Some Strange and Unnerving Events
by for_autumn_i_am

Summary

As a boy in a dreary school on the moors, Kylo Ren had only one friend, a red-headed boy whose sharp tongue and wit drew Kylo to him. But that friend was taken from him. Now grown, Kylo goes into the service of the master of Stormfield Hall, the enigmatic Lord Arkanis, who is seeking a tutor for his charge. Kylo's past will come rushing back to him, both in his new employer and some unusual circumstances that bring to the fore powers that Kylo thought long-suppressed.

Notes

Please refer to the end notes for content warnings
There was no possibility of taking a walk that day. Sombre clouds all but swallowed up Salem, and thunder rolled in the thick yellow fog. Little Ben pressed his face to the cool glass of the window, and peered out.

“A hell of a day,” his father remarked, fumbling with the brass buttons of his tailcoat. Ben grinned; he was used to Han’s cowboy attire, his gambler hat and sailcloth pants; seeing him making an attempt to look decent always felt like a private joke of sorts.

“Have you shaved?” Leia shouted from upstairs.

“It’ll happen, eventually,” Han grumbled, and ruffled up Ben’s hair as he passed him. “Ben is still in his nightgown,” he announced at a louder volume, and started climbing the wide stairs.

“Ben, honey, you’ll catch a cold! Where’s Artie?”

Ben slid down the windowsill, carefully, and ventured to the hearth. He nearly tipped over the toy train he was supposed to pack away; visitors would be coming for tea. He measured the challenge, decided to ask a servant for help at his earliest convenience, and walked to the bookshelf. He frowned at the titles, not quite familiar with every letter just yet, and pulled the volumes down one by one, favouring the ones with pictures; the rest ended up on the floor in a discarded heap.

He heard his Lady Mother the General running up and down, shouting quickfire orders like she used to do on the battlefield. He disliked having guests over for this precise reason, how overwrought her mother got in preparation, how his pleasant home transformed into a busy beehive, how even the kindest request of sit straight and say good morning stung. He vowed he shan’t get involved this time; he won’t be paraded around in some frilly attire, congratulated on his cleverness and for having inherited his mother’s eyes and father’s smile. He’d hide. He knew just the place. He grabbed a volume titled Histo__ of B_itish Bi_ds, and trotted back to the windowsill. He climbed up, sat cross-legged like a Turk, and pulled in the heavy scarlet drapery. The drawing-room disappeared, leaving him in a glowing dusk of gold and red.

There was just enough light to see by. He opened the book, the old spine of it creaking as if it was complaining of his finger’s impatience. There were exciting drawings of birds from his mother’s old country, British birds, foreign and pompous. He didn’t pay any mind to the eloquent descriptions, coming up with names and stories of his own, a bird of prey, moonpecker, puffswallow. He heard Artie call for him, high-pitched voice ringing clear, “Master Ben, please, Master Ben, where are you,” and he held his breath. After a short while, the doorbell chimed and the first early guest was admitted, an Admiral Holdo or somebody. He heard Artie’s anxious whisper from far too close, “Master Ben is nowhere to be found” and Han’s answering grunt, “He couldn’t disappear” and a much less confident “Could he?”

He wished he could. He fancied he did, once, when he was very-very little, and his parents and all the servants were running around with torches in the woods, screaming his name while he was right there, standing in a clearing, terrified of all the excitement he seemed to inadvertently cause and thus too afraid to reveal himself. His mother found him by the strange light of her white-turned torch, which seemed to spit fairy-sparkles. She hauled him up, kissed the top of his head and said, “Promise me you’ll never, ever do this again.”
The curtains were yanked open, and Han grabbed his shoulders. Ben dropped the book as he was lifted from his seat; it fell to the ground with a heavy thud, the pages creasing. He reached for it, but he was swiftly passed to Artie.

“Here he is! Get him his blouse.”

“My book!” Ben complained, twisting in Artie’s hold.

“You’ll get your book, but you need to put on some nice clothes first, for Mama,” Han explained, and then shouted “Coming!” when Threepio called for him, voice shrill with dread.

“...with sharp bullets! Please, sir, think of Master Ben; what if he finds them?”

Ben couldn’t care less about whether Han left his pistols lying about; he wanted his book. Artie tried to drag him up the stairs, but he resisted, making himself limp at first, and when that didn’t work (Artie was surprisingly strong for his short build), he started kicking his chubby belly and screaming, “Unhand me!”

“My-my, what is happening here?” called the Admiral from the anteroom, peeking in. Ben shrieked at her, a pained, beastly sound, and clawed at Artie’s face, barely missing his eyes.

“That’s quite enough.” Han rushed back to him; Artie was keeping him at arm’s length, as if he was a misbehaving cat. The Admiral chuckled. Ben wanted to sink his teeth into her, to chew and tear.

“Go away!” he demanded. Han threw him over a shoulder, and no matter how he kicked and wriggled, he couldn’t get free. He was trapped, helpless, humiliated. He started crying. The first wails summoned his mother, as if by magic, appearing in the door in all her finery; but she didn’t rush to his aid.

“I am dreadfully sorry,” she addressed the Admiral, who waved it away. “Were you followed?”

“Don’t cause a scene,” Han whispered to Ben. He was shaking, choking on his sobs. Han lowered him a bit, so he was pressed to his chest, and started rocking him. Ben punched him, weakly.

“Let me go,” he begged.

“Where do you want to go, huh? What’s the hurry?”

“I want,” Ben heaved, and pointed his finger downstairs, “I want my boo-boo-book!”

“Oh hell, is this about that damned book?”

A strong fit of tears overwhelmed him; it was a good book, and he wished to defend it, but found he couldn’t, not having the strength to summon words. Han brought him to the red room, and dropped him atop a linen chest.

“Look at me, son. I’m getting your book, all right? You must wait here until you’ve calmed down, and I’ll come get you and get you dressed. This meeting is very, very important to your mother, whether we like it or not. We’ll attend, for her sake. Do you understand me?”

Ben couldn’t answer, but he nodded. He wanted to ask permission to wait in his own room, with his toys, but Han hurried away, and locked the door behind himself.

“Leave it open,” Ben cried, but wasn’t heard. He rubbed his nose, and peered around. Oh, how he despised this room! He never told his parents: it used to be Grandmother Padmé’s, and was generally
regarded as the most beautiful part of their mansion with its intricate red wallpapers and lavish curtains. Ben’s problem was the bed: it looked like a cage with its bare posts, and worse still, he was told his grandmother had died in it. The pattern of big, blooming flowers made it look like it was bloody.

He told himself he wouldn’t mind meeting her ghost. She was a perfectly nice lady; her portrait, displayed directly across him, showed a woman of his mother’s age and beauty, a kind smile playing on her lips and with flowers in her hair. He was only afraid he’d see her in the agony of her last minutes of Earth. He didn’t like dying people: they were really loud. He could hear them from the end of the street, wailing as if to call to him, do something, save us, please, we’re so very afraid.

Han returned with a glass of water and the book.

“Will you be good?” he asked. Ben saw that the book was horribly creased—ruined; he started sobbing, not with desperation but anger, and pushed away Han’s hand when he offered the water. It spilled over the parquetry. Han mopped it up wordlessly with his handkerchief while Ben curled up on the ground. They kept the room heated, because Leia loved to come here on wintry evenings and read, but the floor was still terribly cold.

“If I were you, I’d occupy the divan and be miserable there,” Han advised. “I’ll come back once you feel like yourself again.”

Ben already felt like himself, just currently quite wretched. He didn’t say anything, and kept lying on the floor, rolling to his stomach so he was face-down. Once comfortable, he started crying again. He heard Han sigh, get to his feet, and walk away. A click, and the door was locked once more.

He ran out of tears quite quickly. His throat was raw and dry, and his nose was stuffed. He sat up, pulling the book close by the corner. He promised Leia he’d be gentle with them; now that promise was broken. He should’ve held on tighter. He started leafing through the pages, but they only made him anxious: he wasn’t seeing the beautiful pictures, but all the ways the book has been ravaged, a crease here, a bent page there.

The house filled with guests. He sensed it in the corner of his consciousness, louder than the clamour of their conversation. He could hear their thoughts. It was a rather annoying sort of noise, which echoed base emotions— he picked up fear and puzzlement, but also stubborn, boasting hope. He was used to the thoughts clouding the mind of his parents and servants; they were predictable. The noise of new people was annoying at best. He tried to cover his ears, but it didn’t help — never did.

There was a knock on the vast window; a real sound, muting the buzz of minds for a glorious second, knock-KNOCK, knock-KNOCK. He turned towards it, thinking that maybe the branches of the bare oak tree were tapping on the glass; but it was a magpie. Ben frowned at it. Birds were not in the habit of parading around when it was about to rain, and the clouds were still heavy with the promise of a storm.

“Little boy, little boy, let me come in,” the magpie said. Its voice was Ben’s own, whispering within his head. The magpie knocked on the glass again. Ben saw its black eyes flash. “Little boy, little boy, let me come in.”

He got to his feet. Surely, he was imagining that it could speak. No animal he ever met possessed this gift, although they were rapid thinkers, just lost in their own wordless world.

“How may I help you?” he asked, voice barely a tremble.

“I will help you if you help me,” the magpie answered. “I have a gift for you, and you have a gift for
me, a gift I would cherish. Let me in so we can both claim them.”

“That sounds fair,” Ben answered lamely. He didn’t expect that it would reply. He walked to the window, soft on his feet. His stomach felt tied and his heart was beating quite fast, but his curiosity was stronger than his caution. He reached for the heavy lock, and clung to it. The magpie was watching him. “Will you make the voices go away?” he pleaded. The magpie’s head turned at an unnatural angle.

“If that is what you wish.”

“Then come on in,” Ben muttered, and opened the window. A gush of cutting wind rushed in, and the magpie with it. It didn’t beat its wings fast enough, and it dropped to the ground. Ben tried to close the window, fighting with the strong draft. The magpie got to its feet, and started hopping around and around. It wasn’t behaving like a proper magpie at all. Ben secured the lock and turned to the bird, a silent dread gripping his throat. He had to be brave, he told himself; he’d just have to be a brave boy and all would be well.

“My gift,” he requested in a princely tone, lifting his chin. The magpie peered up at him.

“Raise me up.”

Ben offered it his palm; the magpie jumped on it. It didn’t weigh anything at all. Ben lifted it up, mouth pressed into a thin line. His mother did it when she wanted people to obey her will, and it always worked.

Without a warning, the magpie knocked on his forehead with its sharp beak. Ben winced in pain, and dropped it, but it unfolded its wings and started flying around him. Ben touched the spot he’d been hit; his fingers came away clean, although he could feel something oozing from the wound, thick like blood.

“Do you hear anything?” the magpie asked him.

“Just you,” he said in a thin voice. “You and the wind.”

“Listen closely.”

He could hear the guests conversing, and even some clamour from the kitchen; they’d soon start bringing the china out. His father would soon come to get him.

“I can’t hear them thinking,” he admitted. He didn’t quite understand why he was disappointed.

“My gift, my gift, my gift,” the magpie sang, flying in dizzying circles.

“What do you want?”

The magpie stopped. It wasn’t moving its wings, but somehow it was still hovering just in front of Ben’s face.

“I want your eyes,” it announced. Then it opened its beak.

Ben remembers he was screaming.

He remembers hearing his father rushing upstairs, shouting his name.

The next thing in his memory is himself, lying in his mother’s lap, panting and repeating “I can’t see” over and over, voice getting higher. He could feel Leia’s touch on his damp forehead, how she
rocked him back and forth, back and forth, but all was tainted with a darkness, although his eyes were open. He could feel them; it felt like they were on fire.

“Get the salt!” Leia shouted at Han, and just becoming aware of the people standing around the door, she shielded her son with her body, curling over him. “Please leave — My son is badly hurt. Threepio, will you see our guests out?”

A hundred questions—what happened, General—but Leia wasn’t paying them any attention. She covered Ben’s eyes with her palm, forcing him to close them, and kissed the top of his head.

“Where’s the magpie?” Ben asked, shrill with panic that it could be still there, flying around the room on soundless wings.

“It wasn’t a magpie,” Leia said, so softly only he could hear. He tensed. “My darling, it wasn’t a magpie at all.”

Han returned, locking the door after barked apologies, and dropped to his knees next to his family. He got Ben’s hand, and squeezed. Leia lifted her palm, and Ben blinked against the tainted darkness.

“His eyes are all black,” Han whispered, sounding sick. “How—”

“Honey,” Leia said, cupping Ben’s face. “Honey, honey, listen to me. He hexed you; I will try to lift the curse. You need to open your mouth so I can start cleaning away the bad magic. It will be unpleasant at first, but I promise it’ll make you feel better. Han?”

Han put the pincher of salt to Ben’s mouth as Leia helped keeping it open, gently clutching Ben’s jaw. Han started to pour it in, and Ben screamed as his mouth filled. It burned and hurt, and he was soon coughing it up, his saliva dripping down his chin as Leia shushed him, and Han said, “I’m so sorry, there’s not much left, it’ll soon be over. Leia, isn’t it enough? Won’t it kill him?”

“All of it,” Leia whispered, and Ben could hear it was paining her, but could no longer be certain of her emotions. Blind to the world and deaf to thoughts, he swallowed painful gulps of salt until there was no more left. His stomach churned and his throat felt like he had eaten fistfuls of glass. He was crying, cursed eyes dry, and it felt like punishment for having wasted his tears on trifling sorrows. He knew with a certainty that he was about to die, to dissolve into the eternal darkness veiling his vision, that everything would vanish.

“Lock all the doors, all the windows,” Leia told Han. “Send away everybody but Artie and Threepio; after that, no one can come, and no one can go. Get me sage and juniper from the kitchen, and elder berries, if you can find them; get me milk and honey and the sharpest knife. Burn candles; there must be no shadows in the corners.”

“You must contact Luke,” Han pleaded. “The sooner, the better.”

“Give me a week.” Leia squeezed Ben’s hand. “I can save him.”

* * *

Seven nights and seven days were spent like this: he tossed and turned, being eaten alive by sickness and darkness; fever gnawed on him and spit him out, only to swallow him whole again. He was put in his grandmother’s bed, his mother by his side always, feeding him milk mixed with blood and
honey and whispering words strong enough to light up stars. Ben never knew her capable of such power; he understood she did it only in order to save him.

On the seventh night it seemed all would be in vain. Han, tasked with guarding the fires, lingered, as if he sensed that leaving Ben’s bedside would mean seeing his son for the last time.

“Dream with me,” Leia asked him, grasping his hand in her palms. “Come, Ben. Come with me.”

In the dream they’d flown over an ocean; in the dream, there was an island. Uncle Luke was waiting for them, and Ben could see.

“You must send him to me,” Luke said.

“I’d lose him,” Leia objected.

“If you don’t send him on this journey, you’ll lose him forever.”

They woke before dawn, and Leia washed him and dressed him, and Han packed his belongings.

“You’ll read all these books when you can see again,” he chatted away, voice distant and breaking. It was getting harder and harder to listen to the world, as if he was underwater. Han tied a handkerchief around his head, from the tip of his nose to his brows. “I know you don’t understand everything yet, and I know that you’re probably angry and scared. Remember this for when it will matter: I married a witch, and she stopped practicing magic to protect you. You have power on your own: it was wrong of us to pretend, to hope you didn’t. It attracted something which is much bigger and much older than you, or even your mother. Your uncle will be able to fight him off, and keep you safe. We must send you to him, and we can’t come with you — not yet; but we will write to you and visit as often as we can, and we’ll rebuild a life together. I promise you that. Don’t become a stranger.” Han hugged him, and he couldn’t hug him back. His arms were heavy like lead.

He was brought to a steamship, a huge, hungry iron beast. Threepio and Artie were to accompany him, and he was given a new name: Kylo Ren.

“Kylo is from the first part of Skywalker and the last of Solo, so it’ll be easy to remember,” Leia explained, fussing with his traveller’s cape before he’d board. “Ren sounds just like Ben; keep the name you were born with close to your heart, locked in your chest. It has power. I’ll think of you every waking hour, and we shall meet in your dreams. Before you know it, I’ll hold you in my arms again.” She pulled him close, and whispered into his hair: “You’re my blood. Between my strength and your father’s devilish luck, you’ll be just fine. Promise me you will be.”

The long weeks of his voyage must’ve been hell; Threepio almost perished on the way, but he was numb to the pain. It seemed that his soul was a few steps away from his body, rotting in a corner like a forgotten stuffed animal, discarded and useless. In his soul’s absence, the darkness filled up the frail vessel of his flesh. Whoever possessed him was patient like water, seeping in drop by drop but shunning the lingering taste of salt, the echo of his mother’s words, the milk, the blood, the herbs. The fires his father lit for him were dimming but warm, shining upon him like a last flicker of hope, a guiding light for his shadow to know where was home.

By the time they got to the shores of England, his mind was absent; what remained was a vague awareness of being put in a coach and making haste upstream. He was brought to Lowood, to his uncle’s institute for unfortunate boys, and under the cover of night, he was led to a chapel where a thousand lights burned. Vicar Luke was waiting for him.

“He’s catatonic,” Threepio bemoaned, voice reverberating in the air, which was thick with incense.
and smoke. “He doesn’t speak, we can rarely make him eat or drink; he used to be such a lively boy, and now, and now—!”

“I must confess I preferred his mischief to this,” Artie said. “Can you please heal him?” He led Kylo forward, tugging on his sleeves; he followed blindly, stumbling, head spinning.

“You’ve done your part,” Luke addressed them as he crouched down to Kylo. His clothes smelled as if they were kept in an old cellar for far too long, but it wasn’t unpleasant; it just made him smell like a memory. “Please leave us alone for now; you will find a kindly fire inside and some drink to warm your spirits.” Gently, he undid the knot of the cloth covering Kylo’s eyes. The cool silk slipped off; touch, smell, sound, everything was begging him to notice the world around him. The chapel was the first place which felt real, ever since he’s left the red room. “Please, look at me,” Luke asked him.

“I can’t see,” Kylo said, and heard a falter in Threepio’s steps, a squeak of his shoes on marble as he spun around.

“Master Ren! Already, he speaks!”

“Please leave,” Luke repeated, then turned his attention back to Kylo; it had a warmth, like the light of the sun. “I’m right here. Look. See.” He put his thumbs over Kylo’s closed eyes, and rubbed on them gently, as if he was trying to scrub away a bad dream. Kylo heard the door shut, enclosing them in the chapel’s stillness. “You’ve got the magpie’s eyes,” Luke mused. “No wonder you cannot use them. Open your own.”

“I gave them away,” he confessed, and a choked sob escaped his throat. He trembled with fear and shame, part of him wanting to crawl back to the numb darkness, never to feel pain again. Luke’s light touch seemed to pull him back, anchoring him in a frightening reality, unbearably heavy with the weight of unwitting mistakes.

“You did nothing wrong,” Luke said, picking up his scrambled thoughts. “It was a trick. It wasn’t a fair bargain. You’re not bound by it.”

Kylo nodded his understanding. Please make it go away, he thought, but these were the same words which damned him, so he dared not utter them. Luke rubbed his temples, and touched his forehead to his.

“Say it after me: I am no bird—”

“I am no bird—” he muttered, half-convinced. The shadow of the magpie was beating its wings in his mind, knocking on his skull: lies, lies, lies.

“And no net ensnares me,” Luke’s voice suppressed the noise.

“And no net ensnares me,” he said, louder.

“I am a free human being with an independent will.”

“I am a free human being with an independent will,” Kylo repeated, curling his fingers into fists. “I am a free human being with an independent will!” For the third time, he screamed: “I am a free human being with an independent will!”

The veil of darkness was torn, and he fancied hearing a shriek; then there was candlelight, like stars, floating in the air; and he could see Luke’s eyes, sky-clear and bright, and his brilliant smile.

“Welcome to Lowood,” he said, and ruffled up Kylo’s hair.
By the time he was ten years of age, the magpie’s curse was just a faint memory; but Luke wouldn’t let him forget it. He insisted that still, he wasn’t safe.

It was hard to imagine that any harm would come to him while he was at Lowood. It was a dreary place, but there was something comforting in its gloom. The sky hung low over the endless moor surrounding the school, and the eternal gale made the tall grass sing. There were huge stones, old like memory, and thorny flowers, and treacherous, deep waters. Who would come to hurt him; who would cross the no man’s land?

And the building itself: like a fortress, with its crumblings vaults and flying buttresses. The walls were always damp and cold, and they had that cellar-smell which inevitably stuck to Kylo’s plain clothes, the itchy, grey wool uniform they were to wear. About fifty children, all boys, of varying ages and diverse stories of forsakenness. Kylo never felt like one of them; he had his little secret, scented letters sent from abroad, sealed with his mother’s sigil, filled with words of adoration and encouragement. When he cried at night, curled up on the narrow bed in the sleeping hall, shivering under a thin blanket, he cried for his darling New England, his lovely Massachusetts, the busy streets of Salem; he dreamed of his glorious return, rushing to his mother’s arms, being embraced by his father, the three of them clinging to each other without a thought of ever letting go.

Luke never tried to fill the void the absence of his family left; he regarded him with the same calm kindness he had for everybody else, and warned Kylo not to stick to his identity, to his name and rank; that losing them helped him survive those short years ago. “I have given up my heritage as well, and it served me right,” he explained; but that was by choice, thought Kylo. He found himself unable to give up his birthright, the expectation of being treated as the exception.

It was because of his aloofness that he had no friends; he was also told he had a mean tongue, and that he was prone to wickedness. He regarded these accusations as nonsense; a sign of envy, with all probability, which made him resentful in turn. His anger fueled his solitariness, and he buried himself in books while the others wasted away their time with games. He wanted to master his lessons, to cultivate his mind, perfect his manners, and forget everything about magic; to prove he was better than the lot.

The events which brought changes started on a starless Sunday night, with the arrival of a boy with burning hair. They were all asleep when he was brought to the hall; deep in yearning dreams, Kylo fancied hearing hushed arguments, but it was washed away by his mother’s calling. When he woke, he discovered that the bed next to his, an empty grave since its previous owner was claimed by typhus, has been filled. Its new occupant had his back to him, only allowing a glimpse of neatly combed ginger hair and fine travelling clothes, complete with a nicely embroidered cape. He still had his boots on.

The bell rang just after Kylo noticed the presence of the curious student. He jumped to his feet, made his bed in haste, and raced to his little bowl of water waiting on a long table to wash his face. He heard the boy startled from his shallow sleep by the clamour the students were making, and getting to his feet. Kylo chanced a polite glance over his shoulder. The boy was tall and lean, the childish roundness of his face juxtaposed by sharp cheekbones and a displeased frown. He walked up to the bowl next to Kylo’s, and narrowed his eyes at it, as if unsure what he was supposed to do next. Kylo broke in the ice covering the surface, and grinned up at him with a gappy smile, proud to know better.
“I would rather have a warm bath,” the boy croaked, and the students within earshot snickered.

He was called Augustus Burns. Within a fortnight, he earned himself a reputation of arrogance; he never listened to his name, made no attempt at conversation, refused to join games, but he was an infuriatingly bright student, rivaling Kylo’s talent and even surpassing him thanks to his years and experience. Kylo felt a kinship between them; they were the only gentlemen in the mass of ordinary orphans, destined for greatness, superior in skills. Any attempt to make friends, however, failed; Augustus mistook him to be one of the wretched children without hope, without future.

It so happened that when they were ushered outside on a snowy Monday to get some fresh air, Kylo resolved to only watch Augustus from a distance; not so long ago, he would’ve been tagging along, chatting away and making a fool of himself, but I have matured since then, he assured himself. Augustus offered a pitiful sight, his uniform’s coat hanging limply from his narrow shoulders, his trousers too short for his long legs, allowing a glimpse of his calf peeking out from shoes quite insufficient for the weather. His cheeks and nose were red from the cold, and he just walked around the fences while the others were engaged in a snowball fight, running a stick over the wooden bars and listening to how it clanged. How dumb, Kylo mused, to refuse my company for this — the dullness of remoteness. He had smuggled out a book and was ready to make pretence of reading, sitting on the stairs, above them all. There was a delighted shriek, and a stray snowball got Augustus’ nape. Kylo winced in sympathy. Augustus tried to fish it out from his upturned collar, while the others laughed.

“Attack!” called their leader, Perry, a brawny boy of seventeen, and roaring and shouting, the children were on Augustus within a minute. He was besieged, snowballs raining on him like cannon-fire. He was brought to his knees, and made a sorry attempt to protect his head; ‘That’s cheating,’” one of the boys shrieked.

“Take it like a man,” Perry said, grinning and grabbing his collar, “or fight back!” He tried to shovel more snow into his clothes with his big hands; Kylo heard a snap. A frightening scream followed. Kylo jumped to his feet, trying to see what happened. Perry stumbled back; the stick Augustus had in his hand, now broken in half, was poking out of his eye. Blood bubbled up between his ungloved fingers as he covered his face, and he screamed and screamed.

“Who dares lay a hand on me?” Augustus yelled, shouting over Perry’s pained cries, and stabbed at the air with the sharp end of the stick. The boys jumped back, and Augustus repeated on the voice of challenge: “Who dares to try?”

A teacher came running, shouting, “Put that down in that instant! Put that down!”

Kylo tore his gaze away from Mr. Watkins, and met Augustus’ eyes. He looked composed and calm, but when he handed over the stick, his eyes got round with shock, and with trembling lips, he said, “It was an accident— We were playing… Oh, I am most dreadfully sorry! It was a game—a game, sir!”

None of the witnesses opposed his claim, and Perry just wailed and wailed.

* * *

“I am willing to give you the benefit of the doubt,” Luke announced, “but even if what you did was just an act of carelessness, it shall not go unpunished.”
They were all gathered in the refectory, clothes still wet from melting snow, boots muddy and leaving puddles of dirt on the floor. Augustus stood before Luke with his head hanging low. Kylo had never seen Luke so furious; his wind-chafed cheeks were pale with it and his eyes were the burning blue of lightning, but he didn’t raise his voice. He presented an upturned bucket to Augustus, and pronounced:

“You are to stand on it for a day; you will not be given food, nor drink. We welcomed you into our community in a time of need; you must earn our trust, and repent.”

Augustus opened his mouth to say something, but then thought better of it, and stepped on the bucket. Luke was watching him with his arms crossed over his chest; Augustus was taller than him like this, but Luke must have felt he had the upper hand. He looked his pupil up and down, disappointment apparent on his face, and then stepped away from him.

“The rest of you: you will come to me one by one, and I want you to tell me in detail what you saw; and what you say shall remain between us, but have dire consequences for those they condemn. While you wait, please help yourself to breakfast. You will be supervised by Mr. Goodwin and Mr. Quattlebaum, and I ask you not to talk.”

No directive was of use; when Kylo was called into his room, he found Luke standing by the stove, looking quite crestfallen and saying, “They all say it was an accident.”

Kylo swallowed down a smile. “It was an accident, uncle.”

Luke sighed. “You know I can read minds.”

“Do you want them to know?” Kylo challenged. “What will you say? How did you find out the truth, if none of them told you?”

Luke tilted his head. “Why are you enjoying this, Kylo?”

“Because justice is served,” he snapped. “They were tormenting him; they’re wicked boys, the lot. They spread awful rumours and steal our food. Perry got what he deserved—”

“No child deserves to lose an eye,” Luke interrupted. “I would think you of all people could sympathise.”

“I do have sympathy; just not for Perry.”

Luke walked to his writing desk, and touched it with timid fingers. A quill and a heap of papers were lying there, the latter with curious symbols.

“They will fear him,” he said. “Then they will worship him — seek his favours; an eye for an eye, revenge; it is all so ironically Biblical, and has the same appeal.” He sighed. “Mark my words, Kylo: the God of the Old Testament has been overthrown; all it took was a promise of forgiveness, of love and kindness.”

“You don’t believe in God,” Kylo blurted out, only realising this. Luke’s fingers sought out his cross.

“I know of bigger powers; and you are, sadly, right; those powers are not to be revealed, and I cannot lie about my evidence — children know lies all too well. Augustus Burns will stay with us, for now; and I am reluctant to alert his parents — as I said, no child deserves to suffer.”

“Are they bad people?”
“Very.” Luke dropped his hand. “Please, watch the inclinations of your heart. Don’t ever allow yourself acts of fervor or hatred; you know what happens when malevolent powers take a residence.”

Kylo contemplated this advice as he left Luke’s room, but he wasn’t meditating for long. After lunch, he sneaked some bread in Augustus’ pocket as he passed him, and at night, he sought him out with a glass of water.

“Quick, drink,” he whispered. Augustus seemed like a stylite to him, an early saint banished to live atop a pillar. Augustus’ hair glowed with the moonlight that touched it, and the surprise in his eyes was the first genuine emotion Kylo had ever seen on his face.

“What do you want from me?” Augustus whispered. Kylo smirked.

“I want you to drink.”

* * *

Luke was right about Augustus: his fellow pupils avoided him when he returned to floor-level, but it was more of a respectful distance. Any rumours of him being the bastard of some high lord who tried to hide his shame ceased. He also found his bed furnished with a supplementary blanket that evening. He was always given the chair closest to the hearth, the thickest slice of bread, two spreads of butter, sugar in his coffee — and Kylo was to share in these luxuries.

It was a reluctant friendship. Augustus initiated it by stopping next to him as he was chanting his Latin lesson, and scolded him with brows furrowed.

“Dивide et impera,” he said. “Mind your pronunciation.”

“Dee-wide ey em-pear-eh,” Kylo said, overdoing his American accent, and grinned. Augustus almost returned it with a smirk, and took his slate. He looked it over, found no further faults, and handed it back.

“Where are you from, anyway?” he asked, in a voice suggesting it was of no particular interest to him.

“Massachusetts.”

“How do you spell that?”

Kylo wrinkled up his nose, and Augustus’ smirk finally made a full appearance.

“I have not encountered it in the written form as of yet,” Kylo mumbled. It was part of his mother’s address, but he always skipped that part of the letters.

“Let us find your home,” Augustus said, and offered his hand. Kylo took it, and he was pulled to his feet. He was led to the tiny library; it felt such an honour, being seen in Augustus’ company as they crossed the rooms of the school. Everybody pretended to be engrossed in their lessons, and even the teachers did not dare ask where they were headed. Perry was the best at pretending they were invisible, but that might have been because he wasn’t seeing very well.
Augustus got the only atlas Lowood School owned, and handed it to Kylo. “Shall we discover the Americas?”

Instead of an answer, Kylo just greedily opened the book and started turning the pages; Augustus gracefully lowered himself to the ground, and he followed suit, sitting cross-legged and putting the book in his lap.

“Tell me everything I need to know of your country,” Augustus requested. “Make it interesting.”

“If I tell you everything, you wouldn’t believe me, for this is the most fascinating place in the entire world. It all began when God created it first, and named it Eden—”

“He did not,” Augustus scoffed, but his eyes were shining with glee.

* * *

Having a friend for the first time ever, Kylo couldn’t understand how he could have lived so solitary all these years—a decade!—for there was nothing more amusing than telling Augustus tall tales and lowly jokes and making him laugh. While Augustus had no interest in games, he was glad to offer his companionship and converse with him, sometimes late into the night in hushed tones, or after the service, Kylo still wearing his altar boy’s clothes, the both of them hiding away in the sacristy and eating what altar bread had not been turned into the body of Christ yet; Augustus even helped himself to the wine at times, but told Kylo he was still a child and couldn’t appreciate the taste proper.

Augustus’ company made him feel special, appreciated; even when Augustus was in a foul mood, it felt good just to linger, to offer his understanding silence. When Augustus’ spirits were high, he was an absolute delight. They sneaked out for evening walks, and conversed; they would pick marigolds and Lazarus bell, and pick at their petals. The peculiar smell of wildflowers lingered, and Kylo used it as his smelling salts when his temper worsened: a quick sniff at his wrist during an endless lecture would bring him back to the moor, and he could almost make out how the breeze tamed the flames of his friend’s hair. Augustus didn’t appreciate it when Kylo made faces at him while they were supposed to be engrossed in their lessons; he sat with the older boys in the back, and he found Kylo trying to get his attention from the front rows a distraction — but smiles were exchanged, and later, gossip behind the possible reasons of a teacher’s faults or a pupil’s misbehaviour.

They grew inseparable. They always sat together to consume their meager meals, and people would make way for them in the hallways. Kylo always matched Augustus’ pace, and found himself imitating his manner, keeping his lips stiff and letting his eyes cast judgment.

Augustus was often sick, but Kylo never minded it. He’d stay by his bedside, and be allowed to read to him. His studies were far more exciting than Kylo’s own, and he demanded the parts he couldn’t understand to be explained. He imagined walking the streets of ancient Rome with Augustus, riding camels through the Saharan deserts, fighting along with the warriors of the Ottoman Empire together; and when he was in a less fanciful mood, he imagined bringing Augustus home with him for a visit, presenting him to American society and showing him the Aquinnah cliffs, the Royalston falls, and—as they often joked—the World’s End in Hingham.

April found Augustus severely ill again, but Kylo did not think it was cause for any concern; Augustus had it far worse in the winter, coughing up blood and losing weight rapidly. Now, he was merely feverish, and the dry coughs he choked up didn’t sound all that alarming. He couldn’t get up
in the morning, burning up and trembling. Kylo fetched the nurse, left his friend with the promise of seeking him out during nooning, and attended his morning lessons. When he returned, bursting to tell Augustus every single detail about his day, he was nowhere to be found.

He sought out Luke, who was helping the gardener with the lilacs. Still clutching his books and frowning in the sunlight, he called out, “Where is Augustus?”

“In my room,” Luke answered without turning to him. “I’m afraid he’s very sick. He needed a proper bed close to the windows, so he can cool down and breathe fresh air; we sent for a doctor, and alerted his family.”

It was absurd. The garden was blooming merrily, and the air was balmy, sweet; the moors were vivid with the thousand colours of spring, bees and butterflies roaming about; it was unimaginable that death or danger would lurk here, not now.

“Is it that bad, or are you just being very cautious?” he asked, voice thin.

Luke looked at him, worry settled over his brows and his eyes distant. “We’re doing what we can,” he said, “but I’m afraid we can’t do much.”

Kylo spun on his heels, dropping the bundle of books, and raced to Luke’s room, storming through the school. His heart was beating in his throat, and he was chanting, “No, no, no!”

By the time he reached the door, he was blinking away angry tears. The door was yanked open without him even touching the knob, and he hurried to the bed and fell to his knees. Augustus lay there, as white as the puffy pillows, dressed down to his nightgown. Clearly, he was breathing, but the first sob escaped Kylo’s throat seeing him like this, so frail and pale. He grabbed his wrist, and squeezed.

“Wake up! You must wake up!”

Augustus grunted, and sank lower, so the blanket crept up to his nose. He looked very sullen, and his hair was a mess.

“Why would I do that?”

“They are telling me you might die,” Kylo cried.

“They’re probably right,” Augustus mumbled, but pried his eyes open, and peeked at him over the hem of the blanket.

“Please, please don’t die,” Kylo begged, taking his hand with an urgency and pressing it to his cheek. It was cold and damp with sweat.

“I will try my best,” Augustus promised. “Don’t cry.”

“I didn’t even have the time to get to know you,” Kylo bawled.

“Now, that’s just rude; you’re my sole companion, Kylo Ren. I’d say we know each other quite well.”

“That is not even my real name.”

“Nor is Augustus Burns mine. See how much we have in common?” He laughed, dry, then closed his eyes. His light lashes trembled as his face twitched.
“How can I help you?” Kylo forced out between wretched sobs.

“I’d very much like to sleep; I’m so tired, and weak.” Distaste was evident in his voice. Kylo rubbed a soothing circle over his knuckles.

“Can I stay with you?” he pleaded.

There was a short pause. “If you insist,” Augustus muttered. “I’d appreciate the company. It’s awfully dull here, and your friendship has always been a solace—”

“Don’t say your goodbyes yet,” Kylo interrupted. “Don’t get nostalgic; we’re right here.”

Augustus smirked, eyes still closed. “Will you read me a bedtime story, little friend? Something to remember— So I can brag in heaven, I used to have this schoolmate—”

“Go to hell,” Kylo grunted, and punched his shoulder.

“And I will say to the devil,” Augustus teased, “there was this infant, the brother I never had—”

“You only have five years on me!”

“And he used to read me Shakespeare,” Augustus finished with a satisfied grin, and peered up at him. “Didn’t he? Richard the Third, I think, or any of the Henrys.”

“You don’t deserve me,” Kylo announced, but got up to get the volumes anyway; and he was no longer crying.

* * *

Seven night and seven days and countless plays brought little hope; Augustus’ coughing fits grew even more violent, but they both believed he might survive just by sheer power of will. Kylo neglected his studies, and sat by his side, guarding his uneasy dreams as his mother used to do for him.

