And he often sent us or even you reports when he was short on time."

That much was true. "He was quite good with public relations," muttered Prowl. It was an understatement. The public had loved Brazen and at best ignored Prowl.

"You will win them over, too Prowl. You have a good spark and a bright mind. They'll love you."

"I hope so." He just doubted it.

"I know it. Until then..." The Grand Duke vanished and for a moment Black Haze was only Prowl's carrier. "Until then just be careful, yes?"

"I always am."

"Prowl."

He looked away. "I promise, carrier. They will not get me."

~

Despite Prowl's promise to be careful, his creators doubled his security detail. While he returned to the Academy he was acutely aware that he was not only followed by the usual bodyguards but by half a platoon that would be settling in everywhere he frequented.

Feeling more than a bit angry, but knowing that it was necessary and that he really had no choice besides returning home, he listened to the commander of the guards, a massive mech with shining red armor, explaining the security measures, emergency plans and where who was stationed.

Inside the carriage, Captain Quickstrike had placed a map between them and pointed now to the meal room. "And here we have managed to insert one of our own as a kitchen helper. He will take care that none of your food is poisoned, my prince. Still, we would prefer if you always show up at exactly the 12<sup>th</sup> joor to get your energon. Else, we might not be able to guarantee which one you will receive."

He nodded. Another restriction, but this one wasn't so bad. "That should be no problem."

"Good," commented Quickstrike and moved on to another part of the academy, the dorms. Prowl lived in a standard single dorm under the pretense of a scholarship. "Your apartment has already the highest security measures. Still, I have to ask, do you wish to leave the dorms and live outside the Academy?"

"Would that be safer?"

The warframe shook his head. "While the many students in close proximity to you are a security problem, we do know who belongs there. An apartment outside Academy grounds means travelling through the city, which in itself is a risk at least as high."

"Then I wish to remain in the dorms." At least this would not change. "Anything else new?"

"We added several undercover mechs among the student body. They will not bother you as long as nothing happens." Quickstrike showed him the roof of the building. "Also, we have cleared this as an emergency entry point. If you're attacked and can't get to the entrance, the back entrance or the gardens, you can try to make a run for the roof."

Prowl leaned closer as he examined the roof. It was a small place, never intended to be a landing point. In fact, he thought, it had never really been intended for anything. "I do not think a shuttleformer can land there," he pointed out quietly.

"They can't." The Captain looked grim. "But we can get you from the roof with ladders."

It would be a dangerous maneuver, Prowl realized. The winds were strong, but they could be easily shot down from nearly everywhere, especially when the shuttleformer was forced to remain a stationary target. He couldn't even imagine how much would have to go wrong for this to be the best option. But he said nothing. Better mechs than him had surely thought that through.

"What about the emergency contact?" he asked quietly.

Civilians and nobles did not have a commline installed. Too high was the danger for it to be hacked over it. But warframes with their much more aggressive firewalls and their work had collectively decided it to be an acceptable risk.

Quickstrike put a small box on the table. It had three buttons with the colors red, blue and green. "If you push red, it means you're being threatened and need help immediately. Blue that you have noticed something that makes you think that danger might be coming. Green tells us you're safe."

Prowl took the little box in hand. It was kept simple and through that nearly non-hackable and non-detectable. "Why do I need a green button?"

"We would like if you press the green button every joor so that we know you're still alright."

He sighed. "Of course."

"Only outside your apartment, my prince." Quickstrike managed to look apologetic. "If you fail to give us a green-signal, an agent will get into contact with you and confirm your status directly."

"You mean, he will ask me if I'm alright." In front of the other students too, probably. If he forgot a few too many times, he wouldn't be able to keep his cover as a normal student.

"Correct. My prince, do you have any further questions?" The warframe leaned back.

"No. Thank you, Quickstrike." Prowl rubbed his chevron tiredly. "How did my brother manage his public life with this much security?"

Quickstrike's shoulders slumped. "He... was a lot more careless and less understanding than you. Of course, we also had no reason to believe anyone was targeting him."

Typical Brazen. He had never believed that anyone could mean him serious harm and for such a long time reality had backed his perception up. Until this vorn. Now he was dead and Prowl had to take over being the prime heir, only he had never been meant to hold that position. It hurt to know that Brazen wasn't there anymore.

Another thought occurred to him.

"Have my Lords and creators sent a teacher along for my new duties?"

"No, my prince. As I know, additional training is planned for the time after your inauguration."

Maybe it was for the best. The vorn would be bad enough with him trying to finish his schooling in half the time it took most to do it. He grimaced. To add in-depth knowledge about the economy and taxes and Primus knows what, would make his plan near impossible. Brazen wouldn't want him to forget about his dream just because he died, would he?

No, not Brazen.

He straightened. "Quickstrike, I want to finish my studies and become a Master of Statistics. It seems I only have one vorn left to reach that goal, but I will try my best. As such, I will trust you and your mechs with my security." My life and spark. "If you need something, do not hesitate to tell me."

Quickstrike looked utterly surprised for a moment, then leaned forward in a light bow. "As you command, my prince."



# Part Two

## Chapter Summary

Prowl returns to the Academy and meets Flipper...

## Chapter Notes

Beta: Starfire201

It took a long time, but finally here is the second chapter. :) Good news too, I am nearly finished writing Ascension and it is quite a bit longer than I expected. So instead of 5 chapters, I will probably be 8-9 chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

## The Ascension

-

### Part 2

*To the Marquess of Xiphos*

*Dear Lord Vapor,*

*Concerning recent events, you are to continue as the acting second heir until the orn Prince Smokescreen reaches maturity. As such you will also continue to be the Field marshal of the army and the noble leader of the warframe population. Such has been decreed by our Lords.*

*It is fortunate indeed, that Prince Prowl hasn't had taken over his duties as a second heir in their full extent due to his additional studies of warframe culture. As a result this change should not unsettle the warframe population too much. Still, both Lords express their willingness to helping any way, should problems occur, especially concerning the Warlords.*

*Yours sincerely*

*Yellowstripe*

*Secretary of State, Praxis*

~

The Academy for Higher Mathematics and Statistics was still within the Dukedom of Praxus, but not located in the capital. The Talent-blessed genius Fermat founded the academy four generations ago as a place of thinking and learning. Since then, it has produced some of the planet's best mathematicians and could only call the Altihex University of Applied Mathematics its rival.

Prowl was proud that he had been accepted here. He had applied with his real certificates, but had changed everything that hinted at his identity of a Prince of Praxus. As such, he was called Black Dust here, a homage to his own sire. Luckily, many in his generation were called Black or Spark something to honor the Grand Dukes.

A small part of him had wished that the academy had changed. After all, his brother had died, their prime prince had greyed, shouldn't they mourn as everyone in Praxus did? But no, the mechs were walking around on the campus as always, some smiling, some laughing, and some simply hurrying along. He sighed and looked back to the street, but as Quickstrike had promised, he couldn't see any guards.

Well, time to become a normal mech again, he thought and entered the campus. No one greeted him as he walked past the fountain to the building. It had been built as a temple of higher learning, and that was pretty much what it looked like. The doors were big and heavy, and inside the first thing that welcomed him was a big hall with a white marble floor, statues of famous scientists and mathematicians and a high ceiling that glittered with gold patterns. Many of the students from poorer backgrounds couldn't seem to get enough of this hall. Prowl envied them a bit for that. The first time he had walked in his only thought was that the marble floor would be pit to clean when it rained.

He checked the news board with the news, then walked on taking many turns. The further he moved, the more the hallways became practical and simplistic. He crossed a small square and finally reached his own dorm. It was newer than the rest of the academy, something Prowl didn't mind at all. He had heard some horror stories from the oldest dorm and that had ended any appetite to move.

His steps echoed in the quiet of the dorm hallways. Either they were learning, recharging or in a lecture. Only in the evenings could it get loud, especially when someone was celebrating a significant date.

His room was directly under the roof. Everything here looked like the floors beneath, and even when he touched his door he couldn't make out a difference. His invisible protectors were good, indeed. A simple cardscan opened the door (as well as a visible confirmation through a hidden camera and a body signature scan that tickled gently) and he entered.

As always, the stark difference between the simplistic dorm room and the opulent palace in Praxus was jarring for a moment. There was a datapad shelf, a big desk, a small closet, a berth, and nothing else. No golden decorations, no giant statues, nothing.

With a wing flutter, he found himself relaxing, closing the door, walking to the berth and falling down.

He was home.

The next morning, he went to take his ration in the dorm hall. The energon cubes were simple, but warm and came in seven flavors. As main dish this orn they had tyttrium pearls swimming in boiling quicksilver. Still feeling the loss of appetite since the funeral, he only took a copper cube in servo and lost no time walking to his first lecture. But as he walked past one table, a purple-blue arm blocked his way. The mech it belonged to gave him a big grin.

"Hey, Black Dust, where've you been? Don't tell me you used the National Orns of Mourning for studying."

Prowl fought the urge to growl back. As if he would study during the funeral of his brother! "No, I was in Praxus and attended the funeral with my family."

"Really?" Flipper raised an optic ridge. "Well, guess you are a noble after all."

Prowl noticed the many empty chairs around Flipper. The mech had repulsed many with his direct behavior and the ability to always speak exactly the one truth the other mech didn't want to hear. However, Flipper was also a certified Talent with everything that included numbers and was in the process of dedicating himself to research. Friends were dangerous, Prowl knew that. Still, he liked Flipper and so he sat down against his better judgement.

"You stayed here?" the Praxian noble asked.

To his surprise, Flipper shook his head. "Nah, used the time to visit my family as well."

"Oh, how are they?" Prowl didn't know much about them, besides that they were really poor.

The other student grimaced, not bothering to hide the sadness in his optics. "Well, surviving."

What was he supposed to answer to that? Prowl looked down at the table, trying to find the right words. In the end, all he managed was an "I'm sorry"-response.

Flipper chuckled. "Mech, you really are too sweet." His finger touched Prowl's chevron and forced him to look up again. "Seriously, something within your noble coding must have gone wrong."

"You think so?" Prowl frowned.

"Yeah, you act as if there is no difference between a noble and a mech like me."

Prowl blinked. That was, he supposed, a bit unusual. But in the end, there was not that much difference between them to him. Not only was he the creation of Dukes, but the creation of Grand Dukes which meant he was a – if distant – part of the Prime House. When it came down to it, he was Noblesse du primus, and most everyone would always rank below him. Not that he had ever much cared about such things. Sometimes being the second heir had advantages.

He smiled. "A mech like you, Flipper, has more worth to Praxus than most nobles studying here. You are talented and hardworking, that is what counts."

"Wish that were the truth, Dust." Flipper grinned sharply. "The world would look different then."

"Probably," agreed Prowl quietly. Would his House still rule in such a world? "How is your dissertation going?"

"Slow, but it comes around. Say, shouldn't you be going to your lecture? I think it starts in two breems."

Prowl checked his chronometer and indeed, Flipper was right. "Thank you." He hastily stood up. "It would be nice to meet again soon, if you have the time and inclination."

Flipper folded his hand over his breast plates. "Noble and always so polite too. A dream of a mech!"

Heat flowed into his face. "Flipper!"

"Okay, okay. Until dinner?"

"Until then," nodded Prowl and hurried away.

Unseen behind him at the table, Flipper gave the noble a thoughtful look.

The whole orn, wherever Prowl walked the people would still talk about the funeral of Brazen and how it might impact Praxus politics, or simply the beauty of the funeral. Prowl kept his audials ready for any mention of himself, but there was only the expectation that a former second heir would surely press for retaliation, even a reserved one like Prowl.

At midorn the dean asked for a joor of silence in memory of the deceased prime prince. Prowl tried hard to look as detached of true sorrow as the rest, yet he could only hope to have wiped the tears away fast enough.

Besides that incident he settled in well-enough and three deca-orns later he had only forgotten once to push the green button. But the agent sent had been as discreet as possible, giving Prowl a datapad back with a short 'thank you' and 'how are you'. If the professors wondered at his new dedication to learn as much as he could, they never said a thing.

Still, his new workload was heavy and he found himself in his room more often than not, studying until late into the night. When someone knocked loudly on the door one evening, he ignored it at first, so deeply engrossed was he within a text about probabilities on the molecular plane.

"Black Dust? It's me, Flipper. You here?" Again the sound of knocks.

Prowl turned to the door. Should he open it? Flipper hadn't ever visited him before, but then, they were acquaintances and discussed some theory on more orn than not. It felt wrong to pretend to not be here, wrong and honorless.

"I am coming!" he called out and looked towards his device. His guards probably already knew about his visitor. No need to press the blue button. He hurried to the door and opened it. "Good evening, Flipper."

The other student was clearly agitated. His slender armor was puffed up and showing more gaps than any warframe would have ever allowed. Especially the wide gap between Flipper's very small doorwings and the joint made Prowl wince within his thoughts, even though he knew that this was unavoidable with the thin plating of a poor commoners frame.

Flipper gave him a tight smile. "Evening, Dust. Can I come in?"

Prowl hesitated, but then nodded and stepped aside.

The other student looked around in the bare room with obvious interest. "Is it alright if I sit on your berth?"

Prowl suppressed his reflex of saying 'no'. He only had a single chair after all. "Of course, please take a seat. May I offer you something to drink?"

Flipper blinked in surprise. "You have energon here?"

"Yes, I study in here a lot." Not to mention that his guards preferred that he went as rarely to the meal room as possible. "But it is only plain midgrade."

"Midgrade is more than fine, really. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"No more than usual," Prowl tried to assure him, while opening the storage. "I am currently reading Farcry's theory on molecular possibilities. A break might not be the worst thing."

Flipper allowed himself a small smile. "Farcry writes as if he wants a prize in boredom. But it's a good theory. Lacking in the secondary mathematical proof, maybe, and less probable than Ortrium's, yeah, but good." Flipper accepted the energon cube from Prowl. "Thanks."

"You are welcome. I have only reached the first proof so far, and this one seems logical." He took seat in his own chair, staring uncertainly at his not-quite-friend. Maybe he should ask, but his creators had always made clear that it was impolite to force his guests to speak about their concerns too fast.

"It is." The talented student took a small sip from the cube then sighed and stared into his cube. "Look, Dust... I'm guessing you wanna ask why I'm here. Don't look so surprised, you're no stranger after all and you're right. I wouldn't be here today if I had any other choice, but you're kind of my last hope."

"Last hope? Flipper, how could I help you?"

"You're a noble, right? And not just any noble."

Alarmed, he couldn't stop his doorwings from flipping upwards. "How..."

Flipper shrugged, not really daring to look at Prowl. "It wasn't that difficult, really. You never talk about your House, although normal nobles make sure at the first opportunity that you know it. I thought that maybe you're the sixth heir or something or you simply don't like your House or creators, but when I asked you did talk about them happily. Kinda easy to see that you love them and they you."

And this was why friends were dangerous. They knew things about you. Prowl looked at the small device with the buttons. But he couldn't convince himself that Flipper – especially one who looked so dejected – was any danger. "Any other mistakes?"

"Some. But nothing major." Flipper gave him a glance. "I'm not good with politics and I never wanted to expose you, so I never searched which second or third heir is missing and you're similar to. I... I thought you might tell me yourself."

Prowl took a moment to repeat the words in his processor. "Why do you not want to know more?"

"Seriously?" Flipper shook his head while chuckling. "Dense nobles, really. 'Cause you're my friend and you're the only student I really talk to! I want you to stay here for as long as possible."

His friend! Prowl fiercely wished he could give the same friendship back, for now his mistrust weighted stronger. He wanted to stay here too, with Flipper, with the professors and all the others. But Brazen was dead and Prowl's duties couldn't wait for long. Vapor wouldn't be able to or allowed to cover for a prime heir the way he had covered for a second heir since before Prowl's creation. He forced his emotions aside to focus on the most important thing said so far.

"You do not know from which I am House from?"

"Not really," admitted Flipper. "I have suspicions, sure, but nothing more. I only know it has to be a rich and powerful one."

"... Your assumption is correct," Prowl said drily. No sense denying it anymore. Flipper's suspicions were a lot better than most mechs proofs.

"Glad to know."

Prowl shuttered his optics and gathered his resolution. "So, you are planning to blackmail me into helping you?" He would pay, he knew. Against all morals, he would, if it wasn't anything too outrageous.

"What- no!" Flipper sounded truly scandalized and that brought more relief to the noble than the words themselves. "No, you're my friend, Dust, nothing changes that. If you say no, I'll go and I'll never tell anyone that you might be richer than all those other stuck-ups at the academy."

"Why are you here then?"

Flipper huffed, embarrassed, and crossed his arms protectively in front of his spark. "... I thought that you might be able to help my brother."

"Your brother." The word alone was enough to conjure a picture of Brazen within his processor.

"Yeah. Told you I've got several siblings." Flipper sighed, his winglets drooping. "Look, he's younger than me and foolish. He fell in love last vorn and now wants to bond."

Prowl's doorwings twitched with confusion. "A bit fast, but nothing bad there."

"Yes, plenty bad, because they never had a compatibility test!" Flipper threw his hands up in exasperation. "He thinks they're Primus-blessed, but the statistical possibility of that occurring is ridiculously small! I calculated it a dozen times. There's 62.3 percent chance that the moment their sparks touch, both will disintegrate!"

Of course Flipper had calculated it, instead of simply taking the number from the Medical Association's archives. He never trusted pre-calculated numbers and had several times already proven his paranoia correct.

"But why aren't they taking a test at the Medical Association?" Prowl asked. "Then he would know their probabilities and not the general ones for two random sparks."

Flipper gave him a scathing look. "Tests cost money, Dust. How should we pay for it?"

Ah, yes, there was that. "You might be able to the moment you aren't a student anymore."

"Might still be some time with my doctorate thesis," countered Flipper sarcastically, winglets fluttering in clear signs of stress. "And he made it clear that he wants to bond now."

"Now as in...?"

"In a decaorn. They are eve already planning the Celebration Ceremony afterwards and my family ain't objecting," Flipper explained. "My creators just said that waiting is senseless, because the chance that we have the money in a few vorns is ridiculous small."

Prowl sighed. "They're approving of the risk."

"Yeah. And the winning chance is just so small." Flipper rubbed his nose in an attempt to hide the tears gathering within his optics. "I read up on it, and they said that even if both sparks don't disintegrate that there can be damage. Sometimes so bad a mech has to be put down."

"I have heard of such cases," Prowl muttered. It was rare as most mechs were able to pay for the Medical Association tests, but even with their numbers, there was always a risk that something would go wrong. Once, he had been barely a youngling sitting on Sparkshimmer's knees, a 83 point compatibility went so wrong that their families appealed to his creators that both mechs be released from their agony through death. The Grand Dukes granted the request.

"Flipper, if I understand all this right, you want me to pay for the compatibility test?"

"No!" Flipper snapped, but then deflated. "I wanted to ask you to lend me the money. And I will repay it the moment I can."

That was a lot more benign than Prowl had expected. "Even though you could blackmail me into giving it?"

"You're my friend, Black Dust, so yes. But even if we were enemies, I'm not an idiot. You would only pay because you like the academy. Afterwards I would have a powerful enemy and I really like living." Flipper gave him a wobbling smile. "Hope that wasn't too blunt."

"Ah, no." Prowl returned the smile. "It's refreshing, sometimes. And I will help you. Just tell me the name of your brother and I will arrange the rest."

"His designation is Flip Up." At Prowl's rising optic brow, he added, "Yeah, I know, my creators aren't good with names."

"Do all your siblings possess such names?"

"Pretty much. Flipper, Flip Up, Downflip, Sideflip and Flippig." He grinned.

Prowl stared. "Primus."

Flipper left soon after and Prowl set Quickstrike on the problem. Barely a breem after waking up from recharge the next morning, Quickstrike brought him the numbers of how much this favor would cost – 892 credits. It was paltry, compared to Prowl's stipend. He knew that some nobles partied as much away in a single evening. And yet, Flipper's whole family hadn't been able to pay this. It felt wrong to make Flipper repay something that barely qualified as pocket change for him.

He tapped his lower lip with his stylus as he thought. "Quickstrike, how will we pay for this test so that no one can follow the money back to me?"

"The easiest solution would be to give the money directly to Flipper, my prince," answered the guard. "Why?"

"Because this amount is ridiculous. Yet a couple might die because of this!" He sighed. "It feels wrong."

"It is how it is, my prince."

Prowl glanced at the amount again. "How much is my stipend as a prince?"

"Currently, 15 million credits a vorn," answered Quickstrike quickly. "Or 1000 credits every orn."

"And how much do I use?"

"On average you use less than two million credits a vorn."



Not surprising, Prowl knew. He was on a scholarship officially, and the guards were paid through the Praxian household. He really only took money from his own coffers when he bought gifts for his siblings or decided to take a small journey. "The rest of the money is invested in a future trust fund, Yellowstripe said."

"Correct, my prince. The earned interest of that trust fund has been added to your stipend as well," Quickstrike explained. "May I ask what my prince is planning?"

"You can always ask, Quickstrike." Prowl smiled. "Contact Yellowstripe and ask him if an anonymous donor can set up a foundation for mechs like Flipper's family. I know it will probably not be a big one, but if we can help a few mechs every vorn, it is worth it."

"A good idea, my prince." Quickstrike bowed a bit lower than usual. "I will see it done."

~

*To the Grand Dukes of Praxus*

*Dear Black Haze, dear Sparkshimmer,*

*Rumors about Prince Brazen's death have reached my audios and concern me greatly. If even a small part of them is true, I fear for my nephew. Is Prince Prowl safe? Furthermore, I worry for you. Grief still blackens my spark, I can only imagine what you are going through.*

*Yours sincerely*

*Lord Vapor*

*Field Marshal of Praxus*

*Marques of Xiphos*

~

*To the Marques of Xiphos, Field marshal of the Praxian army*

*Dear Vapor,*

*The last orns have been an ordeal, yet Smokescreen has turned out to be our light and hope. Sadly, Prowl couldn't stay with us for much longer. He has already returned to Fortress Prien to prepare for his future duties as the prime heir and to grieve in the privacy the mountain fortress provides.*

*General-Lieutenant Warpath has sworn to provide for his safety. We can only pray that this is enough.*

*May Primus be with you in these trying times, Vapor. And be careful. The rumors you have heard are most likely true and you and yours might be targeted as well.*

*In deep sorrow,*

~

Quickstrike must have kept his word and worked quickly, because he was already waiting when Prowl stumbled back into his quarters from his last lecture. He blinked at the warframe, then chose to ignore him for an energon cube. After a few moments of quietly sipping the fuel, he sighed.

"I guess Yellowstripe said no?" There was no other reason he could discern, that Quickstrike was already here.

"There has been no word on the foundation matter yet, my prince. But our Lords and Masters, the Grand Dukes of Praxus, have expressed their wish to speak with you."

Prowl frowned. That couldn't be good. In all his time at the academy, they had only contacted him once before – to tell him of Brazen's injuries. "Do you know why?"

"I'm afraid I do not." Quickstrike sounded apologetic. "If it helps, my prince, it is my understanding that the matter is of a less serious nature than last time."

Prowl only nodded, not wanting to admit the small panic he had been feeling. "Even then, I should hurry. It is not meet to let the Grand Dukes wait."

Prowl left the campus like a normal student and walked down the street into the city. A few times he glanced around, trying to spot his invisible guards, but he remained unsuccessful. There were several different teams, he knew, but still their level of coordination left him impressed every time. Three streets further on, a plain worker's mech suddenly walked by his right and waved down a cab mech.

"Wanna share a ride with me, lad?" The mech turned and asked with a grin.

'Lad' had been the codeword, so Prowl nodded. "Only if it's going to the center."

"It does, straight down and to the right." The second code. The mech jumped in and held the door open. "Come on, there is plenty of space!"

Prowl climbed in with less vigor and immediately the doors fell shut with a heavy groan. Long training with guards and soldiers left Prowl with little doubt that this cab mech was clad in military grade armor.

The dirty worker mech had by now lost his grin and bowed. "Welcome, your Highness. The ride will last a joor, until we are sure that no one is following us."

A joor was several times longer than the last time he had followed this procedure to pick up a call, but Prowl only nodded. "Has there been anyone following me?"

The worker's mech pressed the tips of two fingers against his helmet and listened for an astrosecond. "None of the teams has noticed anything suspicious, your Highness."

At least something. Prowl pulled out a datapad out of his subspace and started reviewing his last classes.

A joor later the cab mech slowed down and announced: "We're here. I hope you have enjoyed the ride."

"I have, thank you," answered Prowl nearly automatically and put his scripts away. The guard mech had already jumped outside and now held the door open.

They had stopped directly in front of the entrance of a seemingly nondescript building, so much so that the cab was blocking it completely. Before Prowl had a chance to look around more, he was ushered inside. A small, plain office hall greeted him. Quickstrike was already waiting, and behind Prowl four of the biggest warframes he had ever seen fell in step.