“Is there nothing more I could do?” he asked Luke in hushed tones; Augustus was lying senseless, chapped lips parted for rattling breaths.


“And you? Is there no spell, no charm, no herbs? Don’t you have healing powers?”

“There is nothing preternatural in consumption — or death, for that matter; it’s painful and unfair, and it happens. We can only hope it won’t happen to him, not now.” Luke suppressed a yawn; giving up his bed meant he was sleeping in the stables, accompanied by all the animals the school owned and a thousand biting bugs. He looked ready to drop, but Kylo had no pity for him; he should do more than wait out the catastrophe.

“Leave us, then,” he said, “if you cannot help.” He turned his back, but caught a glimpse of Luke’s reflection on the window — how hurt he seemed, how offended before he left. He neglected to close the door, so Kylo got up and shut it behind him with more force than necessary. It startled Augustus from his dream.
“What time it is?” he demanded, sitting up in the bed.

“Around nine, I think.”

Augustus frowned, and collapsed back to the pillows. “Will this night never end?”

“It has barely started.”

“I’m sick and tired of it,” Augustus complained. “How darkness bleeds into light, how morning passes and afternoon comes. Idleness irks me; what wonders could I achieve, and here I am, a useless burden—”

“You’re not a burden,” Kylo objected, but Augustus was overcome with coughing, and couldn’t answer him. Kylo took his seat on the stool he had set up next to the bed, and reached for Augustus’ hand. Augustus shook his head.

“Read to me,” he pleaded, delirious. “Fill my mind; pour in your stories. Give me Shakespeare; my kingdom for some Shakespeare! There’s nothing left in the world which would entertain me; have I ever told you that it’s your accent that does the wonder? I don’t care too much for him — the cursed iambic pentameter hurts my ears, it’s so dull, so simple; not in your voice, however. You have Puritans and prisoners to thank for that; when they arrived in the New World, they kept the old ways: your speech is closer to Shakespeare’s pronunciation than mine will ever be, and all the actors in London would envy you. Lines work; rhymes work; puns work. There you have it: do your magic.”

Kylo was blushing to high heavens, and quickly averted his gaze. The next play in line was Macbeth: he found it fitting to Augustus’ mood, his mind full of scorpions.

“‘When shall we three meet again, in thunder, lightning, or in rain?’”

“Again,” Augustus repeated, imitating his way of speech, and Kylo took it as an order.

“‘When shall we three meet again, in thunder, lightning, or in rain?’”

“‘When the hurlyburly's done, when the battle’s lost and won,’” Augustus quoted.

It was a short play, and it was over too soon; Augustus nodded off before Kylo had reached the final battle between Macbeth and Malcolm, so he finished on scene five in the last act, and marked the page; Augustus wouldn’t want to miss the final speech, the flourish and the hailing. He climbed in bed with him, curling up to the feverish heat he emitted, and slept, resting his cheek against his chest to listen to his breathing.

When he woke, he was alone. The windows were open, and he heard the calls of the meadow pipit, and the breeze rustling the shrubs. Augustus was nowhere to be found. His first thought was that he might’ve escaped, but why would he go without him, and where? He leant out the window, and shouted his name; no answer came. Something was moving in the distance, but it was much bigger than a boy running away in his nightgown.

“Augustus Burns!” he yelled again. “Augustus!”

Luke appeared in the door, wearier than ever, his floppy blond hair hopelessly tousled and eyes eternally tired. One look at him was enough of an answer. Kylo clutched the windowsill, nails digging into the soft wood.

“He died,” he cried, heart sinking, “didn’t he? Died during the night. Oh, why didn’t you wake me up?”
“Why didn’t I...” Luke repeated weakly, and rubbed his temples. Time seemed to still; Luke looked like a portrait titled Denial, and Kylo, Grief; a tearless fury washed over him, and he could hardly hear Luke saying, “His father came to fetch him; they’re taking him down South. It has a better climate, salty air; he might survive.”

“His father wants him to vanish,” Kylo said, voice a tremble. “His death would be welcome. He wouldn’t have come.”

“I was surprised,” Luke confessed.

“Are you lying to spare me?” Kylo demanded.

“I have no patience for your accusations to-day,” Luke said, firmly. His regret and guilt were palpable even without Kylo’s stolen senses.

“Liar!” he screamed; Luke’s shoulders dropped, and wordlessly, he closed the door.

Kylo’s double defiance slowly poisoned his own mind; he denied that Luke could’ve said the truth, but he also protested Augustus’ death. Time would offer a solution; surely, Augustus wouldn’t forget about him, and write him a letter, send his regards, whisper to the wind to greet his friend; but no news came, and no new evidence.

Kylo’s heart panged; he was distracted, half-mad. There was no body to bury and no resurrection to celebrate. He interrogated Luke over and over again, searched the perimeters, made weekly trips to the post office; nothing. A month passed, then two, three, and on a hot summer night, he found himself in the school’s little graveyard, quite ready to dig up the unmarked graves. Mr. Watkins dragged him away, and he was banned from the garden for a week.

His fellow pupils were relieved, sickeningly so; they never cared whatever happened to Augustus Burns; what mattered was that he was finally gone. Soon, his bed was occupied by a new boy named Clement, who was very little, and in the habit of wetting the mattress. Once again, Kylo was without friends, and from all games, he’d been excluded.

Years passed; he never shed a tear for his friend, still hoping that he’d come back from the South, happy, healthy, and with an intricate tale full of twists and misfortunes which prevented him sending a letter.

Near his sixteenth birthday, a very special message was waiting for him; but it was from his mother, and he came to receive those communications with disappointment. Two words— I live!—would have outweighed the pleasure of his mother’s letter. She announced that they’d come visit shortly, to celebrate; a surprise she was more than happy to finally reveal. Kylo was pleased, but not overjoyed, and he scorned himself for it. He knew he should be euphoric; how long he’s been waiting for a reunion, and now that it became a reality, it seemed more of an ordeal. His parents wouldn’t come to Lowood, they wanted him to travel to Chandrila in Cumbria on his own. He told himself he shouldn’t take offense; they had crossed an ocean for him, after all; yet he was anxious, feeling out of his depth as he had to navigate roads he never travelled, so far from the safety of his alma mater.

Leia and Han were staying with an acquaintance, at Miss Mon Mothma’s residence. They had neglected to mention that it was a proper castle, in the possession of Mothma’s family since the rule of the Tudors, and as Kylo stood there in his ill-fitting schoolboy’s uniform, clutching a luggage he had had to borrow from Luke, he felt like an intruder.

He remembered his mother with pearls in her hair, a celebrated beauty with a smile on her lips, but she has aged, and sorrow and worry had caved her kind face and faded her hair; and his father, the
hero of his childhood, looked a proper embarrassment, his simple attire ridiculous contrasted by the castle’s fine elegance. He banished these impressions, and flew into their arms — but found that he couldn’t leave the weariness of his travel behind, that he was fatigued and irritated, and his present mood suppressed the mirth of seeing his family again.

They were to spend a month in Chandrila together; and on the very first evening, they already seemed to run out of topics of conversation.

“So Luke is treating you well, huh?” Han asked for the third time over dinner, and Kylo confirmed that he was content. The dessert was eaten in silence.

“You must be so tired, darling,” Leia said, excusing him finally. “You should rest; to-morrow is a new day, and it has such joys in store.”

The joys in store turned out to be a walk on the perimeters, luncheon, tea, dinner, and the general unease he caused by attempting to clean the table himself. Word got out that he had even made his own bed.

“There’s no shame in work; I work,” Han said, making everything worse. Lady Mothma discreetly glanced away, playing with her parasol as they sat in the garden. It dawned on Kylo that her mother married way below her rank; he didn’t know why he never considered it before. In his memory, he saw his parents through a child’s eyes; but now he wondered — why did Grandmother Padmé leave England, and why did Luke return? What happened after he left? How did his mother explain away the scandal? And oh Lord — what about the secret of witchcraft?

He didn’t sleep that evening; he was bursting with questions, but didn’t want answers. His heritage was tainted; his magnificent return to Salem, awaiting for him in the future, was a child’s dream. His reintegration to society would be a hard and humiliating process. He knew so little of his homeland — and there was nowhere he belonged.

Each day spent at Chandrila revealed that his manners were lacking, that he was seen as awkward and fumbling in polite company. His parents bored him, although he fought against the realisation — it was a losing battle. Leia treated him like a child, Han like a fellow adult, and he was neither. He found himself longing for the familiar misery of Lowood, a chance to return to his studies and to a bed which was not suffocatingly soft.

He knew he should appreciate the luxuries offered him; moreover, he should take them for granted. He felt like a fraud, an impostor: he didn’t fit into the the role which was expected of him. He felt as if he had stumbled upon a stage in borrowed attire, and amidst the admiring cheers of his audience he realised he didn’t know his lines.

Lady Mothma must have noticed his angst, even if his parents were blind to it, and with a discretion Kylo could only envy suggested they seek out excitement and go to a ball.

“A ball!” Leia objected. “I don’t believe I would be welcomed.”

“A general of the army of the United States, a champion of justice, a thinker, a writer?” Lady Mothma said. “Darling, you would be celebrated.”

“Shame you don’t show the same appreciation for herding livestock,” Han noted, and Kylo excused himself. He was making his ways upstairs, planning to lock himself into his room for a week and not talk to anybody, when he overheard Leia:

“If I go, I’d rather go anonymously.”
“Please do come!” Lady Mothma urged her. “Think of it, Ben—Kylo, excuse me—should be introduced to girls soon! He hasn’t even seen one in that dreadful school, has he?”

*Make that two weeks, he told himself. A fortnight of exile.*

Lady Mothma was not to be stopped. She not only made him come out of his room the very next day with the promise of coffee, she managed to convince Leia that attending the ball would indeed be a fine idea, and that they all needed to get new clothes made.

“It’ll be a masquerade,” she explained. “A small gathering, some fifty families. What would you like to be, Kylo dear?”

“Dead,” he said.

He ended up wearing a simple mask, compensating for the lack of flourish with a smart cape and a tricorn hat. Leia dressed as Titania, queen of the Amazons; Han chose the donkey-headed Bottom over Oberon. Kylo tried his best not to be associated with them, kept his distance, and helped himself to generous servings of champagne in the refreshment room when no one was looking. More food was laid out than he could ever dream of, and what a delicious variety: biscuits, crackers, bon-bons, sandwiches, and the queen of the table: cups of trifle. He couldn’t work up his courage to touch the sweets, and drowned his sorrows discreetly.

Two things became painfully clear. Firstly: upon observing the flock of girls present, he had to admit to himself that he was not interested in them, not in the slightest. Secondly: he knew none of the dances, which came as a surprise to everyone involved — as if his blood would make up for a lack of proper upbringing. The floor manager was in agony when he refused to sign up to any set; there were young ladies in most desperate need of a pair for the quadrille. Against his wishes, he was given a card and was told to approach any lady who took a seat for longer than a minute, and ask their hands in dance, or else (it was implied) he’d lose his honour forever.

Having no other choice, he climbed the stairs to the gallery, and hid himself from searching glances. He fancied himself invisible, observing the jolly masses from his hiding spot. Admittedly, it proved some entertainment, from a distance — the dancers twirled into kaleidoscope-formations, broke up the pattern, reunited; but as the trumpet announced several sets, it started to look more and more monotonous, until even the music was reduced to a repetitive buzz. His feet were aching, and he was playing with the curled edges of his empty card absent-mindedly. The ballroom blurred out in front of his eyes as he dozed off for a minute, and when he blinked himself awake, he started, having noticed an apparition: a beautiful youth with flame-bright hair.

The world halted; the music stopped; the dance hall spun around — Kylo leant over the railing, ready to shout the name always on the tip of his tongue; but what if he was mistaken? The youth was taller and older than his childhood friend — but of course he would be, if he survived, he must’ve aged. He was wearing a general’s uniform — it seemed genuine, even: a scarlet coatee with fringed epaulettes and white trousers; he had a limp in his steps as he approached the dance floor, looking around to avoid collision with the ladies’ enormous ball gowns. A mask was covering most of his face, and Kylo couldn’t make out the rest from this distance.

He contemplated leaping over the railing and rushing to him after a dramatic landing, but he didn’t want to risk the injury. He made for the staircase, stealing glances just to check whether the general was still there. He seemed to find whomever he was looking for, a broad man with a ginger beard, leading a sharp-faced woman half his age on his arm off the floor. He said something to him, and the man made an impatient gesture: *away with you.* Kylo quickened his steps, rushing down the stairs.

He was late; the next dance had begun by the time he reached the ground, and it was impossible to
cross the dance floor. He searched for the general frantically, running around on the fringes, peeking over shoulders and earning shocked scoffs. It seemed he had disappeared, as if the earth had swallowed him up. His mother grabbed his elbow, and discreetly guided him behind a column.

“What happened, honey?”

“I think I saw somebody,” he said, restless gaze sweeping over the guests. The hall seemed to be washed over by a storm of colour and noise; among the many spots of white and red and gold, none belonged to his long-lost friend.

“You look like you saw a ghost.”

Kylo shook his head, freed himself, and rushed to check the dressing rooms, the refreshments room, even the privy, and all of them twice: nothing. The lights of the chandeliers were hurting his eyes, the curious glances with which the guests regarded him made him anxious. He must’ve given the impression of a madman.

He ran outside. It was a balmy spring eve, just like the one when Augustus Burns had vanished. The coaches waiting in long lines were all empty, and he didn’t encounter anybody in the garden, save for a little girl counting down to hide-and-seek, some servants, and a pair of young lovers. Defeated, Kylo headed back to the building, mind racing, but his heart seeming to halt.

After the odd encounter, his mood gradually worsened. He spent the entirety of his last week in bed, ate little, and talked even less.

“I wonder what ails him,” he overheard Leia’s whisper. She and Han were lingering by his door after saying their goodnights.

“He’s sixteen,” Han opinionated.

“When I was sixteen, I was writing pamphlets against the gold standard.”

“I had a pet racoon, and Lando and I got banned from every saloon past Missouri.”

Leia scoffed. “He takes after you.”

“He takes after his grandfather,” Han said, and an uneasy silence followed. Kylo rolled onto his back and stared up at the canopy. He wished to tell them everything about Augustus, but the thought alone made him flustered. Their tale, recounted, sounded pathetic: they spent so little time together, and yet he’d been obsessing over his apparent death for six years. If only he knew what had happened; if only he wasn’t being reminded of him constantly; if only he wasn’t being haunted.

He wanted to ask Lady Mothma about the generals in attendance; maybe he could find out Augustus’ real name, and learn his destiny — but if he didn’t care enough to reach out for Kylo, why would he try to contact him? And what if Lady Mothma would just look at him — a general with orange hair, twenty-one years of age? Never heard of anybody like him! In his mind, he searched the dancing hall again and again, the rooms, the garden. It’s not that I couldn’t find him; it’s not that I couldn’t find him; he told himself. He was never there. It was a figment of my imagination; or it might’ve been someone with his likeness and quick steps; I could barge the door of a stranger.

He was so disturbed by the encounter he couldn’t pay mind to anything else. Their stay came to an end, and he only realised what goodbye meant over breakfast, as he heard the servants struggle with their luggages. (He packed his himself, as an act of defiance.) He looked at Leia politely sipping on hot chocolate and Han engaged in an epic battle against a hard boiled egg, thinking that he was more likely to encounter Lady Mothma again, this lady he’s just been introduced to, than his own parents;
of time and place coming between them again. How he wasted these blessed weeks, how selfish he’s been. Still, when Han said, only half-joking, “We could build you a kayak; hop in and come with us, huh?” he got irrationally scared that it was a plan.

“I wish to finish my studies,” he blurted out, “here, where I’m safe.” He shot a pleading glance at Leia, who replied with a sad smile.

“Luke will look out for you as long as you need him to; and when you feel ready, you’ll come home. Your room is waiting for you exactly how you left it.”

That sounded disheartening. He imagined himself sitting on the carpet, lanky limbs folded, surrounded by all his toys, and was filled with dread.

This time around, he was accompanied to Lowood, which made the journey awkward and tense. He already said his goodbyes in his mind, but his parents didn’t vanish with the last adieu. He didn’t know how to conduct himself, what was appropriate, and found himself bitter.

Luke was waiting for them by the gate, and Kylo was almost touched; but Luke didn’t even spare him a glance, he ran to his sister’s arms. Kylo struggled with his luggage as they held each other close, laughing with an unadulterated joy alien to his ears.

“You should’ve come to Chandrila!” Leia exclaimed. “I so yearned for your company!”

“I’m afraid I’m quite busy.”

“Am I not?” Leia scoffed, and poked him, as if they were children.

“Little Luke, if my eyes don’t deceive me,” Han grinned. He was pulled into Luke’s embrace, and got a peck on his lips; Leia smiled fondly, seeing this, while Kylo frowned. He felt like he was standing at a much greater distance, spying on them, an outlander unfamiliar with the geography of their island of joy. He never saw Luke showing so much affection, to the point that he thought him incapable of possessing it; his love was impersonal, remote. His family seemed to consist entirely of strangers, their history nothing but secrets. He turned his back, just when Han asked: “My kid wear you down?”

“Not at all; he’s one of my brightest students, reserved, but talented,” Luke boasted, and they all turned to him.

“I’ll be in my room,” he mumbled, when it occurred to him that he won’t have a room anymore.

“We might go for a walk; are you sure you don’t want to join us?” Luke proposed, and he just muttered, “No, thank you.”

He made his way through the garden; all the flowers were but mere weeds, and the grass was patchy. Now that he was back, he couldn’t understand how he could ever miss the place; he was always cold here, always hungry, and so solitary. He’d have to listen to the nightly noise of his fellow students, be startled from his sweetest dreams; unrewarding work was waiting, black bread, tepid coffee, and swollen feet.

Escape awaits, he promised himself. To hell with Lowood; to hell with Salem; Chandrila, farewell; I will make my own way.

His vow was fulfilled when he was twenty-one; an adult by all measures, with no more reason or excuse to stay away from his paved destiny. Luke made him a teacher three years prior, but urged him shortly after his birthday to leave for the States.
“Your place is with your family,” he said.

“So why is your place here?” Kylo stepped in front of him, challenging. He’d grown; he was tall and well-built, chopping wood and a love for exercise giving him a quite threatening frame. Sinewy Luke was not to be intimidated; he regarded him patiently.

“Never love the same man as someone else,” he said. Kylo refused to be shocked.

“I don’t think I should be too worried about that. Suitors are not exactly lining up at the doorstep of a man of my inclination and fortune.”

“I might have left out of — consideration, a selfish sort of self-sacrifice, an unasked-for martyrdom; the reason I stayed is much more complicated.”

“Tell me,” Kylo urged. They were in the chapel; Luke began to light the candles, without the use of matches. They started to hover, one by one, and Luke was watching them with something akin to sadness.

“I followed a wandering spirit,” he said. “I went to the swamps where time stopped; a toad told me its secrets; I walked the stars and destroyed what was left of my past. I had hopes of building a coven; I sought out peculiar children. Inadvertently, I had brought doom to them — people might no longer burn or hang witches publicly, but don’t think for a second the practice doesn’t live; and don’t think some might not turn against themselves, or others, when they discover what powers they possess. The only lesson I can teach you about magic is this: don’t meddle with it, and you’ll be safe. I only know one truth: it’s time for the witches to end.”

“A toad told you its secrets,” Kylo said slowly, not being able to filter the humour from his voice. Luke was not amused.

“You gave your eyes to a magpie,” he recounted sharply.

Kylo raised his shoulders. “It seems like a dream.”

“It was real.” Luke stepped closer, and tipped his chin up so he could look Kylo in the eyes. “It’s time you face that reality again. You were a suggestible child, naïve, eager when you left Massachusetts — life hardened you, and it did you well. You know now how to guard your mind; you have a perfect sense of self. I healed you, sheltered you, fed you, clothed you, taught you, employed you, protected for you as long as I could — there’s nothing more for me to do. You are on your own. I release you.”

“And I damn you,” Kylo answered. He turned on his heels, and marched away, wishing his words had power. He went straight to the teacher’s room to pen a letter, but it was not for his mother.

A young man accustomed to tuition is desirous of meeting with a situation in a private family where the children are under sixteen. He is qualified to teach the usual branches of an English education, together with French, Latin, Drawing & Music. Address K. R., Post-office, Lowton, —shire

He figured his advertisement would be welcomed favourably in many families, and was disappointed to learn a week later that there was just a solitary envelope waiting for him in the post office. He pocketed it, nevertheless, and felt his heartbeat against it on the long walk back to Lowood. Whatever the letter entailed, he swore it would be the last time he crossed these paths. Mist rolled over the moors, thick and heavy. He watched his steps, and clutched the letter. The scene of his childhood blurred out, the colours of the wildflowers dimmed, and the horizon seemed to close in on
him. He breathed in the smell: rot and wet and smoke mixed with sweet blossoming; he wagered it’d be the last thing he forgot about the place, and just before that, the buzzing silence.

The school came into view, its thick stone walls and wooden hedges. Luke’s window was dark, although dusk had began to gather. He kept his eyes on it as he neared the building. He crossed the shabby garden, which echoed with laughter and a piercing scream; he climbed the steps — he used to take them by two; he stopped by Luke’s door, and listened. No noise. It creaked as he opened it, and stepped inside. His gaze fell to the bed. It was neatly made, empty. His imagination filled it: a boy refusing to die, and his little friend keeping vigil. He wondered whether Augustus truly liked his company; from the distance of his present years, the behaviour of his former self was an embarrassment. Too keen, too wild, too much heart and little mind.

“To-morrow, and to-morrow,” he said, lingering by the door. “These were my last words to you: ‘to-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day, to the last syllable of recorded time.’ I told you that life was a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. A walking shadow. A poor player fretting on the stage. Is it any wonder you left it behind?”

He let out a soft exhale. “Augustus Burns, you died.” It was nothing but a whisper. He walked to the bed, trying to remember what did Augustus say to him last. When the hurlyburly’s done, when the battle’s lost and won. For a brief second, he saw the general. When shall we three meet again? He blinked a few times, sparkles dancing in the twilight. He lowered himself to the bed; it was so small, he wondered how they ever fit into it. He pressed his back to the window, and tore the envelope open. He angled the letter so he could see it in the thinning light, and began to read.

If K. R., who advertised in the —shire Herald of last Thursday, possesses the acquirements mentioned; and if he is in a position to give satisfactory references as to character and competency; a situation can be offered him where there is but one pupil, the Honble. Millicent Hux, nine years of age, sister of G. The Lord Arkanis; and, where the salary is thirty pounds per annum. K. R. is requested to send references, name, address, and all particulars to the direction:

Dopheld Mitaka, Stormfield Hall, near Millcote, —shire

Chapter End Notes

Content warnings: eyes threatened with sharp objects; one instance results in a gruesome accident / possession / temporal blindness, Solo-style / period-typical child mortality rate / implied child abuse (Brendol is a dick) / a red herring about a major character dying (doesn’t happen) / second-hand embarrassment: being a teenager in the 19th century is hard / Hux is a self-important dick and Kylo is also a self-important dick but you get where they’re coming from / implied past Skysolo; Leia knows / period-typical snobbish behaviour / characters having outdated notions regarding class conflict / obsessing over someone is unhealthy

This AU wouldn’t have been written without the help and patient support of my dearest friend Anna

My beta was the ever so wonderful Gefionne: she also penned the new summary that is now longer than two sentences and actually says something about the plot *clears throat*
Thanks are due to the Kylux peeps on twitter for their enthusiasm, and to you, dear reader - thank you so much, and see you in the next chapter!

The title is from the introduction to my edition of Jane Eyre - Collins Classics, 2010; if you have the same edition, we're officially book-buddies

Find me on tumblr: longstoryshortikilledhim // there's a moodboard for the fic
Kylo arrived to Millcote pursued by a thick dusk; the shadows fattened as night gathered, the last red lights swallowed by the noisy waters of the sewers. His senses were assaulted by the foul odour of fumes and smoke, the hullabaloo of workers returning home and the clamour of carriages: the cacophony of a busy town. Giant factories were hulking over crumbling brick buildings, and he could see no flower, no tree.

Holding his truck firmly, he set out in search of the George Inn, mind quite distraught. He left Lowton at four o’clock a.m.; the Millcote town clock was just striking eight, ringing through the streets with a sharp, cheery sound. He still had a long way to go to his new place of employment. He couldn’t even fathom how Stormfield Hall would look, or where it was located. His correspondences with Dopheld Mitaka were brief and to-the-point: he was to wait at the George for the conveyance that would be sent for him. Although the task seemed simple, his mouth was sour with the bile of anxiety. How would anyone find him among all these people, without knowing his likeness?

The inn wasn’t far. He ducked his head when he opened the tiny door and stepped inside. The oil lamps illuminated a spacious room with bold wallpapers and a frankly frightening carpet, its patterns seemingly moving in the uncertain light. The fireplace looked the most welcoming, so he approached it. The air was heavy with the smell of burning wood and ale and stew; he considered ordering something to take the edge off his hunger, but first he’d warm his limbs. The night was biting cold for late August. He rubbed his calloused hands together, put them above the flames, and let his hair fall over his features, resting for a minute before he’d enquire about food and the whereabouts of his driver.

Around him: laughter, merriment; maybe Millcote wasn’t as intimidating as it first struck him, he was just unaccustomed to towns and cities. *When did it come to this?* he mused, trying to recall Salem’s teeming streets; he came up with nothing. It didn’t matter. That memory belonged to someone else.

He half-turned, surveying the room, the plain furniture and the plainer people. A willowy waitress passed him, balancing empty tin pints, and he called after her, “Did anyone enquire after a Kylo Ren?”

“I don’t know, sir,” she said with a sympathetic smile.

He straightened up to look more respectable, and hastened to add, “Someone should be waiting for me to take me to Stormfield.”

“I’ll ask at the bar; take a seat, please, will be back in a jiffy. ”

He thanked her with a nod and looked around for a place to sit. He caught the eyes of a young man lounging in a weathered leather chair, in the company of somebody Kylo took for his father. He signalled Kylo closer with his hand, in which he held a cigar. Kylo peeked behind his shoulder, then walked to him cautiously. He grasped the back of the empty armchair next to the man and looked at
him, seeking his permission. The stranger reached out and seized his wrist; Kylo cried out in shock, but it was swallowed up by the clamour. The young man leant in close; he reeked of alcohol and smoke.

“Who put Maratelle Hux in the wych elm?” he croaked. His father grabbed his collar and yanked him back. Released from his grip, Kylo recoiled and pressed his hand to his chest, nursing it as if it had been burned.

“Hold your noise!” his father hissed at the drunkard, and then peered up at Kylo, his wrinkles framing an apologetic smile. “Please excuse us, sir; the ale has gone into his head.”

“What an odd thing to say,” Kylo exclaimed. “Who put Maratelle Hux in the wych elm?”

“It’s about the lady,” the father sighed. He pushed at the drunkard, who almost fell out of his chair. His father surveyed him with pity. “It happened a while back; three years, I reckon, maybe four? A mystery still occupying the minds of simple people.” He turned to his son. “You’re better than this, Hank.”

“A mystery,” Kylo repeated, intrigued.

“A gossip.”

“Kylo Ren!” the waitress called for him. A rawboned boy was lingering behind her, frowning in the light as if he had just arrived, a light coat draped over his shoulders. Kylo shot a glance at Hank’s father, who raised his glass of ale toward him as if in greeting; Hank avoided his gaze. Swallowing his burning questions, Kylo hurried to the waitress. The boy offered his hand.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Ren. I’m Gideon Thanisson; I’ll be your driver.”

“Are you old enough to—” Kylo blurted out, then cleared his throat and squeezed Thanisson’s cold little hand. “Pleasure.”

He didn’t look a year older than thirteen. His displeased frown betrayed that he was often mistaken for a child. Kylo cursed his rudeness, took special care to take a polite leave of the waitress just to prove he could, and then followed his sullen companion. The cold wind almost pushed him back as Thanisson opened the door and walked Kylo to his two-horse carriage. They hoisted up Kylo’s truck without exchanging a single word. Kylo looked back at the sign of the George Inn creaking in the wind; he idly wished to go back and converse with the locals, ask about the secrets of Stormfield; but he figured nothing could satisfy his curiosity better than seeing the place for himself.

He climbed into the car, and Thanisson fastened the door with a hook.

“How far is to Stormfield?” Kylo risked asking.

“Six miles,” Thanisson said, curtly, and climbed to his narrow seat outside. Kylo heard the crack of a whip in the air, and they set out, the carriage shaking and rattling. Kylo gripped the edge of the cushioned bench and watched the lights of Millcote swim away.

He contemplated the enigma of Lady Maratelle Hux on the way. Her name betrayed a relation to his pupil, Millicent; therefore, it’d be empathically inconsiderate to enquire much about her, especially from a servant he had just managed to offend. She seemed to have died some sort of perplexing death; or maybe it was just an accident and the lady was alive and well. In any case, there was violence and there was a tree. That part made the story utterly bizarre. People weren’t in the habit of being put into trees; maybe the wych elm was a coffin? He scoffed at the fancifulness of his musings. Some befuddled townsman got upset by the mention of Stormfield; no sane person gave him reason...
for caution. He should carry on with confidence and forget about the matter.

The night expanded and darkened. They made their way through black fields; what emptiness was left behind by the all-consuming darkness got filled with noise: the clomping of the horses’ hooves on the soft soil, the chirring of insects, and the gentle rustle of the wind. From time to time, Kylo spotted scattered lights on the far-away hillsides, the evidence of villages and hamlets; once, he heard a dog bark, and later, a church’s bell announcing a quarter. They left the last village behind after two hours’ journey, and Thanisson announced, “Almost there.”

Ten more minutes; fifteen; woods gathering at the edges, like pilgrims paying their respects; and then, there: a solitary light gleaming in an arched window. Stormfield Hall was nothing more than a massive silhouette, as if a piece had been cut out of the sky, leaving a hole in the fabric of the night. Thanisson drove him to the front door, which was guarded by gargoyles and could’ve accommodated the entirety of the carriage.

“I have to take the horses back,” Thanisson said, and with a condescending air, added, “You can find your way, I hope.”

“I don’t know; am I supposed to climb in through the window?” Kylo asked, arching a brow.

“Please use the front door.”

“Oh, there’s a door?” Satisfied with his pettiness, he let himself out of the carriage before Thanisson got the chance to do the favour, and even got his truck halfway down.

Thanisson rushed to help, humiliated by his own rudeness, and ended up taking the heavy luggage up the stairs all by himself. He opened the door for him and guided Kylo’s attention to a chamber from which the light came: “That way, sir.”

“I could never have guessed,” Kylo said, feigning genuine wonder. Thanisson winced and all but fled back to the carriage. Grinning, Kylo made his way through the vast hall. The heaviness of the silence and cold scents reminded him of a cathedral he’d been reading about. A flight of wide stairs lead up to the first storey, veiled in shadows. He could make out the outline of a chandelier and vases with honey-scented flowers; a clock was ticking somewhere, faintly.

Hurrying his steps, he headed for the little room waiting for him. The light of the fireplace blinded him for a moment, but when he looked around, he saw a round table and a rocking chair, in which a mousy little man sat. He met Kylo’s blinking gaze, smiling tautly; he opened his mouth to say something, but Kylo was first ambushed by a lady bearing a tea set on a silver tray before he could speak.

“How do you do, Mr. Ren?” she asked, eyes sparkling behind her spectacles. “Please, please, come sit by the fire; what an ugly, chilly night! I made you some nice tea; had to reheat it twice—Thanisson drives so slowly! Has more consideration for horses than guests, I dare say. Sit, sir, sit.”

Kylo was frozen in place, trying to measure the moment. He glanced at the chirpy woman, then at the little man, who had risen from his cozy seat, mouth still open; he slowly closed it. Kylo’s attention was back on the woman, who put the tray on the table, and tugged a dark lock escaping its confinement back under her bonnet.

“You must be—”

“Mrs. Mitaka, Polly, I’m Dopheld’s mother; what a pleasure to have you.”

“I’m Dopheld Mitaka,” Mitaka found his voice. “I’m the housekeeper.”
“Pleasure,” Kylo took his hand. It was soft and limp, and Mitaka pulled it back too soon; he remained standing, as if unsure what to do, then slowly lowered himself back into his armchair. He turned his nervous gaze to the fire, where it settled. What a curious little man. He took a seat; the rocker was just as comfortable as it looked, the back curved and the cushion soft.

“Your tea,” Mrs. Mitaka said, beaming as she handed him a fine cup: blue and white; Kylo had never seen anything like it, and the taste of the tea was also foreign, full and smokey. He also got some shortbread, which reminded him of his hunger—he had almost forgotten how famished he was in all the excitement.

“You’ve brought your luggage with you, Mr. Ren?” Mitaka asked just as he dipped a biscuit into the steaming tea.

“Yes, I have.”

“Let’s have it sent up to Mr. Ren’s room, Ma,” Mitaka requested; Mrs. Mitaka left with a flutter of her long frock. Mitaka got himself a cup and poured out some fragrant tea. Kylo wolfed down the biscuit while he wasn’t looking. Mitaka turned back to him while his jaw was still working and smiled self-consciously. “She’s the cook,” he explained. “She’s rather good.”

“The shortbread is exquisite,” Kylo announced.

Mitaka took a careful sip of his tea and looked into the flames again, a fond, shy look softening his features. Ren figured they must be about the same age. Mitaka was dressed well, but modestly, his round face clean and not a hair out of place. “I had the room next to mine prepared for you,” he said. “It’s small, but has better furniture than the rooms on the first storey; and the large front rooms are so cold during the winter. I hope you’ll like it; it has such a lovely view to the garden.”

“Thank you,” Kylo said. “I haven’t had a room of my own for the longest time; I’m sure I’ll find it pleasing.”

“You had the most excellent references,” Mitaka chatted, and shot him a nervous glance. “I’m certain you’ll fit in very well with us.”

Thank you, I wrote those references myself, Kylo thought. Excellent penmanship. Then the penny dropped: Mitaka was afraid of letting a stranger into the home he was tasked to manage. No wonder; most teachers were not over six feet tall, with strong builds and a deep voice. Mitaka probably expected some pale, airy creature. Kylo smiled at him, which seemed to only terrify Mitaka further.

Mrs. Mitaka returned, rubbing her hands together.

“Everything is ready to accommodate our dear tutor!”

“Will I meet Miss Millicent to-night?” Ren asked, eager to make a good impression.

“Oh my, the little lady can’t stay up this late!” Mrs. Mitaka chuckled. “No, dear, but your lessons shall begin tomorrow. She was most excited about it; she suffered greatly from the interruption of her studies when her governess was sent away. But hush! I’m keeping you up. You must be dreadfully tired. Should I run a bath?”

“A bath?” Ren asked, taken aback.

Mitaka met his eyes directly for the first time; a compassionate glint flashed in them, and he said, “Mr. Hux has this...fixation—”

“It was recommended by his doctors,” Mrs. Mitaka interrupted, hands on her hips. “He takes good
care of his health, and he’s sensitive to smells. There’s nothing peculiar about it!”

“I wasn’t saying that.” Mitaka shook his head. “He’s just... We take baths. Almost every night.”

“It is rather relaxing,” Mrs. Mitaka added. “The Lord Arkanis has his own bath, of course, and he had one built for Miss Millicent; we have a tub in the kitchen, so we can bathe one after the other without wasting the water.”

“How many servants are there?” Kylo asked, still startled. What a strange luxury they were living in; and where did they get the water from, in such a remote location?

“The number of the servants depends on the season,” Mitaka explained while his mother was discreetly counting on her fingers; he seemed to be calmer with Mrs. Mitaka back by his side, their banter notwithstanding. His posture laxed, and he said, “Stormfield Hall is—immense, you’ll see; it’s a challenge to manage, so most of it is closed down during the year. However, when Mr. Hux is having company, we open up the rooms and send for help from the village and George Inn, so we can properly house his guests.”

“Is his lordship home?”

“He’s in London,” Mrs. Mitaka said. “He travels quite a lot—good for a man of his position.”

“We keep the house in constant readiness,” Mitaka affirmed. “He can return unannounced any time; we have stopped bothering with letters—his plans change so abruptly, it was impossible to keep up with them. He’s a nobleman of many interests and numerous connections; he gets dreadfully bored when he’s forced to stay in one place. He feels a burning need to constantly occupy his mind. When he returns, he’ll interview you for the position himself; but above all else, we want Miss Millicent’s opinion.”

“I would so like to meet them,” Kylo responded. He didn’t have to feign his excitement; he was understandably curious about his pupil, and Mr. Hux sounded like a very intriguing person indeed, but should they not get along, it would be a blessing that he was hardly home.

* * *

The bath proved to be oddly relaxing, as promised, although Kylo could only fit into the wooden tub crouching down. It was positioned by the furnace, soaking Kylo with warmth. Despite the tall, laced windows and heavy stone walls, the kitchen had a friendly, open air, and the familiar scent of garlic and herbs which hung from the ceiling, together with the meat. The plates displayed were talking about a richness Kylo could hardly fathom; not even his mother had such a splendid china collection. Despite the kitchen’s cozyness, he couldn’t imagine himself coming here all that often; he felt like he was being watched, which he accounted for his nakedness and the guilt of stealing some butter and bread.

The creeping feeling stayed with him as Mitaka escorted him to his room. It was a small chamber, to be sure, but the sight of the blue chintz curtains and carpeted floor lifted Kylo’s spirit. The furniture was scarce but tasteful, the single light of Mitaka’s candle illuminating a table with a washing basin, a wardrobe, an iron-framed bed, and even a chaise lounge. Kylo bid goodnight to his restless company, contemplating a promise that he won’t murder anybody in their sleep; voicing it would’ve been counter-productive.

He quickly put on his nightgown and, climbing into bed, pulled the covers up to his chin. Oh, bliss: his toes weren’t peeking out, and the duvet was soft and puffy, generously filled with fluffy feathers. He expected to be asleep in a snap after a long day of such mental and physical excursion; but he
was much too thrilled—he wanted to jump to his feet, grab a candle and survey everything, familiarize himself with this curious, tremendous place, so new and alien.

He counted down to two hundred and ten, then his mind began drifting. He wasn’t sure how long he was in this state of half-consciousness, but when some sound startled him, it felt like being pulled up from a deep sleep. He heard it again; it came from the hallway, and it was impossible to place it. He lay still, listening; fingers — fingers brushing the walls.

A late servant, perhaps; no, of course: Thanisson, returning home, looking for his room in the thick darkness. The noise got closer, but he heard no steps. The fingers brushed over the knob of his door, slightly rattling it. He held his breath. Silence. Then: a choked-off sigh, so pained and miserable his hammering heart lept. He opened his mouth to call out; he couldn’t speak. He saw shadows pouring in over the threshold like roots seeking their place, and he heard the crackle of a tree stretching its branches. Finding his strength, he sat up in the bed, shouting, “Who’s there?”

It was morning. The sun was just peeping in; the cheery blue of his curtains painted the room with a soft teal glow, and the birds had began to sing their early melodies. Kylo jumped to his feet, spinning around. He was unnaturally alert, as if he haven’t slept at all, had just gotten transported from one moment to the next. He rushed to the door and got to his knees, examining the parquetry, half-expecting to find some marks there, a blemish of a nightmare; but it was spotless. Still on the ground, he yanked the door open. The corridors were filled with buttery light—save for the specks of dust floating in the air, there was nothing there. He surveyed the shining floor and even the vaulted ceiling; nothing, and just dawn beyond the paneled windows. He pulled the door back, allowing an inch of light to creep in, and looked around again, helpless. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror: he looked like a madman, long hair wild and nightgown drenched with cold sweat. He peeled it off and walked to his washing basin.

The cold water helped calm his nerves. It was all just some phantasmagoria, influenced by half-told tales in an inn and the uncertainty which came with his novel situation; surely, in a few days time he’d sleep soundly. He combed his hair, put on his better set of clothes with the grey wool vest and dark cravat, and shrugged on his morning coat. Once respectable, he grabbed his leather-bound journal and marched away, chin held high in defiance.

He didn’t encounter anybody; the house seemed empty but tranquil, filled with the sussuring silence of churches. Descending the stairs, he noticed that the walls were decorated with portraits as high up as the eye could see: sweeping landscapes, animals and gallant ancestors—many with military bearing and red hair; some of the paintings were darkened with time, making the figures indistinguishable. From time to time, the gallery was interrupted by a display of antlers and various weapons, probably just a meager part of the Huxes’ collection.

All of these people are buried, he reminded himself, and yet you fancy to have encountered a solitary spirit? How many gory and unjust deaths must have occurred? If ghosts can indeed come back from beyond to shriek for justice, you should’ve been awakened by a choir of wailing beings!

He locked gazes with a mistress who seemed to seek escape from her portrait, reaching out from the frame: Help me! Kylo passed her without sparing her a second glance. He wouldn’t be intimidated, and he wouldn’t be bothered with the dead; he’d been carrying a ghost around for far too long. He resolved to let him rest, and with him, he had buried childish hopes for a life beyond the grave.

He reached the main hall. The gates stood open, letting in the balmy air. He stopped, just enjoying the sunshine on his skin, the beckoning warmth of the morning. How sweet it was to be far from dreary Lowood, to have the prospect of something unfamiliar; to be able to test his knowledge and readiness, to forge his own self without the mould his family readied for him. He would be adamant;
he would discover the alchemy of his destiny yet.

“Ah, huh, you’re awake!” Mitaka called, carrying a stack of folded linens. “Miss Millicent is just having her breakfast in the garden. I believe she would be much pleased if you joined her.”

“I will, thank you,” Kylo said, smiling. It felt a bit forced, but it’d have to do. Mitaka hurried away, whistling a song absent-mindedly. Kylo clenched and unclenched his fingers and stepped outside. The trees roared with the breeze; it felt like the world had opened up to him, revealing an endless horizon of woods and fields stretching out before him. There was a wrought iron table on the fresh grass, laid with an abundance of desserts. A little girl was sitting there with her back to him, dangling her feet. Beside her, there stood her nurse like a somber guardian in black. Kylo approached them, regretting not having fetched his hat, and bid them a good morning. Millicent turned to him; she seemed to him a doll with her curled ginger hair and blue bows, face round and cheeks rosy.

“You must be Mr. Ren,” she said, rising from her chair. Her voice was deeper than he expected, but pleasant, velvety like a cat’s purr. “I am delighted to make your acquaintance.”

“I am delighted myself.” Kylo took her offered hand. She curtsied, and Kylo bowed, kissing the air above her knuckles. She was wearing little lace mittens.

“Would you join me? The cake is heavenly, and you must try the tea! I take it with cream. The lady here is Mademoiselle Marie-Lou Unamo, ma bonne; voici Monsieur Ren.”

“Enchantée,” Unamo said, and having returned the greeting, Kylo took his seat and assessed the table: bread steaks, crumpets, waffles with pear butter, sweet porridge, and thick milk with biscuits. He took a shameless serving of everything; he always ate as much and as fast as he could, never forgetting the days Perry and his friends would take his lunch away.

“I imagine your French education is taken care of with a French nurse,” he noted as he scooped up some milk cream.

“Mais oui,” Millicent asserted, voice dropping even lower when she was speaking a foreign tongue. “I still have much to learn, but I can read it well and find much joy in French literature. My brother has an excellent edition of Considérations sur les Causes de la Grandeur des Romains et de leur Décadence. I just started it the other day, and I am making progress aided by a dictionary.”

“Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline.’ Are you interested in history?”

Millicent smiled and poured herself a second serving of tea. “Armitage is,” she noted as she added as many sugar cubes as was humanly possible. Kylo watched them plop into the tea one by one, transfixed; he couldn’t decide whether it was a sign of wasteful decadence or his pupil’s exceptional abilities at chemistry. He stopped counting at five and collected himself.

“How about Latin?” he asked.

“Armitage requested that I perfect my Latin,” Millicent said, stirring her tea. It had a soup-like quality. She added some cream. “My governess lacked the knowledge of the language. I was pleased to learn you speak it.”

“No one really speaks Latin,” Kylo corrected, watching Millicent take a sip of her culinary experiment and surviving. “However, I can certainly teach what we know about this sadly deceased language; may it rest in peace.”

Millicent laughed at that; thank god, she had some sense of humour—none of his previous pupils
seemed to possess the quality, and even his simplest jokes fell flat. He began to feel that he and Millicent would get along fairly well; she was educated and well-behaved. It didn’t escape his notice how restlessly she kept kicking the air, yet her composure was perfect; albeit her speech was rushed, she kept eye-contact and listened patiently, attention not wandering. As expected from a little baroness, she seemed to have a tendency to be insufferably self-important, but Kylo preferred that to waywardness.

He interrogated her on her subjects, mapping out strengths and weaknesses; constructing a curriculum would certainly be challenging. Contrary to what his reference letters stated, he never had taught outside of a school setting and wasn’t quite sure how to approach Millicent’s education, even after a month of contemplation. He figured he could allow himself the freedom of guess and check. He was confident in his own abilities, and his discourse with Millicent over breakfast reaffirmed his hopes regarding her talent.

“Would you like to join me for a walk?” Millicent offered forwardly. “I could show you the garden; it’s so pleasant in this season.”

“Lead the way,” Kylo allowed. Millicent got her parasol from Unamo, and the three of them set out, Unamo keeping a few steps’ distance. Kylo had the suspicion she couldn’t speak English at all. Listening to their conversation had to be an incredible bore to her, but Kylo couldn’t help a flicker of envy: he’d never been to a place where he couldn’t understand the language; what a singular experience that must be. He had the yearning to travel and see the world; even the garden of Stormfield Hall seemed to him like a new universe.

“My brother says it’s man’s obligation to tame nature,” Millicent chatted. “All you can see bears evidence of his care: he had this bridge built, planted trees and cut down others, arranged the flowers; he even had a lake made, and his work is far from finished.”

“Could we visit the lake?” Kylo asked. Everything about the garden looked so natural, it was hard to fathom that it all obeyed the will of some master: it was lush, almost wild, full with blooming colour and buzzing life. An idea of a garden, he realised. Not as it is, but how we picture it.

“I’m not allowed to visit the lake alone, and the Mademoiselle doesn’t go there because of the frogs, but I should think we’re safe with you here.” Millicent nodded to herself and quickened her steps. There was something familiar in her stride when she walked fast: it called to mind Augustus’ stroll, back too rigid and steps almost comically short. Millicent could easily have been his little twin. Not all ginger gentlefolk in England are related, Kylo chastised himself, but he glanced at Millicent nervously. The nose, for sure; but the eyes and the hair — the latter, shades darker and not at all lank; the former, a lucid blue without a hint of green; her lips: too thin; he would know Augustus’ likeness anywhere, and it wasn’t that. An echo of a whisper: the afterimage of a mirage.

“Do you know where your brother received his education?” he asked, just to be sure.

“Of course; Calais, Paris, Geneva, and Florence, mostly, with Admiral Sloane. I believe they took a trip to Greece, but that wasn’t strictly educational—oh, and a correspondence training from Cambridge; he’s quite proud of that one.”

Kylo hated the sinking feeling in his stomach. He was past this; but just to twist the dagger of disappointment, he asked, “So there’s little chance he’d have gone to Lowood?”

Millicent wrinkled up her nose in a perfect imitation of Augustus, but she said, “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of that place, no.”

“I was wondering because of his noted interest in gardening and history,” Kylo lied through his
teeth, though he then fell silent. Oh, you insatiable, greedy spirit! Will you ever stop haunting me? I have given you years; my young heart, beating, and thousands of dreams; rest now, rest, and leave me be!

“Here it is,” Millicent announced. Kylo came to himself and peered up to a perfect paradise. The water of the lake was dark and deep, and it was surrounded by weeping willows and rhododendrons. It looked as if time had come to rest here: it was ancient and tranquil, trapping the scent of soil after rain. Kylo couldn’t help but stumble closer, as if he was pulled in, mind easing as he watched pale butterflies drifting in the light.

“Your brother made this.”

“Had it made,” Millicent said.

“The lake is full of frogs and eels,” Unamo complained in French, hugging herself as if to ward off the slimy devils. “Don’t stray from the road, Millicent. Mr. Ren, if she falls in, you’re going right after her — do you understand?”

Out of consideration to poor Unamo’s nerves, they made their way back to the house and spent the rest of the day in the library, sorting through the collection. Millicent climbed up and down the neck-breaking heights of the ladders with practiced ease and a relentless energy while Kylo evaluated the volumes upon volumes she delivered to him: grammar, rhetorics, classical literature, geography, drawing, and arithmetic—his least favourite subject, but one which was entirely necessary. It was agreed that biology would be incorporated in the syllabus based on a mutual interest.

Kylo got chilled when Millicent presented him with a copy of History of British Birds; it was a sign: he was just uncertain as to of what. He lowered himself to the checkered floor, leafing through it, enchanted. Millicent sat by him, her puffy blue frock making it look like she was resting on a cloud. Kylo started explaining the innovative terminology established by Mark Catesby and the merits of post-Linnaean classification. He used the illustrations to clarify his points, and Millicent was much charmed. Kylo’s promise that tomorrow they’d set out armed with field glasses and telescopes and make a humble attempt at taxonomy themselves was met with excited clapping.

He stayed up late that night, making notes and drafting, inspired by his pupil’s enthusiasm. He had had his fair share of eager students at Lowood, but most of his time was occupied by disciplining the less devoted children and making compromises in the material so they could keep up—which meant that his best students got bored. It was always a struggle for a fragile balance, but with Millicent, it’d be different. He’d just have to keep her engaged until she was old enough to be sent to school. He could factor in her personal taste, her wishes and needs: it promised to be easy, but entertaining.

He had started nodding off, so he set the bundles of books aside and blew out the candle. As soon as darkness fell, he heard the brushes of fingers. He tensed and glared at the door, as if hoping to just stare down the ghost. The sound was so soft he couldn’t decide whether he was just imagining it, thanks to his expectation of hearing it again, or if somebody was indeed strolling the corridors. Once again, there were no steps; but neither were there a rattling knob and creeping roots. He put his head on the pillow, abandoning vigilance and falling asleep; he felt no dread, just a slight annoyance.

A week passed; the sound was insistent, but muted by the peacefulness of his days. Indeed, educating Millicent proved to be a rewarding job — it was only the servants who caused him discontent. His feud with Thanisson wasn’t forgotten: the boy generally kept to himself, lingering by the stables even though with Mr. Hux’s horse absent, there was not much to do there — but whenever Kylo approached him, he put in a special effort to be cold and distant. Also, he’d been wrong about Mitaka: his anxiety seemed to be his state of being and not a reaction prompted by a stranger. He was skittish and fidgety, in sharp contrast with his mother’s cheerfulness. The rooms
were cleaned by Slip and Nines, whom Kylo found childish and single-minded. Mandetat and Rodion minded the garden, and although they’d stop to converse with him if they chanced upon him exercising outside, Rodion couldn’t stop jesting about his accent, and Kylo felt mocked. He would enquire about current affairs Kylo had no idea of, having not lived in the States for years, and point out mannerisms that felt natural before. It was very unpleasant, and Mandetat was just a little better with his inquisitive curiosity, asking a thousand questions but hardly caring for the answers.

Kylo struck up a strange sort of friendship with Unamo. When he wanted to be left alone with his thoughts, he went to the topmost storey and walked the long corridors, mimicking the distraught ghost. He often found her sitting on the stairs of the attic, smoking her pipe. She was there even on Sunday; it seemed not many of the servants frequented the mass.

“Are we all going to hell?” Kylo asked in French, approaching her. She sat carelessly, half-lounging, smoking away; she had stopped straightening up when she saw him. The church’s bell tolled in the distance, the faintest sound in the still air. Kylo’s fingers brushed over the wood panels, jumping when a framed image or a dusty gaslamp blocked their way.

“I’m a Catholic,” Unamo said. “Not many Catholic churches here.”

“Don’t let anyone hear you say that,” Kylo warned. Unamo tilted her head, looking him over.

“I trust you,” she said. “You’re a cunning one, but I trust you.”

“Am I just supposed to stand here and take it as you debase my character?”

Unamo puffed out a cloud of aromatic smoke. “I just told you we’re friends. No, more than that: we’re raising the same child; we’re practically married.”

Kylo dropped his hand. “I’m not interested.”

“Do I look interested?” Unamo asked, arching a brow. A silent understanding passed between them: a violet exchanged for a green carnation. Kylo climbed the creaking stairs and sat beside her. He was offered the pipe, which he politely declined. They sat in companionable silence, until a hellish noise startled Kylo; his head shot up — it was coming from the attic.

“The wind in the chimneys,” Unamo told him. “Always gives me creeps. Like a damned soul.”

“Do you hear voices at night?” Kylo asked, unable to take his eyes off the trapdoor. It was bolted, three heavy locks closing it up; they looked fairly new, shining in the dimness of the corridor.

“Depends what sort of voices.”

“Fingers brushing over the walls,” Kylo confessed, hoping he wouldn’t be laughed at. Unamo looked lost in thought, chewing on her pipe.

“That’s probably Madame Mitaka,” she pronounced finally, and with confidence. “She’s a sleepwalker.”

“Is she?”

“So I’ve heard. I have the room next to Millicent’s; never encountered her in moonshine. Only voices I hear are the screams of Millicent’s nightmares.”

“She has nightmares?” Kylo was shocked. Millicent was such a placid child—in temperament, if nothing else. She was restless when she was confined to a chair, so Kylo had come into the habit of
taking her on walks and alternating between the rooms to keep her on the move. It worked like a spell; she was anything but tormented, always lively and high-spirited; but then again, he never took Mrs. Mitaka for a sleepwalker.

“So did I, when I was her age,” Unamo said. “It’s a frightening world.”

They sat together for a while, but the silence between them was now an uneasy one.

Kylo woke early the next day, his night having been undisturbed, which made it all the more upsetting. Whether the origin of the nightly sounds was human or inhuman, they seemed to have one thing in common: periods of rest before the visits would start again.

It was still dark in the garden when he went for a walk to clear his head, wearing his nightgown with trousers and a coat thrown over his shoulders. The edge of the horizon coloured, a soft green and a sleepy blue; he walked between shadows, the many flowers humming lullabies to themselves. The dew made his steps slippery; he abandoned the pathways, fearing discovery in his present state. He had no idea where he was headed until he arrived at the lake. It seemed just as peaceful as the first time he visited it, and without thinking much about it, he shed his clothing and hung it over a rock carefully. He could dart out for it as soon as he heard steps, but it was unlikely anyone would come here at such an hour. He was utterly alone, and how he cherished it, some moments of tranquility just for himself.

He dipped into the water; it was exhilaratingly cool, invigorating his flesh. He had certain doubts about his ability to swim, but he could splash around fairly well; the goal was to keep his head above the surface—and that didn't seem to require too much technical flair. He got bolder and ventured deeper, always keeping his eyes on the shore; just a few pushes and his feet would touch the ground again. He realised it didn’t take much to stay afloat, which gave him great joy. He encountered no eels or frogs, just some crow-silk gathering here and there and early dragonflies whirring about. Maybe he and Millicent could try to catch some and add to their ever-growing insect collection.

Slowly, sunlight started dripping from the leaves of the trees like honey, and bees and butterflies joined the scene. The water turned the colour of emerald, and Kylo was just floating on his back, marveling at all this beauty; but the morning was calling—he’d have to dress, wash the lake’s smell out of his hair, have breakfast, prepare the lessons (today promised the eternal joy of arithmetic). Reluctantly, he struggled ashore and put his clothes on over his wet body. Next time, a towel would be necessary, but he could certainly make it a habit: a pleasant swim before the day would begin. He sat on a mossy rock to pull his boots on, frowning at the clenching sound they made. He heard a soft rustle, and peeking over his shoulder, he was faced with a magpie.

The magpie regarded him silently.

“Is this any way to greet an old acquaintance?” the magpie asked; it still had the voice of his former self, a child’s words slurring in his mind. “It’s been a long while since I last saw you, witch.”

“I’m no witch,” Kylo spat, “and birds can’t talk.” He got to his feet and stumped to his discarded boot, the cold mud licking his socked foot. He felt his hair stand on an end, and his vision cleared with panic, the edges dark and hazy but everything else shifting into a sharp focus.
“Are you having a pleasant stay? Are you happy here?”

Kylo didn’t grace it with an answer. Everything was so silent and still he could hear his own breathing. He got the boot and pulled it on, never turning his back to the bird. The magpie was hanging upside-down from the branch, eyes shining like red-hot coal.

“Count your blessings, witch. Let's see what you can keep.”

“I've told you I'm not a witch,” Kylo hissed; he shouldn't have engaged, but he couldn't help it. He braved the magpie with his glare and bared his teeth.

“Lies, lies, lies,” it chanted thinly, in a mocking parody of a song, then snapped its beak, reaching for Kylo’s eyes. He didn’t back down.

“A witch is someone who is practicing witchcraft,” he said, voice filling with threat. “I don’t do that; therefore, I’m no witch—now if you would just kindly shut up.”

The magpie opened its beak for a shriek which never came, its tongue hanging out, with a single drop of blood on it. Kylo turned, and recoiled when he saw how the leaves hung in the air, motionless; he yelled, and made his way through them, breaking into a run; the leaves got into his hair and their blades scraped over his skin, until he looked like a proper witch with light scratches marking him and crowned with twigs.

I didn’t do it; the magpie is playing tricks on me. I didn’t steal its voice; I didn’t stop the leaves, he told himself, over and over, as he raced through the garden, floundering, out of breath. He didn’t feel safe until Stormfield Hall’s doors closed behind him; and then he was faced with new challenges.

“Oh my!” Mrs. Mitaka exclaimed, almost dropping her tray of jellies. “Whatever happened, Mr. Ren?”

“Morning jog gone wrong,” he murmured, and rushed upstairs to clean himself. When he looked into his mirror, his skin was unblemished, and his hair was clean, save from the wetness of the lake.

His mood was fouled that day; he refused Millicent’s wish to go out for their usual walk, and insisted on staying in the gloomiest drawing room, which had no view to the garden. Later, he snapped at her when she made a mistake in her calculus. He hated to see how she flinched; but how could he explain himself? A talking magpie taunted me this morning, the self-same who took my eyes when I was a child?

“Forgive me,” he said, unable to articulate anything else; it seemed enough, because Millicent smiled, and handed him the abacus.

“Please explain how to do it again; I shall take special care. There are twelve pennies in a shilling; twenty-five is divided by twelve to give two with a remainder of—”

“One,” Kylo finished for her, moving the beads in the right direction. “See, the gist of what we’re attempting to do here is this: the problem is continuously normalized as the solution develops...”

It did not help that once again the night was silent. Anticipating the sound was worse than actually hearing it, just like fearing a new encounter with the magpie was worse than actually having to go through it. He had plans to say to it next—how to banish it for good, if needed, how to utilise his dormant powers; but no opportunity was given. When the next morning he visited the lake, he found it placid; and even though he sat there for more than an hour, a sharpened stick in hand, nothing came to disturb the calm of the scene.
He walked back to the house, rather agitated; at first, he didn’t even register the cries he heard, he was so lost in troubled thought — Unamo was shouting, “Au secours! Au secours!” and finally, a gentle sob grabbed his attention. He squinted at Unamo, who was standing under the great sycamore tree by the house, clutching her frock with such force it appeared to be torn; her face was all red from yelling, and her eyes were round, frenzied. Mitaka rushed outside with a rifle in hand (God bless him), and demanded: “What’s the meaning of this?”

“What happened?” Kylo asked in Unamo’s tongue, rushing to her; she just pointed up at the tree. It was hard to see: the crown was quite dense and stretched out wide. Kylo narrowed his eyes and caught a glimpse of something white and black—a petticoat, then a pair of small boots.

“Oh no,” he mouthed, throat gripped with fear.

It was Millicent, suspended on the branches; she was sobbing silently, half-choking on her tears, but she didn’t call out, not even when her weepy eyes met Kylo’s gaze.

“How did she even get up there?” Mitaka cried, turning on his heels and shouting with shocking force: “Rodion! Rodion, come!”

“I can get her down,” Kylo said. He kicked off his boots, handed them to Unamo, and approached the tree. It had a smooth and broad trunk, but the branches were not that high; he jumped up and managed to grasp one on the third try; a small child like Millicent couldn’t have done it. Who put Millicent Hux in the sycamore? With his stomach sinking and twisting, he climbed the tree, keeping his eyes on the limp figure of Millicent, a rag-doll suspended in air.

“It’s all right, it’s all right, I’m here,” he kept saying, praying that his hands wouldn’t slip, that the thin branches would hold Millicent just a little longer. “I’m coming to get you, you’re safe, just don’t move, don’t move, please.”

“Jesus Christ!” he heard Rodinon cursing from below. “Did she jump out of her window?”

“Is that Mr. Ren up there with her?” Mrs. Mitaka asked, panting as if she came running. “Oh, they’ll fall to their death!”

“Don’t look down,” Kylo pleaded. He was close enough to see her properly as he pushed the bright green leaves aside; her eyes were red and puffy, and her teeth were chattering.

“It wasn’t me, Mr. Ren,” she whispered, hiccuping up wet sobs. “It wasn’t me.”

“Hush, hush,” he said and reached out. “Cling to my neck. I’ll get us down in no time; and no one will hurt you anymore, because I’m going to look out for you.”

Millicent buried her face in his neck and folded her thin arms around it. Kylo pressed her close and descended, sending prayers to a God he knew wasn’t there to listen. They reached ground level without any problem; Mrs. Mitaka had fainted, and Unamo was half-mad with worry. She pulled Millicent, who was unwilling to let go of Kylo, into a tight embrace, so all three of them stood there, clinging to each other.

Millicent was brought to the kitchen, where it was the warmest, and she was given a lick of brandy in milk, the best medicine against shock the household could agree on. A thousand questions followed. They stood around and demanded answers, disregarding protests from the sobered up Mrs. Mitaka, who insisted they should leave Millicent be. The child didn’t remember anything; one minute, she was just stuck in the tree and couldn’t come down — and that was the end of it. Some believed she had jumped; others, that she had climbed; all tried to make her confess, but Kylo
believed he knew the answer, and the solution as well. The magpie had to be chased away.

“We must alert Mr. Hux,” Dolphed said, leaning against the doorframe, pale as a sheet. His voice was barely a tremble, but his dark eyes were determined.

“You’d just make him worry,” Mrs. Mitaka opposed. “Miss Millicent is quite well now; aren’t you, love? No foolishness like this will happen again. Mr. Ren saved the day, God bless him.”

“I will make sure to mention it in my letter, which I am writing and sending promptly,” Mitaka announced and, turning on his heels, left in an angry hurry; Rodion let out a low whistle while Ren quickly translated what was happening to Unamo, who sighed with relief.

“Good. Monsieur Hux’s presence would certainly help Millicent overcome this ugly accident. I was so scared, God! If anything were to happen to her —”

“Nothing will,” Kylo said. It was a vow, not just a promise.

Rage boiled in him; he was ready to fight armies from the netherworld, a flock of magpies, a thousand ghosts; but in the following days, Stormfield Hall was eerily calm.

Millicent was upset just for a short while, her mood easing with the swiftness of childhood before Kylo could work out a way to initiate a conversation that included threatening and inexplicable powers; he’d just terrify her further, bring harm her way. He was convinced the accident was the magpie’s doing, mocking his secret fears or reminding him of Maratelle’s mystery. He knew he’d have to be careful, but he also wanted to do something, anything which would prove he wasn’t scared, and he wanted to send a message to the magpie: I’m stronger than you recognise.

If the terrors were interconnected, the best way to fight them was to solve them; therefore Kylo set out to find the wych elm. If I can talk to birds, I might be able to talk with trees, he reasoned; but surely, that’d require time and patience—he had neither; still, he was determined to give it a try.

A storm was brewing; dry thunder cracked the darkening sky open, and a warning wind flapped his coat around. He had no fear; he felt immense, his spirit filling the entire garden. He avoided the frequented paths of his pensive walks and vigorous exercise; he never neared the lake. The wych elm would be in uncharted territory, if it was even on the premises. He was certain he’d recognise it, even if he was met by an entire forest.

The flowers twisted and writhed around his ankles; insects and birds were fleeing from the nearing storm.

“Where could you be?” he called out, voice strong and hands curled into fists in his pockets. A gust of wind ruffled his hair and tore away petals from the buttercups and betonies; they seemed to hang in the air, just for a moment, forming a pathway before they dispersed. Kylo followed the way he fancied seeing. Through shrubbery and gentle slopes, he made his way towards the east gate, and there among the tall, proud trees stood a ghastly elm, overgrown with thorns and fungus. How remote it seemed in its pompous company, how desolate; he briefly wondered whether Rodion and Mandetat were forbidden to care for it; whether they could even see it. He approached it carefully, the wind wuthering and roaring. He reached out and put his hand over the thorns, mindful not to shed blood. He looked up at the twisted branches clawing at the angry clouds.

“Maratelle Hux,” he whispered. He felt the thorns move beneath his palm, but it might have been the wind. “Who put you here?”

Thunder rolled; then, the tramp of hooves, tu-thud, tu-thud; Kylo’s blood ran cold. A gytrash, surely;
a north-of-England spirit, haunting in the form of a horse, stamping folks to death or leading them astray—and it was approaching. He pulled back from the wych elm, looking around in a frenzy to find something to guard himself with, then resolved to climb the nearest uncursed tree: he made a break for the juniper on the opposite side of the path, as far from the wych elm as he could get but still close enough to reach it in time. He miscalculated; he was right in the middle of the track when the gytrash gained on him, neighing; it stood on its hind legs, tossing its head back as lightning crackled and Kylo yelled. There was a cry followed by a thump; its rider fell.

The gytrash never had riders. Nor did it have a bridle or a saddle. Kylo cursed and ran to the fallen figure as the horse danced out of the way.

“Are you hurt, sir?” he said, trying to shout over the blazing wind. The man tried to get to his feet, and failed.

“Damn you, you’ve startled Finalizadora,” he complained and reached for Kylo’s hand. His bright hair fell to his face; all Kylo could make out in the shadows and the confusion was an expensive set of riding attire and high boots hiding whether his ankle had been sprained. Kylo pulled him up, surveying his muddied jodhpurs and wretched coat.

“I am terribly sorry,” he began, but then their eyes met—brown ones widening in shock, a greenish pair narrowing with mirth.

“So it’s true,” Augustus Burns — Armitage Hux purred; he dug his fingers into the flesh of Kylo’s arm, holding on tight. “Kylo Ren, as I live,” he announced with a satisfied grin.

Kylo could only stare at him—that beloved, yet foreign face; how could this be? Was he really here, or was he a wandering spirit, yet another trick? He ran his fingers over slender arms, narrow shoulders, solid and human; he cupped his face, and his long-lost friend did the same.

“Say something,” Hux pleaded, his laughter just a bit too sharp. “Aren’t you pleased to see me? How come you’re in my employ? What were you doing here, all on your own, when it is just about to rain?”

*When shall we three meet again, in thunder, lightning, or in rain? All three, Kylo’s mind quoted.*

It was Armitage Hux. It was the General. His hand dropped back to his shoulders, and Hux released him.

“Can you speak?” Hux asked. “Am I conjuring you up? Is it my mind’s eye tricking me, showing me a ghost I would follow down the moors?”

“A ghost?” Kylo whispered, voice failing with emotion. Hux’s grin widened, eyes dark as he cupped Kylo’s face again with gloved hands.

“He speaks; he speaks in a voice I don’t recognise but remember so well—but it’s now much deeper, richer; and with that accent I always thought so peculiar. It’s him. It’s my little companion.”

“Damn you,” Kylo blurted out, and squeezed his eyes shut.

Hux’s voice was light, teasing. “Damn me all you want; I have you now. Help me to my horse.”

Kylo pushed him back, gripping his shoulders. He wouldn’t look at his face; he was staring at his chest, how it fell and rose with every easy intake of breath; he remembered a boy with rattling coughs fighting for his life; he remembered a lost battle.
“Can you walk?” he asked firmly.

“I don’t think so. I fell on my bad leg. Thank you for that, again.”

Kylo looked at him, bewildered. Hux frowned, nose twitching. Was he really Augustus? An unseemly boy, lanky, awkward; not this man, this alluring, almost ethereal being.

“I’d rather you gaped at me in utter bafflement where it’s dry and warm,” Hux spoke again. “Let us go home; let me sit by the fire, and drink some brandy while I listen to your tale; there’s much to tell, isn’t it?”

“Did you attend a ball in Chandrila, Cumbria five years ago?” Kylo blurted out.

“As I said: all questions will be answered in the comfort of my sitting room.”

“Did you,” Kylo raised his voice, and shook him. Hux hissed in pain; he couldn’t feel sorry for him. He seemed an impostor, a doppelgänger, a changeling of a fairy replacing an innocent memory.

“Careful! Let me think—Chandrila, you say? Five years?”

“I was sixteen; you had to be twenty-one.”

“I remember now,” Hux mused. “Freshly returned from the battlefield—a bright military career, which ended so suddenly; how bitter I was—wouldn’t dance with anybody; I resolved to mind Millicent while her wet nurse chatted with girlfriends.”

“Millicent was there,” Kylo repeated.

“We were playing hide-and-seek,” Hux recalled with a bashful smile. Kylo remembered a little girl, counting, one, two, three; but couldn’t remember the colour of her clothes, or her hair, or anything else. “Why you ask? And how fares she? Dopheld made it sound in his letter as if climbing trees was some gruesome deed; it wouldn’t be the first time—she’s a lively child. I took her down from the roof myself on countless occasions, and trees seem to be her particular favourites. You must’ve noticed it; I cannot believe I tasked Dopheld with finding her a new tutor, and he gives me my lost friend!”

“I was never lost,” Kylo countered. “I was right where you left me.”

Hux laughed. “Left you? Why, Kylo, I can assure you—”

Kylo didn’t care what he had to say, not with that laugh ringing in his ears. He yanked Hux’s arms, dragging him to the horse, which seemed to have calmed down. She was standing with her hindquarters to them, clearly affronted, tail twitching in annoyance.

“I can see that you’re upset,” Hux said, “but could you please cease tossing me around so? You’re worse than the storm.”

Kylo wordlessly put the reins in his hands. “Can you climb up into the saddle?” he grunted.

“I don’t think I can,” Hux raised his voice. “You’re in my employ now, are you not? Help me.”

Kylo patted his shoulder. “See you at Stormfield Hall,” he said, and walked away. He made sure to kick Hux’s tophat on the way; it fell into a puddle.
**Notes and disclaimers:** making good on the Gothic horror promise (involving: auditionary creepiness, sleep paralysis [or was it reality? dun-dun-dun], spooky trees, spooky birds) / real-life murder mystery used for inspiration / a child is in peril/ 19th century still heavily fictionalised: traditionally female/male occupations mixed

Many thanks to *Gefionne* for betaing & *Anna* for proofreading!

A loving gallery of beautiful fanart:
* the portrait of *Miss Millicent Hux*, which Hux probably shows around to exasperated acquaintances, by Anna
* **The Sad Ball Scene** from chapter I, commissioned from flurgburgler

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Three's for a Girl

Chapter Notes

Please refer to the end notes for content warnings!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A dense rain began falling as Kylo made his way up the slippery stairs leading to the entrance, his wool coat twisting in the angry gusts of wind. He pushed the heavy double door in, and then just stood there for a moment, arms outstretched. What kind of fool leaves their employer to be prey of such wolfish weather? he asked himself. What kind of fool am I? He took a hesitant step forward, then another. The draught snapped the door shut behind him; he flinched, but continued walking away from his erstwhile friend, with his bad leg and spooked horse. What kind of fool, he mused as his righteous rage bled into a silent dread. Would he be sent away? Possibly. Probably. The sole thing stopping Hux from dismissing him would be the memory of their companionship; and what was that worth?

In his daze, his legs brought him to the kitchen. He walked like a deserter creeping home, steps heavy with the weight of guilt. One of the planks creaked softly, and Mrs. Mitaka, busily chopping vegetables, looked up at him from behind her spectacles.

“What is it now?” she called out, humour apparent in her voice, but Kylo didn’t miss how her hand almost slipped. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

“The Lord Arkanis is home,” he croaked. The knife was dropped; Mrs. Mitaka hurried to the bells, alerting the household to get prepared while repeating, “Mr. Hux is home!”

The hurry and flurry which followed was beyond Kylo; he stayed in his spot, spellbound, in the icy grip of inexplicable emotions. He heard running steps and Mitaka shouting orders; he could’ve sworn he was able to make out Millicent’s excited shriek, and Unamo enquiring what was happening; there was a call for light, and fire, and the stables to be readied. He began to shiver with cold and nerves; it passed when he drew nearer to the furnace, yet he couldn’t shake off the sensation of being watched; was it his conscience keeping vigil? Was he sorry?

With bitter determination, he headed to the hall; it had a brilliance he’d never seen before, all the gas lamps lit on the walls and the chandelier sparkling. The servants were lined up, and Unamo and Millicent were waiting separately. Kylo’s place was near his pupil. She beckoned him closer with a wave of her hand and mouthed something Kylo couldn’t make out. His heart ached. You were the perfect student, he thought with regret. But if I had half the chance to slap your dear brother, I’d do it, consequences be damned.