"Prince Prowl, second heir of Praxus, welcome inside the headquarters of the Night Guard division," said Quickstrike formally. "Do you wish any refreshments first?"

"Thank you, Captain, but I wish to speak with the Grand Dukes first. Lead me to the communication room."

The communication room was a floor down, but they didn't meet a single mech. The room itself was a small conference room, with a table that looked like it could fit maybe six war frames. In the middle of it was a black sphere serving as the communication device.

"I'm setting the frequency. The holograms might be unstable or have other flaws due to the encryption. On behalf of the communication experts, I apologize for this."

Prowl shook his helmet. "Don't apologize." He looked up from the black sphere to Quickstrike. "Necessity trumps comfort. Tell this the technicians as well."

"I will, my prince," promised his guard. "I will now leave you, but remain in front of the door. If you need anything, just call me."

Prowl didn't answer as he stared again at the black sphere with a dry mouth. At his side, the door closed gently and he was alone. He didn't need to wait long before the faces of his two creators appeared over the table. Prowl hadn't even known how afraid he had been until he saw the gentle smiles on their faces.

"Grand Duke Sparkshimmer, Grand Duke Black Haze... I am glad to see you well."

"And we you, my creation," answered Lord Black Haze. "We miss you here."

Sparkshimmer at the right side nodded, then looked down and his face softened.

"Smokescreen, seems to want to say hello to you as well." He heaved the youngling into the view. "We have important things to speak about, Smokey, so you have to be quick."

"Yes, carrier!" Smokescreen nodded eagerly, already turning to his brother. Then he blinked in surprise. "Prowl! You look strange!"

The mere sight of his little brother lifted his mood immediately. He huffed in laughter. "I am in disguise, Smokey. After all, not everyone can know I am a prince, right?"

The youngling's doorwings twitched as he frowned. "But doesn't all that paint itch? When I painted myself white it itched. A lot. Hoist was not happy."

Sparkshimmer and Black Haze shared an amused glance. "Master medic Hoist had a right not to be happy, little one," said Lord Black Haze. "The paint you used was supposed to be for our walls, while what Prowl wears is not real paint but nanites."

"Nanites?" Smokescreen squinted. "It looks the same as paint."

"But it isn't." Prowl tried to not laugh. "Or I would itch all the time."

"Guess that makes sense..."

"Indeed, little one." Lord Sparkshimmer caressed Smokescreen's doorwings. "Now, our time is limited so say what you wanted to say."

"Oh, okay." Smokescreen sat straighter, doorwings high, obviously imitating all the serious adult mechs he knew. "Uhm, Prowl, it would be nice if you could send me a letter? Not often... just form time to time?" The youngling looked down. "Just so I know you are still there..."

"I will," Prowl quickly said, guilt stabbing his spark. He should have done so without the prompting. Of course, Smokescreen would worry about him now, after having experienced Brazen's death. "I promise."

"Thank you. I know you are doing really important things, somewhere secret that I cannot know, but ... I just want to hear from you." Smokescreen tried to smile, but it looked a bit subdued. "Hope you have fun there."

"I have. Very much so," assured Prowl. "I will see you at the end of the vorn."

"That's enough, Smokey," said Black Haze. "We have to talk about the other things now, before the time runs out."

"Oh" Smokescreen's doorwings went a bit down. "Bye." Then Lord Sparkshimmer and he had already disappeared from the view. The Grand Duke returned a moment later.

"He misses you greatly, Prowl. Not that this is a surprise, he adores you." Sparkshimmer smiled for a moment, then all warmth vanished from his face. "But as much as Smokescreen concerns us, he is not the reason for this call, I am afraid. There have been developments that have given us reason to fear the worst."

"The worst?" asked Prowl, having trouble to grasp what they meant.

"Yes." Lord Sparkshimmer's golden optics flared. "You're too young still to be troubled with such problems, Prowl, but you need to be aware nevertheless. Our investigations have turned up that the murder of your brother was not the act of a single mech, or even of a small group.

We suspect that our own nobles, sworn to serve and obey, have betrayed us!" The anger in the Lord's voice was tremendous, and Prowl found it echoed in his own spark. It was a heavy beat calling for justice. "Worse, we believe that their next target will be you, Prowl. They plan to destroy every heir of the House, so they can claim the spoils. It has turned out that at least one of Brazen's," a small sob, "friends is a traitor."

"Fire of my spark," whispered Lord Black Haze and leaned over to his bondmate, whose anger was turning into boundless sorrow. Their chevrons touched in an intimate gesture of comfort and love. Tears ran down on Lord Sparkshimmer's face. Prowl tried to find words to soothe their pain, but came up empty. Too much burned his own spark with the pain of the loss.

Black Haze drew away after a moment. "We do not have time to explain everything, I am afraid. The longer this connection exists, the more dangerous it is." He sighed. "Suffice to say, if they plan to kill you, then they need to know where you are. Thankfully, your second identity had been crafted very well, and we found no indication that the enemy has even an inkling you are not stationed in Fortress Prien."

Prowl's thoughts raced. "Does that mean you intend to let me stay here?"

"Yes," confirmed both Lords and Black Haze continued: "We had a guard take over your identity, make some minor public appearances inside the Fortress and do everything you would usually do as the former second heir who is trained to be taking over as the prime heir."

It was a logical decision. "How long?" asked Prowl.

"Until our House is safe again," answered his sire hotly.

Black Haze nodded. "We want to find the master behind the shadows and eliminate the evil by its roots. Acting too fast would only get innocents hurt, but we will act with force the moment proof arrives on my desk."

Prowl crossed his arms. "With force? You will call the army?"

"If necessary," answered his carrier. For a moment his hologram faded, but was then restored.

It was Lord Sparkshimmer who caught the intentions of Prowl first. "No, Prowl. Vapor will lead them in your place."

"I am trained for it!" Prowl growled. "As the second heir, I learned the arts of war long before I turned my sights towards the scholarly subjects!"

"And you are their target!" Lord Sparkshimmer snapped. "I refuse to lose another creation of mine to them. I refuse!"

Prowl blinked, then stared at the table. It was easy to think sometimes that it was Black Haze who was the more ferocious of his two creators, but Lord Sparkshimmer's emotions had

something unyielding to them that made most everyone back down. Prowl nodded, not able to look his sire in the optics: "Forgive me, I didn't mean to..."

"I know. I wished I could hug you and hide you away like Smokescreen," said his sire wistfully. Both their faces flickered as the connection failed for a moment, but the voice remained clear. "You're no youngling anymore, Prowl, but you will forever remain my sparkling."

"We are proud of you," added Black Haze quietly. "Trust us to take care of this and concentrate on your studies. Captain Quickstrike mentioned that you even might have made a friend."

Prowl looked up abruptly. "You know of Flipper?"

"Of course we do." Black Haze looked at his creation mischievously. "Who do you think approved of your foundation and tripled the starting capital?"

He stared at them in surprise. "You... approve?"

"It is a wonderful idea," praised Lord Black Haze. Suddenly the holograms were fading, becoming transparent and then nearly invisible. "I'm afraid we are out of time. Stay safe."

"Be careful, Sweetspark" said Lord Sparkshimmer. "Listen to Captain Quickstrike. You can trust him above everyone else."

"I will, creators. I miss you."

The connection ended. Prowl stared at the empty spot for a long while, trying to understand all that had been said. He suddenly missed them so much and wished he had stayed in Praxus with them, instead of insisting on returning. Here he had guards and datapads and ... Flipper. Was that enough to replace his family?

A knock on the door. "My prince?"

"I am coming." He stood up and walked out to his guards and back to his academy life, where he was nothing more than the simple, introverted Black Dust.

~

*To the Secretary of State, Praxus*

*Dear Yellowstripe,*

*The new expenses for Prince Prowl's foundation have further stretched the treasure. While the expenses are being greatly reduced with Prince Brazen's death, I would wish to caution Prince Prowl against following his footsteps.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Lord Shanix,*

*Treasurer of Praxus*

~

*To Lord Shanix, Treasurer of Praxus*

*Dear Lord Shanix,*

*While it is true that the new expenses are unusual for Prince Prowl, his Highness has proven to be prudent with his spending in the past. Prince Prowl has only put his own stipend and savings into the foundation, not the money of Praxus. It had been the Grand Duke's decision to triple the founding capital.*

*Though I do not share your worry about Prince Prowl, I am not blind to the overall state of the treasure. Please, take the new expenses for the foundation from my own account, number 8655. I can't think of a worthier goal than to ensure the future and happiness of so many Praxians.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Yellowstripe*

*Secretary of the State, Praxus*

~

Recharge came slowly to him this night, so he learned, and he only succumbed when exhaustion took over. Far too early in the morning, he was woken by heavy fists hammering away against his door. "Black Dust, open up! I know you are there!"

"Flipper...?" Barely able to activate his optics, he stumbled to the door and opened it. "In Primus's holy name, what happened?"

Flipper stared at him. "You were still recharging?"

He gritted his denta. "Yes. Come in." Prowl closed the door behind his friend. "Pray tell me, what has you upset so early?"

"My brother called. An organization called 'Praxian Foundation of Prince Prowl' has offered to cover the cost, because he had been chosen randomly."

Prowl had shuffled over to his shelf and too an enegex cube to wake up. "Is that not what you wanted?"

Flipper wrought his hands. "Yes, but... I thought you would lend me the money and not..." He looked away. "You didn't agree to any debt or favor or something?"

Prowl looked up from his cube. "What do you mean?"

"Look, Prince Prowl... he's the second heir of Praxus and not exactly the nicest mech, even I know that. Not that he can be with being second heir and warframe prince, and I guess it was the most inconspicuous way to help me without tracing it back to you... but Prince Prowl didn't force you into something, right?"

Prowl stared at him. "You are ... worried, that he is now capable of blackmailing me?"

"I suppose?" Flipper shrugged. "He's now prime heir and you probably know him personally, but ... why are you laughing?"

Prowl was indeed chuckling and trying to hide it behind his cube. "Nothing, my friend."

Flipper opened his mouth, then closed it. For a long moment the young genius just stood there, thinking, then suddenly his optics became wider. "Prince Prowl is supposed to be training in a secret location somewhere."

"Mmh," said Prowl and took a sip.

"He isn't... Right?"

"Well, a doppelganger is."

A shellshocked Flipper sat down on Prowl's berth. "You're... uhm, not angry?"

"For trying to protect me from a strange second prince I have never met?" asked Prowl amused. "No. Maybe a bit honored."

Flipper put his head into both hands. "I'm sorry that's just a bit much at the moment. My nerdy best friend is the second prince and prime heir of Praxus. Unbelievable. Do you have highgrade? I think I need some."

Prowl did not, but Flipper took a deep gulp of the enegex not really caring either way. Only then he dared to look again at his friend. "Is it Black Dust or Prowl, now?"

"Whatever you like more. But I would suggest using Black Dust outside of these rooms." Prowl smiled. "Besides that I have no real preference."

"I see..." Despite that the mech sounded a bit lost. "But how? On the news pics you look very different."

"Some minor cosmetics and color changes done by experts for the maximum effect," admitted Prowl. "Besides that, most photos of me are already quite old, or show only parts of my face. I was only supposed to go public after finishing my education here."

"Was?"

"Brazen's... death has changed many things," said Prowl quietly, the pain clear in every word.

The other mech looked contrite, his small unarmored doorwings growing still. "Oh, of course. I'm so sorry, Du- Prowl."



Prowl only acknowledged it with a nod. "My time here grows short. I do not know when I will be called upon and forced to leave."

"Is that why you've been studying so much in these last several deca-orns?"

"Yes."

"Guess it's not easy to be a Prince..." Flipper smiled nervously. "Uhm, but I don't understand, shouldn't you have guards or something?"

"I have." Prowl gave him a mischievous glance. "They are just very, very good at blending in."

"That's actually quite awesome. I probably walked past them a dozen times!"

"Probably more. Especially as I know for a fact that they have trailed you at least once."

Flipper looked awestruck. Prowl couldn't help but chuckle, feeling more relaxed than in a long time. Certainly since the funeral. It felt good to have a friend.

~

*To my favorite brother*

*Dear Smokescreen,*

*I am well and studying hard here. I think I might have made a friend, rare as that is for me. He might not even care that I am now the prime heir, can you believe it? I can't quite yet, I remain wary, but I hope that he is as true as he seems to be.*

*I hope you are well. Don't annoy your teachers too much. You might be a prince and great with card tricks, but they are still your teachers and not your unwilling audience. If you practice, though, I would love to see those tricks when I am home again.*

*I miss you and our creators and only the knowledge that I will see you all again soon keeps me here.*

*With all my love,*

*Prowl*

~

TBC

As always, hints for mistakes, errors are welcomed. ^ \_ ^

# Part Three

## Chapter Summary

Prowl is enjoying his time at the academy. Yet the outer world moves on and old plans are coming into fruition...

## Chapter Notes

Beta: Starfire201 - thank you!

## The Ascension

-

### Part 3

Prowl threw himself into his academy work with near desperation. At the next quarter-vorn exam, he passed double the amount of exams as a normal student with excellent grades. Quite aware of his need for security, he only told Flipper and his family about the success, though he soon found that rumours of a genius attending the Academy was making the rounds. Flipper took a certain delight in telling Prowl whenever he heard something new. Prowl suspected that his friend simply enjoyed seeing him uncomfortable and a bit annoyed at the Academy's privacy measures. Though thankfully, the designation Black Haze was kept from the students. The professors, on the other hand, knew full well who the young genius was and so Prowl was not very surprised when he was invited by one of the professors to meet in his office to discuss his further aspirations.

In Prowl's opinion, Professor Hardshell's office looked like a curious mech had wanted to know how big a room really had to be to hold an entire library. The shelves were as tall as the ceiling and the datapads were stacked two rows deep at least. The floor was covered in even more datapads and the visitor's chair in front of the desk had turned into a small datapad hill. The desk itself had the look of a datapad fortress; at its very center was a free working space.

By all rights, the chaos should have made Prowl walk out of the office in disgust, but instead he felt a small delight whenever he recognized that datapad, thought another title interesting or saw some old history pad that had only been mentioned before in a lecture. This was a stronghold of knowledge and his spark basked in it.

The professor who had invited him gave his visitor's chair a short glance, deemed the matter hopeless, and turned to Prowl with a smile. "Please close the door," he said. "I'm afraid we must remain standing. Maybe I'll find the time next vorn to bring a few of these back to Praxus' library."

Prowl did as he was asked to. "The State library of Praxus?"

"Yes, you have visited it?" asked the old mech, who managed to look frail despite his stocky miner frame. Only his doorwings, covered by only three heavy, thick plates, made him look in any way intimidating. Next to them, even Prowl's upgraded armored ones looked light and flexible.

"When I was young," answered Prowl with a fond smile, remembering the many times his tutors had deemed it appropriate to go there. More often than not, though, he had only seen the private study rooms instead of the beautiful reading hall. "The architecture alone was impressive."

"Indeed. It is said that its builder, Grand Duke Brume, was a very well-read mech who appreciated knowledge above all else."

Lord Brume had been his great-grandcreator, Prowl knew. His carrier had always said that Prowl had probably inherited his scholarly tendencies from him. "I have heard the same. Didn't he also support this very academy?"

"Very true. You are well-read, although I should expect nothing less from someone with your grades. I see a great future for you, Black Dust," said the old mech. "Have you already decided what you wish to specialize in?"

Prowl held his doorwings in a respectful cant, trying not to give away the thrill he felt when they finally came to the matter he really cared about. "Yes, Professor Hardshell. Mass-tactical simulations focused on mechs."

Professor Hardshell frowned. "That's an unusual selection. In fact, I do not think any of the current professors have such a specialization. Can you tell me why you would concentrate on something so exotic?"

"It seemed like a very interesting topic to prove that large gatherings of mechs can be predicted through the help of statistics and mathematics." It was only half the truth. The other half was that he was wondering if armies could be predicted that much more accurately. It would fit in nicely with his duties as a second, now prime, heir while still being very much his chosen field of scholarship.

"I see." Professor Hardshell seemed to look for a moment past Prowl into nothing, clearly thinking about all the ramifications of such a selection. After two clicks, he smiled. "If you can manage to prove this, you might not only have your Master thesis, but should also be already on your way to becoming a professor. I look forward to calling you a colleague in a few vorns' time."

Prowl's elation disappeared. He forced himself to nod, despite knowing his Professor's imagined future would never happen. "I would really like to be a professor if it were possible," he said, trying to keep the sadness out of his voice.

"Of course it is possible! Flipper and you are the pride of the academy," Professor Hardshell assured him. "Prepare your thesis paper and study. I am sure you can begin working on it in a few deca-orns at most."

"I will, professor," promised the noble. "Thank you for your time."

"It is always a delight to talk with you."

When Prowl left the office, he gave a sigh of relief. That had gone far better than he had dared to hope. To begin in just a few deca-orns! Maybe he could really manage to complete his education before the vorn of sorrow was over. He just had to work hard.

His steps led him through the busy hallways to the dorms and from there to a small, rarely visited garden. The crystals here were only rarely tended to and as a result showed dull patches next to brilliant light reflections and flashes of color. The pathway beneath his pedes was cracked, but provided no danger to the careful mech and led to a few banks standing in the sun. On one, Flipper was lying on his back, arms beneath his head, seemingly completely oblivious to Prowl's approach.

The prince stopped, looked at his friend and then carefully picked up a tiny crystal shard. He took a moment to aim, and threw.

"Ow!" Flipper rolled off the bank and held his nose. "Dust!"

"Good morning, sleeping beauty." Prowl walked closer and sat down on the bank. "I thought you said you wanted to learn?"

"I did learn." Flipper glared at him playfully, but sat down next to him anyway. "But you took so long that I finished the datapad."

Prowl gave him a surprised glance. He was fairly sure that Flipper had taken that specific datapad from the library only two orn ago. "That was fast."

The other student shrugged. "It was interesting, so I finished it fast." He touched his nose carefully, then gave Prowl an appraising look. "That was a good throw for a normal student."

The prince could hear what he was saying. It had been too good, in Flipper's opinion. He looked around, and after a klick saw a shadow behind a crystal that gave an all clear sign. He relaxed his doorwings and decided that Flipper was the one mech that certainly deserved a truthful answer. "Try to be bad at throwing when warframes train you for 90 vorns." He grimaced, then whispered very quietly: "And for some reason, they are obsessed with coordination and control of the frame. They see it as the basis of everything else."

"Oh." Flipper blinked, then he whispered back just as quietly: "So, they made you throw things?"

"Yes. I think I threw stones for a whole vorn, before they allowed me to use the slingshot."

The civilian chuckled. "Suddenly I'm quite happy to be a normal mech and nothing fancy."

"Besides being a genius that reads a three thousand page book in less than two orns."

Flipper grinned. "Besides that." For a moment they sat in friendly silence, then he spoke again: "The test results for my brother came back last orn."

Prowl gave his friend a concerned glance, not liking that he seemed subdued. "They are not compatible?"

"They are. Barely." Flipper sighed. "69 points."

Prowl winced. That was not a good result. If they bonded, there would be a considerable risk of death. "Do they still want to...?"

"Yes. They said that just because they now know their risk does not mean that it changes their processors or sparks." He looked at the ground, which was covered with crystal shards reflecting the light. "My creators think they want to bond in two deca-orns, but of course they have not told anyone the exact date."

It was tradition not to tell the closest family when exactly you would try to bond, if your chances were low. Supposedly it was to spare them the worry. Prowl wondered if it really helped, as Flipper's fear for his brother was plain to see. He touched his friend's shoulder, trying to offer what meager comfort he could give. "I wish I could have done more for your brother."

"Nonsense! You did more than you had to." Despite the sharp answer, Flipper leant into the touch and shuttered his optics. "We both can now do nothing anymore."

Prowl nodded, then noticed that the other wouldn't be able to see him that answer. "Besides praying."

"Has praying ever helped?" wondered the genius tiredly.

Prowl thought back to Brazen, to the funeral, and to the priests. "I do not know. But it helped me to believe that Primus welcomes us all in death."

"That is a good thought." Flipper sighed deeply, relaxing a bit. "I am happy to have met you."

Prowl pulled Flipper closer, even as he heard himself answering, "I am as well."

~

To Marques Bristle, Master of Trade, Praxus

Lord Bristle,

Have you acquired the new parts and weapons I have requested?

General Quake

~

To Warlord Quake, General of the Praxian army

Dear General Quake,

Have I ever failed to provide what anyone within Praxus wanted? As wished for by Lord Vapor and you, I have bought only the best of the best. Swords from Kaon, armor from Iacon, and lances from our very own master blacksmiths are all on the way to you. Furthermore, I have prepared a million cubes of plain energon as war rations. Just in case the worst happens. But it is better to be prepared than to starve, wouldn't you agree?

Yours sincerely,

Lord Bristle

Master of Trade, Praxus

~

Prowl chose his usual seat in the lecture room, a bit to the side, away from the doors. Right where he was most likely to be overlooked. None of the students that now claimed their seats greeted him, though a few gave him a friendly nod. Maybe, if he had shown more interest in friendships that would be different, he mused. His guards had always given him strict rules, prohibited high risk gatherings like parties and turned trips off-campus into small expeditions. But it had always been possible to make friends, Flipper was living proof of that. No, there was no reason to blame Quickstrike and the others, when the truth was glaringly simple - Prowl was bad at making friends. Not like Brazen. His brother would probably sit over there, right in the middle between the nobles on one side and the civilians on the other, joking and laughing.

Prowl sighed, trying to concentrate on the lecture of Professor Hardshell. Maybe he should practice socializing, he thought. He had nothing to lose and much to win. Certainly, a prime heir with his lacking socializing skills was unacceptable... even Smokescreen was already better than he.

Prowl shuddered. For a moment, he would have sworn that a cold shadow swept across his spark like an enormous bird of prey flying over a city, darkening the sun.

He looked up from his script, but his fellow students were listening to the lecture, whispering or recharging as before. Had the lights in the auditorium changed?

"And for this reason," continued the professor, "it is ill-advised to use the formula without making sure that the numbers were calculated as Median numbers and not in any other way..."

Prowl shook his head, but the feeling didn't want to vanish. Slowly, he raised his hands and touched the plate over his spark. It didn't hurt, but it -

The bird expanded its wings and became a starless, all-engulfing night. A quiet moan of confused despair escaped him as darkness kissed his spark with the sharpest of all blades.

The sun had died, he was alone.

Completely alone, standing in the cold universe as eternities passed in astroseconds.

The soft words of his professor created the path that led him back to reality after an immeasurable amount of time. The feeling of desolation remained, but he again recognized the auditorium, the students, and his professor. Nothing had changed. Everything had changed.

The sun had been consumed.

His mind a frozen tundra, he took the little emergency device in hand and pressed the red button. Quickstrike would have an explanation. Quickstrike would know. Again his trembling fingers brushed over armor hiding his spark. He felt so alone, so cold, so abandoned...

But most of all he felt a creeping fear entering him as his mind went over the possibilities of what was happening to him. Poison, his mind supplied first. Yet, it seemed off. Poison would try to kill him, not make him feel as if a part of him had been ripped out.

Maybe something else. Maybe that it happened in two steps wasn't a coincidence. He was an adult, a very young one, yes, but still...

The door to the auditorium sprang open and hit the wall, mechs stormed the room with military precision. The rustling and whispering of the students was immediately replaced by an eerie silence as all students stared in shock at the newcomers. The nobles and commoners, for all their usual differences, were now united in watching with awe and apprehension the massive warframes spreading through the room and securing it. Some might not even have seen a real, trained warframe before. One-third bigger than the standard civilian frames, armored and bristling with weapons, they let everyone else seem fragile and vulnerable. They were certainly different from the upgraded civilian frames of the normal Enforcers.

For a short moment, Prowl's spark had nearly stopped, then he recognized the sigil of his own bodyguards. Had they reacted this fast to the red alarm? Or had something else called them first...? He didn't know, but was very aware that he couldn't do anything but trust them right now. Quickstrike had the information and as such it was his privilege and duty to make the right calls until Prowl was safe again. As such Prowl's current role was simple –he was Black Dust, a normal student, a minor noble, and nothing more.

The professor, who was the last to notice the soldiers, stepped forward as if trying to block their path towards his students. "What's the meaning of this?" he snarled with all the authority his rank demanded to be given.

The nearest two warframes stopped and turned to him like one mech. Prowl could nearly see how their programs went through the threat assessment and, thankfully, came up with harmless. Promptly, they turned away again and continued their silent search, checking bags and trash cans and beneath the tables.



Just as the professor opened the mouth to demand an explanation once more, a warframe that had until now stood next to the door walked up to the professor. Irrational relief flooded Prowl as he saw him. Quickstrike was here and he wore his full set of honor glyphs on his breast plate that showed him to be an acclaimed hero of Praxus and his rank as a captain of the Praxian guard.

"Please excuse this disturbance, professor," Quickstrike said with a light nod, not sounding sorry at all. "We will disappear in a klick."