The door opened; Thanisson came in first, escorting his master, and how he changed! He was giddy with excitement, eyes bright and smile wide; it altered his features, but Kylo noted that he still didn’t look mature. A petty observation; and the next one gave even worse evidence of his character, for he noticed with an odd satisfaction that Hux’s hair, all soaked, was altered in colour, its fiery brilliance degraded to a washed-out auburn. Nines helped Thanisson keep the door open for their lord. There were bows and curtseys from the servants, greeting Hux as if the Second Coming brought him, but nothing could make his entrance even remotely pompous. He left a muddy trail behind him, limping, and he stank of the wet hair of his horse.
“Armitage!” Millicent cried when he looked at her, and reached for him with both hands, asking to be taken up like a much younger child.

“Now-now, Millicent, greet me like a lady,” Hux asked, his voice soft and kind — but he put his hands behind his back, denying Millicent the embrace she demanded. She curtseyed, with an earnest smile on her lips, eyes flashing with something like challenge.

“Brother!”

“Dear sister,” he bowed. They both straightened up, chins held high as they regarded each other; then Hux bowed down again, this time to plant a kiss on Millicent’s forehead. She giggled, and Hux stroked her hair. “Wait for me in the sitting room, please; I must change.” His eyes found Kylo’s gaze. “Will Mr. Ren join us?” he asked in the voice of command.

For a split second, Kylo believed he was to assist with dressing, then, with a flushed face, he said, “With pleasure, my lord.”

Hux’s brows furrowed at that. “Very well,” he addressed the room. “As you were.”

The servants dispersed. Kylo was stunned; he hardly noticed how Millicent latched onto him, pulling him towards the sitting room as if he was some giant bear toy. Her excitement made her forget her manners; Kylo’s own made him forget everything. He caught a last glimpse of Hux as he mounted the stairs, not even sparing Kylo a glance.

He’d never been to the sitting room before; any other day, he would’ve marveled at the fine furniture, speaking of good taste, and the paintings high on the wall; how teal and gold blended together, how beautiful the wallpapers were. Now he couldn’t care. He walked to the arched windows while Unamo seated Millicent on an ottoman and helped her arrange her bright skirts. Kylo pulled away the curtains and looked at the raging storm; he imagined Hux kicking him out, leaving him at the mercy of the elements. Would he do that, as revenge?

He was startled from his dark ponderings when he caught sight of Hux’s reflection. What an image; how handsome and tall he was, and how hateful it was to see him like this. His fresh clothes were simple, but splendid, an offhand elegance only the richest could afford. He greeted everybody, and then announced: “I’ve called for Dr. Finn.”

“Are you hurt?” Millicent asked, worried. Hux smiled at her briefly as he walked to his armchair, dragging his foot in a rather exaggerated manner — his limp wasn’t this bad when he entered.

“I fell from Finalizadora,” he said, “thanks to Mr. Ren.”

“My darling Mr. Ren!” Millicent exclaimed. She beckoned him closer; and who was he not to obey? Millicent took his hand and turned to her brother. “I am certain it wasn’t intentional.”

Hux seated himself, frowning, and stretched out his hurt leg. He had velvet slippers on. “Did you know we were schoolmates?”

“You and Mr. Ren?”

“Oh, yes.”

“You never told me!” Millicent said, and dropped Kylo’s hand. Kylo’s eyes locked onto Hux’s, but he addressed his sister.

“I told you about Lowood,” he said, and watched Hux’s eyebrows arch up on his perfect forehead.
“You told her about Lowood?” he repeated sharply. Kylo flashed his teeth at him, but before he could speak, Mitaka entered with a tray.

“Tea!” he announced, cheery. Unamo flocked to him, seemingly eager to help; Kylo supposed she just jumped on the opportunity to escape their proximity—even without understanding what was being said, she must have felt that the air was charged.

Hux turned to them, and again, his voice was silken: “Could you please put some rum into mine?”

“I’ve brought you brandy, Mr. Hux,” Mitaka said, promptly presenting him with a crystal tumbler, which Hux took hastily.

“Wonderful,” he sighed, and took an eager swig. Kylo’s watched his throat working, then tore away his gaze. His hands felt stiff while he clumsily prepared his tea, the simplest act turning into an ordeal with his mind preoccupied. He walked back to the fire, nursing the delicate cup, and just stood there, lingering, looking at anywhere but Hux, whose eyes never left him.

“Please take a seat, Mr. Ren,” Millicent asked graciously. He thanked her with a taut smile, and promptly sat down, coat and all. He should’ve parted with it a while ago, but decided to play it off as a deliberate choice. He crossed his muddied boots at the ankle, affecting an easy manner, half-lounging, like he belonged here — he did; he would outright refuse to leave.

“Dopheld, would you see to it that a light supper is prepared?” Hux ordered. “A nice soup, I think.”

“Right away, Mr. Hux.” Mitaka bowed and hurried away, the keys on his belt clinking.

“What did you tell my sister about Lowood?” Hux asked with an easy air, when the door had closed behind the housekeeper.

Kylo sipped on his tea, savouring the taste, and after several beats, he said, “That it was a school.”

“But really,” Millicent said, stirring her syrupy tea, “I would never have imagined that you were old acquaintances!”

“Best of friends, actually,” Kylo corrected, gaze boring into Hux. “He left abruptly; never told me why—never sent me a single word to let me know how he was doing.”

“I was dying,” Hux said slowly, and then turned to Millicent, his face softening. Oh, how Kylo hated him in that minute. “I have told you about my consumption, have I not?” he asked. “Why you must always keep warm and dry.”

“I always keep warm and dry,” Millicent nodded, and almost spilled her tea in her eagerness. Hux smiled at her, not commenting on her clumsiness.

“You are stronger than I was; you will grow up to be a bold, bright woman; I promise you’ll always be safe, and I hope you’ll always healthy,” he said. Millicent straightened up, basking in the praise; Kylo had noticed she was rather fond of it. Hux turned to him again, lashes drooping as he regarded him. A strange smile was playing at his lips as he swirled his drink around. “Mr. Ren will see to it that you receive the education you deserve; Lowood was a horrid place, but a good school. I am certain they had made him an able tutor.”

“Oh, he’s brilliant,” Millicent said, beaming; she looked like she wanted to add something else, but Kylo interrupted, his sharp gaze slashing at Hux.

“Why didn’t you write to me?” he demanded; he wanted his voice to be firm — he always imagined
he’d ask this question with wounded passion, but he just sounded brattish. It was Hux’s turn to take a
too-long sip; he licked at a stray drop, then clicked his tongue.

“Didn’t the Vicar tell you my family brought me to a sanatorium in Brighton?” he asked, and turning
to Millicent, continued, “I told you all about it, remember? The seagulls, the sunlight, the salty air;
how I was saved—renewed.”

“Papa then sent you to the Continent,” Millicent said, recounting it with compassion and wonder,
like she was quoting a fairytale of a banished prince. “You came home when I was born; they didn’t
want you to, but you did, you so wished to see me. Then the war; then your travels; London; you
leave so often, but you always come back.”

“It’s a pity,” Kylo interrupted, “that all these long years your brother had neither paper nor a pen on
his person.”

Hux gave him an affronted gaze, but Kylo wouldn’t relent. He couldn’t stand the thought of Hux
recounting this story to his sister so many times that she knew it by heart, while he was left in the
dark for one year and ten.

“Mr. Ren,” Hux said in warning, gritting his teeth. Calling him by his surname was just insult to the
injury.

“Was it a stamp you were lacking?” Kylo asked, almost spitting the words out. “An envelope? A
heart?”

“As I told you, and as you may recall, I was dying of consumption,” Hux said, raising his voice,
cheeks pale with anger and nostrils flaring. “I was fighting for my life. Tooth and nail, I fought for
every breath, every minute—and I lived. My illness left me frail, exhausted; my mind was scattered
—this is how I was sent to Europe: a skeleton on a crowded ship. I arrived in a place where they
refused to speak my language, where they wouldn’t acknowledge my name, when I was all alone, in
the care of foreign servants and tutors, I had to prove my position—again; have you ever asked
yourself why was I sent to that rathole in Lowood under false pretence? Dare you demand my
secrets, when you must know them to be hurtful and degrading? Would you ask that sickly and
confused outcast to give you the satisfaction of a letter, when he didn’t even know whether he would
be allowed to see his motherland ever again, whether he could claim his name, his rank, his
heritage?”

“I understand that—”

“Don’t ever interrupt me,” Hux snapped, and stood up, gripping the empty glass of brandy so tightly
it threatened to explode. “I was fighting for the comforts you now enjoy as my guest; I fought to hold
that little girl in my arms, the girl whom you have the privilege to teach. My birthright was denied me
—don’t ask how, because it’s not your right to know; know this: I didn’t leave you behind—I was
forced to leave everything, my own self included. What do you say to that?”

Kylo regarded him silently. The noise of rain filled the room, with distant birds calling. He set his tea
aside, leaving Hux trembling in his offended fury, then straightened up in his seat.

“What do you have to say?” Hux repeated in a tone that was lighter, but all the more threatening for
it.

“I would say you’re not the only one with a tale of woe,” Kylo said slowly. “I would say you’re not
the only one nursing injuries. You used to understand this; we sought out one another’s company
because we were companions in distress. Augustus; Hux; whoever you are: you are ungrateful and
unkind.” He got up. They were at eye-level; Hux tipped his chin to stare him down. As he moved, pain must have shot through his leg, for he flinched, but kept his balance.

“I am neither,” he mouthed.

Kylo turned to Millicent, who sat still, eyes round, but otherwise, seemingly undisturbed despite all the passionate yelling just a minute ago. “I apologise for insulting your brother in your presence.”

“You shall take back what you said,” Millicent said flatly. “Armitage is kind; tender, even, if you are deserving of his care. He never forgets the ones who did him favours, and returns them tenfold. I would say you don’t know him very well if your opinion is any different. How you welcomed him in his own home is unbecoming of a gentleman. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“I am ashamed,” he blurted out; there was no feeling behind it other than surprise over Millicent’s coldness.

“Don’t tell me,” Millicent said. “Tell him.”

Kylo turned back to Hux. He was standing perfectly poised, looking quite ready to lower himself back into his armchair, finish his drink, forget all about his outburst and Kylo’s scorn. To forget everything, again.

“I’m sorry,” Kylo said, and as Hux waved it away with a grandiose gesture, he finished, “I’m sorry — I cannot forgive you yet.”

He stormed away without taking proper leave; it wouldn’t matter, anyway. He headed to his room, which he wouldn’t be able to call his own for long. As he closed the door behind him, he screamed, helplessly; it was muted by the rumble of thunder. He walked to the window; the floor seemed to be tilted, as if the house was shaking with his anger. He grabbed the gay little curtain and tore it off the rod, then tossed it on the ground to stomp on it. He was consumed by a vile, animal rage, but he couldn’t fight it. He attacked the washing basin next, and then the canopy. He swept through the room like a whirlwind, and then stood, panting, above the evidence of his destruction.

What was next? What else could it be: disgrace. He had disrespected his host and angered his charge; it was very likely Millicent would refuse to be his student after this, and he’d be sent away. Why would you want to stay anyway? he asked himself as he looked around. These ruined comforts were not of importance; he appreciated them, but what truly mattered was the contentment of his position—making his own living, having a roof over his head and food in his belly, doing something in which he found pleasure and pride. All of this would be taken away because he couldn’t excuse Hux’s neglect—but doing so would be a betrayal of his innermost self. The price was this: his reputation. Hux was influential; he would warn everybody of importance not to employ him. He’d be banished to be a schoolteacher forever, to waste his talents; and whenever he went, the magpie would follow him. He felt so close to defeating him, of unraveling mysteries and discovering a knowledge which—

There was a knock on wood, the softest sound. Knock-knock: the ghost. He turned to the door, bewildered. It was dark; darker than it should be—he must’ve lost track of the time in his rage. The knob glinted ominously; he saw it moving. With a yell, he jumped, and yanked the door open just when the unholy spirit knocked again.

“You!” he bellowed.

Unamo gasped, and almost dropped her candle as she danced back. “Nom de Dieu!”
“Oh,” Kylo said, getting hold of the doorframe. “I’m sorry, I mistook you for someone else.”

Unamo peeked over his raised shoulders. The withering flame she held was not enough to illuminate the disgraceful ruins, but worry and disdain was still on her face. “You’re in a foul mood,” she said. “What happened in the sitting-room?”

“I used to know him,” Kylo began, but then the words wouldn’t come. How could he recount their tale without sounding bitter and ridiculous? Unamo arched an eyebrow, urging him on, but he just shook his head, defeated. “We had a little disagreement.”

“I hope you made up.”

“We absolutely did,” Kylo lied.

“I just put Millicent to bed; they conversed with Mr. Hux for a while after you left. She’s so happy he’s home.” Pleading, she added, “Please, don’t ruin this for her.”

Kylo’s shoulders slumped. “And here I was thinking you were concerned about me.”

“I was; I still am. Your behaviour is concerning.”

“And not his?”

“Monsieur Hux’s?”

“He yelled at me,” Kylo pointed out. He didn’t add that he quite enjoyed it—seeing Hux displaying a strong emotion in regards to him; getting evidence that at least, he wasn’t indifferent — that would’ve been unbearable.

“You mustn’t think much of it,” Unamo said. “He carries the war with him.”

“I see,” Kylo murmured. Unamo pinched his cheek good-naturally, and despite his protesting grunt, Kylo quite liked the causality of it.

“Rest up; tomorrow will be kinder, when the storm passes.”

“Looking forward to all my problems getting magically solved.”

Unamo scoffed and left him with a bonne nuit; Kylo looked after her passing figure. My second friend in twenty-one years, he thought. Oh, what is wrong with me? What if it’s me?

He walked to his wrecked bed and dropped down to it, still wearing all his clothes. Throwing his arm over his eyes, he prayed for sleep. It came to him slowly, washing over his consciousness in waves. There was a lake; the lake in the garden — he saw it from a distance. A blink; now it was closer; and finally, he was underwater. On the surface, a figure — Millicent — her clothes: white and gold, keeping her afloat, swollen with air. Her hair: red pondweed. Her hands: unmoving. A splash, soundless. Hux in the water, kicking, spattering. He clings to her with an urgency, tries to push her up, but she’s unmoving. Face down, she’s floating, and her brother is screaming until water fills his lungs and the last bubble bursts.

Kylo woke with a start. Oh, how he despised nightmares—but as the reality of his situation set in, he half-wished he could go back to sleep. He glanced at the clock; he had some time to prepare for his lessons, and hope that Millicent would show up—preferably, alive, and in a sparing mood. He rubbed the bad dream from his eyes and readied himself, taking special care to brush his hair and dust off his morning coat. He tried to forget what his troubled mind made him watch, but he couldn’t
quite shake off the vision. What did it mean? And why did he feel like this dream wasn’t his—like he opened the eyes of somebody else, and was made to look at their horrors? And in that case, whose nightmare was it—Millicent’s, or Hux’s?

Lost in chilling reveries, he walked to the library. The sunlight glazed the windows and the glass ceiling with liquid gold, the polished floor reflecting the shine. He headed for the shelves housing classical literature; a trip to ancient times should pacify Millicent—maybe Ovid; tales she wouldn’t want to end. They could visit the garden—avoid the lake; Kylo didn’t want to tempt fate—sit among lavenders and pretend that the ugliness of yesterday was far away as they discussed the Metamorphoses.

“Good morning,” a sleepy voice greeted him. He spun around in surprise, discovering Hux stretched out over a cushioned loveseat. He was wearing a nightgown, and peered up at Kylo with such an open expression that his heart sank.

“What are you doing here, my lord?” he asked, rather shocked. He pressed his hand to his chest, trying to calm himself. Hux made a face as he suppressed a yawn.

“I wasn’t going to climb all those stairs with my sprain,” he said, sounding disappointed in himself, and assumed a sitting position. Kylo glanced at his ankle; it was bruised and swollen. His gaze lingered a bit longer than it should have, finding its way up Hux’s shapely shin—but no, peeking was shameful and wicked. He politely fixed his stare somewhat above Hux’s shoulder, and noticed too late that a delicate collarbone was exposed. Damn it all to hell.

“Will you help me?” Hux asked. “Dr. Finn left me some ointment to ease the discomfort; if you’d be so kind as to apply it to my leg—or would you deny me such a simple wish?”

“I am happy to help, my lord,” Kylo said, sheepish, and approached him as one would a wounded animal—a carnivorous one.

Hux scoffed. “Stop with the ‘my lord;’ nobody in the household is required to call me that—Lord Arkanis was my father; I’ve inherited the title, but I understand the power of habit and the confusion to which it leads. It’s ‘Mr. Hux;’ and I shall call you ‘Mr. Ren.’”

“All right,” Kylo said. He spotted the dark bottle of the ointment on the little chess table; he fetched it as Hux went on to complain.

“‘All right?’ Is that all? No thunderous judgement, no challenge? How meek you’ve gotten, now that the storm is passed!”

“I’ve reconsidered certain things,” Kylo said, unsure what he meant by this. He didn’t think about it; he just knew he didn’t want to leave. Maybe the strange dream reminded him of his responsibility. He wasn’t just a teacher, but a guardian; he gave his word he would be that. He knelt down and reached for Hux. He let him take his foot and put it over his lap.

“I think both of us behaved poorly the other night,” Hux said. “I’m ready to offer a truce.”

“Not peace?” Kylo dared to tease. His hesitant smile was reflected on Hux’s full lips.

“Peace is not to be offered, but to be achieved.”

“Let’s work for it, then,” Kylo agreed, and poured the ointment over the bruise. It had a clean, sharp smell, and it must have been cold, for Hux hissed. He stopped, earning a gentle poke from Hux’s toes.
“Don’t mind me; I’ve suffered far worse. Proceed, please.”

“What happened to your leg, exactly?” Kylo asked in an attempt to be civil. Hux hummed, considering. Kylo made the mistake of looking up, catching a glimpse of Hux’s exposed knees. He quickly averted his eyes, feeling heat creeping over his cheeks, and hoping that Hux wouldn’t notice.

“You bewitched my horse, and I fell,” Hux said slowly.

“I did not,” Kylo snapped, and was met with sharp laughter.

“There he is! My furious friend—my sworn enemy! Which one is it? Ah, don’t look at me like that—I’ll accuse you of giving me the evil eye.” He tilted his head, still amused. “I assure you, no offense was meant. Now, do you want to hear my answer?”

“Yes,” Kylo gritted, gripping Hux’s leg with more force than needed. This insufferable man!

“The tale is simple: I was hit by a bullet, and my bones got fractured. I made it back to the British lines with the help of my brave Finalizadora. I was brought to a hospital, and I was doing rather well, until I was struck down with enteric fever. I’ve suffered for months, and when I recovered, it was discovered that my limp would be persistent. My health was ruined; so was my military career. I was shipped back to England, where a doctor suggested they could break my bones again, and hope they grow back in an ordinary fashion. I told her I’d think about it, and never went back for treatment. I can walk fairly well; I can ride, with some adjustments to my saddle. I have good days where the pain does not show, and I walk just as gallantly as anybody, but my bad bones are sensitive to the weather, and they also prefer not to be abused or overused.”

“Noted,” Kylo said as he massaged more ointment in. Hux’s skin was soft, with just a few coarse spots where his boots chafed it. He could feel that the sharp juncture of bone was ragged, ill-formed; he rubbed a careful thumb over it. “Does this help?”

“Well, it’s certainly pleasant,” Hux murmured, and narrowed his eyes at him. “Sorry for making you do something so below your position; you were at hand.”

“Was that what happened at Lowood?” Kylo asked; he couldn’t help himself. “Did you only seek my company because I was there?”

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean,” Hux said. “All friendships are circumstantial; you don’t get close to people you’re not likely to ever see again, and you try to win the favours of those you are to spend some time with. That being said”—he raised his voice, probably noticing Kylo’s darkening expression—“my attachment was honest. Nevertheless, if we are to rebuild this friendship, we should start at the beginning. You were a child; it’d be unfair to judge your character based on your old self—and the same applies to me.”

“You haven’t changed much,” Kylo mumbled. “Not in spirit.”

“You did.”

“Well, obviously. Still, I stand by what I told you yesterday. You hurt me; whatever your reasons, you did. I cannot forget that; we cannot be friends. Friendly, yes, if I am to work here.”

“Of course you’re to work here,” Hux retorted sharply. “You have a contract, don’t you? What do you mean, ‘if I am to work here?’”

Feeling a bit idiotic, Kylo cleared his throat and applied a new layer of lotion hastily, almost pouring it all over the carpet. “Erhm, I thought, maybe, that I might be relieved of my position—having
offended you, and consequently, your sister.”

“Nonsense,” Hux said. “Millicent loves you. You saved her life, as far as she’s concerned; children have a quite...undefined concept of death, but if that is how she interprets the incident with the sycamore tree, I’ll accept it. And I owe you my thanks. She loves your methods and considers you the best teacher she’s ever had. Even if it’s based on little experience, I won’t challenge her judgement.”

“I’ll prove my worth to you.”

“You don’t have to.” Hux regarded him with something akin to—pride? Affection? The peculiar expression prompted an idea, a fleeting thought which seemed so real: he saw himself bowing down and pressing a kiss to Hux’s ankle, his lips hot over the cool skin. The scandalous image made him pull back. “All done?” Hux asked.

“There’s a little left,” he said, throat dry.

“Might be better to save it for later,” Hux decided, and dropped his foot from Kylo’s lap. He let out a small sigh, relieved to be rid of the temptation. “Could you fetch me my dressing gown, please? It’s no good to laze around—and I must leave you to prepare for your lesson.”

“Of course,” he murmured, scanning the library to find the requested article of clothing. He could feel the tips of his ears burning, and there was a certain stiffness to his steps as he went to get it; it was pleated and rather heavy, but brocaded with silk. He helped Hux into it, his fingers brushing over Hux’s slender shoulders and hollow chest.

“Do you ever come here for pleasure?” Hux asked on a conversational tone, making him still.

“Pleasure, Mr. Hux?”

“To read at your leisure,” Hux said, and faced him. “You were always a bookish boy; I’m more of a practical mindset myself. Please, feel free to visit my library whenever you wish, and to borrow as many books as you please. I trust that you’ll handle them gently, and enjoy them immensely.”

Kylo’s eyes jumped over his features; he unable to decide whether Hux was teasing him. “Thank you for the offer,” he forced out.

“You’re welcome,” Hux said, and left him to try and make sense of their encounter.

Hux’s return changed everything in Stormfield Hall. It was no longer the still home Kylo had gotten to know, for agents, tenants, and visitors came a-knocking every two hours, seeking to speak with the lord. There was chatter and footsteps, laughter, hushed arguments. Hux kept changing his attire and even combed his hair in a different manner depending on his guest; Kylo caught glimpses of a hundred Huxes crossing his path and greeting him with a fleeting smile which was more in his eyes than on his lips.

The staff was busy: they’d opened up the dining room, chambers on the second storey, and most curiously of all, a place Mitaka referred to as Mr. Hux’s laboratory.

“Every nobleman needs a hobby,” he explained nervously when Kylo enquired about it. “He loves tinkering with inventions. Have you ever heard curious noises at night?”

“Yes, but not recently,” Kylo said, excited; would the mysteries be solved?

Mitaka leant close, as if to confide him. “That’s the water in the pipes,” he whispered. “He designed
them by hand.”

“It’s not the water,” Kylo muttered to himself.

For her part, Millicent enjoyed the change; she kept running to the windows to spy on the new guests, trying to guess who would be next, and rushing to Hux when they left to ask what was their business. Kylo was hurt, at first; he was convinced Millicent wouldn’t be so erratic if he hadn’t offended her—although she betrayed no misgiving about him, being just as eager as enthusiastic as before, whenever he managed to keep her attention. That was the trick: making the lessons so enthralling Millicent wouldn’t even register the bell ring.

His plan meant a return to the garden—the magpie, the malevolent trees and his perplexing nightmare be damned. He was anxious, for Millicent was wearing the same white and gold dress she had had on in the dream, every bow, ribbon, button and lace detail where he remembered them, although he was sure he’d never seen this dress before—Millicent put it on in some unfounded hope that a very important visitor, a certain Captain the Lady Phasma Scyre would come. When Hux informed her that the Captain’s visit would be significantly delayed, by weeks, if not months, she kept it on with a singular stubbornness Kylo came to associate with the Huxes.

They were collecting butterflies in heavy glass jars, before the unforgiving winds of autumn would wither the flowers they favoured. It was a peaceful afternoon, the sunlight sweet and mellow, the leaves collecting on the ground making a soft path through the woods. Kylo never lost sight of Millicent, always worried for her. He couldn’t blame her for her brother’s mistakes, and his relation to Hux made her all the more precious. He wished Hux could see how happily she darted around with her little net, how she made whooping battle cries whenever she caught something. The Millicent her brother saw was a serene little girl seated by his dinner table, her wild curls smoothed by Unamo’s clever hands, the lively colour of the day fading from her cheeks. Kylo wished to drag Hux out of his smoke-filled study, to steal him from his important callers, bring him outside and make him join the hunt, see wind in his hair and in his eyes, merriment.

“I’m going back,” Unamo announced. “I’m getting tired.”

“From standing so much?” Kylo teased. Unamo followed Millicent around with a wary gaze.

“Couldn’t sleep. I want coffee,” she complained. Kylo handed her the webs, which she took wordlessly.

“Leave some of that coffee; we’ll join you shortly.”

“I’m drinking it all,” she said. Kylo watched her leave on unsure legs; was it Millicent keeping her up, or something else? The breeze caught in her light cloak, making it look like the flapping wings of a giant bird—a bad omen; but surely, he was imagining things.

“Mr. Ren, Mr. Ren, look!” Millicent called. Clutching his jar of butterflies to his chest, he joined her; she was pointing at the ground, grinning widely.

“A fairy ring!” Kylo said, laughing briskly. How curious it looked: unassuming white mushrooms in a perfect circle, sucking on the dead leaves in the shadow of birch trees. He reached out with a foot to nudge at them.

“Don’t touch it!” Millicent cried. “The fairy king will take you away!”

“Will he make me dance until I go mad or drop dead?” Kylo asked, jesting, but Millicent was oddly serious in her reply.
“He’ll make you miserable.”

“Huh.” Kylo kicked at a mushroom without much force; nothing happened, but Millicent flinched. Kylo knew he should leave it; but they were out here on a lesson, and there was something to teach.

He’d grown to scorn Luke’s methods: leaving him in the dark left him defenseless; but when he was a child, his ignorance kept him safe under the watch of his uncle the vicar-witch. Millicent had been targeted before; an accident could happen again. Being fanciful would make Millicent unsuspecting of the unnatural—he himself trusted a talking magpie to grant his wishes, after all.

“Nothing to fear,” he announced. “Fairy rings are ordinary things; they can’t harm you, see?” With that, he leapt into it.

Millicent screamed and dropped the jar she was holding. From inside the ring, Kylo watched it hit the ground; and he saw that the butterflies had turned to moths. His lips parted for a warning, gaze jumping back to Millicent’s face, afraid what he’d see—but she was just a terrified little girl, surrounded by a twilight-world, the trees black and the sky orange.

Kylo broke free of the circle, and gathered her up in his arms. A quick glance at the jar: inside, there were just little white butterflies, and the glass reflected daylight. Millicent was crying, and he rocked her like she was his own daughter, not a baroness; who cared about rank or manners, when a child was in distress?

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” he whispered into her hair. “I didn’t mean to frighten you, it’s all right, we’re all right.”

“Never do it again,” Millicent hiccuped, and punched his shoulder.

“I won’t,” he promised, and walked away from the fairy ring as quickly as his legs would carry him, without making it seem like he was fleeing. His heart was beating rapidly; he prayed Millicent couldn’t feel it, and that she didn’t notice how pale his cheeks probably were. “I escaped in one piece; it was a close call, but we lived, didn’t we? Hush, hush! You know what keeps away evil fairies, huh?”

“What?” Millicent sobbed.

“Coffee,” he whispered, as if he was sharing a well-kept secret. “With lots of milk and sugar, I’ve heard.”

Millicent laughed weakly, and he blessed his stars for it. He carried her back into the house safely; his heartbeat calmed, and her tears stopped.

“My-my, what happened?” Mrs. Mitaka cooed when she saw them entering the kitchen. Unamo was sleeping by the hearth, gently snoring while cradling an empty cup in her hand.

“I fell,” Millicent said as Kylo lowered her onto the table. She wiped at her puffy face; Kylo produced his handkerchief and handed it over.

“Oh no! Where does it hurt, Miss Millicent?”

Millicent dabbed at her eyes and said, “It doesn’t hurt, I just got scared. I slipped on a slope; I was afraid I’d roll down and wouldn’t be able to stop!”

“Aw, dear,” Mrs. Mitaka said. “Did Mr. Ren catch you?”
“Yes, he did,” Millicent said, nodding. Kylo got the kettle of coffee from the stove, still warm, feeling pleasantly surprised how good Millicent was at lying; and threatened by the truth they were concealing.

He decided against asking Millicent what she saw, if anything; he felt like recalling the memory of the fairy ring would make it more real and, therefore, more dangerous. They kept indoors for the rest of the day, and it was easy to distract Millicent with some well-deserved Latin lessons; the tasks were just a bit over her level, making her more focused and determined to learn.

Hux didn’t join them for dinner; Mitaka complained he was busy with some new invention, making terrible noise and an awful lot of smoke. Kylo was picking at his food, having lost the appetite which had made him famous with the staff. His stomach was twisted with worry; if only he could warn the others to watch out without sounding like a lunatic! He could only tell Unamo that Millicent was upset, and he had asked her to treat the little girl with special care.

He didn’t know what he was expecting to happen until it happened. He stayed up late, wanting to be the eyes and the ears of Stormfield. Everything was still, disturbingly so. He sat on the bed fully dressed, cross-legged, never touching the beautiful books he had gotten from Hux’s library waiting on his nightstand. His senses were so sharpened that every passing shadow and soft sound jarred him; he let his candle burn down, and as the flame flicked out, he heard it.

The fingers.

The creaking.

He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment and exhaled slowly. He got to his feet. This was it; a ghost, a sleepwalker, or water. Now he’d know. What he’d do with that knowledge, he had no idea.

He approached the door, and didn’t hesitate long in opening it. It had been so long since he had heard the hauntings he was afraid he’d miss the solution to the mystery if he waited a second longer. The knob was cold and screeched as he turned it, too loud in the numb night. He stepped out, one foot over the threshold, one foot planted in the safety of his room; he blinked a few times, letting his eyes adjust to the moonshine pouring in from the arched windows. No movement; no sounds. Not at first.

He closed the door behind him, and felt a shiver creep up his spine. He looked around, and heard himself swallow around the fear gripping his throat. And then: the brush of fingers. He gazed into the shimmering darkness.

What he saw wasn’t to be seen. He could make out no shape or colour, no outline; yet he knew what was there, with a hideous certainty which made him gasp — it was the ghost of Maratelle Hux. Maratelle in the wych elm: she was pierced through with thorns and sharp branches, held up in the air; her limp hand brushed the walls as the tree grew and grew, filling the corridor and pushing the mounted body forward.

Kylo pressed his back to the door, his shaking hand gripping the knob. He forced himself to look the other way; the corridor was just as unassuming as any day. He turned back, only to recoil so suddenly that he hit his head; Maratelle was directly in front of him, her eyes open wide and her mouth wider. The noise she made was that choked-off half-sob Kylo heard the first night he spent here, a cry stuck in her punctured lungs. The tree pulled her back as she clawed at Kylo, barely missing his throat. Her fingers were twisted like the branches of the wych elm.

“Go away,” Kylo hissed, staring into her round eyes while every muscle in his taut body screamed to flee. “Go away; you were never here.”
It was the wrong thing to say. Her wheezing shriek made her jaw loose, hanging hideously as her eyes flashed, white and pale; from below, Kylo heard a loud clamour, and a moment later, he registered where the noise was coming from: the laboratory.

“Hux!” he cried. Maratelle’s face changed at that name — for a second, she looked human: young; pretty; afraid. Kylo had no other choice; he turned his back to her, and ran, the world around him blank.

He heard the branches clawing at the stone wall, a hundred hands trying to grab him. Let them try: Hux was in danger. He took the stairsteps by two, and never looked back. He was frenzied, but panic made him unafraid. He rushed through the abandoned corridor, and couldn’t help a whimper when he saw light: the treacherous light of blazing fire from under the door. Was it Maratelle’s doing? Could a mortal being stop it from consuming everything? He had to try; he rammed at the door with his shoulder, but it wouldn’t yield. He throw his full body against it; nothing. The hinges, his frenzied mind finally supplied; he kicked at them, and they broke under his attack. The door fell with an echoing bang, revealing the inferno within.

It was a relatively small inferno. Much smaller than he would expect from a vengeful ghost, and Hux was halfway through smothering it with a heavy curtain.

“Help me!” he shouted when he saw Kylo, but he didn’t sound alarmed; judging by his expression, Kylo would think him almost bemused, if a tad annoyed. He peeked over his shoulder, looking at the corridor. No ghost there to marvel at the destruction she brought forth. “Now, if you please,” Hux snapped.

Kylo shook his head to regain his senses and rushed to Hux’s aid; they stomped out the fire in a minute. A gaslamp was still burning, illuminating strange sets of glass utensils, copper-covered machines, books and tubes, and the scorching remnants of Hux’s writing desk.

“For shame,” Hux tutted. “I loved this desk.” He put his hands over his hips and stared at it with a morose expression. For his part, Kylo was doubled over, panting and gripping his knees, feeling like he might be sick any minute.

“What happened?” he demanded, his own voice sounding a mile off.

“Will you laugh at me if I tell you that I was actually experimenting with water?”

“Water,” Kylo muttered, peering at the corridor again. No sound, no movement—not even servants rushing to check on their lord; was he dreaming?

“A hydraulic pump,” Hux sighed, leaning against the blackened desk. “Steampowered. The best of both methods—well, the worst, but I am certainly getting somewhere. I think I might’ve just invented a bomb.” He pulled a face at the idea.

“Why is no-one coming?” Kylo heaved.

“Oh, are we expecting company?”

“I heard a loud bang.”

Hux looked him over, head tilted. He must’ve been wretched and disarrayed, but that was the least of his worries at the moment. “Judged by your attire, you were staying up, like me; everyone else is fast asleep, as they should be.” Hux’s voice dropped lower when he asked, “What’s keeping you up?”

Your dear Mama.
“I was reading,” Kylo gritted.

“Good! What about?”

“How about we take this conversation someplace else?” Kylo proposed. He couldn’t bear to stay in the laboratory; he feared a second explosion might happen, and he kept eyeing the shiny equipments, expecting to spot Maratelle’s reflection in them.

“Let me fetch my coat,” Hux said, and sauntered to a bulky wardrobe. He was dressed down to his shirtsleeves, wearing goggles pushed up to his forehead and heavy leather gloves. Kylo had to admit he looked endearing—there were even some specks of ash over his cheeks, and Kylo’s fingers itched to brush them away. They had to hurry and get to safety; what would happen after was impossible to tell. Should he tell Hux about the encounter? Were they about to face the ghost together? What then?

His mind raced as they left the room behind. Hux chuckled at the sight of the ruined door, but Kylo couldn’t share his mirth. He kept close, sheltering him from shadows.

“So, what were you reading?” Hux asked, hushed, heading for the wide staircase. Kylo inspected it, ready to jump at the slightest movement.

“A ghost story,” he murmured.

“Oh, no wonder you’re in a strange mood.”

The wooden steps creaked under Hux’s slight weight, and his dead ancestors watched him grip the railing.

“Do you believe in ghosts?” Kylo asked.

“I know it’s fashionable to do so, but please, don’t take me for an idiot,” Hux said. He was too slow; Kylo instinctively put a hand on the small of his back to help him. He expected to touch soft cloth, but his fingers brushed over something rigid and solid. By all what’s holy, he thought, is Mr. Hux wearing a corset?

“I don’t think you’re an idiot,” he forced out.

Hux scoffed. “Well, thank you. I think it’s common sense not to waste money on the humbuggery of some dilettante calling themselves a psychic. Between ourselves, the ones who fall for them deserve to be cheated.”

Kylo peered into the darkness, and wished he could think what he had seen to be a tasteless parlour trick. “What would you do if you met a ghost?”

“I’d eat my hat.”

“If you really met one.”

“I’d eat my hat with salt and pepper and a slice of pickle.”

Kylo didn’t mean to laugh; it sounded sacrilegious echoing in the silent night. Hux gave him a forgiving smile, mischief in his eyes. They both stopped, facing each other. Hux parted his lips to say something, but then noticed a strange light flickering and turned towards it. Kylo stepped up to shield him with his body; but it was not a spectre, just sleepy little Mitaka in his nightcap. He was holding a candle, squinting at them.
“Did something happen, sir?” he asked gruffly.

“I had a minor lab accident; cleanup can wait until the morning,” Hux assured him. Kylo eyed the corridor in the meantime; it was dull and dark, and Mitaka didn’t look like someone who just encountered his deceased mistress.