"Right." Professor Hardshell squinted at the blue and golden arm crest they were all wearing. "And why are you and your soldiers here, Captain? You're guards of the Grand Duke, right? Shouldn't normal Enforcers handle whatever it is?"

The captain frowned. "It's a matter of the Grand Duchy, more I will and cannot say."

A slyly worded answer, Prowl thought. A matter of the Grand Duchy could mean everything from treason to a harmless interest of the Grand Duke. The guards of the Grand Dukes were their personal force to execute their will. As such, it was entirely understandable that the professor gave his noble students an anxious glance, but fell quiet and watched the proceedings warily. No doubt he expected to never see one of his noble students ever again. For that matter, several of those students looked the same, throwing around near panicked looks or trying to become invisible among their peers.

The warframes had stopped during the exchange at strategic positions in the room. Prowl noted that as they were standing, they were able to shoot down anyone before they could stand up. That wasn't good, his guards expected problems even here; among students they had certainly deemed safe and loyal long ago.

Quickstrike at the front of the auditorium turned now to the sea of frightened students, who watched him as a petrorabbit watched a Seeker. Quickstrike's optics wandered from one face to another, no doubt remembering who paled, who was stoic, who might be a threat. Maybe, Captain Quickstrike was also checking who of his undercover mechs were here, but Prowl had never managed to identify one of those highly trained spies. There were at least three, as Quickstrike had let that fact slip once, but to know their designations was deemed too high a risk to change Prowl's behavior.

After only a klick or two, Quickstrike's searching optics fell on Prowl. A hand wave with three fingers straight and the guards around Prowl moved. Heavy hands fell on his shoulders, restricting his movement.

Prowl did not need to fake his surprise as he was pulled out of his chair like a criminal.

"Black Dust, please come with us on behalf of the Grand Duchy of Praxus," announced Quickstrike.

Please? Prowl knew the laws to apprehend people well, and these were certainly not the right words. As he was led down by the guards, who now respectfully kept their distance of exactly half a step, he understood that Quickstrike wanted to disguise why they were here. Just the "why" escaped him. With a sigh, he looked back towards his scripts and bag and saw

that another warframe was collecting everything. This was it, he realized. This was the end; he would not be able to return. He would never finish his degree.

"Black Dust?" whispered the professor in soft anguish as he walked past him.

It was the tone more than anything else that stopped Prowl. His professor sounded as if he was watching one of his students walking down to their execution – and indeed, that was what it looked like. But the warframes knew no mercy; with a soft but firm touch to his shoulders, they forced him forward.

As they reached Quickstrike, the mech gave Prowl a cursory glance, then nodded in satisfaction. "Company! Move out!"

The guards stationed throughout the room took up positions around Prowl, who looked stoically ahead. What were his peers thinking? That he was a criminal or traitor? Was this really the best solution for whatever reason Quickstrike had to do this?

New touches let him move the stairs up to the door. His fellow students were so silent that he could force himself to forget their existence. Then they had left the auditorium, the heavy door fell shut and pandemonium broke out inside the room. Prowl slumped, glad to escape the many optics.

"Quickstrike..." he said, but the older captain shook his head.

"We must hurry. The longer we can keep our enemies guessing who you are the better," the Captain said very quietly and urgently.

Prowl eyed him, then his optics wandered over the other guards. They looked fine at first glance, but they kept the weapons heated, their armor closed and combat ready. Also, he noticed they acted too aware, too protective. They were nervous, he realized with a jolt. Maybe even afraid. And the uneasiness turned into sharp fear as the random puzzle pieces clicked together.

"I see," he whispered back. "Let's go."

Quickstrike and his guards didn't bother with being subtle as they hurried down the long hallways of the Academy of Mathematics and Higher Statistics. The first five at the tip of the group forced surprised students and staff even-handedly aside, ignoring their short-lived protests and exclamations with the same nonchalance as the wide-optic stares that followed in their wake.

Prowl tried to ignore his life's dream crumbling around him, tried to keep his spark from spinning with worst case scenarios, tried to keep that coldness within at bay. More and more guards marched aside and behind him. They had stood watch at every hallway they crossed and now joined the group around the prince that nearly ran through the academy.

He hid behind his guards' broad shoulders as best as he could, while hoping that no one would see his face. The only thing capable of making this worse would be someone screaming "He's Prince Prowl!"

In the middle of the grand entrance hall, a ripple went through the rear guards.

"Let me through!" yelled an agitated voice. "In the name of the Grand Dukes or not, I cannot allow you to simply kidnap one of my students!"

"Sir-" tried one of the warframes, but was interrupted.

"Do not try to pacify me! I know my rights, I know the laws, and this is illegal!"

Prowl walked slower and couldn't help but to look back. This had sounded like... and indeed, it was Professor Hardshell yelling at the warframes, who tried to hold him back without injuring the smaller and quite old mech.

"My prince, please come." Quickstrike's doorwings moved anxiously back and forward. "It is not safe here."

Was it safe for him anywhere? Before he could answer, or indeed do anything, Hardshell whacked the nearest warframe sharply with a datapad on his chevron. The poor mech hissed in pain and for a moment, his grip slipped. The professor managed to wriggle free and ran a few more steps towards Prowl.

A deep, nearly sub-sonic growl was the only warning that Professor Hardshell had just been classified as a threat by a dozen warframes. A high, distinct hum filled the hall as they activated their weapon spaces and seconds later, gleaming swords surrounded the professor, who froze in sudden fear. Menacingly, the warframes approached their victim, ready to kill if the threat so much as moved.

"Enough!" The sharp command had left Prowl's mouth before he could even think. "Stand down."

Reluctantly, they did so, but their swords never left their hands. He walked through his guards, who parted before him without another word. Prowl gave them the order 'Shield me' with his doorwings, and they arranged themselves in a circle around the civilian and their prince. The order was more to their benefit than Prowl's. Agitated warframes calmed down best with precise orders and expectations.

Professor Hardshell clutched his broken datapad before his spark, trembling slightly, while his vents worked at full blast. The running and subsequent fight had clearly taken a lot from the old mech. At some point he must have deactivated his optics, because they only lightened up with a green hue when Prowl stopped before him.

"Professor, what are you doing here?"

Professor Hardshell blinked. Slowly, he looked from his student to the impressive figure of captain Quickstrike towering behind Prowl. He straightened, a look of pure determination on his face. "I... I may be a Statistics Professor, but I know a few laws. And Captain, it's not right to arrest a mech without even stating why!"

Prowl waited for Quickstrike to answer, but his bodyguard remained silent. It was the Prince's decision in this matter, and he would heed it. Prowl cocked his head. "Professor, I assure you I am alright."

"Really?" Professor Hardshell didn't bother to hide his doubt. "These guards might take you anywhere! Prison, or worse!"

Had his professor always been so brave and caring? Prowl had to smile softly. "Professor, I do not need protection from my own bodyguards. I trust them with my spark." Around him, his guards' doorwings ticked up at this highest of compliments, while Professor Harshell frowned.

"Your bodyguards...?"

Quickstrike bowed down to the prince's audios. "Time is of the essence."

The young prince nodded in acknowledgement. "I truly wish I could stay, professor. I have always enjoyed your lectures, but my duty takes me elsewhere."

Maybe there was more regret in his words than was proper, but ultimately his loyalty was to Praxus and his own dreams were secondary to that. He turned away, leaving the bewildered professor where he was.

They stepped through the main entrance and he saw that the guards hadn't come alone. The usually so quiet and tranquil square before the academy, place of many of the most philosophical and intellectual discussions Prowl had had, was now bustling with soldiers and troop transports. Shocked, he paused at the door, trying to understand what he was seeing. Even at a rough conservative estimation, there were around three hundred warframes here and many of them didn't wear the sword and shield of the Grand Duchy's guards, instead wearing a sharp blue triangle.

"The army!" he exclaimed in shock. "What is it doing here?"

"Protecting you, my prince," answered the Captain and firmly pushed him forward.

Since when did he need the Praxian army to be protected? Prowl moved along with them, but his thoughts were racing. They approached one of the army's troop transporters, a shuttle, matte black and green, waiting quietly with an open door. Usually, nobles did their travelling with carriages as a sign of their station and everyone else with money had an altmode. Shuttle mechs were rarely used as most Cybertronians felt it too strange to travel inside another mech. Prowl was no exception, but the grim expressions around him made sure that he didn't voice any protests.

The interior of the shuttle mech was sparse and very utilitarian. A few seats at the rear, and else only long, empty troop benches. Behind him, Quickstrike and two other guards entered. The moment the door fell shut, Quickstrike held his fingers at his audio to activate the comm. "Retrieval accomplished. Take off now!"

A dull vibration went through the whole shuttle, then they were already leaving the ground. From inside, Prowl could hear shouts of "Go, go, go!"

Suddenly overcome with a feeling of desolation, Prowl walked to one of the few seats, barely padded, and fell into it. Next to it was a tiny window, showing the blue sky, a few white clouds and even more shuttles and fliers escorting them. He shuttered his optics and vented deeply as he tried to stave off the fears haunting his spark. Nothing good could mobilize the army like this.

"My prince?" asked the captain quietly.

Prowl's optics remained fixed on the window. "Tell me, please, that my creators simply have become overprotective overnight."

For a moment there was silence, then the captain gave a deep sigh. "My prince, I'm afraid that would make me a liar."

Prowl's left hand put a dent into the chair. "Then tell me the truth."

Quickstrike bowed his head, quietly acknowledging the order. When he spoke, it was with the same heaviness the warframe had once reaped sparks on the battlefields. "My prince, it grieves me to tell you that the Guard of Praxus has failed in its duty to protect our Lords and Masters. The Grand Dukes of Praxus, Lord Black Haze and Lord Sparkshimmer, have been killed twenty breems ago." The Captain fell to his knees, both of them hitting the ground and his head followed. "Please forgive us, your humble servants, our failure."

Prowl could only stare at his trusted bodyguard blankly, as the words pierced his spark. His creators were dead? It was a concept too earthshaking and skyburning to grasp in its entire monumental meaning. Yet, his spark had screamed the truth at him since the auditorium and that truth sliced deeply into him now.

The Grand Dukes of Praxus were gone, despite Major General Blueshield and the entire guard shielding them, the army defending them and countless others. Their protection had been top-notch! They were supposed to live!

And yet... and yet...

His hand formed a fist over his spark as it kept reaching out, encountering only coldness. Maybe, they would appear; maybe they survived somehow. Maybe Primus would give him a miracle. And so it kept searching for the warmth that had always been there.

His optics burned when he looked at his bodyguard.

"Get up." He wasn't able to bear watching Quickstrike debasing himself any longer.

The warframe rose smoothly. "My prince, may I finish my report?"

Prowl wanted to deny the request, he had already heard more than he could bear. Yet, second heirs – shields and swords of the House - didn't run no matter what, and so he made a permissive hand wave, not trusting himself with more.

"Thank you, my prince. Due to the suddenness of the Lord's murders, the medical staff was not able to provide any shields to their bonds. As a result, Prince Smokescreen's bond was wide open and his spark has taken considerable damage."

"Smokey too?" Prowl barely recognized his own voice, as he forced the broken words out. Whatever, whoever, this had brought over his family, surely Smokescreen was innocent!

"He was still fighting, last I heard. But there is a very good chance he will not survive the night."

Prowl slumped back into the seat. Alive. Still alive. Prowl ignored the rest for the moment, clutching that knowledge like a desperate empty clutching his only energon cube of the vorn.

"My prince, we also have news from Fortress Prien." Quickstrike paused for a moment, trying to gauge Prowl's reaction. "Your doppelganger was also killed two joors ago. He managed to kill his assassin, though."

Prowl shuttered his optics. Of course they had tried to get him as well. This had been an attempt to not only kill the Grand Dukes but to eliminate the whole House of Praxus. Whoever the enemy was, he would be very displeased that Prowl was alive. And Smokescreen. The horror of that realization overcame even the grief.

"Are more attempts expected?" he asked, already knowing and fearing the answer.

"Major General Blueshield thinks so and has initiated several counter-measures," answered the Captain. "He has decided that Smokescreen is to be kept in the Palaise despite his injuries."

Prowl nodded slowly, trying to rationalize his desire to take Smokescreen and run far away. Where could they run to? Maybe their grand-uncle Vapor? Could Smokescreen survive such an escape? He didn't know. Yet now it would be upon him to decide the future. He was all Smokescreen had. All their entire House and city state now had.

It was too much. It was all too much.

"Leave," he pressed out, and to his eternal gratefulness Quickstrike only nodded, turned around and walked to the other end of the shuttle.

There was no one anymore who he could run to for advice or help. No one to tell him that it all would be alright. No one who would smile indulgently at his statistics, and praise his accomplishments with pride. No one who would hug him.

He barely noticed it when the first tears fell, and he couldn't hold back the sobs of grief and fear.

Only when a scarred hand gave him a tissue did he pull himself together. Quickstrike was kneeling next to his chair, looking to the ground in a futile attempt to give him the illusion of privacy.

"What is it?" he asked, while drying his face as well as he could.

"We have nearly reached the city of Praxus, my prince."

Time was slipping through his servos mercilessly. He wasn't ready to face anyone, much less his new responsibilities. He was a second heir! And not a Grand Duke. He should have had time. Instead here he was now without the knowledge, the experience, the social connections, but with powerful, unknown enemies. But succession allowed no doubt.

A vortex of choices swirled around in his mind, all of them leading to more death and mayhem. The future, once so bright with his dream of a scholarly career far away from courts and politics, had turned dark and uncertain.

"Quickstrike," he whispered bleakly. "What am I supposed to do now?"

"My prince..." said Quickstrike, an odd tone in his voice.

Warframes liked orders; that had been Prowl's first lesson with them. To ask them this as their supposed leader was not a good idea, and yet he needed some guidance, something, anything at all.

Thankfully, Quickstrike recovered. "I am no noble or civilian. I can only give you advice as a warframe and creator." Prowl only nodded, too drained to find words right now. "I think you should visit your brother. It might not be easy, but if he does not survive the night..."

Quickstrike didn't say the rest, and it wasn't needed. It was all too obvious. If Smokescreen did not survive the night, then this was the last chance for Prowl to see him and to hold him. To say goodbye to the last living member of his family. And also, Smokescreen would die alone, surrounded by strangers instead of family. He deserved better.

Prowl's thoughts and emotions settled.

"Take me to him."

# Part Four

## Chapter Summary

Prowl hurries to Smokescreen, never wanting to leave. But the harshest truths might still be waiting for him.

## Chapter Notes

A fast chapter thanks to a super-fast beta! :) All thanks to Starfire201/ Skywinder.

## The Ascension

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## Part Four

During the last breems of the flight, Quickstrike used an emergency set to strip away his camouflage paint. It was a crude, hurried procedure that came with stinging pain and damage to the first natural paint layers. Sparkling white, contrasting black and at the chevron fiery red were revealed. His sire had always called the chevron a pointy warning of his hidden temper, while smiling proudly. Now, the thought brought only more tears.

The few modifications on his frame were stripped down to a dull grey and mostly hidden by a black cloak. 'Black Dust is dead, long live Prince Prowl,' he thought bitterly. Only to remember that technically he was now Lord Prowl, Grand Duke of Praxus, even if he would carry the title only after the inauguration. The thought felt so very wrong.

They landed directly in front of the Palaise – a place usually not used as a landing pad. Prowl looked out of the shuttle's windows, trying to gather self-control. There were guards everywhere, grim faced and with bristling armor. Outside of the Palaise he could see even more warframes, but these wore a blue triangle on their arms – more soldiers of the army.

Prowl shuttered his optics and pressed his helmet against the shuttle's wall. His tears had dried for the moment, but he still felt them inside like an endless, deep sea of agony. All he wanted to do was to curl up in a corner with his brother and cry for orns.



However, the warframes were so agitated that they needed a clear sign of control and stability or things would soon be even worse. A crying mech barely out of his youngling frame would not be enough. No, he needed to be strong, to be a second prince, even if he failed at everything else.

He straightened, forcing himself to move.

"Quickstrike?" All the servants had already vanished, which had probably been the best decision. "Tell Major General Blueshield that I want an emergency meeting in two joors. Call everyone who needs to be there and make it clear that I expect an explanation. Also, I want Smokescreen kept as safe as possible."

Vague orders, hopefully they would be enough.

"Yes, my prince."

"Let us go."

He walked down the shuttle, barely acknowledging his surroundings. His pedes knew where Smokescreen was and he nearly ran down the hallways, even opening a few doors himself when Quickstrike and the other guards hurrying after him were too slow.

The medical wing of the Palaise was deep within, surrounded on three sides by a small private garden. Ever since Prowl could remember, it was a place of quiet and peace that extended far beyond the few patient rooms at the center. Now, though, the hallways were lined with guards that saluted when Prowl swept past them.

The double doors to the medical ward were held open and Prowl entered a small hallway decorated with soothing crystals and nothing else, which set it into a sharp contrast with the rest of the castle. Despite the panic outside, nothing here hinted at anything unusual. Prowl automatically slowed as he neared the reception desk, where a nurse stood up and bowed deeply.

"Your Highness, it is a relief to see you well."

"My brother...?"

"The Master Medics have just visited him." The nurse deflated a bit. "He is in a serious condition and Master Medic Hoist has called two specialists from the Lysie Charité."

Prowl's spark clenched. Hoist had needed to call help? He couldn't remember that this had happened before. "Tell Master Medic Hoist that I am here and wish to visit Smokescreen."

"Of course. Please excuse me for a second."

The nurse rose and walked down a side hallway, to patient room two. There, he knocked and disappeared inside the room for less than three astroseconds. When he reappeared, he wasn't alone. Behind him walked three medics, easily identifiable by their medical glyphs.

The one in the lead smiled as he saw the prince and nearly ran over. "Prince Prowl! It is so good to see you!"

It was soothing to see a trusted and familiar face in this crisis. Hoist had been his family's medic since before Brazen's creation and had been trusted with small and big problems of all kinds. So when he answered, it was with a certain warmth.

"I am glad to see you as well, Master Medic," he said. "Despite the situation."

"Ah, yes." The medic bowed lightly in front of him. "It's all so very awful. I wished I could have done more to save our Lords, but my skills were insufficient." Hoist looked harrowed. "It all happened just too quickly, who would have thought...!"

"What about Smokescreen? Will he survive?" interrupted Prowl rudely, but the urgency drove him forward.

Hoist flinched. "Ah, forgive me, your Highness. This orn has been too long and difficult already." He waved his two colleagues forward. "May I introduce you to Master Medic Flatline and Master Medic Cardiac. Both are spark specialists and I have drawn upon their skills to provide the best care for Prince Smokescreen. They will be able to give you a better diagnosis on this than I."

Both medics bowed deeply. Master Medic Flatline gave Hoist a glance. "Our esteemed colleague's skills are tremendous, and we are only able to help thanks to our specialization and because this is a very rare case."

Prowl narrowed his optics, quickly losing patience with the medic's polite words. "Please elaborate. So far all I know is that Smokescreen's spark was injured through the- the deaths of our creators." The truth hurt more than anything before in his life.

All three medics nodded. "This is not wrong, your Highness," said Flatline. "Just as bondmates fade without their mates, a young spark suffers without its creators. Only when the spark is old and stable enough does the bond start to fade. Modern medicine has managed to lessen the initial impact of the death of one creator through shielding. Usually the remaining bondmate nurtures the young spark for as long as he can, which is on average a time between fifty and a hundred vorns. Long enough for most young sparks to stabilize enough to survive the death of their second creator."

"But our creators are dead," he snapped. "Get to the point!" Would he lose Smokescreen as well?

Medic Flatline sighed deeply. "As you wish. At the moment we have managed to stabilize Prince Smokescreen's spark through electrical impulses, but we were unsuccessful in preventing him from slipping into stasis. We do not know if he will survive or ever wake up."

The news hit Prowl and let him nearly take a step back. Reeling, he spoke the only thought he managed to grasp: "I want to see Smokescreen. Now."

"Of course, your Highness. Please follow me," said Master Medic Hoist and led him to the patient's room. "The usual rules apply, please be quiet and don't disturb him."

Prowl nodded. Hoist held up the door and they both entered the patient room that Prowl knew from some very uncomfortable orns in his youth. When he had a virus, Hoist had cared here for him, brought him warm energon with a smile and some jokes, and his family had sat on his bed for joors, reading stories or trying to help with his homework, so he would not fall behind.

Now, the room was quiet and cold. Dead, he thought for a moment and shuddered. The heavy curtains on the windows were keeping out most of the light, and around the berth stood more equipment than he had ever seen within a hospital room.

Before thinking, he ran to his brother's side, wanting to take Smokescreen's small servo, but stopped short next to the bed. His little brother was laying on the berth motionlessly, his colors barely visible anymore. Nearly grey. Nearly dead. The armor around his chest had been completely removed and dozens of cables were connected to the sparkchamber, forming a grisly, perverted image. Through the glass he had to strain to see the greenish flickering sparklight. Every time it went out, one of the machines peeped and blue electrical sparks appeared at the chamber, rocking the whole tiny frame.

"He..." began Prowl, but the words were lost to him as he stared in abject horror at the bared and tortured spark.

Hoist stepped at his side and looked down at the youngling with a grim face. "The Grand Duke's bonds were always strong. With only a little less, he would have been too weak to live." He paused and added, "With a little more, they would have pulled him with them."

"Is he in pain?" whispered Prowl.

"No. As far as I know, he only felt Lord Black Haze's death and went offline immediately after. It was then that Lord Sparkshimmer called for help, recognizing the effects of the poison too late to be saved." The Master Medic walked over and checked the machines with the behavior of a mech who didn't expect to find any fault, but needed to do something.

Prowl couldn't stop his doorwings from shivering violently. "Ca- can I touch him?"

Hoist gave him a glance and nodded. "Yes, your Highness. Just take his hand. Some say that siblings help with the recovery."

Trembling, Prowl reached out, touching the limp fingers of his little brother gently. So weak and fragile. Carefully, he took the small servo into his own.

Master Medic Hoist took a few steps back and, when Prowl didn't protest, walked out of the room silently.

Finally alone, Prowl's strength left him and the sobs he had been holding back overwhelmed him without mercy. Not daring to disturb his brother's rest even a little, he slid down to his knees, still holding the hand and pressing it against his tearstained face.

"Don't leave me," pleaded Prowl brokenly. "Don't leave me alone."

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When the door opened again, he was too exhausted to move anymore. A soft touch against his helmet made him look up. Master Medic Hoist and Quickstrike stood behind him.

"My prince, we only have one hour left until the security meeting," said Quickstrike quietly. "Master Medic Hoist needs to remove your modifications."

He didn't want to leave Smokescreen. He didn't want to leave the room and face the world or anyone. Mechanically, controlling every finger individually, he managed to let Smokescreen's cold hand go.

"Can we do it here?" If he hadn't been a prince, most would have called his tone begging.

"If you wish so, your Highness." Medic Hoist looked towards Quickstrike. "Please fetch a chair."

Moments later, the guard returned with a chair that he placed a few steps away from the bed, along with a warm energon cube.

"Drink, my prince," the warframe ordered. "You need it."

Prowl did as his bodyguard asked without protest, realizing only now that it was far past the time he would have usually drank his fuel. It felt warm and heavier than normal. "Nanites?" he asked.

"Among others," answered the medic. "There was a bit of a discussion even, what exactly will help you most. Your cube has around ten thousand nanite particles, is enriched with iron, potassium and gold, and a calming mixture."

The prince blinked and looked at his cube with new respect. "All that in one cube, Master Medic?"

"Well, the metals, while healthy, are mainly for covering the taste of the rest," answered Hoist with a soft smile. "I remembered that you have always preferred potassium flavored medicine."

Prowl nodded, and managed to convince himself to stand up. Tiredly, he walked over to the chair, freed himself from the heavy cloak, and sat down. His optics drifted towards Smokescreen, even as he felt the soft and sure hands of the medic begin their work.

After only a breem, Master Medic Hoist took a step back. "There is nothing wrong with your frame, your Highness, besides the usual symptoms of shock. Something which is entirely normal considering the situation."

When Prowl didn't find the energy to answer, the medic and warframe exchanged a meaningful look. The Master Medic seemed to struggle with himself, but Quickstrike gave him a stern look. Hoist sighed, nodded curtly and caught the prince's optics.

"Prince Prowl, this might be a private question, but please answer truthfully. Did you feel your creators perish?"

The sudden question nearly undid Prowl. As grief constricted his throat, he couldn't stop himself from touching the armor plate above his spark. Above the gaping nothingness where so much had been. He looked past the medic and the guard towards his brother to gather himself again. If they had been alive, both would surely be sitting on both sides of Smokescreen, holding his hands and stabilizing his spark. If they had been alive, Smokescreen wouldn't be here.

"Yes," he forced out.