“Are you hurt, sir?” he mumbled, and Kylo remembered to drop his hand from Hux’s back. It didn’t go unnoticed; Mitaka gave him a pointed look that would’ve made Kylo flush, hadn’t his blood turned to ice during the night.

“I am quite all right, thank you; you may go back to sleep, Dopheld.”

Mitaka muttered something vaguely polite and left them. Kylo looked after the departing light. This corridor was the scene of horrors just some ten minutes ago; in the soft glow of the candle, he could only see its beauty. Hux made an impatient gesture, and he fell into step without thinking, following him around in the dark; but he didn’t touch him again.

“Sometimes I feel sorry for my staff,” Hux chatted. “I retire late, but I’m an early riser: it must be challenging to keep up with me. Aided with enough pots of coffee, I don’t need more than four or three hours of sleep.”

“That can’t be healthy,” Kylo said.

“Believe me, I have consulted with my physician. This way.”

Kylo didn’t ask where they were headed—it didn’t matter. He couldn’t see himself bidding good night and leaving Hux all alone in the dark. He followed him to an impressive set of doors, and as Hux fumbled for his keys, he kept peering back over his shoulder. Goosebumps and shivers prickled his skin, and he found it hard to swallow. Was it the ghost? Was it just nervousness? His mind was assaulted by flashing memories of the encounter—did it really happen? But how could he imagine such things, wide awake?

“Welcome to my humble quarters,” Hux said, and turned on a solitary gaslamp. They were in a sitting room of sorts, which opened to a spacious bedroom. The walls were painted, not covered with wallpaper—golden glides were their only decorations, and a single painting showing a rainy landscape. Kylo spotted an ice-blue couch, several armchairs, a telescope, a globe, and busts of statesmen with flower arrangements on the mantelpiece—it was all very pleasing, but decidedly subdued.

“Your laboratory looks more lived-in,” he decided to comment instead of a bland ‘how nice;’ it seemed to please Hux, for he looked at him again in that strange, amused way.

“I spend most of my time there. The bedroom is a bit more comfortable.”

Kylo hummed as he noticed notes spread over the table haphazardly; he never took Hux to be...messy. It was not just the paper: the more he looked, the more he noticed chaos creeping in: a candleholder abandoned on the floor, a half-finished cup of tea; nothing extraordinary, just enough to suggest a preoccupied mind.

“Would it please you if I showed it to you?” Hux asked, voice dropped. Kylo nodded without thinking about it. Hux led the way to the bedroom; the Antarctic colour-theme continued: it was a world waiting to be explored. The large bed with an abundance of snow-soft pillows was the only thing reflecting the sort of indulgence Kylo expected. It seemed Hux didn’t care for luxury where no one was there to see it. He took off his goggles and peeled off the gloves, clearly annoyed to
discover that he was still wearing them, and tossed them to a chair next to his little copper tub.

“It’s a shame you don’t really dwell in here,” Kylo said, and dared to add, “It’s wasted on you.”

“Just because I don’t sleep much doesn’t mean my bed is cold, Mr. Ren,” Hux said. Kylo furrowed his brows. Could Mr. Hux be possibly suggesting— But why would he casually mention such a— Was it an—?

Hux shrugged off his coat and parted with his waistcoat, revealing something which made all of Kylo’s thoughts come to a screeching halt. It was a corset. It was an unassuming thing, hugging Hux’s slender waist; more practical than pretty, save for the silken ribbons. It wasn’t even laced very tightly.

“Could you help me take this off, please?” Hux asked him. Kylo reached out, but his mind was still numb. Was he undressing Mr. Hux, or was he merely assisting in getting rid of an uncomfortable piece of clothing? Was Hux getting ready to retire, or was he getting ready for—oh bugger. He couldn’t possibly ask him, could he? It would be a scandal, if Hux didn’t— And why would he? They were still rather distant, and he showed no indication— Could he have misinterpreted Kylo lingering close, touching the small of his back—approaching him in the night—the fear in his eyes—

He fumbled with the ribbons for too long. His big and clumsy hands felt unfit for such a delicate task. The humiliation of the situation made him feel lumbering, oafish, and he burned with his shame. It was a disgrace if Hux indeed proposed to get intimate; it was mortifying if he didn’t. Kylo wouldn’t play manservant, and wouldn’t be his lover either. He tugged at the ribbon, watching it come undone, wishing he could unmake Hux just as easily, make him shed his armour, not his clothes. How distant he looked as he stood there, hands resting on the back of his neck, waiting with his head hanging low. Kylo all but tore off his corset, and let it drop to the ground.

“Careful,” Hux said. “It wasn’t exactly inexpensive.”

“Why are you wearing a corset anyway?” Kylo demanded.

“It’s not a corset, it’s a posture stay,” Hux said sharply. “As the name indicates, it’s to support my posture. I got used to the ones which go with my dress uniform.” He turned to Kylo. He still had on his shirt and cravat; if he asked Kylo to undo those, he couldn’t say no.

“Good-night, Mr. Hux,” he said to escape temptation. For all that Hux’s face was waxy and unreadable, he didn’t look disappointed or taken aback; he didn’t look like he expected Kylo to stay, and it almost made him regret his abrupt goodbye; he could stay as a companion, he could sit with him and converse. He wanted that.

“Good-night, Mr. Ren. It’s getting late.”

Wasn’t it late before, Kylo wanted to ask. What changed?

“I’m taking my leave,” he announced idiotically, bowed, and turned on his heels.

“I’ll be looking through my drafts, I think,” Hux mused.

Is this why your bed isn’t cold, Kylo mused as he fled the quarters, because you stay in it to read? But it did not sound innocent, how Hux had said it earlier; and surely, a well-versed nobleman such as Mr. Hux would be aware of certain frivolous implications—? Or was it just his own wicked mind—the image of a frail collarbone, of a flashing ankle, of an easy smile—

He wanted to crack Hux’s skull open with his bare hands and see his thoughts for himself. He also
wanted to encounter a ghost on the way back to his chamber. He’d beg to be spirited away. This realm offered nothing but embarrassment and suffering.

He closed his door and barricaded it with his nightstand. He couldn’t tell which Hux he was attempting to keep out: Maratelle or Armitage. He peeled off his waistcoat and shirt hastily, all the while musing what it was like to be wearing a posture stay. One did need help with it, didn’t they? It didn’t mean that every corseted lady fell in love with their chambermaids—although it must’ve happened occasionally, but that probably had little to do with the corset—

“Hush, rambling mind,” he whispered, and wished he had a polite way to address a more pressing matter—pressing his trousers, to be exact, making it quite a challenge to get them off. He refused to acknowledge it; so in turn, it refused to go away. He crawled to bed, and gasped when he pulled the covers over himself, making them brush over his growing problem. He put his palm over it, trying to press it down; the sensation shot through him like a bolt of marvelous lighting. Oh, he shan’t—indulging the self in such pleasures led to the degradation of body and mind; he had never learnt much about carnal acts, but he’d learnt that much. He rolled to his side and lifted the cover up, squeezing his eyes shut as he let some cool air in. Let it be his punishment for allowing Hux to get close.

He woke up groggy and weary, even his bones feeling sore. He washed and dressed, and stomped down the stairs with some hazy ideas of coffee and exercise in mind; the portrait of Maratelle Hux made him stop. She still looked quite ready to crawl out of her painting—maybe that was exactly what she did at night. It was chilling how much she looked like little Millicent, except for her sharp nose and thin eyebrows. Kylo looked into her distant eyes, trying to see the soul behind it and understand why it lingered, and how it could be set free. He’d have to do it; the sooner, the better.

It promised to be a sunny day; maybe he could risk another visit to the wych elm without another disloyal friend from the past turning up. His thoughts drifted to Hux, and he continued his walk while trying to unravel his secrets, which seemed to be just as perplexing as the preternatural case of Lady Maratelle. What an impalpable night it was, how bewildering and unsettling. He should carry on like what happened with Hux was but a dream; keep his distance; focus his mind on his duties, both as a tutor and as a protector.

He walked into the kitchen, looking for his favourite cup to serve himself in stealth—he had no patience for the cheerfulness of Mrs. Mitaka this early in the morning; he could already hear her humming. He crept up to the stove on tiptoes. He was out of luck: the coffee was not ready yet. With a sigh, he turned to greet the cook, exchange pleasantries, and make vague suggestions about his most beloved morning drink; but the woman standing by the washing basin wasn’t Mrs. Mitaka at all. Kylo jumped, aghast.

“Good morning,” he called sharply. No response came. The kitchen woman continued humming a cheery, foreign song. She was quite tall, her ginger hair an elegant, weaved crown contrasting her plain dress. She was standing with her back to Kylo, going through the motion of washing dishes—but she had no plates or cups in her hand, just air.

“Good morning,” Kylo said again, and approached her, his blood running cold. He reached for her shoulder to turn her around; he touched nothing. He often had the sensation of being watched in the kitchen; now he realised that wasn’t the case—he didn’t feel eyes on him, just an overwhelming presence. This ghost moved like she belonged here. Gathering his courage, Kylo leaned forward so he could see her face. The kitchen woman turned to him.

She had no face.
Kylo couldn’t quite comprehend what he was seeing; her features seemed misremembered, uncertain, as if being reconstructed and then immediately forgotten. She looked straight through Kylo, her eyes green, blue, grey, green again, and then she was eyeless and toothless and blank.

Kylo ran.

Running seemed to be working.

His coat flapped behind him as he raced through the awakening garden. Maybe he shouldn’t stop, not until he reached Millcote on foot; then he should get on the post coach, and head back to Lowood, and go to his little room he used to share with three other teachers, climb under his warped bed, and stay there forever.

It was a fine plan; but it would’ve made him a coward.

“Up and early and in a hurry,” Rodion called after him; he turned to the gardener, bewildered. Rodion grinned at him and tipped his straw hat. He had a rusty old wheelbarrow with him, filled with dry leaves and weeds and fungi.

“The mushrooms,” Kylo said, blinking at the contents of the wheelbarrow. “Of course. It’s all the mushrooms’ fault.”

Rodion rubbed his nose. “Ate something bad? Better run, then.”

Kylo shook his head and turned around. The garden was dewy, a soft mist pouring over a hundred flowers, trees beckoning in the distance. Kylo pointed at them. “There was a fairy ring,” he said. “There, by the birch trees. Have you seen it this morning?”

Rodion shrugged. “Nah. Just coming from there.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yessir,” Rodion said, starting to take offense. “My memory is quite fine, thank you very much.”

“Thank you,” Kylo muttered, and stumbled forward, keeping his gaze on the birch trees; they had dark spots on their white crusts, like eyes looking back at him.

“You didn’t eat any funny mushrooms, did you, Mr. Ren?” Rodion shouted, and laughed when Kylo didn’t even answer. He’d just have to find the fairy ring—yesterday, he must’ve opened up a door for the spirits; he just has to close it, and they’d be reduced to cold spots and whispers again, giving Kylo a better chance to exorcise them.

Two ghosts, and how different: appearing in the dead of the night or with the first rays of sunlight, living through memories or stuck repeating their last, dreadful moments. He’ll make sense of this, and he will— he will have to work his magic. Luke’s advice didn’t save him. He jumped into that ring loudly denying its powers: and yet, he got trapped.

He reached the birch trees. Rodion was right: there was nothing to see. He turned over leaves, crouched down and raked his fingers over the grass. The fairy ring was gone. He remained there for a while, hugging his knees and staring into nothing. A decision was made: he would stop trembling and waiting for unearthly things to come haunt him. He would hunt, and chase.

He recalled his mother’s conjuring and Luke healing him; from what he’d seen, every herb and spell was just an aid — the magic was within. This implied that he could find his own means to amplify his witchcraft. He examined his hands, trying to convince himself that they could work powerful
wonders. With determination, he spat into his palms, and rubbed them together; then he slammed his hands down three times where the centre of the fairy ring used to be.

“You won’t threaten me,” he whispered. “I’m Kylo Ren, and I defy your power; my own serves me well. I’m no bird and no net can contain me—I’m a free human being with an independent will.”

He waited. A few seconds passed, and he began to wonder what he was doing there—crouched down in the grass, hitting the earth with spit-wet palms, murmuring nonsense; he was a learned man, a teacher. He believed in logic and—and that was the problem. He’d have to let go of all of that.

“I’m no bird,” he said, voice ringing clearer. “I’m stronger; I’m a witch; I’m choosing to be that, like my mother, like my uncle. Magpie, magpie, do you hear me?”

Prove yourself, a voice said; little Ben’s voice, but it was not spoken aloud—it rang in his mind, soft as a thought.

“How do you want me to prove myself?” he challenged, as he straightened up. He couldn’t see the magpie; only the trees were watching him.

Do you think yourself match for a bird? the voice asked, bored, disgusted. Then fly.

“Oh, I can fly,” Kylo bragged, thinking That’s not just impossible but utterly ridiculous. Should he flap around with his arms? Should he—oh god, should he climb a tree and throw himself down? Fly, fly, fly.

How now, Kylo thought, staring down at his polished shoes. I just have to let go of the ground, don’t I? Goodbye, Earth; gravity, farewell — you no longer bind me; I willed it so, so this is how it is.

He felt something shift, and gasped as he noticed that his feet were no longer touching the grass; his own disbelief and surprise dropped him back to the ground, and dropped him hard. He didn’t mind the pain; he got up immediately.

“I’m a Skywalker,” he said, and added, “Nomen est omnis.”

He pinned his gaze skywards, not letting the learnt rules about reality pull him down again. Let’s just take a step, he told himself. Stroll through the ether. You saw your mother walking between dreams; you saw your uncle heal, and kindle flames; this power is unlimited. Use it as you will.

“Let us go for a walk in the sky,” he said, coat whirling around and hair fanning out. He made the motion of climbing a spiraling stairway, and he hovered, hands decidedly in his pockets. Another step and another, bringing himself higher, closer to the sun. He wouldn’t repeat Icarus’ mistake: he stopped at the level of the crown of the birch trees, the bright leaves shielding him. His smile threatened to slice his face in half.

He shifted his weight, and his magic held him firmly in the air. This was a self-made miracle, a demonstration of his dormant power. He was above the world, elevated to his rightful position. Stormfield Hall was dwarfed, along with its dark mysteries. What could threaten him like this? The wind ruffling his hair and tugging at his coat got stronger, but he felt no menace behind it—not until he heard the magpie calling. He peered up, where the leaves opened up to a greying sky; seven—seven magpies.

He swallowed and curled his fingers into fists, following the erratic patterns they drew with his eyes. The flap of their wings sounded like it was brushing his skull from the inside.
“Not bad for the first try, isn’t that right?” he shouted over the ghastly noise. “What do you think, you villains? Do you think you can hurt a witch?”

“Look down,” the magpies said, their voice fading in discord. “We already did.”

He squinted, unbelieving, but his heart skipped a beat. Slowly, he averted his gaze, and what he saw made his blood run cold. He was faced with himself, lying down there, his limbs in an unnatural angle and his throat crushed. He cried out, and began to fall with such force and speed as if he was being pushed; he stopped at the last inch, hovering directly above his own dead body, staring into his foggy eyes. Then the illusion dispersed; there was just dewy grass, and something keeping him in place which was no longer his own bragging belief.

“You’re weak and foolish; a teacher who needs to be taught,” the magpies said, and he hit the ground so hard he lost consciousness.

Chapter End Notes

_Nomen est omnis_, Latin: the name says it all

**Content warning:** manipulation / ghost content with some minor body horror going on / creepy flora and fauna / period-typical misconceptions about masturbation / some second-hand embarrassment / avert your innocent gazes ankles are being seen / Kylo has visions about the death of everybody you love

My warmest regards to Gefionne for betaing and Anna for proofreading *bows with flourish*

I've made a playlist for the AU with the songs I listen on a loop while writing until I'm driven to madness

Find me lurking on tumblr: longstoryshortikilledhim // there's a moodboard for the chapter
Fragments of sunlight scratched Kylo’s eyes as he blinked them open. He was gazing at the blazing crown of birch trees spreading skywards. The gravity of his failure weighed on him: once again and maybe forever, the heavens seemed unreachable.

“Good morning, Mr. Ren,” a faint voice said, a conspiring whisper. His head shot up—it was just little Millicent, sitting in the grass in her yellow dress, so close Kylo briefly wondered how he didn't notice her earlier.

“Good morning,” he croaked. “Please excuse my current position.”

“It's quite all right,” Millicent assured him gently. “I too love to sneak out to the garden from time to time to take a nap; soak up the sunlight.” She turned her pale face up and allowed the early glow to kiss her good morning, as if to demonstrate.

Kylo didn’t find it in him to object that it was not what he was doing out here; that the truth was threatening and sinister.

“May I ask what time is it?”

“Time for our class, I believe,” Millicent said. Kylo covered his face in embarrassment.

“I’m most dreadfully sorry.” He made to sit up just as Millicent lay down, curling up on the grass with a series of little wiggles. So it was decided: they were to remain here. Leaning back on his elbows, Kylo glanced in the direction of Stormfield Hall: would he dare to go back, collect his equipment as if nothing have happened, proceed and pretend that the world was still an ordinary place? That was the British way, the plan of action whenever something unexpected happened—but he was American: landless, nameless, but he was. He might have spent the majority of his life on this sceptred isle, but he refused to submit to its rule.

“Look at poor Nines,” Millicent said, and Kylo followed her pointing finger. Nines was leaning out of the laboratory’s window: just a little dot of a man in the distance, busily dusting the scorched drapes. Puffy clouds of dust and ash rolled off them, dispersing in the air.

“There was a fire,” Kylo said slowly.

“Oh—not the first time, and won’t be the last.”

“Did it wake you up?”

“No,” Millicent rolled onto her stomach and started picking at the grass. “I had the most delightful dream: I was different animals, always changing—how much fun I was having! I was a butterfly, then a rat, a weasel, a cat; but Armitage came to me, and he was so upset—he wished me to be human again. I woke filled with sorrow.” She tossed the shreds of grass to the wind. “I went to his
room; I was being silly—it was but a dream; but I wished to see him and find reassurance in his presence. The door was locked."

"Maybe he doesn’t want to be disturbed," Kylo said hastily, not wanting to think too much about what Hux might be up to behind closed doors. Millicent hummed and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear; Kylo noticed that her hair wasn’t done up—no bows, no curls. Surely, Unamo wouldn’t allow her to venture outside like this. "Where’s Mademoiselle Unamo?" he asked.

"Oh, I’m not quite sure," Millicent said, evasive.

"Miss Millicent," Kylo scolded her, "you mustn’t run around all disarrayed, and without your nurse."

Millicent looked at him directly and asked the most frightening question children could ask: "Why?"

"Because it’s a big world, and you’re but a little girl," Kylo said. She was, in fact, petite, and seemed even smaller curled up like this. She was not like her willowy brother at all. He had noticed earlier that Millicent had Maratelle’s frame and features, but what was more important: Hux didn’t; yet he bore a striking resemblance to the kitchen woman in built, height, hair colour and what he could make out of her face. It suggested yet another mystery which was not supernatural, but all too human: that Hux was indeed a bastard, as the rumours had it, and Millicent was merely his half-sister.

He felt he should’ve faced this realisation earlier; it seemed so self-evident. But everybody around him was in denial—understandably; Hux had no claim for the riches he possessed if he were not a legitimate son; of course he’d protect his position, whatever it took. Kylo wondered whether he even knew the truth: he vaguely recalled Hux referring to Maratelle as “Mother.” Was she in life as she was in death? What was that like, growing up with her?

"I’m not afraid of anything," Millicent said.

"Not even of darkness?" Kylo asked, and Millicent’s shoulders dropped.

"I might be somewhat wary of that,” she confessed with a defensive edge, “but Armitage has explained it to me: we fear the unknown, and our imagination can paint vivid horrors upon the… the…’canvas of emptiness,’ I think he called it. There is a perfectly logical explanation for why we find the night so horrid. It’s a time when we’re vulnerable. All living things cower, except for nocturnal animals; oh, he can explain it so much better, listen to me rambling.” She let out a small sigh. “I remember his words and find solace in them. He’d sit by my bed when I was little and afraid.”

"And your mother?" Kylo asked before he could help himself. Millicent hung her head, so her wild hair was covering her face again; Kylo couldn’t see what emotions lit up her eyes, but before he could apologise for his bluntness, Millicent spoke, voice low.

"She used to read me stories. I often found them upsetting, but I think all children’s tales are like that, aren’t they? Just a little bit, well, dismaying—to warn us from straying away. To warn of the world that is too big for our little hearts to take in without breaking.”

"When was the last time you saw your mother?" Kylo asked softly, vowing it’d be his last cruel question to a grieving orphan. Millicent tugged at her hair rather violently, and Kylo saw her frown.

"The day she died,” she said briskly. “We went out for a walk.”

“Did you——” He bit his tongue.
“Did I what?” Millicent growled. The question was uncharacteristically brusque compared to her usual eloquent way of talking, and sloppy in articulation, almost an animal noise. Kylo saw how taut her shoulders were, and knew that this time he had really upset her.

“I wanted to ask whether you know what happened to her, but I realise it would be rude and invasive; therefore, I offer my apologies.”

Millicent looked at him, eyes suspiciously wet, and her voice barely a tremble when she said, “I just really miss her.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” Kylo said, defeated. Millicent shook her shaggy head and rubbed at her nose before Kylo could offer her his handkerchief.

“Let’s go inside,” Millicent said. “It’s chilly.”

* * *

Mother and daughter went out for a walk, and only one of them returned. The question was, then: whom, or what, did they meet on the short walk to the wych elm tree? The next question, never to be asked but still to be answered: had Millicent witnessed what happened to Maratelle?

Millicent was in an easy mood by elevenses, her geometry lesson having lifted her spirits. She was busily drawing concave polygons in the air with her fingers while munching on a cucumber sandwich. Unamo was doing a very nice job of looking impressed, although Millicent’s French vocabulary was sorely lacking a number of key words to explain what exactly was she attempting to illustrate; the resulting cheerful confusion provided Kylo with the perfect opportunity to sneak out with his cup of coffee.

He refused to give up his investigation, but the magpie’s victory and the unpleasant conversation with Millicent in the morning reminded him to be mindful of whom he might agitate, what acquaintance or inhuman creature. He headed for the stables, whistling on the way there; he figured there’d be no love lost between him and Thanisson, should he overstep his boundaries. It was a cloudless day, however algid: Thanisson would probably take Finalizadora out to the fields soon. However, when Kylo spotted him, he wasn’t accompanied by a horse, but a black goat he was ushering inside.

“What’s that?” Kylo asked, pointing his cup at it.

“A goat,” Thanisson said flatly. Kylo leant against the brick wall of the stables and regarded the unbecoming animal. It had comically large ears.

“Since when do we have a goat?”

“We have had him for three years now,” Thanisson said. Sensing that its master’s attention was divided, the goat wandered off to a promising patch of lush grass.

“Why do we have a goat?” Kylo enquired as Thanisson looked through his pockets. Absurdly, he produced a handful of lettuce leaves and offered them to the goat. It seemed to weigh its options, then continued grazing the grass. “I suppose they give milk,” Kylo went on with his attempt at small talk. Thanisson scoffed.
“He’s accompanying Finalizadora so she doesn’t feel lonely.”

“I didn’t know animals had...pets,” Kylo said.

“What do you want from me, Mr. Ren?” Thanisson asked, tucking the lettuce back into his waistcoat’s pocket. “State your business; as you can see, I’m quite busy.”

“I wanted to ask you what you know of ghosts.”

“Ghosts!” Thanisson exclaimed. “What, you came out here just to talk nonsense? What do you take me for? Some dim-witted village boy?”

“I heard rumours in Millcote that the Lady Maratelle’s ghost haunts the Hall,” Kylo said, feigning casual curiosity in the face of Thanisson’s outrage. Thanisson grit his teeth.

“They are saying what now? Honestly! Some people have no shame.” He shot a pointed look at Kylo. “It’s a disgrace, that’s what it is. To say such things—to make a private tragedy into a public sensation!”

“How did she die, if I may ask?” Kylo asked nonchalantly, sipping on his coffee. Thanisson crossed his arms in front of his chest.

“You may ask, but I might decline to answer. It was a gruesome accident; disturbing as it was—no need to make it into some distasteful penny dreadful. I can’t believe it; the audacity of those Millcote folk!”

His heavy Northern accent got stronger when he was fretting; it was almost charming.

“I heard something about a wych elm,” Kylo said, trying to conceal his bemusement with indifference.

“Have you seen that tree?” Thanisson gesticulated eastward. “It’s more thorn and rot than tree! How could she be put in it? It should be cut down, but Mr. Hux wants to keep it. It was a stag, I’m telling you; I saw the marks on the dress, how it was…” He took a wavering breath. “The wounds.”

“I’m sorry you had to see it,” Kylo said.

Thanisson waved it away. “No, you aren’t! You’re just some tattletale like the rest of them, Mr. Ren. Away with you, and let me work. If I hear one word—one word!—of our conversation back from someone else, I’m telling Mr. Hux about your loose tongue!”

An image flashed before Kylo’s eyes involving Mr. Hux, himself, and his tongue; the lewd vision of a French kiss made him turn his back in wordless shame, and he didn’t even mind hearing Thanisson’s condescending little chuckle.

He was finished with Millicent’s lessons earlier than usual and withdrew to his room. He got his papers and charcoals, settled on the chaise lounge, and attempted to occupy his mind with drawing; it had been a while since he had found time to do it, as he preferred to finish his pictures in one sitting.

He was dreading the night; if Maratelle comes, he’ll have to be prepared. His magic might have failed him this morning, daring the magpie, but now he knew his powers were strong enough to rely on. He wouldn’t be completely defenseless facing her, and every encounter brought him closer to a solution.

He tried to catch her likeness, but he found it impossible, each portrait ending up curled into a ball
and tossed to the wall. He changed the subject of his attention and attempted to draft the kitchen woman. It was a success by the second try; he caught a sense of her shifting features, of her undetermined face, her braids and the crisp collar of her dress. He was searching for the perfect angle of her shoulders—how they arched when she turned—when he heard a polite knock on the door.

“Who is it?” he called, and shot a wary glance at the window. The sun was hanging low like a ripe fruit. Dusk had just began to spread; he was safe.

“It’s me, Mr. Ren,” Mitaka said. “Can I come in?”

“Please,” Kylo said, turning the paper face-down and flinching to imagine how messed-up his bold lines would be. Mitaka entered, eyes fixed on the ground and still holding the knob, he made his announcement.

“Mr. Hux would be delighted if you and your pupil would take tea with him in the drawing-room. He has been so much engaged all day that he could not ask to see you before.”

“Oh,” Kylo said after a beat. “Gladly.”

Mitaka glanced up and added, “You might want to put on something nice.”

“What’s wrong with this?” Kylo scoffed. He was dressed mostly in grey and black, as he preferred, and he had on his favourite coat: time had chewed on it and spat it out, but it was still perfectly functional.

“It is always a good idea to dress for the occasion,” Mitaka said, and scurried away.

Kylo got to his feet, uttering something quite nasty, and put the drawing away. He opened his wardrobe and looked through his meager options. He’s been planning to visit a tailor, but didn’t quite find the time between his job, the hauntings, and his best friend returning from the dead.

He exchanged the heavy wool coat for a light frock coat and put on a dark linen cravat. There, now he was presentable. He considered allowing himself the vanity of brushing his hair for the third time that day, but decided against it and ruffled up his perfect locks instead, so they looked tempest-tossed. He was afraid Hux might mock him if he indeed made an effort to look handsome. He found himself nervous about meeting him again after the strange night of the laboratory fire. He could still recall the touch of the silk ribbons of that curious corset, how it revealed Hux’s frame as it dropped to the ground. How infuriatingly obvious everything seemed for a fleeting second, before all crumbled to obscurity. It was very likely Hux would pretend nothing embarrassing had happened; Kylo was worried he’d not only dismiss the awkwardness what occurred in the bedroom, but the shared smiles from before.

He found Mitaka waiting with a candle, a pout fixed on his mouth.

“I’m afraid this won’t do,” he said. “Don’t you have silk?”

“That’s reserved for special occasions,” Kylo objected.

“I believe Mr. Hux would want you to look your best if you’re to accompany him this evening,” Mitaka said smoothly. Kylo paled. How could he explain that Mitaka was misinterpreting what he’d seen, that he and Hux weren’t intimate, and that Hux didn’t care how he looked? He found it easier to hold his breath and put on the silk cravat.

He was led to the hall, where he collected Millicent. She was rather excited; there was a spring in her steps as Kylo escorted her to the drawing-room. She halted before they entered and smoothed down
her skirt, then nodded to Kylo to lift the curtain that separated the drawing-room from the diner.

Two candelabra stood on a small table and two on the mantelpiece; a brilliant fire was lit, basking the cozy enclave in glory. Hux sat half-reclined on a couch; he appeared to be in a good mood as he greeted his sister, who hurried to him.

“I haven’t seen you all day,” she complained.

“I had exceedingly important guests,” Hux explained. “I’m afraid our splendid Arkanis had been flooded yet again. I’ve discussed my inventions with the good gentlemen to soothe their worry: we can install water pumps and build canals.” Millicent must have made a face, for Hux added, “Pay attention to these matters, Millicent; in case of my untimely death, you will soon inherit the lands.”

“Your untimely death!” Millicent exclaimed. “Why, I forbid you from dying!”

“My darling little canary,” Hux said, and pulled her into his lap. Millicent clung to his neck and buried her face in his chest. Hux looked over her little head at Kylo and Mitaka, who were still lingering by the entrance. “May Mr. Ren be seated,” he announced.

“You’re scaring her with this sort of talk,” Kylo warned as he sat down in a temptingly snug armchair near the fire. The velvet cushions were warm and soft, as expected, and Kylo couldn’t help but sacrifice his good posture for the sake of fully relishing their comfort.

“I must prepare her for the future,” Hux said as he caressed her hair. “Besides, I do not recall requesting advice on how she is to be brought up.”

“Why are you employing me, then?” Kylo asked with a bow arched.

Hux’s mouth curled into a smile. “Clever” was all he said, and then Millicent pulled back. She gently tapped his shoulder to get his attention.

“What is it, sweet sister? Still upset? I’m so sorry. I merely wished to remind you of your duties as baroness.”

Millicent frowned. “As if I could ever forget them.”

“Hah!” Hux gasped, and looked at Kylo with playful humour. “I didn’t upset her; I angered her! That’s quite dangerous, isn’t it, pet?”

Millicent nodded, clearly pleased with herself. She sat over Hux’s knees like it was her rightful throne.

“I think I know just the thing how to make up for my intolerable mistake,” Hux said. He turned to Mitaka, who was fussing with the tea set. “Dopheld, could you please fetch the parcels after the serving?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Parcels!” Millicent said, jumping a little. Hux put a supporting hand between her shoulders, so she wouldn’t fall back.

“I wouldn’t dare to return if I wasn’t laden with gifts, would I? It took a while—it was custom-made, you see.”

Their teas were handed out, and Kylo almost dropped his cup when Hux casually noted, “There’s a
little something for you as well, Mr. Ren.”

“How?” he asked, taken aback. “You shouldn’t have—”

“It pleased me,” Hux said, raising an elegant shoulder. Kylo might have imagined it, but Mitaka seemed to turn his gaze heavenwards with a look which said, “Oh, here we go again.” He hurried away with the tray, and Kylo finally found his words.

“You got these...gifts in London, didn’t you? You must’ve been in a hurry; the same letter which informed you of my identity also included the details of Miss Millicent’s accident.”

“I’m afraid train schedules are not sensitive to pressing family matters,” Hux said. “Don’t think much of it; it’s just a present for my old friend.”

Kylo was rendered speechless again. He sipped on the ruby-coloured tea to hide how much he was affected. He still resented Hux for forgetting him all too easily—but a gift! It must’ve indicated something, and more than Hux’s good will; maybe he did care about his past companion, just a little bit; just enough to make Kylo feel dazed.

His hopeful estimation proved to be true when Mitaka presented him with the parcel. It was just the size of his hands, but then, he didn’t expect anything too lavish. He peeled away the brown postal paper, feeling Hux’s gaze on him.

“What did you get, Mr. Ren?” Millicent asked, dissecting her own packets on the carpet with Mitaka’s help.

Kylo was wordlessly staring down at the book he was holding.

It was the *Tragedy of Macbeth.*

“You never finished reading it to me,” Hux said softly. Kylo caught his glance; oh, he wished to gather him up in his arms and whisper his thanks into his hair.

“Shall I?” he asked, and with those words, a pardon was offered. Hux must have sensed it, for a strange look took over his features. He seemed scared but determined: the same look he had always had when he was about to do something reckless.

“A dress!” Millicent clapped. The charm was broken.

Hux turned to his sister and smiled at her excitement. “I remembered you complimenting one made in a similar fashion. I should think it suits you.”

“Do you?” Millicent hugged it to her chest. It was a pretty affair, with pink and white stripes and a delicate lace detail over the shoulders. Millicent touched the bow adorning the front with careful reverence. “Don’t you think it’ll clash with my hair?”

Hux dismissed it with a wave. “That shouldn’t be a concern. If you find it agreeable, wear it; never mind the ones who would forbid a child their favourite colour.”

“What do you think, Mr. Ren?” Millicent turned to him. He was absent-mindedly caressing the spine of the little booklet, not daring to open it yet.

“What do I think?” he echoed, confused.

“Don’t you think that ginger hair is rather unfortunate and the ones with such colouring should be
careful what they put on?"

“That is not true,” he said with unexpected passion. “I think ginger is the most enthralling hair colour there is, and the ones blessed with it are both beautiful and lucky.”

“Is that so?” Hux asked, amused. His fingers brushed his sideburns as he propped up his head; Kylo was certain it wasn’t on accident. He looked down at the book in his hands to remind himself that Hux could be more than a teasing menace, occasionally, at least.

“It’s an aesthetic preference of mine,” he murmured, feeling his ears burning.

“Shall I try it on?” Millicent asked. “You’ll give me your honest opinions. I think it’s splendid, but don’t let that influence your judgement.”

“We shall take our duties as critics most seriously,” Hux vowed. Millicent left with hurried steps, followed by Mitaka. The room seemed to close in on Hux and Kylo; Kylo felt threatened by the lush softness of the pillows, the glinting mirrors, the scarlet of the wallpapers. The sumptuous furnishings were overwhelmingly intimate. That was the purpose of this room, he figured, a private little place where one could entertain and impress their guests. With just the two of them, he was defenseless, as if he was back in the trap of Hux’s bedroom.

He expected Hux to take advantage of the situation and attempt to provoke him in some way, but he was just silently enjoying his tea and the cheerful fire. After waiting a while for him to speak, Kylo opened the book tenderly and started reading the graceful print, not comprehending any of it. His mind was tormented: what if he was mistaken regarding Hux’s intent? What if he wasn’t?

“I don’t know how it ends,” Hux said, tapping at the saucer.

Kylo blinked at him, head inclined in a fashion which much resembled an owl. “Pray, what do you mean?”

“Macbeth.” Hux tipped his chin at the book. “Old Will’s plays are not typically part of the continental curriculum, and I never picked them up on my own. Wasn’t worth it without your innovative interpretation.” He smiled as he touched the cup’s brim to his lips. “You used to do the voices.”

Kylo cleared his throat, embarrassed by the memory. “The beginning and the end of my career as an aspiring actor, I’m afraid.”

“A pity; you were rather accomplished.” Hux bit his lips, chasing the taste of the tea. “You kept the accent.”

“Of course I kept it; it’s mine.”

“You love to keep what’s yours, don’t you?”

“Who doesn’t?” Kylo scoffed. “What sort of question is that?”

“Are you implying that I’m not being a particularly bright conversation partner?” That taunting smile was back in Hux’s eyes, but his features were perfectly schooled. It made Kylo’s blood boil.

“I never know what’s on your mind, Mr. Hux,” he said sharply, straightening up in his seat. “I never know what’s in earnest and what’s in jest.”

“Explains what?” Kylo demanded, just as Millicent entered with Mitaka in tow. She twirled around in delight, making the dress’s pink-white stripes look like the swirl of a stick candy.

“What do you think?” she asked. Hux scowled, pretending to be deep in thought. Kylo followed suit, rubbing his chin as his mind raced, relieved to focus his attention elsewhere.

“An astonishing display, no question,” Hux said in an assumed manner. “Although I’m not quite convinced by the performance. What does Mr. Ren say?”

“I think the little lady should give her best impression of a debutante,” he opinionated. Millicent took it as a challenge and exited the room to make a proper entrance; they all cheered and clapped as she sauntered in and did a perfect courtesy with such an easy elegance and amiable smile it was impossible not to be charmed.

“Well done, Miss Millicent!” Mitaka said.

“Exquisite!” Hux exclaimed. “I do believe the young lady earned the privilege of opening her other presents.”