Both mechs stiffened, and their faceplates became grave. Could he have ended up like Smokescreen if he had just been a bit younger? Was his spark damaged as well? It felt so upset, so pained, but he couldn't say what was emotional, what physical. Maybe it was the same?

The medic knelt down next to him, placing a daring hand on Prowl's knee. "It is not unexpected, your Highness," said Hoist gently. "You are barely out of your youngling frame and the fading of a bond can vary tremendously."

Prowl blinked. "I thought my bond had already faded," he confessed quietly. "I didn't feel them anymore and suddenly..." He couldn't say it. Couldn't speak about the moment the world lost its warmth.

Quickstrike stepped up, next to the medic. The warframe's face was full of compassion and understanding. "If I may, Master Medic. I personally have felt it, if my creations were alive or not, until their 240th vorn. The stronger the bond, the slower the fading is."

"The slowest recorded fading lasted nearly 350 vorns," added the Master Medic. "It was a special and tragic case really, but it showed the strength such bonds can develop. And the bond to your creators was undeniably a strong one. As such, I have to know if your spark hurts or has shown other abnormalities like becoming hot?"

Prowl was already shaking his head, when he stopped and forced himself to really think about the question. His optics kept drifting to Smokescreen, who was helpless. Defenseless. He couldn't risk becoming like his little brother. Not now, not even when a part of him never wanted to leave this room.

"I am not in pain, if one doesn't consider the emotional," he answered slowly. "But my spark feels cold."

There was a flash of concern on Hoist's face, and downright alarm on Quickstrike's. Again they exchanged looks that were entire conversations.

When Prowl had been a youngling and had observed this behavior for the first time, he had assumed that there was a secret language involved. Maybe hand signs, he had mused and later begged the medical officer to teach him. The poor mech had at first looked flabbergasted and then – after understanding the demand – laughed. Still chuckling, he had sat the young

prince down and explained to Prowl's embarrassment that there was no secret involved. Medics and warframes simply understand each other, said the medical officer with a smile.

Prowl had not understood at all. Warframes were a frameclass set apart from the civilian frames, while medic was a profession. How made that sense?

The medical officer had pointed out that he himself was both warframe and medic, and certainly not an odd case. In fact, what Prowl learned that orn was, although warframes were unsuited for most civilian jobs thanks to their specific programming, they made marvelous medics. And even when a medic was a civilian by frame, they often developed deep friendships with the soldiers and guards, and bondings were far from unusual.

Seeing Hoist and Quickstrike interacting now drove that point home and he wondered for how long the two had been friends. However, when the Master Medic demanded that he open his chest plates, such thoughts disappeared fast.

"Is such a thing really necessary?" he asked with a wince, trying not to let his embarrassment show.

"Yes." Quickstrike's voice was stern. "Do not be worried, my prince, I am sworn to my bondmate and loyal to you, and Master Medic Hoist has taken all the vows of discretion."

Prowl sighed. Warframes, he remembered as well, were pragmatic, especially when it came to sparks. They saw a bared spark more along the lines of a wound, than as a sacred part of a mech, bared as a sign of absolute trust and love.

Logically he knew, that his guard was right and his nervousness unwarranted, when he triggered the code. Smokescreen was glaring proof that he could at least trust these two mechs.

It was not an easy procedure. As a second heir, he had been upgraded with protections since he could walk and had by now incorporated them deeply into his systems. The result was that his spark was protected by layers of armor that only reluctantly folded themselves back. Neither medic nor warframe hurried him, recognizing the delicate balance of trust and concentration Prowl needed.

When it was done, the icy blue light of his spark spilled into the room in a strong corona, bathing everything in its color. Politely, Quickstrike had turned away to the door, guarding the prince at his most vulnerable and giving him the much needed privacy.

The Master Medic's scan and fingers were quick as he checked the spark casing. Every light touch made Prowl shudder and gasp softly. He was sure that he was blushing.

"As strong as always, your Highness," he said. "Your spark shows signs of stress and light injury, but both should pass naturally. The coldness is probably more a psychological phenomenon, but it would comfort me if I could check it regularly until your spark has healed."

Prowl barely had waited for the diagnosis before he was already folding up again. "Anything else, Master Medic Hoist?"

"Besides the modifications, no. Captain Quickstrike, how much time do we have left?"

"Four breems." When Prowl had closed up and the light had vanished, the Captain had turned towards them again. "But they will wait if you need longer."

"I'll try to finish in time," promised the medic.

The Master Medic managed to remove the modifications that had made Prowl slightly bulkier and rounder in time. He added a protective coat onto Prowl's strained and pale paint, insisting that it would help in repairing the surface damage faster. Quickstrike tried to point out only once that such a coat was not really necessary before he crossed his arms grumpily and watched in silence. Medic order always beat warframe opinion in health matters. At least some things never changed.

Eventually the Master Medic did step back, and gave Prowl an approving nod. "Much better now."

"He looked fine before as well," said Quickstrike, his armored doorwings flapping annoyed at his back.

"Fine, yes, but he is our Lord now," said the medic and Prowl flinched. Lord. Not prince, never again. Even now they only called him prince, because his inauguration ceremony had not taken place yet. Thankfully, none of the other two commented on his reaction.

"Still, we are now late. My prince, we must hurry." Quickstrike walked to the door. "Major General Blueshield has informed me that they are already waiting."

"One moment, Quickstrike."

Prowl stood, and walked over to Smokescreen. Lightly, he caressed the cold hand, and a new wave of sorrow gripped his spark. All he could look at was his fading brother, so small and vulnerable on the big berth. So alone.

He vented deeply. New determination coursed through him, clearing his thoughts and spark.

He had to protect Smokescreen. No one would ever harm him again. No one.

Not as long as Prowl lived.

When he let go of Smokescreen's hand, he felt calmer and centered. The pain was still there, but at least he had an idea of what to do now.

"Thank you, Master Medic Hoist, for the care." He gave a nod to the medic, who bowed deeply. His optics settled on Quickstrike. "And thank you, Quickstrike for protecting my spark and I, when I was not myself."

The utter surprise on the warframe's face nearly made Prowl smile. Quickstrike bowed. "It's an honor to serve you."

You can trust Quickstrike above everyone else, his creators had said. When he walked down the hallways to the meeting room, Quickstrike at his side, he was glad their words had been proven true. The massive warframe was the pillar he now needed.

As they neared their destination, Prowl quickly recognized where the meeting place would be. It felt like a long time ago when Prowl had played hide and seek here with the Vosian princes and they all had been too small for anything else. Then, it had only been a big room with a long table, many chairs and few hiding opportunities if not for the fact that only few people were allowed to enter.

It was vorns later that Yellowstripe explained that the Council Chamber was the most secure room of the Palaise and reserved for the twelve most important mechs to meet in secret and away from scrutiny. To be chosen by the Grand Dukes as one of the ten chair holders was widely considered the highest honor a Praxian could reach.

"I will have to wait outside, my prince," said Quickstrike in front of the beautifully decorated double door.

For a moment, Prowl contemplated ordering Quickstrike to come with him, but it would have only been for his own comfort. He had never attended a Council meeting before and had only been expected to join when he would take over Lord Vapor's duties as the Field Marshal. Yet here he stood now, hesitating and unsure what to expect. Did they expect him to lead the meeting? Was there a certain ceremony or conduct to be observed?

Did it matter? With the death of his creators he was the acting Grand Duke of Praxus, until the inauguration when he would officially be handed the titles and honors through Sentinel Prime.

Prowl's optics narrowed. They would obey him. They would tell him the names of his enemies. Or else.

As Prowl entered, his optics fell on the huge painting of Vector Prime holding a glowing red radish as a sign of might, while behind him the Praxus of the past tried to connect sky and earth. It hang over the top of the table, where once Black Haze would have sat. Opposite was the painting of Lysis Magnus, Vector Prime's beloved bondmate, holding a bloodied lance. It was a grim reminder that the Council room had once been built as the War Council room.

Between them was the long council table, five seats to each side, every chair showing the crest and rank of its owner. At the heads were two subtly more elaborate decorated ones for the Grand Dukes, directly beneath the paintings.

Around half the seats were empty. The vacancy of the two belonging to the Grand Dukes had been inevitable, as well as Brazen's, who as the first heir had sat to Sparkshimmer's right. Still, the visible reminder hurt so much that for an astrosecond he froze midstride before recovering.



But a full Council should have still included nine mechs. Instead he counted only five behind their chairs, waiting for him.

Frowning, he noticed the absence of his grand-uncle Vapor, who as the Field Marshal and acting second heir was ultimately responsible for the defense of Praxus and its rulers. Had he not yet arrived from the east or was he already hunting down the murderers? He had hoped for his calming presence and advice.

Even more puzzling was the empty seat of Yellowstripe, who alone represented the common civilians as the Secretary of State.

The five mechs present bowed in greeting, but Prowl was only really familiar with one of them, who stepped forward.

"My prince!" greeted the flier warmly. He had the functional build of all warframes that spoke of power, but was more slender and his wings were bigger and more elaborate than any doorwing.

"Airlord Skydive!" Prowl relaxed at seeing the friendly face of his old teacher, banishing his unease. "It is a relief that you could come so fast."

"How could I not, hearing that my favorite pupil and prince was calling?" Skydive's face sobered. "Please accept my deepest condolences for your loss, my prince."

For a moment his emotions roared again, threatening to swallow him up once more. But he couldn't give in, Smokescreen depended on him. "Thank you," he said. He looked to the other mechs in the room. "Lieutenant-General Warpath, it is good to see you as well."

Warpath was a truly massive warframe, capable of dwarfing many in even his own frame class. He gave the prince a small bow. "It is good to see you alive, my prince. Dreadful business all these assassinations."

"Captain Quickstrike informed me that my doppelganger has managed to kill the assassin?"

"Indeed." Warpath smirked. "The assassin was skilled, but Leveler had trained with me and did not let the enemy get away. He died honorably."

In Prowl's opinion it would have been better if he hadn't died at all. But Leveler had died in his place and name, and that was a fact he would have to live with. "He will be remembered as a hero and great warrior, Lieutenant-General. I will make sure of that," he promised with all the sincerity he could give.

Warpath nodded. "His division and family will be overjoyed to hear that. Leveler was a good mech."

Prowl nodded and looked to the last warframe in the room, who seemed reluctant to step forward. He was older than the other two warframes, and looked pale and defeated. "Major General Blueshield, I thank you for calling this meeting."

"It was your wish." The mech bowed. "Yet I am afraid that my failure to protect our Lords and rulers weighs too heavily to be part of this Council any longer."

Warframes and their code of honor! Prowl's doorwings made a sharp flick. "You will provide the answers I seek, and afterwards I will decide if the fault lies with you. Do not assume that you can choose your own punishment."

Warpath's engine gave an approving hum, as the Major General took a step back and bowed. "Please forgive me for assuming."

"It is forgiven." But not forgotten, Prowl thought. Blueshield obviously blamed himself for what had happened, but was it deserved? He would find out. "Lord Shanix, Lord Clearwater, I welcome you, too. Were there any attempts on your sparks as well?"

Lord Shanix, a slim teal colored mech with the pale, nearly white spark of the truly ancient and trusted treasurer, gently shook his helmet. "By fortune or Primus's will, my House and I were spared. Though the loss weighs heavily on our sparks."

"There were no attempts on my life as well, your Highness," said Lord Clearwater, High Judge of Praxus. "If I may, I would suggest to begin the Council. Time is of the essence."

"As wise as always, Lord Clearwater," he said. "Please sit, my Lords. The time for pleasantries has long since passed."

They did as he had said and it made the empty chairs between them all the more obvious. Twelve mechs it should be, and yet they were only six. Especially painful was the empty one on the other side of the table, where the second Grand Duke – his sire – was supposed to sit, and only slightly more bearable was the empty chair of the first heir at the right side of the table.

Automatically, he avoided both and found himself staring at the left side – the military side of the table, where Vapor's and the General's seat had no occupant. Prowl wished that at least his grand-uncle would be here. As the acting second heir for the past 200 vorns and the real second heir for far longer, his experience was sorely needed. Not to mention he was family and would understand Prowl's grief better than anyone else.

"Blueshield, before we begin, my grand-uncle has been informed? Is he on his way?"

All three warframes froze. "The Field Marshal has been informed, my prince, but there was no answer."

"No answer?" Prowl could not stop the flinch of his doorwings as new dread crawled into his spark. "Has he too been...?"

"You misunderstand, my prince," said Blueshield slowly. "I tried to contact the Field Marshal and anyone who might be able reach him, yet received no answer."

"That makes no sense." Prowl shook his head. "It's impossible that no one answers."

"Not impossible," said Skydive darkly. "The Major-General contacted me with his problem and I sent my fliers to check the situation. I got their report a breem ago."

Everyone at the table turned to the flier. "And?" asked Prowl anxiously. "Is Vapor still alive?"

"I think so." Skydive's wings dropped a bit. "At the border to the Field Marshal's lands, my fliers were attacked and forced to return. We must assume that Field Marshal Vapor is deliberately not answering the calls."

There was a sharp hiss as several of the mechs vented. Prowl thought he was going to be sick. "Airlord Skydive," he said. "Are you claiming my own grand-uncle is disloyal?"

The flier's optics flashed. "Disloyal and maybe worse."

Vapor. His own grand-uncle. Family. Trusted and loved. Surely, there was an explanation somewhere. Some unknown enemy that had bested him and the hundreds of warframes the Field Marshal had kept at his home for training...

Prowl felt dizzy as the horrendous ramifications hit his processor. All these warframes had probably turned traitorous as well. Maybe more. A lot more. How could this be? Vapor was supposed to be the one to explain everything to him! To be Prowl's acting second heir, the shield of Praxus. Prowl's shield!

"My prince?" said Skydive hesitatingly. "There is more."

Prowl already didn't want to hear the rest, but Skydive had been his teacher for vorns. Had patiently taught him war tactics as well as the art of speeches and warframe customs. Skydive was without a doubt a Talent of war and strategy, and had never led Prowl astray.

"I came here for answers, and I will listen. Please continue, Airlord."

"As you wish." Skydive inclined his helmet, and for but a moment there was something like pride to see within his optics. "Major General Blueshield did not only fail to contact Field Marshal Vapor. General Quake was also unreachable."

"General Quake lives in Praxus," the prince said quietly, staring at the table in front of him but not really seeing anything. "Was there a trip I knew nothing off?"

Blueshield dashed his desperate hopes. "No, my prince. When he didn't answer, I personally visited his apartment with the guard. It has been stripped of anything personal and the General has not been there."

Prowl looked at vacant chair of the Master of Trade with a feeling close to hysterical despair. "I assume Lord Bristle is the same?"

"Yes, my prince."

It hurt. The realization hurt so much. "I see. We will probably find them in the east with my dear uncle."

A klick ago he had feared for his Vapor's life, now he wished that the dagger of a stranger's assassin would have found its mark within his grand-uncle's spark. It would hurt less than the sharp betrayal that was slicing apart his spark now.

His family was dead – by the hands of family and closest friends.

All these mechs his family had trusted and seen as friends. It made no sense. As far as he had been aware, his creators had only ever praised them and given them everything they had asked for. Why would they turn traitor?

Vapor, who had always taken him on the nicest trips around the fortresses of the state. Quake, who had taken the time during the celebrations to sit with the younglings and tell them stories from grand battles of the past. Bristle, who had always seemed gentle and passionate about his office as Master of Trade. It made no sense!

And then, he remembered that there was still one explanation missing. He couldn't stop himself as he looked to his right – to Lord Black Haze's right – where the Secretary of State should have been.

"Yellowstripe too?" he choked out, praying that someone would say no.

Instead, all that met him was a stony silence.

No.

Not Yellowstripe. Not the mech he saw as a third creator, who had encouraged him beyond everyone else. Everyone but him. Please!

The silence stretched unbearably. Not one of the mechs, warframe nor noble, managed to look him into the optics.

It was Lord Shanix who finally answered, on his face pity as clear as light. "Has no one seen fit to tell you, my prince?"

"Tell me what?"

For an awful moment he hoped that Yellowstripe had been murdered.

"Yellowstripe was the one who killed the Grand Dukes."

The world broke and Prowl was falling.

Every moment, every smile, every tear... a lie?

And yet the Lords and Warlord didn't stop talking, didn't stop adding more to the nightmare.

"He'd been bringing sweetened enegex into Lord Sparkshimmer's office for vorns," said Blueshield, his voice shaking. "We didn't control it anymore. It was as good as if it had come from us, the guard. But this time Yellowstripe had added a slow, unstoppable poison."

"Humbling River," said Skydive. "I read the report and would bet my wings on it. Extremely rare, unstoppable, nearly untraceable."

"Yes, thank you, Airlord." Blueshield vented, trying to clear the static from his voice.

"Yellowstripe left the poisoned cube and continued to walk towards the meeting with Lord Black Haze. There, he stunned the Lord and attacked him with an energy dagger, stolen from our own weapon chamber vorns ago. When we arrived, he was kneeling next to the Grand Duke, dagger still in hand, blood everywhere..." Blueshield stopped as his voice broke.

"I have ordered my best soldiers to guard him in the dungeon," Warpath jumped into the silence. "He will not escape." Dark rage colored the last words.

"Good work, honorable Warlords," said Lord Clearwater. "What I don't understand is the why. Lord Vapor and Yellowstripe have rarely seen optic to optic, so why would they conspire together?"

"Who knows," answered Warpath gruffly. "Yellowstripe is not speaking. Yet. There are ways to change that."

For a moment there was a heavy silence at the table.

"Maybe blackmail?" suggested Lord Shanix. "Yet, I cannot imagine what would be a bad enough secret to drive a mech to do such a thing..."

"Whyever Yellowstripe did it does not matter!" snapped Airlord Skydive. "We must decide what to do with the three traitors that are running around free! With the Field Marshal and the General among them, there is no doubt that most garrisons in the east are loyal to them and not to Praxus!"

"Worse, Lord Bristle's coffers are full with gold and silver, and as the Master of Trade, he has more than enough connections to ensure a steady money flow," Lord Shanix pointed out.

"Not to mention weapons and energon," said Warpath. But he didn't sound worried, more... delighted by the prospect of slaughter. "Bet they have prepared for a long while."

"Without a doubt," agreed Lord Clearwater. "Neither are prone to hasty decisions and frankly, if Yellowstripe has helped them, we cannot even be sure that any resource will respond to our call."

"My prince," said Blueshield suddenly. "Are you alright?"

Prowl wanted to cry. His optics were swimming with tears. No. No he was not alright. And they made it all worse.

"Silence, please, just... a moment of silence."

The three Warlords and the two noble Lords fell quiet.

Within the silence, Prowl managed to grasp the shards of his world and looked at them. Trying to find something to hold on. Something that might make the horror controllable.

General Quake and Lord Bristle, he could have accepted. It would have hurt, yes, but he would have managed somehow. They were the friends of his creators after all and not his own. Now they were enemies, and nothing more. He released their shards, his spark bleeding.

But grand-uncle Vapor? Yellowstripe? The mere thought of them brought on more pain than he could bear. They were family. He would have trusted them with everything.

His own spark. Praxus. *Smokescreen*.

In fact, he had trusted that they would find the answers to his desperate questions and would assure him with plans of what to do.

Never had he imagined that as thanks for all the love and trust they'd extended to them, for all the money and titles they'd been given, they would murder his creators and Brazen, put Smokescreen into stasis and try to kill himself as well.

Why?

It made no sense, the world made no sense. There must be a reason, something he was missing. Something he was simply not knowing.

That was it. He needed information. Answers.

He stood up. "Lieutenant-General Warpath, you said Yellowstripe is in the dungeon?"

The Lieutenant-General blinked. "Yes, my prince."

He was already walking to the door when he answered: "I will go to him. He will speak with me." Or else.

Lord Clearwater stood up. "But we need to decide –"

Prowl stopped and turned towards them. "I will get the answers we need. The why, their goals, everything Yellowstripe knows! In the meanwhile, I want you to determine Vapor's assets, how many soldiers he might be capable of calling upon and how many more traitors there might be among the nobles. When the dawn comes, I will decide how to proceed."

He left stunned silence behind as he stepped out of the Council Chamber.

# Part Five

## Chapter Summary

Prowl takes a drastic step, he visits the murderer of his creators in the dungeon. But he might not be prepared for the truth...

## Chapter Notes

Beta: Starfire201 :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

## The Ascension

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### Part 5

Quickstrike startled and then bowed lightly. "My prince, that was fast."

"I need to visit Yellowstripe in the dungeons."

Quickstrike paled. "But-"

Prowl glared. "That is an order, Captain."

The warframe seemed to literally swallow his misgivings down. "Yes, my prince."

Surrounded by the heavy steps of his guards, he tried to connect the Yellowstripe he knew with the murderer in the dungeon. How could a mech who had never failed to have time for an overly curious youngling, who had worked tirelessly for even the smallest victory of justice, commit such a crime?

The answer was no clearer when he walked down the stairs that became rougher the further they got beneath the earth. This was no area a visitor would ever see. Here were the training

rooms of the warframes, their sleeping rooms, storage of all and everything a mech could imagine, and even a training hall, which he had frequented in his youth.

Then they went down another floor, and the walls became colder and pure, raw metal. They hadn't been ever touched by an architect or designer; instead mechs had hammered and melted the core of the planet away to create a hallway in which three warframes could easily walk shoulder on shoulder. In optic-sight guards stood, grim faced, bowing slightly when the prince and his personal guard passed them.

Then they reached the entrance of the dungeon. Even though Prowl had lived in the Palaise for most of his life, he had passed beyond this door only two times. It had seemed like a dark relic of the past, horrible times to him. Still, the education of a second heir included also prisons, and as such, Blueshield had led him down the small staircase, opened the three heavy doors with the help of another guard and explained to him the function of the eight cells and the interrogation room at the end of it. The interrogation room had given the youngling that he had been nightmares.

He had grown since then, even though it had only been 45 vorns ago. In his adult frame, he had to be careful about his doorwings, or they would scrape along the damp, cold walls of the steep circular staircase. Only the lights of his guards made the steps visible at all as they descended into darkness.

The three black gates on the staircase platforms were guarded by two veterans clearly willing to kill anyone suspicious. The doors themselves had not grown any lighter and the guards worked hard to open them. Most civilianframes would have failed to move the heavy metal at all.

At the end of the staircase, another veteran guard awaited him. An ugly scar across his face, he wore his rank with pride.

"Colonel," greeted Prowl. "I wish to see Yellowstripe."

"Please follow me. He is in the interrogation room at the end of the hallway," said the veteran. "We have secured him, searched his subspaces and everything else we could think of. But, my prince, he is still dangerous."

"I am aware." Prowl had to stop his engine from growling. "But I need answers."

"I understand," was the carefully kept neutral answer of the veteran. "Do you wish for assistance?"

Prowl wanted to decline immediately. Torture was an unreliable, vile method and even worse, some torture methods were dangerous for both sides. Yet, he needed the answers no matter the method, even – no especially – if it was from Yellowstripe.

The coldness within his spark spread a little when he said, "If he proves unwilling, yes."

They walked past the empty cells. Tiny, dark rooms with heavy chains and no berths and no room to transform. Kept in eternal darkness, if not for the guards coming occasionally down.



The interrogation room was bigger, but that was no relief as Prowl knew what it contained. In front of it, Prowl stopped. "I wish to enter alone. Even you, Quickstrike, will wait here."

"But –"

"I have been trained by the best of you. He will not be able to surprise me."

The warframes looked unconvinced, protective even. As the second prince, he was their prince, no matter what he had become. It was oddly reassuring. It was this that made him add, "I hope that he will better respond to me alone. If I am wrong, I will ask for... assistance."

The possibility alone tasted repulsive, yet he would do it.

It was Quickstrike who nodded first. "Please, do not hesitate to call."

"I will not," he promised as the Colonel opened the door to the Interrogation cell.

As Prowl entered the cell, it lay in a sharp contrast of light and shadow. At the wall burned a torch, its light unsteady. The old tools of pain and horror stood at the side, waiting for his order to be used again. He knew them well from his lessons, even though it had been longer ago than his lifetime that they had been used. The shadows highlighted their sharp edges and spikes, whispering of dark possibilities in his mind.

Possibilities centered on the mech chained tightly to the wall. Dents and dried energon covered cracked plating, and Prowl felt ill for a moment as he wondered how much of that energon belonged to his own carrier. As his optics wandered over the punishment the warframes had wrought on the secretary's frame, he noted with a detached sense of relief that the plates between Yellowstripe's legs hadn't been touched.

"So, you came." Yellowstripe had looked up, both of his blue optics a near pale white. "I guess you know now."

The voice was the same. The same as the one which had praised and encouraged him hundreds of times. The same voice he'd loved. "Now I know what, Yellowstripe?" he said, unable to stop himself. "I know you to be a murderer and traitor. What more is there?"

"A lot." Yellowstripe tried to move, and the chains merely jingled. Exhausted, he fell back. "Am I the only traitor?"