“Oh, there’s more?” Millicent asked, and darted to the parcels, instantly shedding the manners of a ball’s belle.

“Naturally; how else am I to spoil you?”

She dropped bodily to the carpet and squealed in delight when Mitaka presented her with a small, blue box.

“Sugarplums!” she uttered with awe, making Kylo frown.

“May I ask what those are?”

“Have you never tried them?” Millicent laughed, clearly surprised by the prospect. “It’s not Christmas yet, but Armitage knows they’re my favourite. You can have one...or two, but not three.” She walked to him and offered the candy. It was a sort of dragée, not actual plums coated with sugar as Kylo was led to believe by the name. He took one, popped it into his mouth, and let it melt on his tongue.

“How delicious,” he proclaimed, amazed by the spice.

Millicent grinned at him and announced graciously, “You may have as much as ten, but then you must draw me in my new dress, Mr. Ren.”

“That’s right, you draw,” Hux said as Millicent got back to unboxing the rest of her presents.

“I make sketches every now and then,” Kylo corrected. He wished he had more time to better himself as an artist, but that would require more free time than the summer breaks, not to mention some rather expensive books and albums. Hux’s collection had some promising titles, but they were more of the theoretical kind.

“Well, if you take it upon yourself to make a portrait, you must be paid more generously than in candies,” Hux decided.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Kylo objected, and washed away the sugarplum’s taste with a quick sip of tea. “I lack the experience.”
“But do you lack the talent?” Hux asked, and laughed at the defiant silence that followed. “See, this is all an artist needs: confidence. And you possess it.”

“I’m not modest enough to deny that I believe I do,” Kylo said. “Although I’m well aware of my shortcomings, as well.”

“Let me be the judge of those. Could you very sweetly show me your portfolio?”

“Now?” Kylo said, rather shocked. Hux signalled to Mitaka, who came up to him, hands clasped behind his back, and bowed down to listen to his lord’s wishes.

“Would you please fetch us Mr. Ren’s drawings? Where can he find them, Mr. Ren?”

“They’re on the chaise lounge,” Kylo said, mind blank. It was as if Hux asked to survey a piece of his naked soul; all his emotions were in the blackness of the charcoals, in those loud lines and twisted forms. Mitaka was already out of sight when he realised what will be the first drawing he’d find: the portrait of the kitchen woman.

A numbness overcame him, seizing his sight and his hearing for a minute; he flexed his fingers, fighting to calm himself. If only he was more accomplished with his witchcraft; maybe he could make Mitaka forget the request or make the paper invisible — who knew what was the limit of his powers? Mr. Hux shan’t see it, he commanded silently, but knew that it wouldn’t be enough.

He looked up, just to discover Millicent staring at him, holding a china doll. Her eyes looked almost transparent.

“You can be honest, Mr. Ren,” she said.

“What about? Please excuse me, my mind must have wandered off.”

“I was asking how you like her.” She made the doll dance in the air; its rigid limbs flailed around absurdly, joints creaking as it stared into nothing with its too-blue gaze.

“She’s very agreeable,” Kylo managed, and rubbed his temples. Mr. Hux shan’t see—

“Why don’t you show her to Mademoiselle Unamo?” Hux suggested in a pleasant tone. “It appears that Mr. Ren is rather weary; let him have some quiet. You are allowed half an hour of games before rest.”

“Starting from now?”

“Starting from now, yes.”

“Good-night, then,” Millicent answered, and started to pack away her things in a delighted hurry, tucking the box of sugarplums safely under her arm.

“Wait for Mitaka so he can help you, please,” Hux said.

“It is all right, I can manage,” Millicent said, and hastily curtsied, making the doll follow suit. Kylo jumped to his feet to bow and remained standing as Millicent raced off, calling for her nurse with loud cheer.

“Mademoiselle, mademoiselle, viens voir!”

“Do you wish me to retire?” Kylo asked Hux faintly as Millicent’s steps died away.
“Absolutely not, unless you’re unwell,” Hux said, slightly affronted, and waved him to sit. “Is it something a lick of cognac can’t amend?”

“Only one way to find out,” Kylo allowed with a smile. He was not particularly fond of alcohol, but he was not about to turn down an invitation. Hux was eyeing him lazily, taking in his form and face. Kylo dared to ask with a mocking lilt, “Do you find me handsome, Mr. Hux?”

“No,” Hux said slowly, tongue rolling around the single word. He chuckled at Kylo’s frown and finished the last drops of his tea. Kylo noticed the slight tremble of his fingers holding the saucer.

“What fault do you find with it?”

“Nothing.”

“So you contradict yourself,” Kylo concluded and leant back in the armchair, pressing the tips of his fingers together.

Hux shook his head, setting the empty cup aside. “I didn’t invite you here to discuss your vanity.”

“Am I vain?” Kylo asked, voice dropped low.

“One of your many vices,” Hux said with a sly look. Kylo opened his mouth to demand an honest answer, but the echo of Mitaka’s steps made him bite his tongue. He glanced into his cup; a thin film was shining on the surface, showing that it had been neglected for too long. He chugged it down, nevertheless, in one loud gulp, just to bide his time.

“The portfolio,” Mitaka announced.

“Thank you.” Hux nodded to him and waited for it to be laid over his knees. Kylo averted his gaze, fixating it on the exotic carpet.

Mr. Hux shan’t see that drawing, he willed again; the fire gave a strange flicker and the darkness expanded for a moment.

“Dopheld, would you please pour us some cognac?” Hux requested.

“Which bottle, Mr. Hux?”

“Surprise me; just make it a pleasant surprise.”

Dopheld bowed and made haste to do as he was told. Hux toyed with the folder’s fastener; it was untied, as Kylo had left it. He couldn’t take his eyes off Hux’s fingers tugging and twirling the linen ribbons, enthralled by their lively elegance and fearful of what they might discover, whether his wish worked. The drawing of the kitchen woman would be on top; he reasoned he wouldn’t have to be in suspense for long—and then Hux flipped the folder. Kylo’s stomach sank.

“What are they in chronological order?”

“More or less,” Kylo murmured, defeated.

“Let’s start with your old works, then, as we observe your process.”

They were served their drinks; Kylo was beginning to need it.

Hux swirled his portion around in the glass, took a whiff of its sharp scent, and then said, “The Courvoisier; a superb choice. You are dismissed, Dopheld; thank you for your services.”
“My pleasure, Mr. Hux.” Dopheld bowed and took his leave at once. Kylo looked after his retreating figure, wishing him to return so he wouldn’t have to face his destiny alone.

“How peculiar,” Hux said with wonder, opening up the folder to look at the first sketch. Kylo saw it reversed from where he sat: a boy, crouched over, heaving, a stick in hand, and around him: nature, disrupted.

“It’s Wordsworth,” he explained. “He recounts a seemingly insignificant tale to his lover in the *Lyrical Ballads*; how he set out as a boy on an early morn’ to observe nature; he discovers a patch of paradise, and after resting there for a while, he gets a stick and ravishes it, breaking the branches, stomping on the flowers. There’s no reasoning given, but from the first time I read it, I was convinced I understood it clearly, that perfect rage.”

Hux followed the lines of the trees with his fingers up in the air, mapping out how they framed the picture as if they were guarding a disturbing memory. The boy’s figure might’ve looked like Augustus Burns, right after he poked out Perry’s eye; maybe it looked like Kylo himself; and maybe he was a stranger—his face wasn’t visible. Kylo wanted to capture the vile victory his friend must have felt, his own ever-present anger, and project all of it on somebody else.

“*The hazels rose tall and erect, with tempting clusters hung; a virgin scene,*” Hux quoted in an even tone. “I always interpreted it to be about coming of age, but I quite like your more literal approach.”

“I never considered any...underlying symbolism,” Kylo croaked, betrayed. It was one of his favourite poems; of course Hux would find something indecent in it. He had to admit there was something thrilling in how unabashedly Hux shared his salacious reading, how he didn’t even fumble as he set the drawing aside to look at the next one. He was as composed as if he had just made a remark on the weather.

“And here we have a taste of Arthurian legends,” Hux said, his undisturbed calmness exciting Kylo further.

“I’m quite fond of knights; you’ll find them loping along throughout my portfolio,” he babbled. “The hero of *Hart-Leap Well*, Sir Gawain and the Round Table, Childe Roland from *Lear*, even the unfortunate fellow of *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. They’re all there, going about their business.”

“I find the lack of glorification rather refreshing,” Hux remarked, crossing his legs at the knees. “You portray them during their struggles, not in the moment of triumph. And look at the framing: how chaos expands into unity, the dynamism of your lines coming to a rest at the edges—it’s quite brilliant.”

Kylo had to cross his legs as well, to disguise a growing problem. His head was swimming with praise and the lush image of the ‘virgin scene;’ he tasted his cognac again, hoping it would lull his aroused senses. How tempting his lordship was, lounging there and leafing through images of Kylo’s mind, as if he was stripping his dreams naked. He licked his fingers whenever he turned the papers, and his eyes burned with intense passion.

Kylo found it impossible to contain the words of his desire any longer—he was about to make a fool of himself when he noticed that there were only two pages left. Soon, his fate would be sealed. He swallowed back the forward remark on the plush beauty of Hux’s lips.

“You chose the *Lime-Tree Bower* over *Kubla Khan* or the *Ancient Mariner,*” Hux remarked. “You’re full of surprises, my friend.” He put the drawing aside, and there, plain as day, was the image of the kitchen woman, revealed.
Dimly, Kylo wished he had put more effort into it; it was really just a sketch, and he never intended to finish it for the sake of his own sanity. Hux scowled at it. Was he judging the state of it? Did he recognise the one portrayed? Kylo’s heart seemed to seek escape from his ribcage. If he had any cognac left, he would’ve poured it down his throat then, but at present, he could only savour the aftertaste, and pray for the fog of drunkenness to finally claim him.

“Why do you store a single blank paper in there?” Hux enquired.

Kylo couldn’t answer for a few seconds. He succeeded—he really did; he hid something in plain sight, and all he needed to do was to wish it so.

“It’s so the uppermost drawing won’t get smudged,” he answered slowly.

“How practical; but how disappointed I am to find it blank.” Hux closed the portfolio and handed it back. Kylo’s hand was slightly shaking as he took it. He felt as if little bolts of lightning were tickling his fingertips. “I am delighted to know you’ll teach my sister to draw; you’ll be a very adequate master indeed. When shall your lessons begin?”

“The wintry months, I reckon,” Kylo said, trying to find his voice. “We shall start with still lifes, and turn to watercolours and landscapes come the spring.”

“A solid plan.” Hux nodded his agreement. “Is this the same curriculum you followed with your previous pupils?”

Kylo pretended to fumble with the folder, and he casually noted, “Oh yes, and I must say it worked quite well.”

“You can’t meet my eyes when you tell a lie,” Hux said with a fox-like smile. “How charming.”

“Yes, I can,” Kylo countered, daring Hux with his glance. Hux was still showing teeth. “Why do you accuse me of dishonesty?”

“Because you’ve forged your references,” he answered easily. Kylo didn’t know how to proceed; the cognac, the triumph of his magic and his lingering desire made him light-headed and tongue-tied. Hux laughed, dry, but not without humour. “You shan’t worry, I won’t hold it against you; your talent is evident enough. I’m pleased you ended up in Stormfield Hall, after all.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Kylo said flatly, ears ringing.

“Make sure to teach your little tricks to Millicent; between ourselves, I never found cunning a vice—I think it’s rather clever.”

_Do you think yourself clever?_ Kylo wanted to ask. _You compliment me, just to then take it back; you caress me with one hand and slap me with the other. You don’t yet know what I’m capable of. You think you’re stirring still water, but friend, you’re playing with fire. Will you like it when you get burned, I wonder? Maybe I am ready to burn._

Hux finished his drink. Kylo watched his long, pale throat, the flutter of his lashes. He was a witch; couldn’t he have anything he wanted? But he was also a young man, scared, inexperienced, and half in love with someone equal measures cruel and beautiful.

_Beware, beware. Don’t get your heart eaten._

“Shall we call it an evening?” Hux proposed. “Well, dusk just fell, but the shadows are getting longer, and I wish to work on the design of the water pumps my little sister found so undeserving of
“She’s but nine years old,” Kylo said in her defence, rising from his seat as Hux got to his feet.

“That very well may be, but when I was her age, I was in awe of watermills, and we’ve come such a long way with the power of steam; pumping stations truly show the might of engineering.” Hux adjusted his dress coat, and got a candelabrum and Kylo’s portfolio. He headed out with them, and Kylo followed, clutching the book and feeling a tad confused. He expected to return to his rooms on his own, but Hux didn’t look very intent to leave his company just yet; he was chatting about ditches and sewage as they crossed the dining-room, statues of Roman emperors staring down at them (among them, Augustus in his laurel wreath). He was explaining the benefits of trenches over gullies as they made it into the grand hall, and when they began to mount the stairs, he was on the topic of Archimedes’ screw pump. He was holding the portfolio hostage; Kylo couldn’t just bid good-night without asking for it back first. He began to suspect that Hux wanted an excuse to escort him to his room, and maybe get invited inside; however, his conversation was anything but sensual or suggestive.

They reached the corridor on the second storey. Kylo was chilled as its yawning darkness opened up for them; and in the darkness, something moved.

“It had such a powerful simplicity,” Hux babbled. “A double or triple helix was built of wood strips —”

“Hush,” Kylo said, his round eyes fixed on Maratelle. She was at a distance, standing still, looking right back at him. Her skirt stirred, billowing like a curtain.

“What is it?” Hux asked, lifting the candelabrum. The light of the five bright candles spread over the vaulted ceiling, coating the corridor in a humble glow; when the light hit her figure, Maratelle screamed — a ragged voice, high and hoarse; her jaw dropped lower than it should have been possible. She turned her head sharply, as if her neck had been broken, and squinted at Hux.

“Run,” Kylo hissed, and grabbed his wrist. He started to drag him back to the staircase, but Hux put up a fight, waving the candelabrum around to illuminate the shadowy corners.

“What do you see, pray tell? Did an owl get in again?”

Maratelle crouched down like some animal, mouth still wide open in terror. She began to retreat; with her limbs horribly twisted, she crept up the wall.

Kylo stood stock-still for a fleeting second. This couldn’t possibly be happening. He squeezed his eyes shut and reached for Hux blindly; he got a hold of his shoulder and yanked him back. He made a break for the stairs, pulling Hux, who grumbled something unsavory, after him. Kylo made his way through darkness; he felt protected there, and didn’t open his eyes again until they’ve reached the third storey.

“What’s gotten into you?” Hux demanded as they halted. Kylo looked at him, chest heaving. Oh, they were safe; Hux was safe—for now, that is. For the first time in the history of his unpleasant acquaintance with the ghost, he got the impression that she was just as terrified as he was — but was it because of the light, or Hux?

“Owls frighten me,” he panted. “I despise the way they…” He mimicked an owl turning its head around. Hux scoffed.

“I could shoo it away for you.”
“I think I saw it fly away.”

“We’re free from danger, then.”

“I believe so, yes.”

There was a moment of silence. Hux shifted his weight, and peered at Kylo with a quizzical expression.

“Would you like to wait out the frights of the night in my room?”

“I wouldn’t want to impose you have a project to work on,” Kylo answered, realising just what he just said no to only after he was finished.

“Very well; thank you for saving me from an...owl.” He handed the portfolio back. Their fingers brushed.

“Call for me any time a bird threatens your life,” Kylo said, throat dry. “They are my speciality.”

Hux smiled faintly. “I will. Goodnight, my knight.”

They locked gazes as they bowed. Kylo turned on his heels and descended the stairs, feeling as if he was walking on air again. Hux remained standing to illuminate his way. Kylo resisted looking back at him.

The gloom of the second storey corridor held no further horrors; he got to his room safely, and put his hand over the knob. He wondered whether he had gotten a glimpse of Maratelle’s usual routine: waiting still until the witching hour passed, then rattling the doors and scratching the walls. He peered over his shoulder.

“Armitage Hux is under my protection,” he addressed the emptiness.

It was still relatively early; he stayed up to pore over Macbeth, practicing how he might read act five if Hux made him keep his promise.

The next morning he woke refreshed and audaciously unaffected by Maratelle’s new ways of haunting: the secret joy he felt thinking about Hux, not to mention the confusion and lingering enmity, outweighed his fears. He gathered his linens and a bundle of fresh clothes, and went to the kitchen. His mind supplied images of the previous night: crooked limbs and a muted scream, but he supplanted the memories with Hux’s voice praising him, the taunting shine in his eyes and his ruthless charm.

He found some leftover water in the wooden tub by the furnace; he put on a kettle to mix in some hot water, and stripped naked. It was early still, the lights no more than a blue gleam over the shiny surfaces of copper pots and silverware. Once his bath was ready, he climbed into the tub, squatting down and splashing the water over his arms and chest. He surveyed his surroundings dreamily, hardly taking them in. He was wanted in Hux’s room, in his life; he was wanted—that much was almost certain; what remained a question was the intent. Was Hux toying with him, seeking to exploit his barely concealed devotion? Were his intentions honorable? Could they even be? They weren’t allowed to marry.

He may want me, but does he love me? And do I, him? He’s delectable, but detestable, and I loathe to adore him so.

He soaped up and scrubbed down, and he was just putting on his clothes when he heard a distant
voice sing a song.

One’s for sorrow, two’s for joy—

He hastened to button up. The voice was unfamiliar; the lass, perhaps, who brought their milk. He turned to leave, but what he saw made him freeze.

The kitchen woman was within his arm’s reach, scrubbing the countertops; yet her voice came from far away, an echo of a memory.

“You can speak,” Kylo breathed with wonder. She also saw you bare-arsed, his mind supplied. “I am dreadfully sorry; I have forgotten your...hours. Oh, you can’t hear me, can you? You can’t see and can’t hear; you’re not here.” He inclined his head and looked her over. She was wearing a different dress: brown with a white collar. Maratelle was always in the same elaborate gown she had on in her portrait; probably the same she died in. Kylo was unsure of its colour—Maratelle was ethereal like a nightmare, but the kitchen woman seemed solid. If he only knew her name!

He leant on the counter and watched her walk to the basin. She rinsed out a cloth, which was invisible to Kylo’s eyes, and hung it up to dry.

“You’re quite an agreeable spirit,” Kylo told her. “Considering your lack of definite features, it’s a praiseworthy accomplishment; if my words can reach you, do show me a sign of it. You looked at me the other day; I promise I won’t run away.”

Seven for a secret never to be told —

“I’m a witch, you know,” Kylo said in a sharper tone. “I implore you to listen, ghost.”

The song ended in a gasp; the kitchen woman staggered back, slamming against the counter. Her face was human, and she looked positively frightened.

“I didn’t mean to startle,” Kylo began, but he stumbled over the words as he realised the kitchen woman wasn’t looking at him. She was staring at the door, tensing up to flee but paralysed by fear.

“You’ll listen to me when I talk,” a pleasant voice said. In the door was Maratelle: no ghostly aura, no branches, her auburn-red hair arranged in perfect ringlets under a bonnet and her white dress spotless. If it wasn’t for a stiff line between her brows, nothing would have betrayed her annoyance.

“Are you listening? Then answer—Tell me.”

The kitchen woman’s hand pressed over her belly. A blink, and then they were nowhere.

“Listen to me,” Kylo whispered to the empty kitchen, shoulders dropped.

* * *

He was shaken the whole day, and found the air in the house cold and suffocating—yet he didn’t dare to set a foot in the garden, much less approach the wych elm. “Time is out of joint,” he thought, forlorn, “O cursèd spite, that ever I was born to set it right!”

He never understood Hamlet’s idling before; he always fancied that if he were him, he’d get his sword and do his duty. Damn these supernatural dealings; damn ghosts and their mysteries; as if
human existence wasn’t burdensome enough without the meddling of spirits. He had no guidance, no boastful usurper to slaughter—and his own uncle would want him to leave Stormfield Hall, there was no doubt about it. There’s been an awakening, and he was at fault—he caused it.

“Do you think your brother would mind terribly if I sought out his company this evening?” he asked Millicent over dinner.

She hummed around a mouthful of scone, swallowed diligently, then said, “He’s off to London.”

“What, he left?” Kylo asked, startled. Millicent scooped up some butter pudding nonchalantly.

“Early this morning; he’s to meet an engineering committee, I believe.”

“He didn’t say goodbye,” Kylo murmured, and helped himself to a second serving of baked potatoes. He’d earnt it.

“It’s not in custom to say goodbye to the staff,” Millicent reminded him gently.

It wasn’t in custom to flirt with the staff either—well, maybe in this household it wouldn’t be so extraordinary, if the kitchen woman was indeed Hux’s mother—but that was beside the point. The point was that Kylo’s been abandoned anew.

He retired late that evening, staying up to exercise, take a decidedly late bath, and read poems by wounded lovers. His candle burnt out around two a.m.; the scratching and rattling began.

“I know,” Kylo said. “Something dreadful has happened to you; you can’t rest in peace; got the message—now leave me be.”

Maratelle was not that easily swayed: the noise persisted, but Kylo simply put a pillow over his head.

The morning found him fatigued, his hair tousled and eyes hollow and baggy. The day dragged on endlessly, and his mood only fouled. Millicent was just as disinterested in her rhetoric lesson as him; they finished early, and Millicent spent the rest of the afternoon sewing clothes for her new doll with the help of Unamo. Kylo stayed to converse and even helped sorting through laces, but they all looked the same to him after two hours. He fled the tediousness of pins and silks, and—lacking motivation to use his time for anything more productive—walked the corridors, up and down.

He slowed down when he passed Hux’s door. What was he hoping for? That it would open and Hux would repeat his invitation? He put his hand over it wistfully. If only, if only.

The door creaked open.

Well.

That was new. He inspected the lock; there was no question—he had moved it with his will. Encouraged, he slipped inside, and turned to the door again.

“Close,” he commanded. Nothing happened. He looked around, helpless, feeling the marble busts staring at him with mocking, empty gazes. “Close?” he tried again, then he lifted his hand, and gritting his teeth, spat: “Close!”

The door slammed shut, the knob rattling.

He felt a grin spread over his face. Oh, how delightful was it to be apt in magic. He bowed to his stony audience, and set out to explore the room for new challenges. He surveyed the globe and the
telescope—but he was too afraid he’d damage them; the blue couch, maybe—but it was too heavy. He turned to the bookcase and reached for a leather-bound atlas. It didn’t move, not until Kylo sneered at it, then it soared into his hand like it was a feather.

He was beginning to form a hypothesis. It seemed that one had to be either scared or agitated to be able to work magic; maybe a choleric temperament was the secret of witchcraft. Deep in thought, he hardly realised that his legs were carrying him to the bedroom. He halted by the threshold, holding out the atlas like a shield as the door creaked open of its own accord.

_I should turn my timidity into something more powerful,_ he thought, but didn’t dare to move yet. He looked around, allowing himself to be overwhelmed. Everything looked the same as on that evening he had helped Hux undress: the walls a powder blue, the bedding striking white and inviting, the curtains softly rippling in the draft. He stepped inside and closed the door. The room carried Hux’s scent, so warm and pleasant that he couldn’t help a small gasp; it was as if Hux was there—what would he think, finding Kylo nosing about? He reached for that fancied shame, the thrill of being found out, the fear.

_I can walk the sky and see behind the veil; what is moving objects to me?_

He reached for the nightstand drawer; there was a series of clicks, and it opened. Kylo tilted his head.

“Multiple locks, Mr. Hux? What on Earth are you hiding there?”

Did he dare to peek at his secrets? But who had the right, if not him? He approached the nightstand and hesitated for a moment—surely, sitting on the bed would be unforgivable. He chose to kneel down, and told himself he’d only allow himself a glimpse; doubtlessly, Hux kept his money there, or some precious schematics for his engineering.

The contents of the drawer proved to be something else entirely. For a few seconds, Kylo could hardly comprehend what he was seeing. The vials of oil weren’t surprising, although Kylo would’ve expected them to be kept near the tub, or in the kitchen; there was handcream there, and an album, and, well, an object that much resembled a phallus. It was carved of ivory, resting on a velvet pillow. Kylo couldn’t take his eyes of it. It was life-sized. Maybe somewhat bigger.

“What in tarnation,” he whispered. He shouldn’t touch it. Absolutely not. It was evident it wasn’t just some risqué artefact—it’d be either displayed proudly or stored away in the attic, in that case. No: it was an object which was in frequent use, however immaculate it looked.

Where did Hux even get it? Who would make such a thing? Who would buy it? And how, exactly, was it to be used? Did one just—? Was that even pleasurable?

Kylo kept his eyes on it as he reached for the thick album. He didn’t know what he expected to find; probably an instructions manual. He untied the gay ribbon holding it closed and opened it toward the middle, where the spine was broken. It revealed a depiction of Saint Sebastian, tied to a tree, head held high as arrows piercing his strong body.

“Prayer won’t save your soul,” Kylo murmured; he lifted the protective tissue paper, and turned the page. The next drawing was done by another hand, showing Prometheus cuffed to a cliff, a sinister eagle hovering above him; it was much smaller than the picture of Saint Sebastian. The following item of the collection was sketched on the back of an envelope, with Apollo and Hyacinthus in carnal embrace. Kylo dropped the album; it fell with a heavy thud. Self-conscious about causing too much noise, he picked it up again, and he was faced with Patroclus treating the wounds of Achilles, who sat shamelessly open-legged. Kylo groaned.
He was conflicted, compromised, even—the artworks were worthy of his envy, but the fact that Hux possessed them aggravated his jealousy; to imagine him leafing through this devious collection and then put that mock-organ to use: how selfish, how reckless and infuriating! If he was indeed so weak that he needed these amusements at the risk of his good health, why then, Kylo was just a storey below him, a call away.

*Would I oblige him?* he wondered; he felt he would when he thought of the other artists—whether these were commissions or gifts, it was enough to imagine Hux whisper a soft ‘thank you’ to their creators to make him want to roar. He didn’t trust his shaking hands to leaf through it in search of clues without tearing the pages; he put the album back as if touching it burned him, and looked at the ivory phallus with revived fury.

“Exceedingly impudent,” he announced his judgement. He felt his own member press against his trousers. He wouldn’t fall so low as to— But just to picture Hux opening the door, stunned to discover him here, and then a knowing smile creeping up his darling face—how thrilling that idea was! He turned, as if Hux really were there, weary from travel and cloaked, droplets of rain in his hair.

Suppose he’d say, “Snooping around, are we? My, my. Boredom leads us to do such indecencies, doesn’t it?”

“You would know about it, Mr. Hux,” would be his reply, pointing at the drawer with an accusing finger. Hux wouldn’t blush facing the evidence of dishonour and infamy; he’d smile still, stepping closer, so close they’d be almost chest-to-chest. He’d look up at him, tipping his chin slightly.

A whisper: “Is my good friend jealous?”

Kylo would grab him them, get a hold of his lapels and growl, “I am your Achilles, I am your Saint Sebastian and your ravishing god.” Rubbing up against him: “Is this not harder than ivory?”

Hux’s lips parting to a wet gasp— But enough.

Burning with desire and fury, he left; and his frenzy gave him the power to rearrange the room with a wave, so nothing looked amiss.

He took a cold bath, and tried to read—to no avail; he was tossing and turning, and half-wished for a visit from the apparitions plaguing his life to distract his mind, but they were silent that night. He succumbed to sleep some time in the small hours—but his dreams did not deliver him.

He was in London; it was a patched up borough built from the recollections he had of Salem, book-illustrations and the filthy streets of Millcote; but in the dream, he knew it to be the capital with the same certainty he knew he was heading for a molly house, whatever that might be. The molly house was hidden: he went through streets which didn't make sense, he passed blind alleys and boulevards, and then he was inside without having arrived.

There was a vast, furnished room surrounded by a gallery, much like the dance hall in Chandrila where he’d met the general. The guests were mostly male, although many were dressed in a feminine fashion, and there were painted women around, about a handful; music was in the air, eerie, Eastern. On the ground, cushions: he had to sidestep them and the men spread out there, smoking strange, long pipes, fanning themselves or talking in whispers with one another. He saw dancers, but they seemed to move independently from each other. Companies were playing cards or talking, sitting close or sitting over the lap of someone else. The air was heavy with scented smoke and the smell of wilting garlands.
Dizzy but determined, Kylo walked past them, until he reached a leather settee in a shadowy corner, illuminated by a brief candle. Hux was sitting there. He was wearing his corset and undergarments, shirt included, flowers in his hair and a pipe in hand. A group of men with angelic faces and in various states of undress tried to get his attention: their slow swaying and the dance of their hands looked choreographed and forced. When Hux looked up at Kylo, they all froze, as if they were pillars of salt.

“Fancy seeing you here,” Hux said, much fatigued.

Kylo’s throat was tight, and his lips trembled, but his voice was sure when he spoke: “I wished to see you.”

Hux tilted his head, surveying the room at leisure. It expanded beyond the tilted walls, transforming into an endless and endlessly repetitive universe of earthly pleasures. “Aren’t you afraid to be here?”

“I’m not afraid,” Kylo said, smiling.

“Then come, sit with me. Talk; say anything. I missed your voice—isn’t that strange? Two days, and I’m already yearning to hear it again.” He chuckled, eyes round and terrified. He leant close when Kylo took his seat, back straight and hands over his knees. “Even when you’re not present,” Hux confessed, “we converse. I invent topics for us, and calculate your answers. Tell me: am I going mad?”

Kylo turned his head to look at him; Hux was so close he couldn’t directly meet his eyes, and every breath they took was shared. “It’s a madness we both have.”

“Impossible,” Hux scoffed. “You’re a world away. You’re so different. We’re mismatched.”

“Don’t our differences excite you?” Kylo asked. He ran praising fingers over Hux’s slender shoulders as Hux got hold of his arms and felt their firmness.


Kylo put his forehead to his, letting their lashes touch, soft like the kiss of a butterfly. “Then why won’t you have me?”

“Why indeed, goody Mr. Ren?”

“If you knew the things I’ve done,” Kylo said, “If you only knew, you wouldn’t think me so good then. I am of the devil; I am cursed with his powers. What sort of secret could come close to that?”

He felt Hux’s sigh over his lips. Hux kissed his eyelids, one then the other, and said, “You’ll find out, and then Stormfield Hall will burn to the ground.”

Kylo woke with a gasp. His loins were ablaze; his nightgown ran up his torso, leaving him exposed. He grabbed two fistfuls of the crisp sheets, thrusting his hips forward to take the edge off the pressure. Hux’s voice was a lingering whisper, calling to him. He imagined him underneath him,pliant and boneless, the petals from his crown of flowers scattered over the pillow. He heard him breathing, felt his fingers digging into his back—maybe if he didn’t spill, he’d be safe—maybe he was allowed to indulge in it, maybe—

“I will not let harm come to you,” he said, voice breaking. “You’re safe with me; come back; stay!”

A powerful shudder ran through his arched back; he stopped his movements, frightened. His heaving
chest felt too tight, and his heart was beating hard; but he hadn’t climaxed. He hung his head, letting out a trembling breath.

Every item in his room was floating in the air.

Chapter End Notes

**Content warnings:** some ableism / ghost steps up body horror game, has no chill (or body) - if you don't want a literary jumpscare, look for Hux fanboying over Archimedes’ screw pump - the scary part is a short scene after that / Kylo still believes masturbation can harm you; be assured he’s still wrong

The Wordsworth poem quoted is titled *Nutting*, of all things

Many-many thanks to the wonderful Gefionne for betaing, and to Anna for her clever suggestions!

Find me on tumblr // there's a slightly NSFW moodboard for the chapter
For several subsequent days, Kylo was adrift; he did his duty dawn to dusk, but his spirit was absent, ascended in the aether. He walked in dreams, calling out the name of his sweet tempter. He happened on him again: he saw Mr. Hux on a silver-gilded bed, the green canopy half-drawn in. He was asleep, but far from peace: Kylo saw his eyes roll behind his closed eyelids and how he gritted his teeth.

“Rise; I’m here,” Kylo said, but couldn’t wake him. He stood by the bed, powerless, paralysed, holding onto the curtain. He could feel the exquisite softness of the velvet and an old, musty smell lingering in the air. He deduced that the gorgeous room wasn’t in frequent use; looking around he took note of the expensive furnishings and the strange trophies on the wall, but even more interesting was the landscape unfurling behind the windows: the moaning sea stretching over the low horizon, the battered cliffs and the glimmer of a pale sun. Hux wasn’t in London anymore; maybe he was on his way home, staying with an acquaintance — restless to get back.

Kylo woke from his nightly vision with a desperate yearning in his heart. He curled up in his humble bed, believing that Hux would sleep better here; that he might want to trade velvet for linen just to know the comfort of Kylo’s closeness.

“Come, come back to me,” he whispered, wishing he could cast a spell and dominate Hux’s will; but that’d be a worthless victory. He wanted him to return on his own volition; to abandon obligation and pleasure and hurry back, to fly to Kylo so he could see in his eyes what was fancy and what was real: whether his visit to the molly house and the mansion above the sea was but mere dream, or if he could somehow send his spirit to faraway places to keep vigil over his beloved.

His heart ached as he kicked off the covers and walked to the little water basin. He called the pitcher of water to him; being able to move objects had become second nature. A wave of his fingers: his razor flew to his hand; a blink: the soap dropped to the table. He shaved thinking of Hux; oh, curse him; curse him thrice! Curse the wicked glint in his eyes, curse his self-satisfied smile, curse his inviting body—and bless, bless, bless him.

Once he was ready for the day, he headed to the kitchen to have his breakfast. The ghost of the kitchen woman was there, humming to herself—a foreign song again; Kylo was reluctant to interrupt her, so he didn’t. He had coffee and leftover crumpets, listening to her sing. A curious idyll; but one he had come to embrace. He wanted to be careful about his next interrogation, afraid that he might chase her away. He wouldn’t be against getting rid of Maratelle, but he grew fond of this other ghost, placid and harmless.

Millicent requested their class to be held in the garden, despite the crisp autumn weather; Kylo obliged, asking Unamo to dress her up well. Millicent was a bundle of heavy skirts, fur-lined cape, muff, and a big bonnet shielding her from the nipping winds. She sat on her swing as Kylo lectured
her on Euripides, his monologue interrupted by the occasional happy squee when he managed to push her really high up.

“Oh, I’m just like a leaf, soaring in the delicious air!” Millicent cried, throwing her head back and letting her hair fly.

“Yes, yes, you’re a leaf. As I was saying: consider how Pentheus is the only unburied body we know of in Greek tragedy, despite being royalty, and deserving of…” He drifted off. He glanced at Stormfield Hall, standing at a short distance over colourful trees, overrun with blood-red ivy. How majestic, how immense—and how forlorn; for its master was nowhere, and the windows yawned empty in his absence.

“Don’t stop, Mr. Ren,” Millicent said, kicking into the air; she tried to make the swing move again, but Kylo was holding onto the ropes firmly. “You were telling me about poor Pentheus; was he really torn to shreds by the dancing women?”

“According to the play, yes.” Kylo came back to himself, and gave a gentle push. The swing creaked and moved forward an inch. He pushed it again. “Say, when do you suppose your brother will be back?”

Millicent peered up at him, wrinkling her nose. “Armitage? He told me he might be away for a couple of days; he was planning on a visit to Nautilus—that’s Captain Phasma’s residence; with a little luck, he might convince her to come.”

“He’ll be bringing company,” Kylo noted dully. Would it matter? But of course it would—they wouldn’t have a chance to be left alone.

“I so hope he will!” Millicent said with yearning. “I can’t wait for you to meet Miss Phasma—I’m sure you’ll find her amiable—and she might bring along her niece Frey. She’s my best friend; my only friend, to be exact, for I don’t know many girls my age.” She made the swing stop and turned to him sharply. “Could we be friends, Mr. Ren? I enjoy your company tremendously; although you’re in my service, I would like to believe that your affection is genuine.”

Kylo smiled at her wistfully and pushed at the swing, watching her fly away. “Of course we are friends, Miss Millicent; of course we are.”

Hux had been absent upwards of a fortnight when the post brought a letter for Mitaka. He surveyed it over tea and looked so distressed when he was finished that Kylo thought he’d received news about the death of a relative. He glanced at Mrs. Mitaka, who was peering over Mitaka’s shoulder with a very different expression: that of radiant joy.

“He’s coming, and he’s not coming alone,” Mitaka announced anxiously.

Kylo pretended to be preoccupied with pouring Millicent some cream, and asked nonchalantly, “He’s not likely to return soon, is he? When shall we get ready?”

“He’ll be here by Thursday—three days, and he sends directions of all the best bedrooms to be prepared, and the library and the dining-room cleaned out; the ladies will bring their maids, and the gentlemen their valets—he mentions no exact number, but we’ll have a full house, I recon.”