"No." It would have been so much easier to have Vapor at his side. To be able to trust his grand-uncle for advice and help. "But you conspired with them, so that shouldn't come as a surprise."

"Conspired." Yellowstripe grinned sharply. There was no mirth, only bitterness and sadness. "If you call betrayal and backstabbing each other as such, yes. Then we conspired."

"Backstabbing my creators, you mean," spat Prowl, his servos clenching to fists. "They trusted you!"

"They shouldn't have."

The fist hit the wall, right next to Yellowstripe's helmet. "I haven't come to let you gloat. I want answers." Prowl's optics narrowed. "And you had better give them to me."

Yellowstripe nodded slowly, glancing towards the equipment standing just a few meters away from them. "I guess you are prepared to use any method?"

"Yes." Prowl took a step back, massaging his right hand. He saw no reason to lie. "I will get them. No matter what way."

"You always were the most ruthless of your family." Pride echoed within the words. Deeper down was a timbre of fear.

"I am the second prince," said Prowl. "Wasn't it you who told me that I would be the one to make the darkest choices to protect Praxus?"

The former secretary sighed. "Yes, I did. You were so young then, barely a youngling. And yet, I had just talked your creators into sending you away to the warframes for training. They didn't want to raise you like a second heir, did you know that, Prowl? They thought it too harsh and dangerous to raise a noble to think like a warframe. But in the end they couldn't ignore the demands of their own military. The warframes get all second heirs of the nobles, that is the tradition and even they had to bow to it."

"Don't distract!" Prowl's doorwings soared. "This ancient history has no bearing on the now."

"But it has," objected Yellowstripe gently. Like a teacher trying to steer his student. "You want answers. Ask and I shall provide, your Highness."

Prowl vented, trying to gather himself under control once more. "Why," he finally forced out. "Why did you poison my sire, Lord Sparkshimmer? Why did you slaughter my carrier, Lord Black Haze?"

"Oh Prowl." He looked weary. "You've never hesitated to ask the difficult questions. In a way it is simple. You can't be a cyberkitten among turbofoxes, and that is what your creators were. Sooner or later someone would've ripped them apart."

"But it was you. Without you and your help, they would be still alive!"

"Without my help, this would've happened before Smokescreen was created!"

"Liar," hissed the prince.

For a long moment, the spitting of the fire was the only sound in the cell. Prowl took a step forward, ready to force an answer, when Yellowstripe started to chuckle quietly. The broken sound made the prince shiver.

"I wish," whispered the prisoner when he calmed. "If Primus had listened to some of my prayers, maybe you would be right. But our god showed no mercy and over the vorns my hopes failed one after another, until I saw no other way out."

The suddenly surging anger within him had Prowl turn away, turn towards the gleaming instruments of torture. "Are you saying my creator's deaths were necessary?" When Yellowstripe failed to answer, he touched the nearest one as a reminder to the mech. It was tool made for burning sensitive places. "Are you? Were Brazen's and Smokescreen's deaths necessary as well?"

He noticed with satisfaction that Yellowstripe flinched at Smokescreen's designation. The grief on the secretary's face was deep and true. "I hoped he would survive..."

"Smokescreen?"

"Yes." Yellowstripe bowed his head.

"Hope sometimes isn't enough," said Prowl cruelly. Yellowstripe did not deserve the shred of hope that Prowl was clinging to. Who said that he was even lying... there was a good chance that Smokescreen had died, while he talked with the murderer of their creators!

The mere thought let him take up that tool in earnest. It was surprisingly heavy. At its end was the sigil of Praxus, which could be burned into the protoform of the unfortunate victim.

"Was it all nothing but an act?" asked Prowl sharply. "Were you merely biding your time, while playing the loyal friend?"

"No!"

The near desperation in that single word had Prowl whirling around to the traitor, until he stood straight in front of him, the branding tool still in hand.

"No, Prowl," repeated Yellowstripe more softly. "I was their friend, and I loved them with all of my spark. I still do."

The worst thing was, that Prowl wanted to believe him more than anything else. It would all be better, if those happy memories of his life weren't all a lie. And yet, the experiences of the past joors alone had already changed him too much. There was no proof in this world anymore that could make him believe these words. In a way, that was most bitter realization of all.

"Then why did you murder my family?" Why did you betray us? Why did you hurt me so much?

There were tears swimming within Yellowstripe's optics that seemed as gentle and trustworthy as all his life. It tore on Prowl's spark. But he did not dare to whisper a single word of comfort.

"I never wanted to," confessed Yellowstripe. "Never." Prowl waited, saying nothing. "My prince... my Lord... for what I did, I deserve death. And I have no wish for anything else. If I tell you all and everything, will you promise me death?"

Despite everything, the question was still a blow to Prowl's spark. He didn't want the secretary dead, not really. He wanted his family back, including Yellowstripe. He wanted

them all alive and happy. And yet, it would never be again.

He deactivated his optics for a moment, searching for the coldness within him. When he found it, he let it fill his spark, let it burn him from the inside out. Only then did he look at the secretary again.

"There is no need for any promises. Your spark was foresworn the moment you handed Sparkshimmer the poison."

Every word carried the brutal edge of judgement within it and the former secretary shuddered beneath their weight. Tears fell from the bowed helmet. "Thank you."

Prowl slapped the secretary with his left hand. "Do not thank me! You deserve no mercy, much less from me!"

Yellowstripe didn't look up as he answered: "I pleaded for death, not mercy."

How true. And if not for the coldness, Prowl would have let his own tears join Yellowstripe's. But the coldness ruled, and buried all pity and love. "All I want is answers from you, traitor. Afterwards, death is the only thing that will welcome you."

Now Yellowstripe looked up, and Prowl saw that he had cracked the corner of the left optic. Maybe he had hit harder than intended, maybe he had miscalculated the fragility of a true civilian frame. He couldn't bring himself to care.

"So be it then," muttered Yellowstripe and something within the words sounded broken. Defeated. "I told you, they were similar to cyberkittens. Loveable, charming, but ultimately too nice to rule."

Prowl barely stopped himself from hitting the former secretary again. "My creators were good rulers!"

"Were they? You who have studied the statistics and travelled the realm, do you really believe so?" When Prowl didn't answer, Yellowstripe sighed. "Close your spark to your emotions, my prince. This is not the time to let grief rule you."

Then when was it the time? Prowl took a step back to prevent himself from doing something he might regret. Or not. He didn't know what would be worse. With a cry, he threw the branding iron across the cell, watching it fly.

He didn't want to admit it, but there was truth within Yellowstripe's accusation. The border was insecure, and the warframes helpless to change it as the smugglers came with letters from nobles that allowed them immunity. The canyons housed bandits, and had become a feared place as no one saw the need to send an army in. Too expensive, too high a loss of life. The economy was struggling, the debt accumulating too quickly, the growth too low to help.

His mind went back to Flipper, who had been forced to plead for his brother's life just because the entire family had been unable to pay 900 credits. Would they have been too poor to pay for the testing just a generation ago?

The iron clattered against the wall and fell to the floor. Prowl eyed it with crossed arms, then turned to Yellowstripe, who seemed to relax a bit now that the torture instrument had left Prowl's hand.

"There might be some problems," the prince admitted. "But Praxus is no worse than other Dukedoms and states."

"Praxus is the only one continually getting worse," argued Yellowstripe harshly. "We once were at the top, now we are in the lower middle, soon we will be last. The reasons are simple - mismanagement and corruption."

"You blame my creators." Prowl clenched his hands.

"Of course I do! Whenever possible they gave away yet another expensive gift, yet another lavish favour. For nothing!" Yellowstripe was yelling. "Just orns ago, there was this Lord who couldn't pay and they simply waived his debt with a smile. 10 million credits lost and why should the other Lords pay now? Or your foundation. They tripled the money without checking once if they had the money or even what your seed capital was."

Prowl had wanted to protest the former accusations, but the last one stopped him. "How much did they add to the foundation?"

"86 million credits," was the fast answer. Too fast. Prowl frowned.

"And where did they come from?" Yellowstripe looked away, incensing the prince's anger once more. "Answer! Or do you really want to force me to use other methods?"

"No... no, I don't." Yellowstripe sighed. "I do not know, Lord Shanix is the treasurer."

"And yet you know something, or you wouldn't remain silent first." When Yellowstripe refused to say another word, Prowl placed his hand on the neck of Yellowstripe. The former secretary had only a civilian frame, and those had gaps and openings. A quick turn of the hand in the right place, and he held a very sensitive cable within his fingers. He squeezed it slowly. "Tell me."

Yellowstripe panted. Less from pain, and more from shock. Had he really thought that Prowl would not do as he promised? He squeezed the cable harder and gently began to tug. "Tell me now, Yellowstripe." He softened his words. "Tell me, and I will stop."

Yellowstripe looked away. Maybe to hide the new tears within his optics. "I'll tell you." Prowl's hand stopped moving. "The money for the foundation came from my private funds."

The hand left Yellowstripe's frame as if it had been burned. "It was your money?!"

"Yes."

"Why?" And for a single moment, Prowl sounded as lost as he felt.

"Lord Shanix came to me in desperation, not knowing where to take the money from. And I knew already I would not need it anymore."

Prowl could only stare, speechless. This was the Yellowstripe he knew. Gentle, helpful, loyal. This was the mech he loved. Only why...? He stumbled backwards, away from the mech. He turned away, trying to get his composure back, to get the coldness back that had protected his spark. But it was impossible, because Yellowstripe continued speaking.

"I thought the foundation the best idea that had landed on my desk in the last 60 vorns. I knew that I had to support it. Not only would it help you with winning the favor of the population, but it would also lessen the suffering among them. The 86 million credits are all I owned besides my apartment and private things. I haven't been blessed with a bondmate, so there is no family besides you to inherit anything."

Besides you.

Prowl wanted to claw his own burning spark out. "You considered me your own?"

There was a long silence. Prowl reached the opposite wall, leaning against it, while deactivating his optics. He dared not to look at the other mech. The silence stretched.

"Always," was finally the quiet answer. "Brazen was your creator's sparkling, their pride and joy. But you... you had their warmth, and Black Haze's mannerisms. However, your processor was far more academic and inquisitive. You always wanted to know everything and you were asking endless questions..." His voice had softened. "I enjoyed teaching you more than anything else."

Prowl concentrated on the wall against his back. Its coolness, the roughness beneath his hands, the points pressing against his doorwings. Yet, he could not ignore those words that were all he had ever wanted to hear – and yet brought him now closer to breaking than anything else besides Smokescreen.

"I enjoyed it too," he whispered. A confession more than anything else. How could he have enjoyed the lessons with a murderer? How wretched was he?

Yellowstripe must have heard him, because he said: "Your creators never minded it. And when your tutors were called, they could build upon existing knowledge. It was I who oversaw your teaching. The subjects, the grades, everything. Even the intelligence test they subjected you to, after you learned everything at a far faster pace than expected. Needless to say, you excelled, though I hid the results and instructed the tutors to treat you as normal as possible. I wanted to prevent you from becoming arrogant under any circumstances."

An intelligence test? Prowl had indeed no memory of one, but then he had been so very young. In his memories, the tutors had always been quite strict and rarely showered him with praise. It had never seemed unusual to him in any way... but then he hadn't had any comparisons, had he?

Intrigued, he dared to look at Yellowstripe and asked: "I suppose you are not simply telling me this to remind me of better times?"

Yellowstripe managed a sad smile. It was answer enough.

"Then what is it you want to say? It can't be worse than the other things I have learned today."

"Not worse... per se." Yellowstripe sighed. "The signs of Praxus' worsening were already visible when Brazen had just reached adulthood. He was adept at capturing the sparks of the masses, but every flaw of your creators he exhibited worse. Those who knew became exceedingly worried."

"Meaning ... Vapor and you?" guessed Prowl. Yellowstripe nodded. "Was it then that both of you started conspiring?"

"I do not know about Lord Vapor," answered the former secretary. "But I decided to implement a...let's call it a contingency plan." Yellowstripe's optics burned into him. "I decided that you were our best bet."

"I?" asked Prowl surprised.

"Yes, you. A young genius, entrusted into my hands to teach and form." Yellowstripe smirked darkly. "And form I did. I saw that Brazen would need a co-ruler at the very least. Maybe even a shadow ruler."

Prowl shifted with sudden unease. A shadow ruler? He? He had never planned to stand behind the throne and to rule in its shadow. He had never wanted it. Yet...

"Brazen," he remembered out loud. "He always said we would rule together."

The former secretary nodded. "I sped up your education, taxed even your mind to the limits. A normal second heir would have only learned military customs and tactics to prevent them from taking over with the military's might. Just as Lord Vapor is trying to do right now. I arranged that you learned much more. Etiquette, laws, languages, economics and more. I encouraged every interest you showed and managed that even the Grand Duke's approved of your training."

So many bright, happy memories of praise and lessons, they all became suddenly darker. Tainted. "My creators knew?"

"Partially. They only saw that their second creation was a genius and their first creation had trouble with the paperwork. The solution was obvious to them." There was an ugly sneer on Yellowstripe's face. "They always were blind how foolish, incompetent and idealistic to an armor raising degree he was. But no one cared, because he had Sparkshimmer's charisma, looks and a warm spark." He gave Prowl a hard look. "He was all you aren't."

Prowl flinched. "I was supposed to be the second heir. Brazen's shield and the Field Marshal."

"As if. You were supposed to be Brazen's crutch. All the work, and none of the glory."

Disbelief warred with horror. "And Brazen simply accepted that?"

"Brazen never had the intelligence to ask himself of the danger his little brother might represent," snapped the prisoner. "He was happy when we told him that you would shoulder the greatest share of his administrative tasks during his rule!"

"Those reports, which he always sent me..." he said slowly, turning the thought over in his head and becoming more and more sure that it was true. "They were the normal work of a first heir."

"Indeed."

"A second heir shouldn't have been able to do them." It was a heady thought. To think that he had been trained to this. To think that the signs of betrayal had always been so visible.

"Yet you never had trouble." Yellowstripe's optics gleamed. "You had finished the education of a first heir when you were 108 vorns old. We only omitted the introduction to society and the forging of your own net of connections, but then there were already traitors everywhere. What worth have such connections then? Instead we sent you to the warframes like a true second heir. I knew that they would be able to teach you more about war than any tutor ever could."

"Airlord Skydive was angry in the beginning that I knew nothing..."

Yellowstripe shrugged. "But he taught you, didn't he? And you learned."

It was all true. How had he missed so much? Yet, how should he have known better? Only now, looking back, he could truly recognize how sheltered he had been. There had been his family, Orion and the warframes, but he never got truly close to any other nobles or second heirs.

Oh, there had been the princes of Vos, yes, but Vos had always operated under a vastly different system. And when he had turned 200 vorns, instead of taking up the mantle of a second heir and becoming the next Field Marshal of Praxus, he went off to the academy in secrecy – with the explicit encouragement of Yellowstripe.

The cold tactician within that had been raised by warframes for 90 vorns could admire such manipulation. The rest of him that still loved Yellowstripe like a third creator rocked with pain. He raised his hand to his face, and touched it. His fingers came away glistening with tears. Angry at his own weakness, he let go of the wall. There was no use in crying now. The dagger and poison had found their mark.

Only, the mark had never been Prowl. He called up the realization that his creators were dead, the image of Smokescreen so small and helpless in the berth. It gave him the strength he needed.

"That is why I survived, isn't it?" Prowl walked over to Yellowstripe, banishing all emotions from his face. "You never wanted me dead. You wanted me in power."

Yellowstripe watched him like a cyberhawk watched a silversnake. "Yes."



"And to ensure that, you killed Brazen first. Because with him dead, even if everything else failed, I would eventually rule."

"Yes."

Finally, the parts were falling into their place. "Was the assassin sent to Fortress Prien then nothing but a distraction?"

"In a way, though not of the guards as you might think." Yellowstripe sighed. "While I came to the decision of wanting to see you rule, Lord Vapor has lost his faith in the ruling family completely. It does not help that your birth inevitably lowered his own standing from second heir to acting second heir."

Prowl deactivated his optics as new understanding brought new pain. "So that is why now. I have become 200 vorns and an adult and as such Vapor would lose any power beyond his title as a Marquis. He wouldn't have been Field Marshal anymore! He had to act now or never."

"Yes. Your very existence threatened his power and his ambitions. He sees himself as a better ruler than your creators and speaking in pure ability, it is true."

There was something in the tone in the last sentence. Not quite admiration, but a certain kind of respect. "I guess he approached you?"

A wry smile. "I imagine he approached every mech on the Council and many more."

The Council chamber and its empty seats rose from Prowl's memories. Of the nine most trusted mechs outside of the immediate family, four had committed high treason in the worst way. How many more traitors were there outside of the Council? The coldness settled in again, deeper than before.

The secretary looked away. "I rebuked his first offers. After all, I had been loyal for a thousand vorns, secretly removing those that didn't deserve the Grand Duke's trust."

A decaorn ago, Prowl wouldn't have thought Yellowstripe capable of murder. Now, the hint that Yellowstripe might have killed other nobles and mechs alike was only taken with a certain kind of dark acceptance by his hardening spark.

When he said nothing, Yellowstripe continued: "However, my loyalty couldn't stop their penchant for giving away expensive presents and Lord Vapor's arguments were based very much in reality. Worse, even as he argued, I could see his regret and pain... Lord Vapor is an honorable mech and not disloyal to Praxus itself. On many subjects we saw and thought the same."

An honorable, loyal mech that had committed high treason against his own family. Prowl wanted to tear something apart, but all that showed of his rage was the trembling of his doorwings and the blazing within his optics.

"And so you plotted?" he said quietly.

"I thought it better to join. He already had traitors everywhere, and..." Yellowstripe vented harshly. "I had to ensure that you lived!"

The former secretary looked pleadingly at him, begging him to understand, to approve. But all such empathy had left Prowl joors ago and now he only wanted to hurt something. Someone.

"I suppose my creator's sparks were then simply the low, low price that had to be paid." He leaned forward, putting a hand against the wall, so he could whisper to Yellowstripe's audios. "Tell me, what did Sparkshimmer say when you gave him the poison? Thank you? Did Black Haze show you his back in complete trust, while you pulled out the dagger? Did my sire scream for mercy?"

Yellowstripe trembled and outright flinched at the last question.

Prowl's spark became heavier. "He did, didn't he?"

When the prisoner remained silent, Prowl pushed himself away from the wall with snort of disgust. It was nearly casual when he forced his hand into the opening of the plated between shoulder and breast and ripped out a small cable.

Yellowstripe gave a shout, and Prowl found he felt nothing. He let the cable carelessly fall to the floor.

"Let's talk some more," he said. "How about those other traitors you mentioned?"

It had been a mistake to hurt Yellowstripe. Prowl knew this the moment the former secretary looked at him again. There was anger now in his optics.

"You are wondering who you can trust anymore, aren't you?" Yellowstripe chuckled. "I have wondered that for vorns now."

Prowl crossed his arms. "Give me your thoughts."

"Haven't you found anyone who you can trust?" Yellowstripe smiled.

Anyone? Who was left? Smokescreen was a youngling and in stasis, he barely counted. Who else? Two orns ago, he could have answered with a dozen designations and yet now ... all he saw were possible enemies.

Yellowstripe's smile waned. "Not a single designation?"

"Major-General Blueshield," Prowl answered finally. "He can't be Vapor's or yours, or he would have been the perfect traitor to carry out the murders, while keeping you in a perfect position as a spy."

"True. Major-General Blueshield always was the biggest obstacle," the secretary admitted, much to the prince's relief. "A true pinnacle of all those warframe values. Though Lord Vapor has insisted that I be the one to carry out the assassinations. Insisted to a point I saw no way

to refuse him, without alerting him to the fact that I might be less... enthusiastic than he thought."

"And alerting him to the fact that I am not in Fortress Prien," said Prowl drily.

"Yes, my prince. He wanted to get me out of the way."

And he had succeeded, Prowl thought, contemplating the chains. Would Yellowstripe be here in this cell if he had been willing to kill Prowl? No, do not go down that road, he scolded himself. There is nothing but more pain at its end. And yet...

"I find it curious that you didn't name Captain Quickstrike. Surely, he has earned your trust?"

Yellowstripe's words pulled him out of his dark thoughts. "He certainly has not told my granduncle where I am. Yet, I wonder, if he is loyal to me... or to you."

Had it only been a few joors since he had trusted Quickstrike completely? But the doubt was now there, it had crept into his spark together with his grief.

The secretary gave him the same smile as so many vorns ago, when a much younger Prowl had gotten some particular difficult answer right. "He has no affiliation with Lord Vapor, and he certainly knew nothing of my plans. Indeed, I handpicked him to guard you for that very reason."

"I see." Prowl shuttered his optics. "No warframe enjoys deceit, so I can suppose that all warframes remaining on the Council are at least to some degree loyal to me. Lord Shanix and Lord Clearwater?"

"As loyal as a noble can be."

Which wasn't very, as Prowl was learning. He checked his chronometer. Time was precious and already he had been too long in this cell. If all the warframes outside were indeed loyal, they were probably already contemplating on breaking down the door to help out their Lord.

"Just tell me, has all this been worth it, Yellowstripe?" He searched the secretary's face for something, yet he didn't even know what. Regret? If so, he didn't find any. "The people loved Brazen. He would not have made the best ruler, but with your and my help he would have been passable. Now I am alone. I have no connections or support among the nobles and among the people few know me, fewer love me." He couldn't help but sound bitter. "And I am about to begin a war that will endear me to neither."

Yellowstripe had the audacity to shrug. "Ultimately, there are two ways to rule, my prince. Through fear or through love. Your creators chose love and there is nothing wrong with that. But some will always love power more."

Prowl felt wary. "What are you saying?"

Yellowstripe smiled sharply. "Love has failed. But you have all the tools for fear. The warframes, the army, even your own reputation, they all will aid you." His optics became darker. "Who needs connections, when you can force them to obey by the blade?"

Prowl reeled back. "I do not want to rule through terror!"

Those dark optics narrowed. "You do not have to. You can simply flee and let my carefully wrought work go to waste. Why not send a letter to Lord Vapor to congratulate him as well?"

Prowl stared, shocked.

"Look at the situation! You're not some hapless second heir shoved into a ruling position. You have been prepared for this very orn, you have the only support that counts –that of the warframes, and I have even painstakingly put aside the money you will need to win the war."

"What..."

Yellowstripe's face twisted. "This has always been your coup."

Prowl backed away. This was not the Yellowstripe he knew. Not at all. "You're insane."

"Insane? This is the truth. Put an end to the rebellion. Kill Vapor, execute the traitors, and force the rest to be loyal!" He smirked darkly. "Then everyone will fear you regardless of what else you will do."

"No..." whispered Prowl.

Yellowstripe strained against his chains until they creaked, as if trying to reach the prince. His optics were wild. "The truth is not a pretty thing. Choose Prowl! Live and rule through fear, or let the murderer of your family rule! Choose fast, or Vapor will chose for you."

Prowl turned and run, but before he reached the door, he could hear Yellowstripe's last sentence loud and clear:

"This is your time of ascension! Make them kneel!"

And then, finally, the door closed behind Prowl, and Yellowstripe's voice fell away.

## Chapter End Notes

Took a bit longer than expected, but I hope you enjoyed it anyway. I would really appreciate reviews about Yellowstripe and this whole chapter. I put a lot of work into it, and really hope that Yellowstripe came across as intended. ^^  
Thanks for reading!

# Part Six

## Chapter Summary

Prowl knows the truth now, but that only means it is time for some difficult decisions.

## Chapter Notes

Beta: Starfire201

### The Ascension

-

### Part 6

For a single moment, it all felt surreal. Like a nightmare he would wake up any second now. He could still hear Yellowstripe's words, ringing in his head like a cursed song of truth.

"My prince?"

He looked up. The warframes surrounded him, radiating concern and uncertainty. Quickstrike stood directly in front of him, hand half raised as if to touch him.

"Just thinking," he said quickly and glanced back at the door. Maybe it was wrong to feel relieved that it was closed, but he truly never wanted to see Yellowstripe again. Never. "He confessed everything. Send in a scribe and a judge to listen to the confession as well, then prepare everything for the execution."

His spark twisted in on itself, screaming, but he barely felt it among all the other pain. The Colonel of the prison guards bowed. "Yes, my prince. Shall we interrogate him for details?"

"Yes. And ask him to tell you everything that I should know. Make sure that no one besides the three of you and I will see what he tells you. Understood?"

"Yes."

"Good. Captain Quickstrike, come with me." He started walking past the prison guards and the cells to the stairs. He wanted out of this pit. Just... away. Far away.

Yet... could he? Could he run? Surely, Sentinel Prime in Iacon would offer sanctuary for the creations of his own cousin. After all, they were part of House Prime, noblesse du prime and Prince Orion would certainly be happy to see Prowl and Smokescreen safe and unharmed.

Smokescreen. There was no way that his little brother would survive such a journey. He shivered, feeling cold.

When he reached the usual floors of the Palaise, he did not walk down to the Council Chamber. Instead, he followed the old memories of his younglinghood, when he had played with the princes of Vos. They had always liked towers and the wind and as such he had visited these places of the Palaise much more often than anyone else.

Several hallways and a small staircase meant for servants and guards later, he stepped out onto a small balcony on top of the highest tower of the Palaise. It was night, the cool air greeted his doorwings like an old lover long lost. In front of him, Praxus laid out in all of its shining glory, glittering in the night like an endless ocean of light. Here, up high, it was all peaceful and calm.

"My prince, wouldn't it be safer to step inside again?" asked Quickstrike quietly at his side.

"Probably," admitted Prowl. "But then, who would expect to see me here on a tiny balcony barely big enough to hold the both of us?"

Quickstrike sighed, clasping his hands behind his back. No doubt to prevent himself from simply grasping Prowl and dragging him inside. "If someone sees you..."

"They never saw four playing princes in broad daylight, why would they now see me in the dark?" The happy memories were soothing. "Also, from the ground this balcony looks barely more than decoration. I doubt that many know it has a practical use."

"Still, there might be someone waiting..."

"Maybe. But for the moment I want to be right here." He should care more, he knew. But any threat to his own life and spark just felt so insignificant at the moment. More like a promise of relief than anything else.

No. He couldn't let those thoughts win. He put his hands on the low balustrade, wondering who of the normal citizens already knew or suspected what had happened. They were now his subjects.

His to rule.

His to protect.

But from what? Vapor would be a good ruler to them, maybe better than his own creators. Why should he protect them from such a thing? And of course, if he denied Vapor, if he demanded justice... then it would mean civil war. Worse, Vapor was clearly prepared and willing to risk just that. And Prowl suspected that his own armies – what Vapor hadn't stolen – were just as prepared and willing.

However, was he willing to risk countless deaths, incalculable suffering, and worse, just so he could kill his own grand-uncle who might have committed treason out of the good of his spark?

It tasted bitter in his mouth. He had never desired power. If he walked away, he could race after his own dreams and joys. He could complete his Masters. He might even become a professor. Granted, probably in Iacon, but... he would be happy. And Praxus would be happy as well.

But to leave the crime of his own creators' and brother's murders unpunished... Yet, if anyone would understand any of his decisions, it would be these three warm, loving mechs.

So, the answer was no. He was not willing to let the pain in his spark befall other creations, other brothers. He did not want to see them sacrificing their lives in his name – or in Vapor's.

And yet...

Smokescreen.

Smokescreen could not flee. And as long as Smokescreen lived and was in Praxus, Vapor couldn't rule. To abandon him would mean his little brother's death. He clenched his servos. He couldn't let Smokescreen die. No matter what. He had already lost too much, grieved too deeply, to walk away.

As he looked over Praxus, the city he had been raised to love and protect, he followed his thoughts to their dark conclusion.

He would sacrifice them, and more for Smokescreen. He would bring war to his own land, he would strike fear into friend and enemy alike, he would rule without mercy until every single mech bowed his head and knelt.

'May they forgive me...' he thought with the deepest regret.

Then he started to plot his next steps on the inevitable path to all-out civil war.

~

Dawn came slowly, lightning the sky from an impenetrable black to a dark blue and eventually to the pink of freshly spilled energon. In a brilliant display it spread across the sky, changing the light to a muted golden-red that covered everything. From so high up, he could already see the first Praxians, walking or driving to their work. Did they see that omen of blood? Could the priest divine what horrors his decisions would bring upon them all?

He turned away and entered the tower, plans and tactics occupying his now too quiet mind. The coldness of his spark had spread and settled over him like a too heavy cloak he couldn't shed anymore and instead pulled ever closer.

The coldness brought relief from his emotions.

"Quickstrike, wasn't there a saying?" he mused on the way to the Council Chamber.  
"Something about a second heir on the throne."

Quickstrike looked towards him, startled. "Yes, my prince. They say a throne with a second heir on it has Death at its side."

"Ah, yes. I will certainly not be the one to prove them wrong." He gave Quickstrike a glance. "As second heir and future Grand Duke, I want all warframes within Praxus, Fortress Prien and the Garrisons Kumbalt and Trian to mobilize. From all other bases, I want reports about their combat readiness as fast as possible. Everyone who does not heed my call will be considered a traitor to state and Prime. Understood?"

Quickstrike blinked, astonished. Then a fierce joy entered his face. "By your orders we live, my prince. May I go...?"

"Go," said Prowl without breaking his stride. "If anything comes up, do not hesitate to let me know immediately."

"As you wish, my prince." He gave a wink to two guards who walked a bit further behind to take over his spot, then he broke off and ran down another hallway, hand already at his comm.

Prowl reached the Council Chamber door and looked at his new guards. He would have to learn their names fast, if only to protect himself better. "Please tell someone to bring several cubes of enegex to the Council Chamber. I need the refreshment." He looked into their optics. "Make sure that there is only enegex in them and nothing else." The guards flinched. "I trust you," continued Prowl, to soothe the verbal slap he had just delivered. "But we all must remain vigilant in the coming vorns."

They bowed. "Yes, my prince." One stepped forward. Quickstrike's Lieutenant? "No one but your most trusted will come near the enegex."

"Good." Prowl entered the Council Chamber. Inside, the Warlords and noble Lords stood around the table, the chairs having been pushed back to the walls. Before them were maps and lists, photos and notes.

"Good morning, my Lords," greeted Prowl calmly, waving away their light bows. "It seems you have been busy as well. Maybe it is time to rename the Council Chamber the Warcouncil Chamber again."

The warframes shot the two noble Lords a triumphant look, then Airlord Skydive stepped forward. "So, war it is?"

"War it is."

~

The Council meeting hadn't lasted for long after that. All the Lords and Warlords had known what they needed to do, and Prowl had passed the point of exhaustion joors ago.



Yet, recharge did not come easily or fast. He had hoped for rest; instead, all he could think of was Smokescreen and how he was lying all alone and vulnerable in the medical wing. Guilt and worry ate at him, yet his thoughts simply couldn't stop racing. Who was a friend, who was a traitor, who was a foe? Was Smokescreen really safe among those medics from the Charité?

The only thing worse was the everlasting grief, which choked and drowned him. To avoid crying helplessly, he forced his thoughts back to the sole living, non-traitorous member of his family, and the threats he faced. Would Vapor send new assassins for Smokescreen? Or would he try to kill Prowl first?

He didn't know. There was so much he didn't know. So many secrets and plots and lies... He shuddered even under the warm blanket. He couldn't trust them. He could trust no one.

He was glad that his creators had been spared this pain.

The soft knock at the door woke him as surely as any alarm. "My prince, are you awake?"

With relief, he sat up on the berth. He wouldn't have been able to stand his own mind and feelings for much longer.

"Yes," he said, while standing up. Checking the chronometer told him already what he had feared, he had barely gotten two joors of sleep. That meant his guards had woken him up early. "What has happened?"

A warframe entered the room. It was Quickstrike's Lieutenant, who knelt down before him. "My prince, a missive of his Grace, Sentinel Prime, has arrived. The envoy is waiting outside."

Prowl nodded, his doorwings barely twitching. "Anything else?"

"Only that another assassin has been caught in the kitchens. He now is confined to the dungeons."

Prowl's tired frame became even heavier. "Who had he targeted?"

"You, my prince. He tried to poison your energon, but fell for a trap."

He wished he could say that he was surprised. Yet he would have been foolish to assume that Vapor had given up. Feeling so much older than his 200 vorns, he said: "Interrogate him. When you feel you know everything, execute him and send his head to my dear grand-uncle. Don't let the public know about him, there is no need to spread uncertainty even further."

Crude, yes. But it also was a message that couldn't be mistaken for anything else.

"As you wish, my prince."

Prowl walked past his guard, who followed a step behind. Through the door was a hallway, where indeed a slim, blue mech surrounded by guards waited. He had the typical Iaconian frame: slender, but with sharp edges. He wore the traditional, golden decoration of being

Prime's personal envoy on his frame. Usually the mech was jovial and more than a bit hyper, but the ready weapons of the clearly agitated guard had dimmed his energy output somewhat. That said, he was still constantly fidgeting.

"Blurr," greeted Prowl. "You are earlier than expected."

Blurr knelt down. "Prince Prowl of Praxus, acting Grand Duke of Praxus, my Lord and Prime has sent me off last orn, but the night has slowed me down a bit. I apologize for only arriving now. I bear a letter from his Grace, Sentinel Prime." Every word was spoken as if in a hurry, but Prowl knew that Blurr lived all his life a bit faster than the rest of the world.

Blurr held out a small, black box to him. Black, the color of justice. Its only adornment was a small latch at the top.

Once, Prowl would have stepped forward and taken that box without hesitating. Once. Now he gave a wink to the lieutenant. "Please take that box and secure it."

The lieutenant accepted the box on his behalf and began to quickly examine it. "It looks genuine, my prince. It has a bloodlock."

"Every personal and important message of the Prime has a bloodlock for security and secrecy," Blurr explained quickly. "Only the intended mech can open it without destroying the box and everything inside, in this case Prince Prowl of Praxus."

"He is right," said Prowl. "Please give it to me."

The box was surprisingly light in his hand. Prowl pushed the latch aside and found a long, silver needle. Without hesitating, he pressed it between two armor parts of his fingers, so he could pierce his protoform and draw energon. It hurt a bit, but the 'click' as it opened made that feeling nearly insignificant. Inside the box was a folded, white sheet of agrament.

With a pounding spark, Prowl reached for it. It was light between his fingers, so thin that it felt easily breakable. An illusion, Prowl knew. Few things could change an agrament enough to write on it, fewer could completely destroy it. A solar star would be able to do it, maybe the forges at the temple if given enough time. This property was what made agrament so difficult to create, and the most expensive writing material on Cybertron. It was only to be used for the most important messages.

As he unfolded it, he saw the Prime's own handwriting in each glyph.

'To the second heir of Praxus, acting Grand Duke of Praxus

Dear Prowl,

I hope you and Smokescreen are still alive when this reaches you.

With sorrow I felt the sparks of Sparkshimmer and Black Haze expire, with horror I heard that it had been Yellowstripe who did it. For all my wisdom and despite the Matrix entrusted to me, I did not foresee this.

Orion wanted to bring this message to Praxus himself, but I could not allow him to go. It would be too dangerous and such an act would be interpreted by too many other Grand Dukes and Dukes as unlawful interference and intrusion into ducal matters. Militarily my hands are bound, but I still am Grand Duke of Iacon in my own right.

If you need to flee, know that Iacon will always open its doors to you. You are my kin, and part of my House and I will protect you as I protect my own creations. There is no shame in fleeing. You are still far too young to stand alone in such a situation. Older, more experienced, mechs have chosen flight.

Yet, when I prayed at the temple my spark felt that Iacon would not be your path. Death had visited upon Praxus and death will feast there and death walks next to you. From this barest of knowledge I can only surmise that you will try to get justice in your creators' and brother's name.

If you indeed choose to do so, then all of Cybertron shall hear the truth as I speak it:

'Whoever is responsible for the death of my beloved cousin, his bondmate and his prime heir, for the attempted murder of their other heirs, be they forsaken by Prime and Primus.

All who help them, give them shelter, lie in their name, be they forsaken by Prime and Primus.

All who stand in Prince Prowl's way to mete out justice, be they forsaken by Prime and Primus, for he is our tool and will.

Such is my will and word as Sentinel Prime and Judge by the Grace of Primus. All shall heed it.'

Whatever darkness you might see, do not lose sight of Primus's flame and light.

Stay safe,

Sentinel Prime'

How had the Prime felt his creators' demise? Had he felt it like Prowl? Or differently? And how could he have possibly known that Prowl would not do the sensible thing and flee? A Prime was said to know and feel more than a normal mech, but he had long thought this to be mostly myth. Maybe he had to rethink this.

He reread the letter to understand all its implications and then a third time just so he could feel the concern – the love – between the lines. Yes, he had never been close to the Prime. But after all this it felt too good that some family was not...

He stopped his thoughts and folded the letter again. He had no time to be weak.

"Envoy Blurr, tell Sentinel Prime that I am thankful and that I indeed choose to stay." He paused. "And to fight."

"As you command, your Highness." Blurr rose, bowed and was then escorted away, his fast steps barely letting the warframes at his side keep up.

Prowl looked to the Lieutenant. "Please tell the Council and Quickstrike that the Prime is supporting us and has asked us to be his tool and will to bring Vapor and any other traitors to justice."

His words were greeted with sheer elation. While the Prime was the highest Judge on Cybertron and Primus' voice, it was rare that he chose to involve himself in a conflict and rarer that he openly supported one side over the other. That he did so now would make this not merely a war but a crusade for Primus in many processors.

Prowl allowed himself a small smile. And once the exact wording of Sentinel Prime's ruling became known, Vapor and the other traitors would have much greater difficulty in finding support anywhere. He turned back to the door, though he didn't know what he would do. Recharge had been a failure, and the room barely offered anything else to do.

Brushing past the Lieutenant, he spontaneously decided that maybe this was the perfect moment to learn more about one of his warriors. "Lieutenant, please follow me."

The stunned silence at his back was enough to make his smile a tiny bit bigger.

He sat down at the berth, elbows resting on his knees, and the Lieutenant closed the door behind himself. A flash of sudden fear coursed through Prowl. Was that mech trustworthy? Could he defend himself if it came to a fight? It was pure logic that forced these thoughts away. The Lieutenant and his mechs could have killed him at any time in the last two joors. That he was still alive was proof of their loyalty – at least for the moment. And as for their future loyalty, well, he just had to ensure that it would stay with him.

The Lieutenant had knelt down in front of him. That would be something to get used to. As a prince they had only bowed, and when he had trained with them as one of them, there had been even less respect.

"Rise, Lieutenant," he said. "There is no need to kneel when it is only the two of us."

"Yes, my prince."

The warframe rose smoothly and Prowl took the time to really look at him. He was green and extremely broad-shouldered, even for a warframe. Specialty upgrades, maybe? His doorwings had more panels too. And then there was his left hand that had a different shade of green than the rest of the frame. Lighter, shinier. Newer.

"What is your name?" asked Prowl.

"Lieutenant Sharphack, my prince. At your service!" He stood at attention, yellow optics focused at the wall.

Maybe another civilian or noble would not have seen it. But Prowl knew warframes and their quirks and as such this overcorrect behavior was a glaring alarm bell to him that Sharphack

was nervous.

Prowl guessed that he was actually very young to be a Lieutenant. Oh, he was older than Prowl, but young compared to most adults. Maybe 400 vorns. Warframe ranks were bestowed on abilities alone and it defined everything in their society. Only those becoming a Major-General or higher could claim the title Warlord, which was the equivalent to a civilian noble.

This was why second heirs were necessary. Warframes wouldn't be able to accept someone ordering them around on right of birth alone. No, they had to respect that mech and second heirs were those that earned that necessary respect through training, living and dying with them.

The Lieutenant shouldn't be kneeling in front of him, thought Prowl. Not in front of a second heir, who once would have gladly fought side by side with him.

"Relax, Lieutenant," he said quietly, not hiding how much he disliked that subservient behavior. "I may be the acting Grand Duke now, but I still was and am a second heir. I will require kneeling when it is protocol, but not here."

Sharphack hesitated, then relaxed as he was told. There was an uncertainty in how he held his doorwings, even though his face was neutral. "I understand, my prince."

But he didn't believe him. Well, he would. Prowl needed the loyalty of the warframes, and he was more than willing to go the extra mile to get and keep it.

His optics flickered to the unusual hand. It twitched unconsciously as Sharphack followed Prowl's glance. "Your hand, it looks different. Reconstruction?"

"Yes, my prince."

"Master Medic Hoist?"

"Ah, no. The Charité." When Prowl said nothing, he elaborated: "Master Medic Hoist felt that my hand was better served with a specialist. But he did do the regular check-ups."

"No pains, I hope?"

"No."

If possible, Sharphack looked even more uncomfortable than he had a few clicks ago. Just how had Brazen always made friends so easily? Prowl was trying and yet... failing. But failure was not an option. If Flipper were here, he would undoubtedly tease him for his great conversationalist skills, and then encourage him to try once more.

He tried to smile. "I said you can relax, Lieutenant Sharphack. I do not want to reprimand or eat you."

This time the optics widened in surprise. "Ah, my prince... that is not what I thought you would do."

Was that a spark of humor? Prowl hoped so. He grasped it with both hands, and said, "Really? Then I suppose you were waiting for my vicious claw attack?"

Sharphack stared at him, then closed his mouth and looked away. "I don't expect you to attack me."

"Good. Because that would be very strange to attack one's own bodyguards." No stranger than to kill your own family, he thought bitterly. "Sharphack, I simply called you to talk. If you feel that this is something you do not wish to do, you can leave."

The moment he had spoken these words, he feared that the Lieutenant would take him up on his offer. Maybe Flipper had been just a fluke. If he failed with a single mech sworn to protect and support him, then how could he succeed with a state?

For the first time since entering the room the Lieutenant truly relaxed, to Prowl's immense relief. His doorwings lowered and even began to gently swing. "No, my prince. I am truly honored that you consider me important enough to talk to."

Now it was Prowl's turn to feel uncomfortable. "Why wouldn't I? Obviously, Captain Quickstrike trusts you a lot."

"Not many nobles care to know their guard," admitted the Lieutenant slowly, as if expecting some unfavorable reaction.

"Not many ruling nobles were ever second heirs," countered the prince. Privately, he thought the words very true. Second heir or not, had he bothered to know who guarded him at the Academy? No, not at all. He had just lived his life without checking if those he trusted had his back. It had been pure luck and Yellowstripe that had saved him so far and nothing else. Never again. "So, tell me, how is Quickstrike faring?"

"Good, my prince. Shall I ask for an update?"

"Please." He nodded. "What about Yellowstripe? Has he talked yet?"

"Yes. He has answered every question and more." The warframe scowled. "He was extremely cooperative, that coward."

Coward? Prowl thought many things about Yellowstripe, but the word coward was not one of them. "He is answering, because he fears what would happen if he remained silent," Prowl said quietly. "He is answering, because it furthers his own goals." His guard stared at him, and Prowl regretted his words. Maybe he had already said too much.

Sharphack nodded. "But how would it further his cause to tell us everything?"

'This has always been your coup.' The cruel words echoed in his processor and he flinched. For a moment the silence between the two mechs was nearly suffocating, then Prowl sighed and buried everything deep within his frozen spark. "Sharphack, ask me in a few vorns again, but right now the pain is too fresh."

The tone was one of an order and the warframe nearly snapped back into standing at attention, but barely stopped himself. "Of course, my prince. Excuse my insensitivity."

"Nothing to excuse," said Prowl. "Curiosity is a sign of intelligence, after all." Maybe that intelligence plus the upgrades had been the reason for Sharphack's quick rise through the ranks. "How did you get your hand injured?"

"Oh. A training accident."

Prowl nearly believed him, until he saw the left doorwing twitching nervously. "A training accident," he repeated. "Somehow, I sense there is more. Are you willing to tell me?" Sharphack looked pained and Prowl added with a smile, "I promise that I will tell no one. But a good tale might distract me."

Sharphack huffed. "As you wish, my prince. It really was stupidity and nothing else."

"A promising start," said Prowl and leaned back against the wall.

The story turned out to be entertaining. Full of acid, excitable young warframes and spectacular mischief that culminated in a bet – and a Major running around in a dotted pink and orange armor. The more Sharphack talked, the more he relaxed and the more Prowl managed to drift away as well.

In the middle of the third adventure, he fell into recharge.

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~He is in recharge, Captain,~ Sharphack said through the unique commlines of the warframes while he carefully stood up and walked as quietly to the young prince as possible.

~Good work, Sharphack,~ was the quick answer. ~Anything else?~

For a moment, the Lieutenant hesitated. It was easy as a warframe to rage against the civilians and their nobles and he had been no different. Oh, he had always been and would always be loyal. But nobles were no warframes, even though second heirs tried to pretend they were.

When the prince had asked to follow him, he had expected a reprimand, at best an order. Not an attempt to talk. Confused by the strange behavior of the noble, he tried to brush the attempt away as much as their ranks and politeness allowed. But that little stubborn prince had tried again! And then offered the Lieutenant the opportunity to leave.

Sharphack had wanted to do so. But before he managed to even think the words, his training had kicked in – or maybe simply his empathy, but he liked to think it was training – and he suddenly saw the wide optics, the nervous hands, the low, trembling doorwings. He saw desperation and fear and reacted as if he had found a youngling in need.

He let his voice get softer, relaxed, and tried to hide his confusion. This was his prince, his commander, not a victim!

It was only when he carelessly mentioned Yellowstripe – may he be executed in the most painful way! – that the truth hit him with all the power of a metrotitan.

His prince was a young, grieving mech reaching out to Sharphack, because there was no one else he could trust not to kill him. Not even to mention comfort him.

Sharphack's spark clenched painfully. For all their dangerous and harsh lifestyle, warframes were rarely alone. They lived to work in units and armies. Prince Prowl's situation struck him as wrong on an instinctual level he hadn't ever consciously known before to possess.

~I have thought about your offer, sir.~

~Yes?~

~I would like to become his permanent guard,~ he said and looked towards the now recharging prince. ~I think we might get along.~

With a gentle smile, he took the blanket and covered the little prince with it. After all, he was a guard, and it would be wrong to only guard the body.



# Part Seven

## Chapter Summary

Prowl draws the inevitable consequences.

## Chapter Notes

Beta: Starfire201 - Many thanks to her.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

## The Ascension

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### Part 7

When he awoke much later, he felt relaxed, comfortable, warm. He laid on his side, his doorwings touching the wall at his back. The big, fluffy blanket covered him completely. As he onlined his optics, he saw the door and in front of it a kneeling Sharphack who was cleaning a sword.

He must have moved, because the Lieutenant looked up and gave him a soft smile. "Ah, you are awake, my prince. Right on time."

"On time?" he muttered, unwilling to leave the warmth of the berth just yet. Had Sharphack stayed the whole time? ... And covered him with the blanket? How embarrassing.

But the Lieutenant simply put the sword back into weapon space and stood. "Yes. The Council has arranged the press conference for the evening. You still have a bit more than a joor to prepare, my prince."

"Ah, yes." He remembered. Remembered everything. The warmth of the berth suddenly was no match anymore for the coldness inside. "How much does the media know already?"

The doorwings of the Lieutenant lowered a bit, then Sharphack clasped his hands behind his back and straightened with that exactness only military training provided. "Everything that happened last orn. Prince Smokescreen's condition was leaked by a servant."

Prowl sighed. "It was a far-fetched idea to keep it a secret anyway." But it would have been nice to make Vapor worry about two princes instead of only one. His doorwings trembled for a moment, then he forced them back under control. "I guess they are all waiting for my statement of how to proceed?"

"Yes. Do you wish for me to fetch you the newspapers and videos of the newsfeeds?"

"Only if there was some other scandal besides the one here in the Palaise." Carefully, he pulled the blanket aside and sat up.

"Thankfully, no," answered Sharphack.

"At least that's something. I was half expecting that Vapor would make some grand declaration." Now that first move would fall to him. Prowl decided that was a very good thing.

"The traitor is probably waiting for you to flee like a civilian, my prince." There was distaste in Sharphack's voice.

The prince barked a laugh. "Then he can wait a long time."

The guard had prepared another room as his temporary office on another floor. Prowl was sure that two orns before, this little room had served as a forgotten storage room. Now it had a cheap chair, a simple desk and no windows. Prowl said nothing when he sat down on the chair and started to sketch out the media statement.

He didn't bother with the pleasantries and warm affection his creators had always added to their interviews. Neither did he add the funny quotes his brother Brazen had been famous for, nor would he give the interviewers time to ask questions. This statement would be short, reduced to the absolutely necessary and leave no doubt at all what he wanted. No, demanded.

Again, Sharphack had remained in the room with him, continuing to polish an already gleaming sword while kneeling in front of the door, effectively blocking it. Once, he stood, opened the door and let Quickstrike in, who took up position at the desk's side, but said nothing. In his servo, the Captain held some more datapads.

When Prowl was finished with his statement, he turned towards the Captain. "News?"

"From the garrisons, yes." Quickstrike placed the datapads on the desk. "More will be coming tonight and tomorrow."

"Good."

He took the first datapad and began to read it. For a moment he wanted to ask for how much longer Major General Blueshield and Quickstrike planned to hide him in his very own Palaise – but then he refrained, fearing the answer.

Too soon afterwards, he was forced to leave his improvised office and was led into yet another room, near the training hall. This one was bigger and looked like a well lived-in, if small, living room with a few comfortable armchairs, a small table, a shelf with books, and

several pictures of a very happy family on the wall. If the mech in the pictures wouldn't have been enough, the certificate on the wall would have certainly done it. He looked back at the Captain with a frown.