“Don’t despair,” Mrs. Mitaka said, patting her son’s slouched shoulders. “Make haste: to the George Inn! We’ll be needing all helping hands we can get—Mr. Ren, you’re included; if you don’t mind terribly, please alert Rodion and Mandetat, and assist them with the firewood—you’re a capable, strong fellow. I’m certain they could use you.”
“Why, I am happy to be of service,” Kylo said, confused; Millicent and him were just taking a break from a rhetorics lesson which now had to be abandoned altogether.

Once operations commenced it became clear there would be no time for teaching, and Millicent was exonerated from her school duties. She capered about the chambers, jumped on and off bed stands, and lied on mattresses and piled-up bolsters and pillows before the enormous fires roaring in the chimneys. The household was up in arms, and three women were brought from Millcote to help; for three days, there was scrubbing and brushing, washing of paints, beating of carpets, polishing mirrors and picture frames, airing sheets and drying feather-beds over the hearths.

Kylo was under the impression that Stormfield Hall had been immaculate before, but now that the bed-hangings were festooned, radiant white counterpanes spread, and the floor and the stairs polished to the brightness of glass, the place looked transformed. He didn’t have much time to marvel at it; he was kept busy, and when there was no heavy weight to lift and no goods to transport, he was to work in the kitchen under Mrs. Mitaka’s care.

“I know it’s not becoming of your occupation or gender,” she explained, worrying her hands, “but no cook would come.”

“Nonsense!” said one of the woman from Millcote, little old Agnes. “I have worked for two masters and one mistress; all had male cooks, and they’re better with meat, I daresay.”

“They know nothing of seasoning,” Mrs. Mitaka said, clearly offended.

Kylo was taught how to make custards and cheesecakes and French pastry, to truss game and garnish dessert-dishes; he even enjoyed the learning process, and if he cheated once or twice with his powers, no-one had to know.

Thursday morning found him in the pantry looking for red wine vinegar and olive oil. Through the narrow door, he saw Agnes and another charwoman enter the kitchen; they took no notice of him, gossiping freely as they started doing the dishes.

“Look at the state of these,” the charwoman complained. “All these beautiful plates, and they just let them collect dust, for shame! Patsy would be appalled — are you certain she won’t come?”

“Certainly doesn’t look like it,” Agnes said. “Suppose she doesn’t like what happened here.”

“Oh, with Maratelle Hux?”

Kylo almost dropped the bottle of vinegar he’d just recovered; he caught it without the use of his hands, and pulled back into the shadows to eavesdrop. Dusty beams of light pierced through the plank wall; clutching the bottle to his chest, he peered through a convenient hole and caught sight of Agnes, standing with her back to him, wiping the plates clean.

“Some hoity-toity lady dies in a freak accident,” she said, “what do we care? No, I’m talking about the MacGowan girl.”

“Moll?” the charwoman exclaimed. “What does she have against Moll MacGowan?”

Agnes peered around; Kylo’s blood ran cold. Don’t let her see me, he wished — and although they locked gazes through the peeping hole, Agnes couldn’t observe his presence. She didn’t even drop her voice to a whisper when she said, “She was stealing the silverware.”

“Who doesn’t?” the charwoman scoffed. “Fits these lords and ladies right; I’ll never earn as much as these pretties cost. If we’re not given enough reward, we get it ourselves: that’s how it’s always
been.” To illustrate her point, she made a half-dried spoon disappear up her sleeves.

“Oh, Moll was getting rewarded all right,” Agnes muttered meaningfully.

“You don’t mean to imply—?”

“The lord was positively in love with her.”

“The idiot,” the charwoman hissed. “You fall for Moll, you get your heart broken and she gets your purse; that’s the sum of the deal, I believe. Patsy is one to speak ill of the dead, as if she never—! Moll was kind, wasn’t she? A sensible girl, and a great friend. She used to tell the most amazing stories, and—”

“You haven’t heard the best one yet,” Agnes interrupted. “Patsy says the last time she saw her, she was heavy; and the last time she saw the late Lady Arkanis, she had a nurse and a child with her; how the babe wailed, and she wouldn’t even flinch, just kept browsing the laces!”

The charwoman gasped. “How cruel! Oh Moll, Moll! If she told me, I’d have raised little Armitage like one of my own!”

“Just look around!” Agnes laughed. “Look how he lives now; I bet it was Moll’s scheme all along.”

“What scheme, pray tell? She died; what is the use of a scheme if—”

“She didn’t plan to die.”

The charwoman cleared her throat and said with a heavy sigh, “Who does, who does? My poor Moll, my dove, my darling.”

“Patsy won’t set foot in a house of death, sorrow, and infamy,” Agnes said slowly.

Their conversation turned to Patsy’s husband, leaving Kylo bewildered. He waited a little, mind a-buzz with a thousand humming questions. He made his entrance as if he just came in, and commenced to make the dish of the day as the women diverted to the appropriate topic of the weather. He chopped onions and mushrooms, mixed them with the vinegar, crushed the garlic, cut the parsley, all the while wondering: How did Moll MacGowan die? He couldn’t ask and thus confess to eavesdropping; he had a reputation to uphold: that of a loyal, respectable tutor, who only minded his own business.

He had her name now; summoning the ghost would be easier. And he had questions to ask—he could enter her memories once; he might be able to do it again. He was prepared for a ritual—he would just have to wait until the night.

Dusk fell; Stormfield Hall was ready to welcome its guests. Kylo had almost forgotten that a party would arrive, and with them, Hux; he was so preoccupied with the endless preparations and then with the mystery of the MacGowan girl, that he hardly had time to comprehend what was about to happen until he saw Mitaka put on his gloves and golden watch-chain to receive the company. Millicent sauntered down the stairs in her gold-white dress, a refined smile gracing her lips.

“Are they here yet?” she asked, the tremble in her voice betraying her bubbling excitement.

“Not yet, Miss Millicent,” Mitaka answered with a short bow.

She nodded sharply, making the carefully arranged curls of her hair jump; Unamo hastened to smooth them down while Millicent nagged: “When are they to arrive?”
“I’ve sent Thanisson down the road; he’ll report promptly.” Mitaka looked ready to faint.

Wordlessly, Kylo turned on his heels, and left unobserved; indeed, he was invisible and insignificant. He needn’t even put on his best attire: he wouldn’t be introduced to the guests — what did they care about a mere teacher? Oh, if they knew the rank he truly held—how would they bow and curtsy, rush to assure him of their sympathies! Ben Solo was a duke — but Ben Solo was buried — and Kylo Ren withdrew to the library, cocooning himself in his ragged coat to fend off the cold.

He tried to read as the warmth of the furnaces spread; it was hopeless—he lost track of lines, confused words. His gaze kept wandering to the large windows opening to the garden: the drive was visible in the falling light of the sun, but there was no sight of Hux yet. He felt a failing at the heart thinking of him, and strange chills; would he come to greet him? Impossible. Still, he waited; and there: four equestrians galloped up the drive, and after them came two carriages. Two of the cavaliers were dashing gentlemen; the third was a lady—although she had trousers on, her cape and veil streaming long on the breeze betrayed her gender, and Kylo caught sight of shining blonde ringlets of hair; and lastly: Hux on the back of Finalizadora, straight-backed, gallant.

Kylo got up from the armchair and rushed to the window. He lay his fingers over the hard glass, swallowing back a cry; Look at me; I beg of you—just a glance!

The cavalcade followed the sweep of the drive, quickly turning the angle of the house, and Kylo lost sight of them. His hand dropped, heavy like lead. He felt as if he might get sick; on unsure legs, he walked to the loveseat, the same Hux had rested on with his sprained ankle, in nothing but his nightgown; how he had jested with him—and what a wasted opportunity it was: he had been permitted to touch that milky skin, and yet he failed to adore it with a caress, to grace it with a kiss; if Hux was here now, he’d worship his body.

Don’t lavish the love of the whole heart, soul, and strength, where such gift might not be wanted, he chastened himself, dropping to the cushions. Don’t make him the object of fine feelings and raptures —you don’t know whether such emotions are returned; his desire might have waned; it is possible his heart never caught on; he wanted you—you refused his advances; you visited him in dreams—he might not have seen you. Wait, wait just a minute; learn his feelings; stop hoping, if there’s no hope for a meaningful union. Don’t dare settle for anything less; he owes you devotion or outright refusal. Cease the games! You’re no toy; you are worth so much more.

A joyous stir was audible in the hall: gentlemen and ladies talking together, servants rushing, and the voice of Hux—distinguishable, but not loud. Kylo couldn’t make his words out. Then light steps ascended the stairs; there was a tripping to the gallery, soft cheerful laughs, opening and closing of doors, and, for a time, a hush.

Kylo sat motionless, listening to the tick-tock of the grand clock. He forced his attention back to the book in his lap, a first edition of Blake’s poetry—worthless love, destructive passions. He read until there was noise again as the guests left their rooms for dinner; he read on, until the book was finished and the dessert served. It was past nine; he hadn’t had dinner yet, and had no hope to grab a bite without being seen. He got two big volumes of history books, and fed his mind instead of his angry stomach. Ten o’clock: judging by the clamour, the guests were having coffee. Eleven: now, there was music. Kylo got to his feet and left the library.

His little chamber welcomed him with a chilly air. He made the hearth roar to life and sat by the fire, useless and powerless, chewing on the dried meat he stored in his room. His lashes felt heavy, but there was no possibility of sleep: doors kept closing and opening, and the music only got louder. Around midnight, he did his set of exercises, push-ups and pull-ups, jumping jacks, squats, lunges, until his muscles were screaming with pain. He washed by his basin; he wouldn’t be able to visit the
tub in the kitchen. He dropped to the bed, and listened for Maratelle; predictably, she was absent. Lying on his back, he surveyed the canopy, gaze unfocused. He knew what he wanted to hear: uneven steps and then a soft knock on his door. He’d admit his master, rub the pain away from his leg—riding and the cold winds must be killing him. He imagined Hux in his bed (he did it so often it felt like he belonged there) just lounging there and maybe complaining of exhaustion, or telling Kylo how much he missed him; how he’d never ever part with him again.

It was near one when the merry company started to retire, some still humming the sweet songs of their merriment; no visitor stopped by.

“Fine,” Kylo hissed. “Do as you may; but don’t expect me to be gentle with your secrets, if you’re so careless with my heart.”

With that, he got an empty piece of paper from his journal. Wetting the quill, he wrote: *Moll MacGowan dies,* and put it under his pillow. After a little consideration he added a shiny button, silk, folded banknotes, anything that might attract the spirit, including the half-finished portrait. Once he was ready, he buried his face in the pillow and, squeezing his eyes shut, wished for arcane sight.

If it didn’t work, he could try again on a quiet morning; but he hoped his anger and impatience would be to his benefit. He attempted to conjure her figure from memory as he fell asleep: a tall woman—red hair—Moll MacGowan—thin as a slip of paper—and in his last conscious moment, he remembered Maratelle, standing in the doorway.

The windows burn blue. Daybreak; the gas lamps in the kitchen are lit and a low fire flickers in the furnace. Bread is being made: Kylo can smell it. He surveys the table: it is still covered with flour, making its bumpy surface look like a wintry landscape. All the pots and plates are in their rightful places, waiting for the day to begin. Where is the kitchen woman, where is Moll MacGowan? A whimper; Kylo turns to a corner guarded by a bulky cupboard. There: crouching on the floor, hugging her round belly, her frock soaked through. Mrs. Mitaka is with her—she’s younger, softer, hair still raven-black. Whispers are exchanged: alert the Lord Arkanis—he’s not home—who is, who is?

A flash: the lights burn brighter. Maratelle is in the kitchen, hair loose, a shawl over her shaking shoulders. Mrs. Mitaka pleads to her: a midwife must be called; she refuses: imagine the scandal. Moll’s place is closer to the fire: there are cushions and blankets, and a maid is with her, clutching her hand. If you want to help her, so help her, Maratelle says; I have nothing to do with this business.

Moll is screaming in pain like a banshee. And she screams, and she screams, and she screams.

There’s blood, too much of it. Mrs. Mitaka is dashing around with bloodied towels: she hardly manages to wring out one, but there’s already need of it. Maratelle stays; she watches. The sun is high in the sky; she hasn’t dressed.

Mrs. Mitaka is on her knees, motionless. The maid cries, stay with us, Moll, Moll, you must, you must. Maratelle says: you may leave now. And Mrs. Mitaka: my lady, my lady, don’t make me. I’ll never forgive myself, I’ll never forgive—

The kitchen is empty, save for two women. Moll is shaking and bloody, sweat dampening her pale skin; she clutches at the air, let me hold him, let me hold him please, Armie, Armie, please let me hold him. Maratelle stands with the baby in her hands: he’s wrapped in white, face blue, soft hair red, little lips trembling. Please let me hold him, please he needs me, please I must hold him, my child, please.

The child is crying. Maratelle says: he might be innocent now but his mother is not, wicked little
bastard, bad blood bad blood I’ll keep an eye on him.

You can’t hurt him, never, never, I won’t let you, curse you curse you I’ll haunt you, I’ll come back for him you hear me, give him to me give him to me he needs me he needs me.

Hands claw at the air. She sits up, but she can’t stand. Maratelle steps back, rocking the crying baby. Hush now hush now.

Sleep.

Kylo woke with a cry. He covered his mouth with his hands, muffling the scream, but let his tears roll freely. He was stunned, aghast; the sorrow he felt, though, might not have been his own. He let it pass over him, let it consume and ache. It was deserved: uninvited, he’d borrowed a secret.

He had half a mind to get up, to visit the kitchen; seek out MacGowan and offer the comfort of revenge. A futile fancy: breakfast was already being prepared, and the ghost of MacGowan was a solitary one—she wouldn’t come now.

Kylo sat up in bed and peeled off his sweat-drenched nightgown. What a villainous gift he had; how he wished he wouldn’t know what he did now—but what would be the use of ignorance? What happened, happened; oblivion wouldn’t make it less harrowing or less real.

He washed himself, then rinsed away the bitter taste of the nightmarish past with salt and tooth powder. Did MacGowan make good on her threat to haunt Maratelle? Was that why her ghost seemed so content? But why did she stay, then?

(He needs me.)

Kylo dressed. Was it too late to save Armitage Hux? Could present joy amend past pains? In any case: Hux was a grown man now, responsible for his own pursuit of happiness. Kylo’s pity wouldn’t help him—never did; not even as Augustus, the boy with the shattered heart who could only offer a fragment of affection.

Kylo was lost in thought as he walked through the servant’s hall; two coachmen and three gentlemen’s gentlemen stood or sat around the fire. Maids and the women from Millcote were bustling about everywhere in the kitchen as Mrs. Mitaka shouted orders. Kylo watched her, looking for a broken light in her eyes or a tell-tale shiver as she passed the place where MacGowan died — but staring only earned him the privilege to make the cakes.

The company set out early for an excursion. Millicent and her little friend Frey were left behind and begged Kylo to hold them up so that they could peek out of the window and watch the flamboyant guests leave for the day. They were both heavier than they looked, yet Kylo hardly wavered with a girl sitting on each of his arms.

“Ah, look at Captain Phasma,” Millicent indicated the veiled lady. “I believe Armitage and her are racing for the gate—who do you suppose will win?”

“Auntie,” Frey said solemnly. Her eyes were distant and dim, but a lopsided smile tugged at her lips as she peered at Millicent, making her look less grim. “I raise the next wager: who do you think will propose first?”
Kylo almost dropped them; an excited scream was the girls’ answer.

“My apologies,” Kylo croaked, then cleared his throat. “Is there talk of marriage?”

“Yes,” they said in unison. Kylo felt a fiery glow rising to his face, and a terrible rage expanding within.

He gritted: “Are they in love, then?”

Frey let out a sardonic laugh unbecoming of her young age. “Aunt is incapable of love.”

“That’s not true,” Millicent argued, “But as for the marriage—there are political reasons to consider, and her rank and connections above all else; Armitage would benefit greatly from the union, there’s little doubt. They may not be lovers, but they’re great friends; and as for me, I like the idea of marrying a friend.”

“Just imagine,” Frey sighted wistfully, “you could come to live in Nautilus; it wouldn't be such a bore anymore. We could go to school together; no more dreadful governesses.”

“Would you come with us, Mr. Ren?” Millicent asked.

Kylo shook his head without thinking. He saw Armitage reach the gate first, making Finalizadora stand on her hind legs; he cried out for Captain Phasma, laughing. Kylo felt faint; he had to sit. He set the girls down and unceremoniously dropped to the floor.

“Are you quite all right?” Millicent enquired.

“I shall rest here for a while.”

“Come on now, Mr. Ren, the floor is no place to rest!”

Kylo just grunted and closed his eyes. Oh, that his luck would be so shrewd—that as soon as one problem was close to being solved, a thousand new ones arose! Hux was finally back on the premises—but the distance was never wider between them: old acquaintances stole his attention, and a lady, his loyalty.

What would his mother think? Kylo mused. Would she want her son to be happy, or wealthy? What wealth surpasses happiness? But could my company offer him delight, besides the pleasures of the flesh?

His torrid thoughts couldn’t go further: a vial was pressed to his nose and he sat up coughing, the sharp, horrid smell filling everything.

“What on Earth—”

“Smelling salts,” Frey announced warily, and pulled back a bit, putting the vial back into the purse tied around her hips.

Millicent rubbed Kylo’s back, and pleaded, “Please, Mr. Ren, don’t fall ill! I request your company this evening for coffee!”

“I was just struck down with nerves,” Kylo explained, unwilling to get to his feet; he remained on the floor like a fool. “You must understand it’s all news to me—besides, don’t you take your coffee with the company?”

“I indeed do, and that is why I need you,” Millicent said patiently. “I have told them so much about
you yesterday; they must think I was boasting; Armitage said they might have the pleasure to make your acquaintance."

“Mr. Hux?” Kylo whispered, befuddled.

“Oh, yes,” Frey interjected. “He said you were his American—”

“His,” Kylo repeated.

“An old friend from school, a beloved companion,” Millicent added.

“Beloved!”

“Although lowly in rank,” Frey hastened to add.

Kylo looked at one girl, then the other.

“Little ladies,” he announced, “consider the invitation accepted.”

* * *

His decision proved to be ill-advised. First of all: he had to wait alone while the elegant guests took their dinner. He only had a bite of buttered bread in the kitchen and some water to wash it down before Mrs. Mitaka banished him to the drawing-room. He was to sit still, not talk unless spoken to, and try his best to merely look like one of the room’s exotic decorations. He found the heavy smell of the wax-candles suffocating; the ticker of the clock annoying; he loathed to see his expression reflected on the gleaming silver surfaces—how pale he looked, how odd his features were, how poor his attire.

If only he was permitted a book or his charcoals; if only he had someone to talk to—if only Hux would come to see him, just peek in to be assured that Kylo was as entertained as his other guests: but he didn’t come—he didn’t care.

Curling his fingers into fists, Kylo noticed he’s made some of the objects levitate—oranges from the lavish fruit bowls and a candelabrum; gently, he concentrated on putting them back where they belonged, and then resolved to look at the select paintings: a peacock, a landscape, horses; boring, safe—unlike Hux’s private collection of art. Did his guests know about it? Did they suspect? God—did they participate, some of them, as artists, models, or fellow commissioners?

The curtain parted. The ladies entered; Kylo would later learn their names: there were the Tarkin girls, loosely related to the Grand Moff whom Hux held in high respect—two comely twins with good cheekbones, pale complexions and quick judgements, followed by their other sister, withdrawn, awkward, a mathematician; little Lieutenant Siv, a colourful shawl decorating her dreadlocks, steps easy, voice loud; Miss Gosta, strongly built, secretive, her white dress complimenting her brown skin; and lastly: Captain Phasma, the Viscount Scyre, in her silver robe, so heavily pleated it looked like armour.

Kylo rose to bow; Siv and Gosta responded with a gracious nod of their head, but the others remained motionless, confused by his presence. Maybe his invitation was not as well-advertised and warmly welcomed as Millicent led him to believe. She entered with Frey presently and made haste to occupy the most comfortable sofa. Kylo’s eyes were on Phasma: his nemesis, his rival. She didn’t
seem interested to engage in a mortal battle of gazes. She walked around the room, seemingly uncomfortable in her weighty gown, holding her fan as if it was a sword to be drawn. She was as tall as Kylo himself, if not taller; pearls were adorning her neck and a diadem was nestled in her fair hair. A queenly figure, muscular enough to be to Hux’s tastes—but still, not his preferred sex. Of course, that was precisely why their marriage would be so convenient.

“Do you suppose we’ll have games tonight?” Gosta addressed the room and lowered herself to a sofa; as soon as she was seated, Millicent was over her lap, demanding attention—she looked to be in a state of ecstasy with so many fine ladies around her. Gosta laughed and petted her curls.

“No if the General keeps lecturing the Director about engineering,” one of the Tarkin girls observed.

“How infinitely tiring,” her twin added.


“He hasn’t designed a weapon in ages,” the first speaker moaned.

“I’m certain he will,” Gosta said, “but you see, he’s rather busy with this little one here—isn’t he, love?” She tickled Millicent, who squirmed and laughed. “And then there’s the barony; and this estate; so much to do, now that—Now.”

“Now that Brendol is gone,” Phasma said, soft but daring.

There was a hush; and then everybody started speaking, mostly of unrelated topics—and in the ensuing cacophony, Phasma continued to circle the room.

Kylo felt dazed and rather idiotic; it was like the Chandrila masquerade, as if he was an unrefined teen again, ignored by polite society, unworthy to know their secrets. Be it, then; he had greater things to consider—from everybody present, he was the only one who had command over the supernatural; what did he care about worldly intrigue?

He sat brooding, unable to silently slip away yet—the evening had just begun; and even if he was excluded from all conversation due to his position, he was supposed to be present and be pleasant. He was already sick of it, sick of the shimmer of muslin, the buzz of voices, the overwhelming smell of powder and perfumes.

By the time the men were admitted, his rage was boiling red-hot in the cauldron of his heart, threatening to overflow. They all wore black and white; he was in his browns and greys.  There was Mr. Erso and Director Krennic, both silver-haired but exceedingly handsome; the jovial Lance Corporal Carr and the colossal Sergeant Torben from Phasma’s company, helping her brother Keldo with his mahogany wheelchair; and finally Hux himself.

How Kylo wished he could be indifferent to his presence; how he wanted to turn away, unconcerned; but Hux arrested his gaze—he was positively radiant that night, hair combed to a swell swoop, eyes brilliant. Kylo’s treacherous heart jumped with joy: seeing Hux was an acute pleasure, one he couldn’t deny himself—so he watched; he longed; and he was ignored.

Last time they saw each other, Kylo saved him from the nightly terror of Maratelle; Hux called him his knight; complimented his art; invited him into his private quarters; and then he was gone. Gone were his easy smiles, the inviting shine of his eyes, his interest—he engaged in conversation with all his guests while the coffee was served, but didn’t spare so much as a glance at Kylo.

Kylo wondered whether he was being punished or teased, or whether Hux forbid himself to enjoy his company—or maybe his trip to London reminded him of his duties; maybe he realised that an affair
with a tutor would make him ridiculous; and maybe Hux thought he was respecting Kylo’s wishes with the withdrawal of his pursuit. This last possibility made Kylo gaze on, stare unabashed, and bare his naked soul.

“Don’t look directly at the sun,” a voice said.

Spooked, he straightened up in his seat in the shadowy alcove and blinked at Keldo, who responded to his befuddlement with a sardonic smile. “Pardon, my lord?” Kylo asked.

“Don’t look directly at the sun,” Keldo repeated. “You’ll go blind and he won’t look back.”

Kylo spared one last glance to Hux—conversing with Krennic and Siv, Millicent sitting over his knees—and then turned back to Keldo. “I apologise, my lord. I didn’t mean to be rude to your friend.”

“I don’t think he’d be offended; and that’s the problem.”

Kylo looked him over. Tanner than his sister; angular features; blonde hair and considerable sideburns, a bitter mouth and intense eyes—an attractive face indeed. When Kylo’s attention was back to Hux, he was talking to Phasma, heads bent together in an intimate whisper. He flinched.

“You are the new tutor, yes?” Keldo asked with an edge.

“Yes, my lord.”

“Do you know the Lord Arkanis well?”

“I haven’t been in his employ for long.”

“He mentioned you being old acquaintances; a most peculiar matter.”

Kylo’s ears were burning; was it embarrassment, was it shame? In any case, he was cornered—and made to feel like a fool again. He was terrified Keldo knew of his amorous hopes and scorned them —how piteous is a dependant in love!

“We attended school together,” he said. He began to see how insignificant this shared experience was; he liked to imagine that he was Hux’s only friend, as he himself was without any other companion—but behold, Hux could fill a room with people who admired him, even if that admiration was just for the sake of his position.

“Armitage has always been a bright student,” Keldo noted.

“Certainly, my lord.” Kylo swallowed around a lump in his throat. Abashed, but with a certain provocativeness, he changed the topic and said, “I don’t know much about you, my lord.”

Keldo was taken aback by the possibility that someone would be ignorant to his achievements. Adjusting his cravat, he said, “Well, I’m the brother of the Lady Scyre and a lieutenant in the Royal Engineers.”

“Did you meet the Lord Arkanis in the war?” Kylo asked. “In India.”

“There are many ‘wars’ in India, son; you’d have to be more specific. And no, actually, we’ve known each other since childhood. My sister was his father’s favourite; he supported her military career.”

“Yours as well, I presume.”
“Actually, no,” Keldo said, surveying him with growing distaste. “I’m a pacifist, mind you, I never wanted to do anything with the army. My sister made me join the campaign.”

“I hear she might get married soon,” Kylo said, unable to help himself.

Keldo frowned. They both glimpsed at Phasma and Hux, still speaking confidentially. “That is very likely,” Keldo said. “What a horrid match.” He looked Kylo over and added, “It could be worse.” With that, he took his leave; Kylo hardly had time to jump to his feet and bow to him.

He remained standing, nails biting into the flesh of his palms. What an utter embarrassment; he wished he could go after Keldo and challenge him to a duel for the injury he’d done to his character—or better yet: challenge his sister.

They wouldn’t fight with the fast pistols his gunslinger father preferred, life and death depending more on luck than skill: Kylo wished for a sword; he’d charge at Phasma on horseback, wielding a sword comparable to Excalibur, red with blood and burning bright. He’d be Arthur and Merlin wrapped in one, smiting Sir Lancelot for stealing fair Guinevere’s attention. Justice, magic, might, and revenge would come together in his person—but he was no wizard-knight; he was just a tutor and a miserable witch.

“Let us have music,” Phasma called. “I am bored.”

Kylo looked at her; oh, if looks could kill. No-one minded the glowering teacher; they were too preoccupied with begging Erso to play, who made the pretense of being too inapt to meet the courteous request, citing his poor skills and poorer taste, but eventually he obliged them and walked to the piano. Kylo watched him like a hawk: the impromptu concert might give him a chance to leave unnoticed. Erso smiled and joked as he cracked his fingers, but Kylo noted how dull his eyes were, how rigid his posture. He was a man none too happy to be here; that made the two of them.

“What shall I play for you?” he asked, the lisp of a foreign accent embellishing his words. Krennic came up to him and put his hand on his back.

“Whatever you play will be lovely,” he said in a tone that didn’t suggest encouragement but boasting pride about a friend’s talents.

“Greensleeves!” Millicent cried out. Erso’s face lit up as he turned to her.

“I will play it gladly; will the little lady sing to my tunes?”

“Oh, I don’t possess the talent, really,” she said, pulling closer to Hux who stood next to her. He chuckled softly and bent down ever so slightly to squeeze her little hand.

“Nonsense,” he assured her while lacing their fingers together. “You’re magnificent and we’d be delighted to hear you.”

“Please do take it into account that I’m out of practice,” Millicent announced self-importantly as she let Hux lead her to the piano. “My music lessons haven’t yet started with Mr. Ren.”

At that, Hux turned to Kylo, as if on instinct; his lips were smiling and his eyes were begging: stay. Just a fleeting minute: Hux’s attention was back on his sister, helping her assume the pose of an esteemed singer ready to melt hearts with her grand aria.

Kylo stood stock-still as the first notes played, mellow, low, like the unsure humming of a schoolboy.
Millicent put her hand over the piano’s lid, cleared her throat and closed her eyes. Her alto was perfect, albeit a little breathless, as she sang: “Alas, my love, you do me wrong, to cast me off discourteously; and I have loved you oh so long, delighting in your company!”

Kylo felt eyes on him. Peering up, he was met with Hux’s gaze again: open, broken, forbidden.

“I have been ready at your hand to grant whatever you would crave; I have both wagered life and land, your love and good-will for to have.”

How could he bear it? How was he to overcome his blind rage, the aching of his wounded heart? He begged with his eyes: don’t look at me now; don’t look, or we’re done for.

“Well, I will pray to God on high that thou my constancy mayst see and that yet once before I die—thou wilt vouchsafe to love me.”

Kylo turned away. He needed to get out; he needed air—he felt faint and he knew he must’ve looked like it, pale and shaking. The guests were standing around the piano in a tight circle, enchanted, trapping him like the fairy ring did. There was no way of escape.

“Greensleeves was all my joy, greensleeves was my delight”

Something in Kylo’s chest felt too tight; he looked back to Hux—he wasn’t watching him anymore, but Phasma, who gave him a taut smile as the verse ended.

“Greensleeves was my heart of gold—and who but my lady greensleeves?”

In the ensuing applause, Kylo broke free. He swept through the empty dining room, heart beating in his throat, choking on curses. Damn this charade to hell, the affected show of society, the ban of the union of man and man, and master and teacher—and damn Hux for accepting these rules, for betraying the wishes of the soul for an appearance of civility.

“Mr. Ren!” Hux called; he halted. They were separated by the considerable length of the room, Hux by the curtains and Kylo by the door. Hypocrite, he wanted to scream, and worse words still; but they wouldn’t come. “Where are you going?”

“I’m tired,” Kylo said, hating how hoarse his weepy voice was.

“You didn’t excuse yourself,” Hux said. He didn’t come closer, the coward.

“Excuse me, Mr. Hux; I am very tired.”

Tired of games, tired of you, tired to the bones—and no sleep would fix it, unless Hux was in his bed. How beautiful he looked, how overcome—good: let him know bewilderment, let him suffer. If he couldn’t return love, let him share the agony. That was only fair.

“Tonight I excuse you,” Hux said, “but understand that as long as my visitors stay, I expect you to appear in the drawing-room every evening; it is my wish, don’t neglect it. Furthermore: I desire you to be sociable, and come and speak to me on these occasions.”

“You could’ve come speak to me if you were so interested,” Kylo retorted. Hux stepped closer: just three limping steps, too little to close the distance between them.

“I couldn’t,” he hissed. “I can’t! Don’t you understand?”

“I understand enough!”
Hux narrowed his eyes at him, hands laced behind his back. “You’re crying. Are you well?”

“I am very well, sir,” Kylo gritted, blinking away tears of anger.

“What have you been doing during my absence?”

“My job.”

Hux sighed. “Go on; sulk. I’ll see you tomorrow, I hope you’ll be in a far more pleasant mood.”

Kylo just bared his teeth in answer. Hux turned, defeated, and called: “Good-night, my—” He bit off the sentence and disappeared behind the curtain.

Kylo remained in his spot, tears falling freely now. A song was in the air: *Dido's lament* by Purcell. A farewell.

* * *

“S’il vous plaît, ouvrez la porte,” Unamo pleaded, knocking on Ren’s door.

He was lying face down on his bed, utterly wretched. He’d hid away in his room for the past day, only emerging when nature called; evening was fast approaching and his company would be required. He was wearing his clothes from the day before, his frock coat creased, his collar lopsided. He didn’t even comb his hair; it didn’t matter.

“I need you to mind Millicent,” Unamo continued. “I’ve been told to help with the refreshments.”

“I could do that,” Kylo mused. A drop of arsenic here; a lick of love potion there. Unamo rasped on the door anew.

“Make haste! Monsieur Hux asked for the dining room to be re-arranged. I don’t want Mademoiselle Millicent to be underfoot while furniture is being move around, it’s dangerous. Come now, what ails you?”

“My little heart is sick,” Kylo said in a grievous tone, but got to his feet.

He ascended the stairs like a vampire freshly out of his coffin to survey his terrible premises. The impression was somewhat ruined by the ladies dashing about, ringing for their maids who hurried to them with heaps of fabrics, shawls, and knick knacks. Kylo bowed to them; most of them were too busy to acknowledge his existence. Little Millicent came running to him and almost collided with his knees. He gathered her up in his arms to avoid further accidents.

“Mr. Ren, Mr. Ren, will you be on my team? Oh, you must!” she begged, hugging his neck.

“What are we playing, pray?”

“Charades! It’s wonderful fun, have you never played it before?”

“I don’t recall, no.”

He carried Millicent to the dining room. The tables had been wheeled away, the lights otherwise disposed, the chairs placed in a semicircle opposite the arch. A team working under Mitaka was
going in and out of the drawing-room, which had been transformed into a boudoir.

Hux was there, surrounded by ladies and gentlemen, selecting team-members. He looked at Kylo as he entered with Millicent, and in an impassive tone, asked, “Will you play, Mr. Ren?”

Without thinking, Kylo shook his head, then hastened to add, “I’ll be Miss Millicent’s consultant.”

Hux nodded curtly, but Krennic complained: “That’s cheating.”

“I don’t think we’re playing with stakes, so it shouldn’t matter,” Millicent fired back and signaled to Kylo to put her down.

Their team was sent to the dining room to take their seats on the crescent of chairs; Hux’s team remained behind the curtain. Kylo found himself unreasonably excited; he blamed his competitive spirit—playing against Hux and Phasma was just what he needed. They were served drinks, and ere long, a bell rang.

The curtain drew up and revealed the figure of Keldo in the arch, enveloped in a white sheet, complete with a pallium, and Krennic standing behind him with a live dove, his mantle pooling to the ground. The Tarkin twins entered, cloaked, bringing palm leaves with them. A bell sounded: Phasma and Siv marched in in military garment, carrying a chair on their shoulders; upon the chair sat Hux, laurel around his forehead, extending an arm to greet the imagined masses of his subjects. One of his shoulders was exposed: he was the only one who neglected to put on a shirt under his makeshift toga. Kylo’s lips parted as he sat drinking up the sight. The cheek of this man! The impudence! And oh—the beauty! How graceful were his fingers curled around his lance—how majestic he looked—how the low lights made his lashes a translucent gold, how they painted soft shadows over his marble skin; oh, if Kylo could be that darkness and caress his slender shoulders.

The curtain dropped and he involuntarily groaned. His team started discussing the solution: court; Emperor; Rome. He alone knew the answer: Augustus. His ears were burning when the curtains rose again and Millicent announced their best tip.

Hux looked directly at Kylo as he said, “That is correct.”

A considerable interval elapsed. Kylo was restless, humiliated, aroused. Doubtlessly, this scene was addressed to him: a postcard Hux should’ve sent years ago. He pictured themselves under better circumstances, playing charades in Chandrila, him and the General. He’d have his Emperor in his lap, cover his bare arms with kisses. He’d cloak him in desire, find an empty room, kiss him till dawn.

He had loved him then, at sixteen: it was a love that dared not speak its name yet, but which had ached and burned with such fervor he got sick with it. He had fancied to know the full breadth of love’s anguish — oh, how weak and foolish he had been! Now his love regenerated him with a vengeance every night; it grew each day—such tortuous transformation—yet he persisted: he needed evidence of Hux’s trust and appreciation. He was strong; proud; relentless; and even if his yearning heart expanded to break his ribs, he’d say: prove me Hux truly wants it, for I’ve had enough of wasting my love.

He didn’t pay attention to the following two scenes, preoccupied with untangling the confused strings of his heart. It was his team’s turn now—but before that, there was a break for ideas and wine. They withdrew to the drawing-room; the air was heavy, the surroundings chaotic: feathers here, jewelry there, weapons, utensils, a thousand garments—nothing piqued his interest. He paced aimlessly while his teammates discussed the performance. There was some clamour from outside, surpassing the volume of their endless debate.
Torben yanked the curtain open and called: “Oi, keep it down, we can’t hear our own thoughts!”

A frozen scene was revealed: poor Mitaka curling his shoulders and blinking rapidly, trying to disappear; Hux’s party turned in their seats; Frey pulling on Keldo’s cuffs, begging.

“There’s a Gypsy woman,” Mitaka sputtered.

“There is a Gypsy woman who insists to be admitted,” Hux said, exasperated, and touched his temples with his index fingers, as if poking on a headache. “Dopheld was just explaining why he absolutely cannot send her away.”

“She’s being quite troublesome, Mr. Hux,” Mitaka murmured. Gosta popped up behind Torben’s shoulders, obscurig Kylo’s view of the dining room. “A Gypsy woman! Does she tell fortune?”