"Your own quarters?"

"No one will suspect it," said Quickstrike easily and walked past his prince. "Lieutenant Sharphack is fetching the Grand Ducal robes for you to choose from."

Prowl only nodded quietly, unable to look away from those pictures. Most showed a Vosian warframe, to his immense surprise. While the relationships between the states weren't bad at all, it was still rare to see bondings between different Dukedoms. The Seeker – as Vosian warframes were called – looked deceptively slender in the Captain's arms, though Prowl knew Seekers were notoriously difficult opponents. Not to mention famous for their mercurial moods.

He felt Quickstrike step up behind him and gave a tiny flick of welcome with his doorwings, while he let his optics wander some more. "Are these your creations?"

"Yes, my prince. The three are my pride and joy."

They looked happy in every single picture. At the centre was the photo he had tried to ignore, but couldn't anymore. Quickstrike, his bondmate, the youngest creation standing between them, the two others to the left and the right. Prowl gritted his denta as hot jealousy flushed through his systems and he had to turn away from the wall abruptly.

Glowering, he walked over to the armchairs, sat down and said nothing further until Sharphack arrived with the robes.

"My prince, the robes," announced the Lieutenant and carried in one giant trunk after another. "These were selected by the attendants, but the final decision lies with you."

"Thank you."

All of them were expensive and beautiful, a presentation of power and wealth. But that was to be expected. Also expected was that those robes were difficult to don, yet Prowl hadn't seen any of his creator's or even his own servants in Quickstrike's room. They probably weren't considered trustworthy enough by the warframes. For the moment, Prowl was inclined to share their opinion, but decided to not wear the more complicated robes for that reason. He put over half of them aside.

He added to the discarded clothes every single robe he could ever remember his creators wearing.

After that he eliminated every robe he deemed too light for the occasion, those with lighter pearls, too much decoration, or embroidered glyphs in silver. Not that Sharphack and the attendants hadn't already chosen well. There were only grey and black in the selections before him. Somber colours, representing death and justice.

But which one did he want more?

In the end he chose a simple grey robe, very similar to the one he had worn at Brazen's funeral. The difference was the cut, which revealed now more and the black strings that formed delicate patterns. Despite calling the robe simple, he wouldn't be able to get into it alone.

A bit embarrassed, he looked at the two warframes. This was not their function, not at all, but without attendants or any other servants... "Captain Quickstrike, Lieutenant Sharphack, I apologise to ask this of you, but I need your help."

"We are here to help in any way you require us to, my prince," answered Quickstrike. "But you will need to tell us... the finer details in this case."

"That shouldn't be a problem," said Prowl, relieved, and proceeded to explain that his arms had to go through the strings that hung from the shoulder of the robe and that more strings at the back would have to be draped over his doorwings, holding the shroud in the right place. The rest was thankfully exactly like any other robe.

It took a bit, but in the end the robe fit perfectly and it was time. Before he had to leave the room, he saw Quickstrike looking at a picture with his family inside. Prowl felt something within him soften.

"You have a beautiful family, Quickstrike," he said. "You should visit them, when all this is over."

Quickstrike looked surprised. "I will, my prince."

The media room was packed with mechs. Security was everywhere, warframes literally lined the walls, not bothering to hide their weapons or deadly intent. The sitting journalists were not deterred by that at all. Instead, they talked with a restless, excited energy with each other, until the whole room was humming with conversation and expectation. In the back, the rare camera mechs had transformed and prepared to send everything to every news feed in Praxus and beyond.

Prowl refused to show any of his fraying nerves as he entered the room and it fell into an abrupt silence. With measured steps, he went up the podium and to the sleek black lectern. He remembered when his sire had once let him play-act a speech from here, his family in the audience. If Prowl remembered right, he had declared chocotar a mandatory food for all non-adult mechs. Good times.

He looked up to see the ocean of the journalists and raised his doorwings, until they showed nothing but authority. His creator's had always had a few nice words, had let them ask a few questions first. Times change, he thought bitterly. The good ones had passed after all.

When he spoke, he did it quietly, but every word resonating with an unshakable authority. There was no doubt, nor hesitation. Only the expectations that they would listen – and listen Praxus did.

"Citizens of Praxus," he began. "I am sad to have to confirm that my creators, the Grand Dukes of Praxus, passed on to Primus yesterday. Their passing was not peaceful. They were murdered by their own trusted Secretary of State, Yellowstripe."

There was sad acceptance and disbelief as the reaction. It seemed that most had still hoped that it hadn't been Yellowstripe, but someone else. Prowl didn't bother to pause, but simply continued:

"Yellowstripe was observed to give Lord Sparkshimmer a poisoned cube, and only a breem later stabbed Lord Black Haze to death. He was found with the dagger in hand and confessed later everything. There is no doubt to his guilt."

The words should hurt more, Prowl thought, but instead all he felt was a cool detachment. As if he had run out of emotions, of caring.

"Yellowstripe also confessed to have conspired with Lord Vapor, Field marshal of Praxus, to kill prime heir Brazen. Proven to be part the conspiracy are currently also General Quake, Lord Bristle, several dozen other mechs and many warframes."

He paused for a moment. When he spoke next, his words had the warmth of space, and the sharpness of a vibro-knife. But most horrifying was maybe the hard truth that every single word contained:

"To all these traitors and murderers I want to say one thing:

"Sentinel Prime has forsaken you! Primus has forsaken you! They have named me their tool and will of justice and justice I will bring. I will hunt you down, I will make you know fear and despair. I will bring death to your homes and those you love.

"To all their families, to all those who shelter and support them, reject them now!" He paused and let his voice become darker, "Or be forsaken too. No haven will accept you, no shelter will hide you. I will burn your homes, your fields, scorch the memories of you and yours from Cybertron."

It was more than mere words. He wanted it from the darkest parts of his spark. He wanted to see those who destroyed his family burn, wanted them to scream in agony and to cry with the same anguish that ravaged his own spark. Revenge would taste sweet. With the coldest of smiles, he added the last line of his vow:

"Until nothing is left anymore."

Silence. No mech in the room seemed to dare to move or make any noise. They all stared at him as if they had just seen a monster emerge from nothing. Maybe they had. At least his guards were showing more intelligence than that.

Prowl straightened. "Any questions?"

A click, then two, then nearly thirty hands rose. Prowl chose a mech from a large news outlet that he recognized. "You."

The mech flinched at being chosen, but regained his composure after an astrosecond. "Thank you, your Highness. I was wondering, how you would decide... who a traitor is and who not?"

"Simple," said Prowl. "Every noble who has not sworn loyalty to me in a deca-orn's time, will be considered a traitor and treated as such." He narrowed his optics. "The countdown begins now."

"I-I see," said the stunned journalist.

"Next question?"

The room was deadly silent, then one old journalist stood up, the fluttering doorwings on his back the only thing betraying his nervousness. "Your Highness, that is a very short time frame!"

"It is enough for even the poorest noble to travel here." He had bothered to check it. No one would be able to call him unfair.

"Barely, your Highness," the journalist dared to say. "Wouldn't it be kinder to give them more time?"

"Kinder?" hissed Prowl, as his temper flared. "Yes, it would be kinder. But they killed my brother, because he was too kind. They killed my creators, because they were too merciful. I will show them neither!" He leaned back, suddenly aware that he was losing control over his emotions and reining them in with swift brutality. "Either they come and swear their fealty to me as their new Grand Duke, or they will perish. Understood?"

The journalist nodded quickly. "Understood, your Highness."

"Good." Prowl gave them all another look, but no journalist actually raised his hand anymore. "If you have more questions, don't bother until the next news conference tomorrow." He turned around, making sure that his robes billowed, and walked out of the door.

Only when he was down several hallways and corners, he stopped and vented. Deeply. Maybe he shouldn't have run out so fast. But he was glad that he didn't have to stand there anymore, hoping that they wouldn't ask the really painful things. Some things he couldn't yet talk about.

Quickstrike, as always faithfully at his side, gave him a concerned look. "My prince, are you alright?"

He looked up weakly. "Yes, Quickstrike. How did I do?"

The warframe hesitated, then answered with a shrug, "If you wanted to terrify every noble in the state, very well."

Had he wanted to? Yes, whispered his spark darkly. Oh yes. "A bit of fear is nothing that will harm them."

"Indeed, but may I ask why you choose a decaorn specifically?"

Prowl walked on to his temporary office room. "It will keep the nobles and citizens busy with observing who is coming and who not. And those who are unsure must now decide fast. But mostly it is something else." He clenched his hand. "I need a decaorn to raise the army."

Quickstrike, to his credit, only nodded. "So everyone who isn't here in a decaorn...?"

"Will get a visit, just as promised," said Prowl quietly.

And then something, or someone, would burn.

As the deca-orn passed, first heirs, barons, counts arrived at the Palaise.

They all came and bowed and swore their loyalty to him. They all met a mech that accepted their promises of fealty, but trusted them not even within two steps of his frame. The calculating coldness within his optics unsettled them enough, that soon whispers of his frozen and dead spark, of his warrior skills and of his death count made rounds.

Prowl nearly laughed at the last one. While he had trained with warframes, he certainly had never killed before. His creators would never have allowed that.

But the rumours enhanced the impact of his declaration, just as the publication of Sentinel Prime's damnation of Vapor had, and in the last two orns he saw nobles swearing their loyalty out of fear and nothing else.

Yellowstripe had been right. Fear was a good tool.

What really surprised him at first were the second heirs. They came alone, without their House colours, without the blessing of their creators and swore loyalty. They unsettled him as they were wild cards. Were the second heirs insurance for their Houses in case Prowl would win? Or had they really turned away from their families? Or were they simply assassins waiting for a good chance?

He did not know, but accepted their vows and then sent them home to convince their House in the next five decaorns. He gave them time and the chance to see his worth. At the very least, they would be far away, denying them any opportunity to kill him.

Only one second heir refused, quietly and politely, optics never leaving the polished floor. Red Alert, he had said was his name, and Prowl might have thought him shy if his bow hadn't looked so awkward. Painful even. So Prowl ordered him to get a check-up and a meal first and expected not to hear from him again.

But an orn later it was Master Medic Hoist who gave him a report on that young noble's health with a grim face. Old scars and injuries, barely covered by the glossy paint. Malnutrition, hidden by armour upgrades of the second heir. Nightmares, revealed by screams. Worse, he was even younger than Prowl, having literally walked into the Palaise the orn after he had become an adult.

When the report ended, the room was plunged into a heavy silence as the three mechs contemplated the long list of wrongs that had been committed against this mech.

"Will he heal?" Prowl asked eventually.

The Master Medic sighed, his pale optics the only thing betraying the rage he was feeling. "Red Alert is a strong mech, but this... I haven't really talked with him yet, but it will take vorns to heal this."

Prowl nodded. "But he can heal and he has sworn loyalty to me." He was now one of his. Prowl might not be trusting, but he would take care of his own. "What do you recommend, Master Medic?"

Hoist looked to Quickstrike, who nodded. Again there seemed to be something Prowl was missing, but fortunately the medic didn't wait to explain: "Your Highness, it would be best if Red Alert would have a temporary guardian to take care of him."

"A guardian?" Prowl frowned. "Like a creator? But he is of age..."

"He needs it." Hoist stressed the words, and the concern for his patient was spreading across his face. "He is barely an adult in by law, but his emotions are very much those of a very desperate, very frightened youngling. A guardian would enable him to learn basic trust, maybe even love and give him stability."

Prowl looked at his desk, feeling smaller than ever. Desperate, frightened youngling – was that how others saw Prowl? Red Alert was not even ten full vorns younger than he, and yet here he was deciding his fate. "What do you think, Quickstrike?"

"I agree with the Master Medic, my prince," was the calm answer. "I would offer myself as a guardian, if I weren't so busy."

"I see. But then who would be a good guardian?" asked Prowl. "Most mechs are very busy, now."

"What about your bondmate, Captain?" The medic made a step forward. "As a Vosian, he will not be involved in the coming battles."

Quickstrike looked pensive for a moment. "Bitstream has complained about being bored, but I would have to ask him."

"Naturally," said the medic and smiled. "I think you two are the best choices for this young mech."

"Let's hope you don't overestimate us," said the warframe gruffly, but there was a certain pride and warmth in the words that Prowl had rarely heard before.

"So, it is decided?" he asked. Both nodded and Prowl felt no small measure of relief. "Good. Will there be a fixed duration of this guardianship?"



"No," said Hoist quickly. "Theoretically, Red Alert can move out or refuse it whenever he wants. He will need that to know that we don't imprison him."

"Very well." Prowl prepared the necessary statement. "If you need anything else from me, please tell me. Beyond that, I wish you the best."

Medic and warframe bowed. It was only a joor later that Quickstrike gave him a smile and said "Bitstream is ecstatic about the news."

"Really?" Prowl blinked.

"Ecstatic and honoured that he was chosen, despite being a Seeker."

Ah, yes. Seekers often faced fear and mistrust for being war- and flightframes. Both came with heavy modifications and the resulting bias that something wasn't right with them because of that. That there had been two insane Winglords of Vos in the past had not helped their reputation.

Prowl shook his head. "Master Medic Hoist's word and your bond are more than enough for me to trust him. Though I might check up on him in time."

Quickstrike gave an accepting flick with his right doorwing. "Of course, my prince. You will be welcomed."

And then the deca-orn was over, and the line had been drawn. Prowl's spark became colder as he read the list of all the Houses and nobles who should have sworn their loyalty but never did. It wasn't just how long the list was, but also that every single mech of Vapor's family was on it. Of his own family, besides Smokescreen and the Prime House.

Now, this could only end in blood and tears and death.

As the dawn came, he was ready.

Quietly, he choose a long black cloak that had no decoration at all. Then, with the swiftness and the graveness of a ghost, he walked through the Palaise to his destination – the Grand Weaponry. He hadn't been in it for a long time, even though it had always been the domain of the second heir.

"Wait here," Prowl commanded to his guards.

As he entered, he did not bother with lights. The soft light from the coming dawn falling through the windows, reflecting off the silvery metals, was guide enough. Listening to only his own steps and the murmurs of history, he walked past the display cases full with ceremonial weapons and trophies from foes long dead.

At the end of the hall, claiming a spot of honour, was a simple lance. He stopped to deactivate the alarm systems, then reverently took the weapon in hand. It fit into his servos smoothly, the metal feeling raw and heavy beneath his hands. Its weight was perfect, the edges sharp.

This was not a weapon of beauty and grace, nor a weapon for celebrations and ceremonies. This one had been forged to kill, and had killed in the past.

His optics gleamed. He would quench its thirst once more.

Feeling its weight and destiny, he turned and left the hall.

Outside, Quickstrike gave the weapon a single, unsurprised glance. "You have chosen the glaive, my prince?"

"What more fitting weapon than the one Lysis Magnus used to avenge his bondmate and Prime with?" asked Prowl.

Through the window he could see that the sun touched the horizon. Far away, a heavy beat of drums rose, slowing beating in the exact rhythm a spark turned.

Da-dum. Da-dum. Da-dum.

The beat never ceased, never stopped, never stumbled. It was everywhere in the Palaise. In every room, in every hallway and - as the sun rose - in every spark.

His guard was ready and prepared, awaiting him in front of the Palaise. All of them wore a black armband. The security measures taken were enormous. But even though Prowl knew that a carriage would have been safer, he had insisted on the traditional way - he would walk.

Da-Dum. Da-Dum. Da-Dum.

Outside the Palaise the drums were louder and when he entered the streets of Praxus, surrounded by his loyal warframes, they were louder still. It stood in sharp contrast to the Prince's entourage which did not speak or make any other sound.

Da-DUM. Da-DUM. Da-DUM.

The mechs that saw him and his group watched in silence as well. There was the knowledge in their optics where he was going, what he would do, and it frightened them just as much as it made them excited. Prowl only listened to the drums, to that beat of a single spark.

As they reached the square at the center of Praxus, a silent crowd awaited them. Prowl had no optics for them as they rested immediately on the mech standing in the middle of the stage, wrists chained left and right to posts.

Yellowstripe.

The former secretary was looking at Prowl, optics bright and fevered. For a single moment, a smile was visible on the traitor's face and Prowl broke the optic contact.

At both sides of Yellowstripe stood two mechs, completely hidden by their own black cloaks. Attached to their faces were plain black masks.

When Prowl entered the stage, cloak billowing like a dark cloud behind him, he felt all their optics on him. Felt their excitement, their awe, their respect. It left him cold.

For he trusted not a single pair of these optics.

Da-DUM. Da-DUM. Da-DUM.

An elderly mech stepped forward. Prowl knew that he should know his designation, but he had already forgotten it beyond the knowledge that he was one of the best judges Praxus had.

"Today, we have come together to see justice done. Yellowstripe, former Secretary of State, has been found guilty of murdering the Grand Dukes Black Haze and Sparkshimmer, as well the first Prince and prime heir Brazen, harming the third Prince and second heir Smokescreen, high treason and collaboration against the state of Praxus. For these crimes, his sentence his death." The old mech paused. "In the name of Primus, the sentence shall be fulfilled now by the blade."

Someone started chanting 'Die' and within clicks everyone joined. "Die, Die, Die."

Then the judge looked to the Prince and Prowl nodded. "Proceed, your Honour."

"Yes, your Highness." The judge bowed and winked to the two concealed mechs. "Prepare him."

The two executioners stepped forward and suddenly the crowd quieted again, some leaning forward in eager anticipation, some stepping back with dread.

With efficient brutality, they tore away Yellowstripe's plates protecting his spark and dignity. He was a traitor and deserved neither, but every single one of his screams made Prowl flinch on the inside.

Yet he didn't look away as they took the chains in hand and forced Yellowstripe to kneel before him.

DA-DUM.

Didn't look away as they forced him back so far his backstrut broke and the secretary sobbed in agony.

DA-DUM.

Didn't look away from that beautifully pulsing yellow - near golden - spark presented to him and the sky.

DA-DUM.

The only sound was the steady rhythm of the drums and the humming of that spark before him. The whole world seemed to shrink to these two things: The drums and the spark, the spark and the drums.

Yellowstripe's tearful optics found Prowl's, so wide, showing only pain and fear. He opened his mouth –

Prowl struck.

With vorn long ease and practice, he raised the lance, the symbol of Praxus' might and threw it into the vulnerable spark in front of him. Prowl shuddered as if it had hit his own and all he could hear was that endless, painful scream, all he could see was Yellowstripe – friend, uncle, family – convulsing in agony, his spark struggling around the blade of the lance, fighting for life... and losing.

Eventually, Yellowstripe's spark vanished, and the frame collapsed in a dead heap.

The drums fell silent.

He ripped his weapon out of the corpse and the crowd cheered. It was done.

He had bloodied his hands, had killed a mech his spark still called family. There was no happiness within, not even satisfaction. All he knew was with crushing, dark certainty that Yellowstripe was merely the first.

Many would follow.

He drew his cloak closer around his shoulders, then turned around and left the stage.

The silence roared in his audios.

In the afternoon, everything was ready. From the Palaise, Prowl and his guard walked to the edge of Praxus, to its wall. Old and massive, it had protected the city from many foes in the past and if necessary it would serve again.

Prowl slowly climbed the stone stairs that led to the top of the wall, the lance a comforting weight in his hand, natural as any other frame part. His cloak was billowing in the cool winds of the Praxian plain.

As he reached the top of the staircase, Prowl hesitated and looked back one last time. Behind him laid Praxus, beautiful as ever. Its rooftops and towers sprawled across the landscape, and far away he saw the familiar silhouette of the Palaise. He could only pray that the battalion he had left would be enough to protect his comatose brother. It had to be enough.

He hardened his spark and turned away from his home.

Two steps more, and he had crossed the width of the wall and looked now down to the Praxian plains. Instead of gentle moving fields, he was greeted by weapons glittering in the sun. To the horizon and beyond stood the warframes in endless rows.

A single glance of his and the entire crowd stood at attention, unmoving as if struck by a spell.

"Kneel to your new Lord and ruler, Lord Prowl, Grand Duke of Praxus!" came the cry.

It was too early. There had been no formal inauguration, no blessing by the Prime, and no feast at the temple. There was only the demand and Prowl with the bloodied lance in hand and black cloak around his frame.

And as one, they all bowed their heads and knelt down – knelt for him, their Lord, right hand over the spark.

Tank next to swordfighter, lancer next to flier, and far away he could see the hulking shadows of titans next to shuttles. An eerie silence descended upon the plain as tens of thousands of mechs all waited with trembling sparks.

Overseeing the silent fields, the endless kneeling army, Prowl finally truly understood.

This was power, this was might. This was fear.

"Praxians!" he called, his voice amplified by speakers to a thunder. "The time has come. We will make them regret ever turning against us!"

He paused, letting the words vibrate through every spark.

"Stand up! Fly up!"

As one mech his army rose, the fliers soaring into the sky. He raised his lance.

"To War!"

## Chapter End Notes

Well, I really hope you people liked the story so far. I did contemplate to write more about the civilwar, but Prowl's change had been mostly completed here and now.

Bitstream: Is surprisingly a canon G1 character. A Seeker and an Information Engineer with a speciality in breaking encryptions...

Next Chapter: The Epilogue, from the POV of Flipper. More canon characters will appear. :)

After that there I will upload a Oneshot called "The Survivor", which is about the end of the civil war.

For the Red Alert fans out there, yes, there probably will be a side story with him and how he survives in a family of warframes, seekers and insanity. ;) For those waiting for the romance part: I am working on it hard. ^^ But it will probably be another few months until I'll upload the Jazz's story.

~silber



# Epilogue - Flipper

## Chapter Summary

Flipper expects another boring orn at the academy. Instead his friend had been arrested, he is hunted by journalists and the news mech talk about civil war. What's a genius to do?

## Chapter Notes

Beta: The Evil Starfire201 - who keeps certain oneshot as blackmail so I upload. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

## Epilogue

-

## Flipper

Flipper often recharged long and deeply, when most mechs were already walking around. The reason was simple: he liked learning when everything was quiet and he didn't have to worry that some simpleton of a student would bother him for another explanation of Isotope's theory of quantum entanglement. Seriously, by now he was comtemplating simply making a video and putting it on the network or demanding payment from professor Cleaver for doing his work.

Anyway, this habit ensured that he walked into the academy without any idea what had happened earlier in the afternoon. Well, he would admit later, this habit and the fact that he only had one friend that would have cared enough to wake him up.

"There he is!" someone called out loud, when he entered the academy.

Flipper ignored it, he was reading a new theory on his datapad. A lot more difficult to ignore was the crowd that blocked his way seconds later. Annoyed, he looked up and frowned. They looked excited. "What is? I have some calculations to do."

The students exchanged glances. "Haven't you heard yet?"

"No. And I will certainly not care. Now, can I pass?"

But they didn't part in front of him. A timid student he had maybe exchanged a few words every vorn with spoke up, "But weren't you friends with Black Dust?"

Flipper, ready to push through the crowd, froze and turned towards him. "Yes?" he said uncertainly. "Did something happen?" For a klick, he expected them to laugh and scream 'prank'. But the uncomfortable silence remained and suddenly he was very concerned about his friend. "Is he alright?"

"I don't know," said the timid student, who Flipper had never bothered to learn the designation of. "Two joors ago, warframes stormed the academy, I was there at the square. They just suddenly landed, in shuttles even! Hundreds... I'm sorry, I didn't count, but I think I saw the army?"

"Yeah, it was the slagging Praxian army," another student chimed in. Noble, Flipper remembered, fourth heir or something. "But my friend said they were led by the guards of the Grand Duke."

Black Dust. Flipper gulped, his spark suddenly beating stronger. They couldn't know... "So?"

"They stormed a lecture, Flipper," said a mech who had once introduced himself as Towerfall. His optics were uncharacteristically serious. When had he arrived? "And they pulled Black Dust out, as if he were a criminal. Then they vanished again."

Flipper stared. "The guard... arrested Black Dust?"

The students around him nodded. "Don't you know more? You are his friend!"

"Only that this makes no sense," he answered tersely, trying to keep his mounting worry at bay. "Now let me through."

~

Flipper didn't go to the library as he had intended. Instead, he sneaked off campus to a café that offered excellent enegex, beautiful crystal arrangement between the tables – and several screens with the latest news. If they arrested their own second heir, sooner or later the Grand Dukes would explain themselves – he hoped. Certainly, they wouldn't just execute him behind high walls?

Already, there was a hot report about the unprecedented move of the warframes to 'attack' the academy. Black Dust's designation got out there, and the speculations were rife. When they started interviewing students about Black Dust, Flipper took his cube and moved into a corner, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible.

"So many warframes on a campus with only civilians and nobles! Who knows what could have happened? They are dangerous, those warframes, and their temper unpredictable, everyone knows that... they could have killed someone!" some minor noble explained in outrage. "And what then? I demand an explanation from our Lords and rulers, if they really ordered this."



"And if they haven't ordered this movement?"

"Well, that just makes it worse, doesn't it? These warframes are then totally out of control!"

Flipper had to look away. He doubted very much, that the army and the guard had decided to arrest their prince on a fluke. No, something, something very bad was happening. Slowly, he sipped his energon cube and hoped for his friend's sake he was wrong.

"They – the warframes – attacked a professor!" A student reported with shining optics.

"Really?" The journalist looked like gift orn had come early. "How did that happen...?"

"I do not know why, but Professor Hardshell had been running after these brutes and said something and suddenly they were moving to attack!"

"How horrible! They attacked him?"

"Well, nearly. Someone commanded them to stop."

"Who?"

"I didn't see, but it must have been their leader, right? They use these ranks among them instead of designations, after all."

Black Dust, it must have been Black Dust, Flipper thought. Or should he call him now Prince Prowl? It felt so strange to connect these two files in his processor. One was his nerdy friend, the other was a distant second prince, someone so far out of his reach that he should have never met him. Only he did.

"Professor Hardshell, an interview please?"

"No." The professor was walking away fast. "I have nothing to tell you."

"But wasn't it your lecture that was targeted? Didn't the warframes attack you? Weren't you afraid?"

"Those warframes," the professor made a face that made clear he didn't like how the journalists were talking about them, "were the honourable guards of the Grand Dukes and very much within their rights. And now, please excuse me, I have things to do."

"What do you mean by that? Professor Hardshell, please –" A door was closed into the journalist's face. "Ah, slag."

Of course, it didn't take the journalists too long to find out about Black Dust, his arrest, and in turn about Flipper.

"Black Dust is a genius," one student said. "We all knew it and I guess that is why he never really talked with us, we just were boring to him. I really can't understand what he could have done to be arrested like that. He likes numbers, and was always polite, even shy!"

"It certainly seems as if Black Dust might be innocent..."

"He looked so surprised, when they forced him away." The mech actually looked sad. "I really hope he is alright."

"Didn't he have anyone he confided in? Who might know more?"

"Well... I guess there is that one mech, Flipper. He is also a genius, really, and a bit older than Black Dust. But they seemed to understand each other exceptionally well."

"Oh," said the journalists. "Friends, or maybe more? Lovers even?"

The student shrugged. "I don't know."

"Do you know where Flipper is?"

"Nope. I heard he ran from the campus, once they told him about Black Dust."

"A normal decision for a mech with a broken spark – or maybe he is now hunted by the warframes as well!"

Flipper hid his face in his hands. He certainly wasn't hunted by anyone besides these stupid journalists. Really, if the guards had wanted him, they would already have him; of that Flipper was sure. No, to them he had been entirely irrelevant. And that rumour that they were lovers! Laughable. As if a prince would ever look twice at a poor commoner like Flipper.

Of course, before he had known about Prowl, when he had thought Black Dust was just like him... he might have dreamed.

Then, slowly, news from Praxus began trickling through. That the warframes had erected a protective barrier around the Palaise. That they let no one through either way and arrested anyone who tried it anyone with extreme violence. That something had happened inside...

"A coup by warframes?" wondered a reporter.

"Not by the warframes," answered an expert, a third heir that had specialised in political relations. "At least not by them alone. But few things would rattle warframes enough to initiate these kind of measures."

Flipper could have sworn that in this moment the reporter for the first time realised the sheer magnitude of what was happening. Uncertainty swept his face, followed by tendrils of fear. "Do you think something has happened to our gracious Lords?"

The expert sighed. "It is evening and the nation is in an uproar and yet we are hearing nothing from them."

The journalist's optics dimmed. "That was a yes, right?"

"Yes."

It was at this point Flipper couldn't hope for the best anymore. You do not practically kidnap your own second prince and prime heir, destroying his second identity, unless you were supremely concerned about his life and spark. If the Grand Dukes had been badly injured, kidnapped or even, Primus help them, murdered, then it would explain that behaviour neatly.

That also meant that it wouldn't take very long anymore until someone managed to connect Black Dust to Prince Prowl. And when that happened, the curiosity already surrounding Flipper would increase tenfold. Did Prince Prowl even have any friends besides Flipper? He had never heard anything in the news and, more importantly, Black Dust had never mentioned anyone...

He gulped down his last enegex, and left the café. Using the feeble protection the darkness offered, he used a terminal to send off a few letters to his professors, explaining that he was taking the next week off because he was feeling unwell. An obvious lie, yes, but he doubted anyone would point that out now.

For a moment, he contemplated going back to his dorm, but decided that it was probably already haunted by journalists. He could only hope that no one would break his door down.

Flipper rubbed his face tiredly. What a vorn. At least his family would be happy to see him again so soon – even if it took nearly all of his emergency savings. But if this didn't count, he didn't know what would.

He managed to catch the last train of the orn.

~

When the news finally broke, he was safe in the small home of his his family who had been, as predicted, delighted by his surprise visit. They weren't a very political bunch, so they only noticed during the next orn that something was amiss, when the neighbours started talking about the rumours as well.

"Flipper," his creator said, a bit white-opticed with stress. "They are searching for you?"

"I did nothing," Flipper hastily reassured them. "I just... don't want to talk to them."

Them, the journalists, who seemed to know no other theme anymore but the Grand Dukes, the Princes Prowl and Smokescreen and Flipper. Who would have thought he would ever be mentioned in one sentence with them on state media?

Flipper would be forever grateful that his family accepted his reasoning and said nothing.

But when it was announced that the prime heir and second prince Prowl would give an interview, everyone was there. Everyone watched and when it was over, they all began speaking to each other with their servos waving, afraid for Praxus, their future and loved ones.

Flipper sat there, staring at the retreating back of the one he called friend, unable to formulate a single thought.

He had searched for his friend in this foreign noble's face and behaviour. For that gentle, funny, intelligent mech who had been fascinated by numbers as much as Flipper and had seemed too small for his own frame.

He found nothing. Had Black Dust just been a lie?

~

They were sitting in the tiny living room of their creators, watching the news again. Flipper had done barely anything else since returning, for once unable to concentrate on formulas and numbers. The couch underneath him was old and lumpy, the blanket he was hugging a bit threadbare and, despite wishing differently, there was no energon or sweet in his hand, because they only fuelled once a day.

"So," his brother said after watching yet another report about Black Dust. "They got it really right? Your best friend is Prowl, slagging Prince Prowl, future Grand Duke yada-yada?"

Flipper sighed. "Yes. But I knew him as Black Dust."

"I guess that explains why that foundation suddenly helped Flip Up. He knew through you." His brother looked thoughtful. "So, you never knew?"

"No, Downflip, I didn't," Flipper lied.

"Pity. Even an overheating processor like yours could have used a connection like that."

Flipper looked away, unsure why he suddenly felt sick.

His brother frowned. "You do know that by now you could make a few thousands credits just by offering a single interview?"

"I am aware, yes. But... it would feel like wet-credits." Wet, from someone's forcefully spilled energon and blood.

Downflip flinched and fell silent for a long while. Then, he moved to Flipper and rubbed his shoulder gently. "He really is your friend." Flipper could only nod. "They spotted reporters in the slums being led on a merry chase, because everyone wants to take a few of their credits... but sooner or later they will find this house."

Flipper shuttered his optics. He wasn't sure how he should react to this news, but he felt so tired. "I have nowhere to run."

"Well, I wanted to say just do that damn interview and they will go away, but... yeah. So hey, remember my best friend, Hightower? He did well for himself and he would hide you."

Surprised, Flipper looked at his brother. "Really?"

"Sure." Downflip grinned. "You go running, and I get nice credits from an interview. Probably less than half what you would get, but...well, beggars can't be choosers. Now, up with you, what are you waiting for?"

~

Hightower's apartment was in a Constructicon tower. While, usually no one had anything against construction frames, there was still the small fact that their living places tended to be eternal construction sides, no matter need or logic. To them, improvement was an ever-lasting quest.

Flipper peered from beneath his hood at the tower that certainly many vorns ago had a sensible form and wondered why exactly it now looked like a giant purple griffin. Aesthetics couldn't have been any consideration.

But whatever reason had been at play, they hadn't forgotten to add signs. Soon, he stood in front of door 3-623 and rang the bell. A sturdy green and purple mech opened the door and looked down at the genius.

"Ah, hey, you're Flipper, right?"

"Yes. My brother has told you about my situation...?"

"Did he need to?" Hightower grinned. "No mech is talking about anything else in this city, you know." He looked left and right in the hallway. "Come in, before someone sees you."

He did, even while mildly protesting that he was hidden beneath the cloak.

"Because that one is totally normal to wear," complained Hightower. "We are Constructicons, not drug dealers."

"I am aware." Flipper shifted nervously on his pedes, suddenly acutely aware that this big mech was a stranger and he needed his help. "My brother said I can stay here for a while?"

"Yeah. He waives my debt if I do that." Hightower moved past him towards the energon dispenser that certainly looked like nothing one could buy in any licensed shop. "Want energon?"

"Please, yes." Flipper nodded politely.

Hightower nodded, then gave him a second glance. "I'll make it a bit stronger, you look like you could need it."

For a moment, Flipper wanted to protest - that contraption looked as if it might explode any given moment -, but frankly the last two orns hadn't been good ones, so he simply nodded quietly.

"Oh, and I forgot to mention it," Hightower said while pushing far too many buttons for a simple cube, "but my crew might come over. Don't be surprised if you have to squeeze in a bit."

"I will not mind," promised Flipper. "What crew?"

"Construction Crew, of course! They are young still, and not very big, but with me as their foremech they'll become something great, just watch!"

And before Flipper could stop him, Hightower had started to describe his crew in detail. It distracted Flipper better than anything else had so far.

~

Flipper avoided any media outlet and buried himself in his calculations. Hightower's crew did indeed come over, a strangely mixed group of mechs that were seemingly only held together by their paintjobs. Flipper had tried to avoid them, despite Hightower's assurances.

As such, he buried himself on the floor in the corner of the small one-room apartment, trying to disappear behind his datapad and certainly not expecting two slender legs in front of him, and curious red optics peering over the pad.

"Excuse me?" said Flipper.

"Hello," said the mech and something behind him swished nervously. A shovel tail, Flipper saw after looking at it for a moment. "Do you like this?" The constructicon held out a glittering stone.

Flipper blinked and took the stone. "A trinarium pyrrillid?" he said curiously. "It's pretty, I guess, but the uses are limited to mostly artistic things like colour."

Instead of deflating or walking away, that strange mech beamed. "It can be used?"

"Yes?"

"I knew it!" He turned around, his tail nearly hitting Flipper. "I was right, Hook. It can be used!"

Hook was apparently the mech that had found a place on the left corner of the couch. His purple visor hid most of his expression but he managed to come across as supremely annoyed anyway. "Wonderful, Scavenger. Yes, it can be used. But not for much."

"P-p-paint," said another mech suddenly who, despite his size, seemed to shrink into himself when everyone looked at him. "G-g-gold paint. I-I-I could make i-i-it."

Flipper looked at the Constructicon with sudden interest. "You're a chemist?"

"Y-yes."

Flipper glanced between his calculations and the chemist. "Do you know anything about molecular interaction through quantum sympathics?"

The chemist opened his mouth, closed it, and just nodded this time. Hightower – again standing at his dispenser and seemingly repairing something utterly unbroken – looked from him to Flipper and said: "If it can be used in chemistry, Mixmaster knows it."

"Wonderful!" Flipper sprang up, walked across the room and gave Mixmaster the datapad he had been working on. "I know there is a mistake in there, but I can't find it! Do you see that calculation -?"

"Bro- Bromat's rule," Mixmaster said.

"Yes! And I tried to apply it to this problem..." Flipper started a long-winded explanation, and only grew surer of himself when Mixmaster was only listening and nodding. With time, the nervous stutter of the Constructicon receded, until it was only now and then he had to search for words.

Around them, Hook and Scavenger and two other mechs picked up a game, Hightower had started to completely rebuild his dispenser and the evening went on. When the group left, Hightower gave a blanket and a cushion for Flipper to sleep on the couch.

"It was a good thing you did there with Mixmaster," Hightower said suddenly. "I have tried to break him out of his shell, but he is very shy."

"Really?" Flipper tried to think back. "I like him," he finally said, with a shrug. "He could keep up with me."

"Or you with him," said the foremech. "He was the best at the 'Chemistry in Construction' class we had and I do know he studied everything else he could get his servos on."

Flipper nodded. Intellectually, he had known that Constructicons had their own academies, but it was strange to think that he would have never heard of Mixmaster if they hadn't met in this little, bare apartment.

"Doesn't the rest of Mixmaster's crew try to help?"

"They do," Hightower assured him quickly. "But, well, you have seen them, right? Take Scavenger, for example. His creators weren't the best, yet he got very good grades in recycling and forgery, even upgraded into that direction. But the neglect left him with barely any self-confidence. He needs praise to function." Hightower sighed. "I try to give it to him, but I wonder if he'll ever function without."

Flipper frowned, trying to remember the young Constructicon. "He seemed very happy to have found something useful."

"He was."

"Right." Flipper frowned and sat down on the couch. "But there are the others, too. Hook and Long Haul and that other one... crusher something?"

"Bonecrusher. He's a demolition expert and loves his job probably a bit too much. Terrible temper, too. When it strikes him, he just might 'demolish' those that angered him."

Flipper blinked. "Sounds like someone needs therapy instead of a crew."

Hightower guffawed. "Don't tell him that! In his defence, he is loyal to a fault and half a warframe. Not that he talks about that."

"That is not a defence," Flipper growled. He waved his hand. "What about Hook?"

"Perfectionistic mechanic." Hightower sighed. "In a way, I worry about him most."

Flipper was taken aback. "Why? He seems the best adjusted out of all them so far."

"No, that would be definitely Long Haul, the logistics expert. Only Long Haul, sadly, is not interested in anything beyond living a good life." Hightower huffed. "He had the gall once to tell me that he simply wants to do well what he is told to be done. No ambition, not anywhere."

Flipper smiled. "That is what probably makes him likeable."

"Definitely. He's the spark of the crew, keeps them together. And Hook is the leader of them. Only as I said he is a perfectionist." Hightower grimaced. "Micromanaging a crew as if they were screws is not good for construction."

"I can see that..." Flipper leaned back into the couch. "So they are talented, but a bit of a mess."

"Yep." Hightower stood up. "But look at who am I telling that to, your life isn't exactly straightforward right now either, right?"

"Yeah."

Later, as Flipper laid alone in the darkness, his lines of thought returned to Black Dust and Prince Prowl and the future of all Praxus. What would now become of his friend? Would he simply forget Flipper like a dream?

He stood up and watched the media news cycle as they discussed which House and who was swearing loyalty. War, they said, war was coming. Flipper felt cold.

~

He'd been living in Hightower's apartment for several orns when the doorbell started ringing. Flipper didn't move to open it. Hightower was at a construction site and no one knew he was here.

"Flipper! It's me, Downflip! Come on, I am alone."

Reluctantly, he put the article he was reading aside and stood up from the couch. "Coming," he grumbled and opened the door. "What ar-" The words died on his glossa as soon as he saw how his brother looked.

Downflip's thin Praxian doorwings hung low, his face held tear tracks and his optics were the deep blue of sorrow. "Flip Up deactivated," he said.



Flipper stumbled back. "No..."

"He tried to bond, but- but-" Downflip steadied his sibling, then hugged him tightly. "The bond wouldn't take and they were just both so stubborn they tried again, and then- they said they bonded, but the bond was out of equilibrium and dissolved both sparks."

Flipper sobbed. "That rust-bucked, fool-sparked idiot. I told him... I told him it was dangerous."

"He knew," Downflip said. "But they were so much in love..."

Spark feeling as if it was being torn apart, he closed the door and led his brother to the couch. Together they curled up beneath the blankets and grieved.

~

His brother couldn't stay long. Too much had to be done and Flipper insisted on remaining in hiding. But to his surprise, not a joor later the whole crew stumbled into the apartment.

"We heard," said Hook as an explanation while putting the sweet energon on the only table. "So we came."

"With gifts!" Scavenger gave him a whole box of things Flipper couldn't identify. "I hope you like them, they are some of my best finds."

"We- we will stay," Mixmaster added, and gave him a nod. "Until you are b-better."

Long Haul hugged him. "We will not leave you alone."

"Losing a brother is never easy. Mine decided to join the army and went to war last orn." Bonecrusher, who had hidden behind his comrades, came forward. "We... we might not be your friends or anything, but we are not sparkless."

Flipper burst into tears. Not because his brother had died, but because he had never thought that there would ever come a moment in his life where five mechs would try to comfort him – or anything.

His tears sent the crew into panic mode. Just what had they done wrong? Should they stay, go, call his family or even, Primus forbid, the prince? Bonecrusher apologised profusely that whatever he said he hadn't meant it and that they are of course friends if he wanted them to be friends.

Flipper hit him and grinned, too amused to see the big bad Bonecrusher promising the stars of the sky if he just would be normal again and not cry any longer.

Boncrusher stared, then laughed, relieved. "Careful, mechs, that one is a scrapper!"

Later, when they were all piled on the couch, and Flipper among them, Long Haul looked at him and grinned. "Guess we are your friends?"

"Yes," agreed Flipper softly.

He wondered if his other friend, Black Dust, was alone now. How much worse must the loss be for him? How much more lonely must he feel?

~

The vorns flew past, and the journalists eventually forgot Flipper; too many other, worse, news occupied the top place in the news cycles. Yet Hightower made no signs that Flipper should leave and Flipper did most of his academy work remotely with the Constructicon terminal every apartment wing had. He had asked what he had to pay to use it, explaining in a somewhat embarrassed way that he didn't have a lot of credits left – well not any. With half the trade routes blocked by the raging civil war, the energon prices had spiked and his stipend barely covered that and his dorm room anymore.

Hook gave him a strange look and said that if he helped them out with a problem tonight they would pay him appropriately. Relieved, Flipper agreed quickly and the crew became a lot more effective. Soon, Flipper did more and more work with them, even going so far as to start designing his own parts and making suggestions.

"Don't you want us to join at our next construction site?" Long Haul suddenly asked one orn.

Flipper looked at him. "You never asked before."

"We never had to leave Praxus before, little Scrapper," explained Bonecrusher and crossed his arms. "But the war destroys things faster than we can build them and the Grand Duke has ordered that we should repair at least the worst damage left in his wake immediately."

Flipper's spark twisted for a moment. Prowl. Black Dust. Right. "You would be gone?"

"Just for a few vorns," said Scavenger from his side, his tail twisting around his legs. "Not long..."

"But we would prefer to have you with us," said Hook gruffly. "You make us better. Of course, if you come with us you will get a payment like any other Constructicon." Meaning he would get half his payment in the form of energon. A boon in these times, when prices had spiked and refugees were storming into the cities with empty tanks and lots of desperation.

Flipper looked at the last one. "Mixmaster?"

"I-I-I agree."

He looked at them one after another and then nodded, feeling warm and content. "I would love to come with you."

~

He became part of their crew in every way that counted. Sometimes he had to travel back to the academy, to his own dorm room, but it felt more and more lonely and empty. He missed

his crew, the construction sites, the rhythm of creation and demolition. As a result, he forced more and more work into his orns at the academy so he could be back faster.

Tiredly, Flipper stumbled through the long hallway home. The orn had been a long one, with a meeting among the researchers, a whole new set of numbers that made a recalculation of everything necessary, and a message from his creators that his brother Downflip might have met a mech that he would like to try bonding with. His spark shuddered at the news, remembering Flip Up's fate all too well.

And also because it forced him to forever to remember the mech who had paid for that test, who he had called friend and laughed with and missed every orn when he sat alone during lunch joor.

He had tried to forget him, but that was easier said than done. Prince Prowl was everywhere. In the news, when he oversaw another execution or explained another law. In the hallways, where he might get cornered by journalists or other students, because "Weren't you his friend?" and even at his work with his crew, when he used a formula he had once explained to the younger mech.

But he had forced himself to face a bitter truth, whoever he had been friend with that mech had probably been lost... either to betrayal, sorrow, or war.

He opened his door, and shuffled inside, closing it behind him.

"Good evening," said a voice.

Flipper let out a squeal while jumping into the air. On his berth sat a massive mech, a warframe he realised a moment later. Not only that, it was a warframe who had clearly been into battle recently. There were silvery patches all over his left arm, and his right optic was a bit lighter than the left one too – signs of a very recent replacement. Probably from one of the dozen of battles in the east of Praxus.

But the most important thing were the signs on the amour that told him this wasn't a random visitor. This was a personal guard of Prince Prowl, reigning Grand Duke of Praxus.

It was this sight that made him take an uncertain step back until his doorwings hit the door. There was no chance he could flee. Not only was the warframe bigger and faster, he probably also wasn't alone.

"So," said Flipper slowly as the silence between them stretched. "Ah, I guess Prince Prowl has sent you?"

"Yes," answered the warframe. "My designation is Lieutenant Razortide."

Flipper forced a smile. "Nice to meet you." He gulped, wishing he had his crew at his back. "Just to make it quick, you are not here to throw me into some prison or worse?"

"No!" The warframe's armour moved, a sure sign of true emotional shock. "No," he repeated, calmer. "You have nothing to fear from me, Flipper or, as now many call you, Scrapper. I

promise."

"Good to know." He relaxed only marginally. "So, you know my name..."

The warframe leaned back on the berth, the picture of relaxation and non-threat. He even kept his hands open and near his knees where Flipper could always see them. "You are very well known among the guard. It's an honour to finally meet you."

Flipper blinked. For sixteen vorns now he had feared what would happen when the prince remembered his existence. Not once had he imagined the word 'honour' to enter that conversation. "What?"

"You are one of two mechs our prince has ordered to be protected," explained the warframe. "The second is Prince Smokescreen."

Who hadn't risen from his stasis yet, as every mech knew. Flipper felt his spark clench as he realised what that meant. "Oh," he said very, very quietly.

The warframe looked at him closely, then nodded in apparent satisfaction. "Yes," he said. "His Highness wanted it kept as secret as possible to ensure your safety. One of the measures taken was not to inform you." The warframe hesitated, then added: "We are sorry if this caused you unnecessary concern or distress. But there were elements willing to use anything to hurt our prince."

Flipper nodded slowly, he understood the words but was not quite as certain about their meaning. "My death would have hurt him?"

"Of course."

It was a processor-boggling thought. Yes, he had liked to believe that Black Dust had cared, but Prince Prowl had been so different and distanced, like an image straight from a strange dream, that he had convinced himself that it had all be one-sided. That it hadn't been was... a pure relief.

"I'm glad he is healthy, too." It was the truth, and that made everything even better. "Wait, he is well, right? I mean I know I can't trust everything the news stations say, but surely if the Grand Duke had been hurt someone would have said something?"

The warframe gifted him with a warm smile. "Our prince is well. Just a bit tired from the last several vorns."

"No wonder," said Flipper drily. He could imagine that a war campaign of this scale was nothing one could do while lazing around. "But he can relax now, right? I mean, all the big rebel bases have been taken, Lord Vapor and the others are dead..." Public executions, most of them. He had made it a point not to watch them.

"I thought so too, yet the prince disagrees with me." Razorback sighed. "He said now comes the most important thing – the rebuilding."

"He is right! Even I lost count of how many bridges and roads were destroyed, not to mention buildings." Or families and lives. Of course, it ensured work for him and his crew for the next hundred vorns at least, so he wasn't complaining as strongly as he probably should.

The Lieutenant smirked. "I never counted." Then he stood up. Flipper couldn't help but note that he was nearly one-third taller than he. "This is actually why I am here, Flipper. We have helped the prince with everything he needed or wanted so far. We kept him safe, we stood at his side, we died on his orders... now his Highness faces new challenges we are ill-equipped to help with."

Flipper frowned as things finally fell into place. "He trusts me," he realised. "And he needs someone who can now give him an opinion of what to focus on, what to rebuild first."

"Yes. I was told that he himself has a Talent that aids him, but..." The warframe shrugged. "It was never fully developed."

Because Black Dust hadn't gotten his chance to do so, Flipper thought sadly. And now he would never be able to do it. As Prowl, he had too many duties elsewhere to disappear for several vorns to an academy. No, war and politics would be his calling, no matter his personal preferences or Talents. So much power, and what had he gained from it? Blood, death, and sorrow.

"So, Flipper-"

"Scrapper," he said. "If he wants me for rebuilding, construction in other words, he wants me and my crew. And that means I'll go by Scrapper."

The warframe nodded. "As you wish. Scrapper, will you help?"

Something that had been frozen in Flipper for over sixteen vorns relaxed and he smiled.

"Yes. Yes, of course."

## Chapter End Notes

I hope this epilogue surprised at least a few and that all of you have enjoyed the story so far. :) It will definitely not be the last in this universe and series.

Thanks for all the wonderful reviews. They are a true motivation. :)

~silber

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