“I’m certain she does,” Phasma said. “She sings, she dances, she curses your enemies—no doubt the whole deal.”

“Oh please, do let her in!” Gosta pleaded, and the little girls joined in. The room filled with voices of sceptics and believers. The master of the house listened to everybody patiently; he sat leisurely, legs crossed, but he looked just as dignified as he did on his throne, the very figure of a gracious monarch.

“All right,” he declared. “Let’s put a hold on our games for now. This might prove to be interesting; real magic for some of you; a study in delusions for the rest.” Chairs were pushed back and the guests all rushed to the main hall, chattering excitedly; Kylo followed them, anxious with anticipation. Some of the servants were lingering on the gallery, watching the girl patiently waiting by the door, guarded by Unamo. She was about eighteen, dressed in flamboyant fabrics and laden with jewelry: even the silk in her hair was festooned with golden pendants. She curtsied, her raised skirt revealing frayed boots.

“Good evening!” her voice rang clear. “I’m Rey, at your service.”

“You’re awfully pale for a Gypsy,” Phasma noted.

Rey bowed her head. “I was an unfortunate orphan, my lady; I was adopted by a Romanichal group who kindly raised me as one of their own. You must’ve noticed the smoke from our camp on your excursion the day before. They’ve sent me to your generous company, as I am more likely to get admitted due to my white complexion.” She curtsied again, this time with less flair. Kylo noticed a quick smirk, and then she was all pearly smiles again.

“What can you do?” Phasma asked, crossing her arms in front of her chest. Rey ventured closer; the guests stepped back, white Mitaka leapt to stop her. Rey halted and inclined her head.

“Past, present and future I see; and I can influence the forces which govern our fate to give you what you desire.” With that, she plucked a shiny coin from behind Mitaka’s ears; somebody from the company gasped in delight, and Gosta clapped. “You can be rewarded,” Rey said, and tossed the sovereign to the air; it turned, glinted, and then it disappeared with a flash. “I can take back what I granted.” She stepped to Unamo and produced a single red rose; handing it to her, she continued: “I promise to be kind if you’re kind to me. I honour hospitality.”

Blushing, Unamo smelled the rose. Hux cleared his throat. “Can I ask your prices?”
“The Lord Arkanis is a practical man,” Rey said. “I don’t ask for much, my lord, bless you: half a crown per person; and note that I only wish to admit those who respect my practice.”

Kylo overheard Krennic’s whisper, “Easy to convince a mind that had already made its decision. Parlour-tricks and promises of riches; some people can’t say no to those.”

“You may join us for a while for the entertainment of my esteemed guests,” Hux said, beckoning her closer with a gallant gesture. “You’ll be given a place in the library and two maids to help you prepare. Madamoiselle Unamo,” he continued in French, “lead the way to the library and make sure our medium doesn’t get too nosey.”

“Dear baron, a moment,” Rey said in rapid French, her tempo and pronunciation far surpassing Hux’s affected speech. “I came on foot; and it’s such a long distance—I’m famished and fatigued; please, let me eat first, God bless—just a slice of bread, a sip of water—I can’t tell fortune on an empty stomach.”

In the end, she was served a full dinner, asparagus soup and baked salmon with Hollandaise sauce, green peas, potato balls, lemon sherbert, and fine tea; she ate with an appetite which the ladies found most amusing, and she even got a basketful of goods to bring home to the hungry children in the camp she didn’t neglect to mention.

Kylo couldn’t explain why he was so nervous around her. Could she be a fellow witch? She certainly didn’t behave like it: if Kylo was her, he’d hide his powers—it wasn’t so long ago witches were hunted and hanged. He wouldn’t dare go from house to house and advertise his anomaly in the hopes of a few coins. Rey laughed so easily and spoke so freely—she didn’t look like someone who was chased by a magpie or haunted by ghosts, which Kylo understood to be part of being a witch, the precious cost of his abilities.

After she was finished with the food, Rey withdrew to the library while the company flocked to the sitting room amidst delighted chatter. They occupied the rich purple sofas and armchairs, lounging and gossiping about magic; Kylo’s place was on an ottoman in the corner; as soon as he took his seat, Millicent and Frey were upon him, demanding fairy tales. He told them the stories of his childhood about Old Stormalong, the Black Dog of the Hanging Hill, and how Joseph Bonaparte met the Jersey Devil—it helped to take his mind off the threat of Rey’s presence, but before long, her first customer Gosta returned, speaking of wonders.

“She knew everything about Mama!” she exclaimed, dancing through the room. “Oh, you must all go to her, she’s blessed with the Sight!”

“Did she help you talk to Mama?” Phasma asked from her seat, setting her pack of cards aside. “Did she have a very deep voice, did she roll her eyes?”

“She’s not some occultist!” Gosta said, slightly offended, and ceased her joyous gavotte. “She doesn’t claim to talk to the dead—but she can talk to us, and she knows all!”

“Oh, I can’t wait to have all my secrets revealed,” Phasma said, getting to her feet. She smoothed her frock down and noted, “Maybe she’ll make the table dance for a crown.”

“She only admits believers,” Keldo reminded her.

“I do believe,” Phasma said, clipped, and marched out.

The room was abuzz with speculation the minute the door closed behind her: could Rey’s magic reveal something Phasma desperately wished to keep hidden? Would Phasma’s crude scepticism
meet its match in the silver-tongued fortune-teller? She was absent for quite awhile, and when she returned, she was wide-eyed and visibly shaken.

“Armitage, a word,” she barked; they went to the abandoned drawing-room together. Carr wasn’t discouraged; he sought out Rey in the absence of Phasma and Hux, and they were still conversing while Siv’s and the silent Tarkin sister’s turn came. Millicent tapped on Kylo’s elbow.

“Can I be the next?”

“I didn’t know you believed in magic.”

“I’m curious,” Millicent said, worrying her lips. She was being shy and rather anxious; Kylo proposed to accompany her, much to her relief. They approached the library hand in hand, Kylo whispering sweet promises: that the lady would be very nice, and that it was all a trick anyhow, so Millicent had nothing to fear. He wasn’t sure he believed what he was saying himself: he felt like some nocturnal animal shunning the light as they entered the bright room. The moon and all her stars shone upon the glass ceiling, the chandeliers were sparkling and there were candles all about, contributing to the radiance.

“Welcome,” Rey said. She was sitting on the carpet, hands resting on her knees. Unamo and an elderly maid were looming behind her, standing with their head bent. The three of them gave the impression of the Parcae.

Kylo placed two half-crown in a modest bowl on the ground, filling steadily, while Millicent asked: “Can Mr. Ren stay with me?”

“If you’re not afraid he’ll find out something you wouldn’t be willing to share, then no,” Rey said; the words were somber, but her tone suggested jest.

“I’m not afraid of you,” Millicent said very seriously, making Rey laugh.

“Good, good; please be seated, the both of you, and give me your hands.”

They obeyed, so they were forming a circle. “Will you read our palms?” Millicent asked as she arranged the frock of her pink-and-white dress, the one Hux gifted to her.

“I’ll read your minds,” Rey whispered, closing her eyes. She put her chin up and squeezed their hands.

Kylo’s palm was damp with nervousness. He sought out Unamo’s glance, who rolled her eyes at him with a smirk. The other maid looked deeply troubled, fanning herself with her hand. Rey’s eyes opened; only the whites were visible.

“Monsters,” she said, her voice altered. “All monsters. Tom Tit Tot has been invited. Yallery Brown. Snoke. Fairy fair and fairy foul. Rawhead and bloodybones. He knocked on the window. You left the gate open. Murder, murder, murder and murder. Blood in the kitchen. The hanging tree in the garden. He keeps hidden. You slaughter. I cannot forgive what happens in the fire. Then what comes after. And then, and then. Curse your midnight magic. Curse you with it. Curse you to hell. It doesn’t have to happen. Curse you to hell. She made a promise. Curse you to hell. Mother, mother, mother. No excuses. Curse you to hell.” Her eyes flew open and she dropped their hand as if she couldn’t dare to touch them any longer; jumping to her feet, she yelled: “Get out!”

Kylo was too stunned to move, the enigmatic prophecy scratching at his mind; he felt raw—a helpless body on a dissection table, and Rey had the scalpel.
“Out!” she screamed. Kylo came to himself when he heard Millicent whimper; she was curled up and trembling. Kylo’s heart sank at the sight of her.

“You frightened her,” he said; maybe it was a threat—Rey knew of his powers; and he was ready to use them against those who hurt the people under his protection.

“Get out!” Rey repeated. The lights flickered, the flame of the candles expanded: an inferno of brilliance, and Rey seemed to glow herself. Kylo gathered up Millicent as Unamo grabbed Rey, demanding to know what happened, why was she screaming. Millicent was crying, her whole body shaking. Kylo pulled her to his chest, and ran.

He could’ve stayed. Could’ve asked: How come you have magic? What do you know? What does it mean? — pacify her to get answers; follow her back to the camp, even, interrogate all fortune-tellers, pry at their secrets— but what did it matter, when Millicent was so upset, and help had already been denied of Kylo: curse you to hell.

A return to Lowood was impending. Maybe Luke knew of Rey; maybe everything was connected; maybe he could get an explanation of the kitchen woman, the wych elm, the magpie, the fire.

They encountered Hux in the hall; he was headed for the library, marching sternly, livid with cold rage. Millicent reached for him, weeping, and he wordlessly took her over.

“She’s wicked,” Millicent bawled. “She said all these awful things, she said—murder and fire and monsters—? I don’t understand! I think she mentioned Mama, the tree, how could she, how dare she, Mama, I want Mama, give her back, I’m sorry, I—, give her back, she cursed me—”

“She wasn’t talking about you,” Kylo said softly. Hux looked at him; his eyes suggested murder.

“We have reasons to believe that she is some sort of spy,” Hux said, rocking his crying sister. “She gathered intel and rumours and wrapped it up in mysticism. She’ll be sent away.”

“She’s wicked,” Millicent repeated. “She’s wicked, she hates us, she—”

Kylo was choking on a revelation: It’s not just about what you saw all those years ago. It’s about me: I’m tangled in Stormfield Hall’s mystery, and I’m the only one who can solve it—and I have my own misery: the magpie, the magic.

“Mr. Ren,” Hux said, “would you be so kind as to fetch Carr and Torben? They’ll escort Miss Rey out if she doesn’t leave on her own volition.”


A glottal sob escaped Millicent’s throat. Hux dropped Kylo’s hand to hug her closer; she buried her face into the crook of his shoulder. “All right, all right,” Hux whispered into her hair. “You can talk to me, always, always. Come come, it’s all right.” A parting glance to Kylo: “Please tell Mademoiselle Unamo to stay put; I want to talk to my sister privately.”

“As you wish,” Kylo bent his head and hurried away, heart hammering and the place where Hux touched his wrist tingling with gratification. A day before he might’ve lingered to eavesdrop in the hopes to overhear what Millicent knew of the wych elm, and what secrets his darling Hux guarded; but Maratelle’s mystery now seemed to be the least of his worries, just a piece in a shattered mosaic. He suspected that Rey referred both to an unknown past and his future: he just didn’t know which was which. And what about Yallery Brown and Rawheadandbloodybones? Weren’t those some kind of detestable creatures, preying on men?
As it turned out, the assistance of Carr and Torben wasn’t needed: Rey ran away, leaving behind the money, the basket of food, even her coat. The guests were confused and rumours were already spreading due to the servants; Phasma assured everybody that Rey has been banished for her inappropriate behaviour, and upsetting Millicent (as reported by the maids) only added to her offences. She suggested to continue the merriments: soon, there was champagne and music; she’ll make a good hostess one day, Kylo thought bitterly.

He slipped away from the company, head swimming. I cannot forgive what happens in the fire. It echoed Hux’s words in the London dream about Stormfield Hall burning and Millicent’s then-innocent observation that the laboratory fire wouldn’t be the last to happen. The fire was a future threat. You slaughter; utter nonsense. Tom Tit Tot has been invited; something to do with the past. He tried to extend his consciousness to Luke, but to no avail, of course: it’d been decades since he could reach somebody with his mind.

He found himself on the second storey corridor. It was empty for now, but brightly lit. He pressed his lips together and set out to turn off all the lamps and summon the one person who could have answers to his questions.

“Come now, Maratelle Hux,” he muttered, “help me out here. It's just you and me. Come; haunt me.”

The last flame flickered and then there was nothing but darkness and the lingering scent of petroleum. He heard the piano from downstairs: a distant melody, slow, almost menacing. He blinked a few times, bringing sparkles to his eyes; he whispered the name again, and there: sitting on the stairs in a distance, the ghost of Maratelle.

He’d be a fool to approach. Maratelle has proven to be malevolent on numerous occasions, including the most recent account he got from the last memories of Moll MacGowan. Maratelle was a heartless, cruel creature, who only got worse with death.

He gathered his courage, curled his fingers into fists, and started walking.

He soon noticed that something was amiss.

There was no tree. Maratelle looked like one of the guests, if a bit old-fashioned, with feathers in her curled hair, her white dress not torn by branches; but her heart was bleeding, and when she looked at Kylo, he could see that she was crying bloody tears, wet stripes of scarlet painting her face.

“Millicent is hurting,” she sobbed. “She needs me.”

“Can I be of assistance?” Kylo asked, chilled, and Maratelle nodded sharply, her curls bobbing almost comically.

“Please bring her to me.”

Absolutely not, Kylo’s mind screamed; but he smiled pleasantly, and asked: “Will you let me pass?”

Maratelle moved aside. Kylo’s stomach threatened to turn over. There was no way he would pass her: she could reach out and grab his ankle, drag him to hell; but then he heard a child’s scream—he was needed; he took a deep breath and mounted the stairs.

Maratelle tipped her head back to look at the ceiling, clearly worried; then she tipped her head a bit more, and more. Kylo broke into a sprint, not daring to look back: the sound of cracking bones suggested everything he needed to know.
On the third storey corridor, he looked around frantically, hardly registering that Hux came running towards him until the man called out, “Thank God you’re here!”


“Quick! I was just headed out to call you—I need you, you’re the only one I can trust. Will you betray that trust?”

“Never,” Kylo blurted out. Hux looked frantic, his hair disheveled, eyes shining brightly. Kylo noticed a scratch mark on his face, fresh and oozing red.

“Millie is in pain,” Hux said. “You must help her. Come quick, this way!”

“What happened?” Kylo demanded, allowing Hux to pull him by his clothing. He’d never seen him like this: Hux was frightened.

“She’s having an episode,” he explained. “She flew into a rage—You’ll see. You’ll understand. Only you can.”

“Hysteria?” Kylo guessed, making Hux chuckle—it had an edge of mania.

“I wish,” he said, and opened the door to Millicent’s room.

Kylo had been here before—it was a perfect little dollhouse: she had her own tea-table, a vanity, various shelves filled with toys, a small tub, a bed with white canopy, paintings of docile flowers and windows opening to the silent garden. Kylo looked around while Hux locked the door.

“Where is she?”

“Under the bed, at the moment.”

Kylo’s blood ran cold. He peeked behind his shoulder in the vain hope Hux was jesting; he was standing with his back to the door, broken and breathing heavily. Kylo approached the bed, minding his steps like a burglar, and crouched down.

“Miss Millicent?”

Something was watching him from the darkness. He heard a growl—low, unnatural.

“She doesn’t recognise you,” Hux said softly.

“Millicent,” Kylo tried again and extended his hand. A hiss; he saw eyes which reflected back the light the way a cat’s does, but they were too big to belong to anything but a human.

“Can you help her?” Hux begged. Kylo looked up at him, uncomprehending.

“How could I?”

“You’re a witch, are you not?” There was something defeated in Hux’s tone. He looked a different man altogether than the one who proposed a study in delusions. He was exhausted, and maybe bitter, but not at all in denial about what was happening to his sister—whatever was happening, it wasn’t the first time. “I hear Miss Rey suggested you were one of them.”

“I—What is Millicent?”

“I never put a name to it. She’s not something; she’s human—as much as I am; she just does certain
things—shapeshifting among them.” Hux waved it away. “I am convinced it is some sort of medical condition; what you call magic might be a mutation.”

“Mutation,” Kylo repeated, disbelieving. “Look at her.”

“She looks fairly normal,” Hux said. “Considering.”

Kylo looked under the bed again. Millicent looked back.

“How often—?” Kylo asked.

“You can ask her yourself when she turns back. She has to be rather upset, and she’s a placid child, so it doesn’t happen frequently. I’ve forbidden her to tell anybody about it, obviously. She is quite apt at hiding her skills, so much so that I can leave her alone safe in the knowledge she won’t fool about; unless when she gets up into a sycamore tree.” Hux shot a pointed glance under the bed. “That was very silly of you, Millie.”

“No-one knows?”

“No-one but you. Unamo might suspect something, but she’s a reasonable woman. She’s quick to dismiss the evidence and pretend that the world is as normal as she believes it to be. Unlike Millicent's former governess. We had to get rid of her.”

Kylo shook his head. It was all a dream. It had to be. Hux in a corset surrounded by adoring gentlemen in a pleasure-dome made more sense than this.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked, helpless.

“I need you to get her out. She’ll resist.”

“What then?”

“Employ your occult arts.”

Kylo let out a deep sigh. He shed his coat and rolled up his sleeves; an unwise decision, given that Millicent seemed prone to clawing, but he needed a wider range of movement than the confinement of his clothes allowed. Silently, he counted to three, and then reached to grab her.

That part was easy—keeping her still, less so; she wriggled around and Kylo had to struggle to get a firm hold on her arms without hurting her. He pulled; Millicent growled.

Apart from the fact that she had a cat’s eyes, long nails and sharp teeth, she did look fairly normal; rather adorable, even, as absurdity would have it. A partial shapeshifting: no fur or whiskers, or anything else resembling a cat’s anatomy—just an evocation of the animal. She was strong and resilient; but Kylo was stronger, and promptly overpowered her. He got a hold of her nape, gentle but firm, making her freeze.

“Do your magic,” Hux requested; Kylo didn’t have it in him to respond that that was not at all how witchcraft worked. Hux had suggested Millicent would turn back on her own vocation; the wisest thing to do would be to wait.

“Could you calm her?” Kylo said. “You’re her brother. I think she would listen.”

“That’s what I usually do, yes; how come you don’t have a spell?”

Kylo just groaned. Damn this beautiful idiot.
Hux walked up to them, clearly affronted, but summoned a pleasant air as he knelt in front of his sister. He stroked her frizzy hair. “I know she scared you,” he said. “She’s gone. We’re here to protect you. We won’t tell anyone what you can do, upon my word and honour; and if she suspects, let her. No-one will vouch for her.”

He went on like this: gentle promises varied with self-assured threats concerning anybody who would seek to ruin their little family. Kylo tried to catch his breath and halt his rapid thoughts in the meanwhile: there’d been a prophecy, and it turned out Millicent was also a witch. He should’ve suspected it. The incident with the sycamore tree was certainly telling. He also had to take into account that while Millicent wielded such powers, they were completely absent from her brother: it all led back to Maratelle, the same way he inherited his own abilities from his mother.

If a ghost didn’t sound bad enough, now he knew he was dealing with a witch’s ghost.

Shivering, he held Millicent through her transformation. Hux told her she was doing admirably, that she was being very brave. Kylo let go of her, and Millicent, human again, crawled to her brother’s lap, curled up and wept.

Kylo let them be; let Hux hush her. If he had a say in the matter, he would’ve whispered: *Scream; rage; howl and wreck; destroy so you can recreate yourself from the remnants.* That wasn’t the English way. Millicent swallowed down her tears, pressing her forehead to her knees so no-one would see her scrunched up face, her weakness and humiliation. For eternal minutes, she fought with herself while Hux rubbed calming circles over her trembling shoulders. She tried to speak; gulped down air bravely, but the words wouldn’t bubble up.

“*It’s all right,*” Kylo told her, sitting cross-legged and not making any movement. “*You don’t have to talk.*”

“I tried to hurt you,” she said, barely intelligible. “I’m mmm, monster.” Finally, she raised her head. The fierce animal was gone; all that remained was a mirthless child.

“You are not a monster,” Kylo said softly. “You were afraid.”

“It happens—When it happens—Oh, I should known better. I should know better by now. I didn’t want to think for a while, so I turned; but look, I couldn’t even turn well.”

“I think you made a fine little lady-cat,” Hux said. It earned a weak little chuckle. Hux pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“All right now, love?”

“I am; but oh, I’m so ashamed!”

“Don’t be,” Kylo said. “There is nothing wrong with you.”

“I growled at you,” Millicent complained. “That is not polite, and not nice. You must think me terribly rude and wayward.”

Kylo thought that should be the least of Millicent’s concerns, but he didn’t voice his opinion. “I don’t think you wayward,” he said instead with a reassuring and doubtlessly exhausted smile.

“I should’ve told you—”

“No, you shouldn’t have,” Hux said, readjusting the bows in her hair so she looked presentable again.
Millicent sniffed. “I made you worry when I was human again in the sycamore tree. I was so afraid of the fairy ring I went out early in the morning to make it disappear—but I just plucked the mushrooms out and burned them, the gate remained open, didn’t it, and now we have no way of closing it!”

“We’ll find a way,” Kylo promised. “My uncle Luke is a bogwitch. He’ll help.”

“He’s a bogwitch,” Hux repeated. Kylo regarded him with his head tilted.

“Are you surprised at anything at this point?”

Hux briefly considered it, worrying his lips. “Not really, no.”

“I was so scared when I found you in the garden,” Millicent said. “You were cold and lifeless and hardly breathing. A magpie sitting on your chest, stealing your breath.”

“You met him?” Kylo asked, and shook his head. How many more revelations was he expected to bear?

“It flew away and I told your lungs to clear.” She rubbed her nose; Hux presented her with a handkerchief.

So Millicent was not only a shapeshifter, but she could heal too—she needed a teacher, but Kylo had a lot to learn from her as well. Based on his encounter with Rey and Millicent’s accounts, magic manifested differently for each witch, and not all abilities came naturally; some had to be mastered.

He wondered about Maratelle’s powers. He saw the bloody kitchen again; heard her cruel promise to make Hux suffer. What ways she could find to torment him? Doubtlessly, a thousand.

“You’re being very silent,” Hux noted.

“It’s a lot to stomach,” Kylo said, watching him clinging to his sister. He was overcome with a need to shelter; he’d do anything to protect them. He wished his spirit could stay and stand vigil as he embarked on his journey, to guard the step of the Huxes—they were his family now, even if his position suggested otherwise, even if Hux could never return his affections: they were bonded by destiny. He was certain his fate led him here to fulfill this duty, to be their protector.

“The company must wonder where we are,” Millicent said. “Let me wash my face, and then we better get back—lest they suspect you’re here to pacify me; surely, they think I’m having a foolish tantrum, and that’s not the impression I want to have on them.”

“I’m convinced our guests think highly of you,” Hux said, helping her stand. He adjusted her dress with practiced precision, and lead her to her washing basin. Millicent was still slightly shaking, and her eyes were red-rimmed; but she schooled her features and had the posture of a perfect baroness.

Kylo remained seated on the floor. His reality had become so hazy and unpredictable that he didn’t trust his legs to carry him, or gravity to still operate: maybe if he stood now, his feet would never touch the ground again.

“Mr. Ren, could you visit your uncle at your earliest convenience?” Millicent asked, toweling off her face. “I believe we’re in most desperate need of his help.”

“I could go tonight,” Kylo proposed.

“Thank you so—”
“Tonight!” Hux exclaimed, interrupting Millicent. “I forbid you to travel at night; that is dangerous and foolish.”

“I don’t fear the dark,” Kylo said gently. “It keeps me hidden: less suspecting glances, less trouble.”

“Thank you a thousand times; bon voyage, and best of luck, Mr. Ren,” Millicent said warmly and then shot a sharp glance to Hux, who seemed ready to interject again. “Not a word, Armitage; you know nothing about the matters of magic. As tonight’s incident shows, my reputation is at stake. One more unnerving event, an unexpected visit from the horrid Miss Rey, anything to disturb our peace—and I’m sure we’re done for, once and for all. We were lucky to go on this long. Mr. Ren generously offered his help: and we shall take it immediately. I’m sick of living like this; quite sick.”

Hux blinked, owlish. “Rhetorics runs in the family.”

“So it seems,” Kylo chuckled; they locked gazes.

“I demand to be taken seriously,” Millicent said.

“Maybe don’t climb under your bed then, pet.” With that, Hux rubbed her back. Millicent pouted. Kylo knew it’d be hard to part with them; he never thought it’d be nearly impossible. His heart ached as he watched Hux walk Millicent to the door. As he unlocked it, it occurred to Kylo that they’d have to pass the second storey corridor—and that the lights were still out.

“Beware of the ghost,” he said with urgency, getting to his feet finally. Millicent spun around, looking at him with wide-eyed surprise.

“What! A ghost?” she gasped.

“Ah, they’re real now?” Hux said, reserved. Kylo forced on a smile; Millicent didn’t know—and presumably, what she didn’t know couldn’t hurt her: it never did before, anyhow.

“I’m merely joking,” he said as lightly as he could muster.

Millicent frowned. “A cruel joke. I’ve had my fair share of scares tonight: no more, I beg you.”

“Pardon me, Miss Millicent.” He bowed; as he straightened up, he caught Hux watching him, head tilted.

“Is there no way I could make you stay? Just until the morning. I’d keep you entertained.”

Kylo paled, then turned red. How could Hux suggest such things in the presence of his innocent sister? And how could he say yes under these circumstances, or demand that Hux explain himself? Would his proposition even be possible, considering that the house was still flooded with guests? It’d be all too easy to get caught—and it wouldn’t win them any favours. Impossible carelessness! Oh, that he’d have to reject him again!

Hux must’ve seen his altered state, for he explained slowly, “We still have to finish the charades, and I promised billiards to my guests.”

“Of course, certainly, yes, no,” Kylo said, and cleared his throat. “No. I’ll pack and set out right away. I promise I’ll be safe.”

“Take Finalizadora, in any case,” Hux suggested with an easy air. “She knows the paths well; Thanisson shall accompany you with a lantern until you reach Millcote. I can’t arrange for a carriage until tomorrow.”
“I understand,” Kylo said. Thanisson, who else—a punishment for his sinful hopes from God above. Millicent pulled at Hux’s hand.

“We shan’t make our guests wait any longer!”

“Coming, coming.”

Hux stepped over the threshold. Millicent got hold of his hand, and curtsied to Kylo. “Safe travels, my dear Mr. Ren, and please make haste! I hope you’ll soon find the answers to our pressing matters; may I write to you?”

“No need; I’ll be back before your letters could reach me.” He glanced up at Hux. “I’m delighted to see your sister knows how to send letters to Lowood.”

“Oh, shut up,” Hux mouthed. He nodded to Kylo, who bowed. The door closed.

* * *

Packing his meager belongings helped clear his head; he half-regretted deciding to depart right away, but he knew these matters couldn’t wait. He had a thousand questions for Millicent—but no answers for her enquiries; he needed to get them as soon as possible. It broke his heart to leave, but he had a vicious need to flee: he dreaded a confrontation by Unamo, or a tattletale guest; if word of Rey’s prophecy got out, he better not be present. He yearned for some blessed silence and tranquility to organise his scattered mind: travel would be the best opportunity to get away from the hubbub of society—and it’d be only fitting to revisit Lowood, where everything started.

He contemplated asking Hux to accompany him; wouldn’t that be quite the journey? Hux would turn down the offer, for sure. He had an obligation to his company and he needed to be with his sister, should anything happen to her.

Kylo snuck out of his room with his heavy trunk and locked the door. For a moment, he let his hand rest on the wood, overcome with premature nostalgia: how he’ll miss the feather-soft bed, the lovely hearth, the scent of lavender, the tapping of rain on the little window! Looking around the corridor, he fancied he’d also miss the ghosts: it seemed a strange concept to only be accompanied by the living.

The stairs creaked under his feet; it was swallowed by the clamour and the music. The rushing servants paid him no mind. He looked back over his shoulder once more: on the gallery of the second storey corridor he could see the creeping shadow of a tree. He smirked at it and, with bowed head, hurried out of the gate.

It was a clear night; the air had a sharp scent, and the breeze was chilly, but a light coat was enough to protect him. A full, yellow moon shone and the stars were out: he’d have an easy trip to Millcote. He saw that Thanisson had already readied the horses—Finalizadora was waiting by the stairs, so it’d be easier to get into her saddle. Thanisson was holding her bridle, his brows furrowed. It was a special treat to inconvenience him so, and Kylo couldn’t help but grin as Thanisson’s resentful gaze met his.

“I don’t ride really well,” he chattered. “You’ll have to lead us.”

“I gathered,” Thanisson gritted. “Tutors have such important dealings these days, they even need the
master’s horse.”

Kylo readied a retort, but then the gate opened. Hux stood there in his whites and blacks, looking slightly alarmed. The golden glow of the hall surrounded his figure; then he let the gate close behind him, and he stepped closer, descending the stairs with a slight limp.

“Mr. Hux, are you well?” Thanisson asked.

“Did something happen?” Kylo said, pulse jumping. He reached out and got hold of Hux; he had no coat on, the idiot, and shivered under Kylo’s hands. Kylo rubbed his arms; Hux took another step so that they were almost on the same level.

“I just wanted to inform you,” he said, eyes flicking over Kylo’s face, “I thought you should know before you go, although you will not be away for too long, and a better opportunity might arise to express such sentiments; nevertheless, I couldn’t bear to part with you under the assumption that you might be ignorant to the matter, however trivial; call me selfish, but I have to say this—I must, I couldn’t carry on without revealing—”

“What is it?” Kylo demanded; oh please, no more secrets—

“I will miss you quite terribly, for I cherish your company,” Hux blurted out, and then leant in, and kissed him.

The Earth halted its spinning; the moon grew three sizes; Kylo felt stars flare up in his chest. He kissed back, reckless, clumsy, earnest; his nose bumped into Hux’s, and he didn’t dare to part his lips—but he kissed him. Hux cupped his face.

“Come back to me soon,” he whispered. “Come home.”

Chapter End Notes

**Content warnings:** There is talk about a marriage of convenience between Hux and Phasma - it’s evident they’re not involved romantically or sexually; do you think it stops Kylo from being jealous? Right, no. / Kylo has a deeply upsetting vision (marked with present tense) - spoiler: ÁPage 41Á / Kylo is stray cat home ARRIVED WITH A HANDSOME MOTHER DYING IN CHILDRIGHTS AND RACIAL STEREOTYPES CONCERNING ROMANI PEOPLE / Short fantasy about the past involving 16 year old Kylo with 21 year old Hux (their current ages are 21 and 26) / Kylo has Victorian notions about casual sex / period-typical racial stereotypes concerning Romani people / Some body horror. You know the drill.

A million thanks to bioticnerfherder for proofreading and betaing the chapter!

Greensleeves // Dido’s lament // more music on the playlist for the AU

We have some gorgeous new art for the fic, look:
* his Lordship and his ivory...companion by tired-techie (NSFW)
* I comissioned staryaoirs to illustrate the scene in the molly house and HOLLY MOLLY (NSFWish)
* a mysterious benefactor comissioned pangolinpirate for a picture of Kylo doing some Art and it's beautiful
*chrisdoof* made Kylo hang out with his creepy ass magpie nemesis, this drawing just gives me *chills*
Thank you all so, so much, you're ridiculously talented!
Find me on tumblr: [longstoryshortikilledhim](https://longstoryshortikilledhim.tumblr.com/)
there's a [moodboard](https://moodboard.tumblr.com/) for the chapter
The night was bright with a thousand stars and abuzz with cricket melodies. Kylo felt his spirit soaring above the darkening lands, feeding on the moon’s honey-light, as close to Paradise as man could ever get. His lips were still tingling from Hux’s kiss: how soft, how sweet it had been! He wished Finalizadora could grow wings and bring him to Lowood like Pegasus; he could get the guidance he so needed, and then fly right back to the arms of his darling tormentor.

"Don’t gallop, you’ll wear her out," Thanisson said.

Kylo wished to cry ‘How could I be slow and still; he kissed me!’ — but upon consideration, Thanisson had been witness to it, and he’d been quiet ever since then, riding his bay mare in wide-eyed befuddlement. Kylo took pity on his companion and tugged on the reins to ease the pace. Finalizadora snorted, vexed, thrashing her head back. She was made to dash and canter, not to loiter about. She kicked at the earth as Kylo shushed her, scratching an ear.

"I know, I know," he whispered. "I’m so sorry; please, do bear with me."

Finalizadora leant into his touch; encouraged, he raked his fingers through her soft mane. He wished he could understand her language, so they could converse better; he was intrigued to learn how she came to meet Hux, and what she thought of him. A delusional line of thought, maybe, desperate and love-sick, but he remembered a time, distant as it was, when he could hear the hazy thoughts of beasts and pry into the minds of men. Oh, if only he never gave up that ability; he could have learnt what is in Hux’s innermost heart and forsake any doubt regarding his intentions.

He wondered whether Millicent could talk to animals when she was altered, if she so wished—one of a thousand questions which needed answers posthaste. Help was getting nearer. They passed one more hour, and then he could make out the shimmering lights of Millcote. His heart pulsed in his throat and his muscles ached pleasantly. *Onwards, onwards; carry on, carry through the night.*

"I’ll need you to wait in the stables," Thanisson said, making him start. Kylo had all but forgotten he was there. He gazed through the darkness. The paleness of shock had faded from his cheeks, and he levelled Kylo with an even stare, neither judgement nor kindness overtaking his features.

"Why?" Kylo managed, defiant to the last minute.

Thanisson scoffed. “Trust me on this, please; it won’t be easy to find you a carriage at this time of the night. I don’t need you under my feet as I make the deal.”

“Oh, you’re an expert,” Kylo whispered, arching a brow. Thanisson didn’t grace him with an answer.

In the end, Kylo didn’t mind staying with the horses; he felt like he was making new friends, and could observe Millcote from the comfort of their company. The town still spooked him: even at this
ungodly hour, it was busy and loud. The gas lamps painted dirty shadows on the thick brick walls. Kylo surveyed every passing silhouette of a gentleman or worker with equal disdain. He ventured outside when he could no longer bear the stench of sewers mingled with the odour of the stables, taking deep gulps of air through his handkerchief as he lingered close to the door. How he longed for the fragrant gardens of Stormfield, the cleanness of the rooms, the smell of dusty books!

Through the faint yellow fog a figure emerged, that of a girl around twenty: blond, dainty. She wasn’t wearing a bonnet. “Looking for love, sir?” she asked in a soft voice.

“I think I’ve found it,” Kylo said, hastening to hide the handkerchief; it wasn’t polite to talk through it.

“I think you have,” she said as she came up to him, stepping closer than absolutely necessary. The smell of patchouli filled everything.

“You misunderstand, ma’am; I have someone.”

She looked him over, deliberating, then adjusted his askew collar. “I could take better care of you than your wife, sir.” Her freckled hand came up to touch Kylo’s hair. He pulled back.

“How much to leave me alone?”

“No need to be crude.” She flicked at a lock of his hair, barely missing his sensitive ear. “Go spend your money on a barber.”

Kylo was affronted. His hair might have been unfashionable, but he took great care of it; besides, Hux seemed to like it. He scowled at the girl, who turned on her heel and hurried away. She had only gotten five long steps away when something occurred to Kylo, and he called after her: “Wait! Do you know about kissing men?”

She stopped, hesitant, then looked over her shoulders, a sneer over her face. “I can kiss you, but then you’d ought to be nice, sir.”

“No, don’t kiss me, please; I am intrigued by the, let’s say, theoretical aspects.”

The girl looked him over and pulled a face again. This time however she looked much friendlier. “I see how it is; how much have you got?”

Kylo drew a shiny shilling from his pocket and tossed it to her; she caught it swiftly and tested it against her yellow teeth. Kylo waited patiently for her verdict, beginning to worry that he had placed his secret in the wrong hands; but if somebody in this town was familiar with forbidden acts of love, it had to be her. With a soft sigh, she dropped the shilling into her purse, and signalled Kylo to follow her.

By the time Thanisson returned, Kylo was poorer by an additional sixpence, but all the more rich in advice. He and the girl still occupied the clean hay on the ground nearby, deep in eager conversation.

“By this point you should be confident to put your teeth to good use,” she explained. “Don’t bite: merely nibble, for teasing is essential—”

“Bess!” Thanisson exclaimed, colour rising in his cheeks. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Good evening, Gideon,” Bess said cheerfully. Kylo didn’t miss how her knees parted in keen greeting. Turning his gaze away, he noted the fellow who accompanied Thanisson: a scarecrow of a man, tall, lean, his wide hat shadowing his features.
“I see you’ve met Mr. Ren,” Thanisson said with wounded passion, then turned to his companion. 
“This is Merril, Mr. Ren; Mr. Ren, Merril, your driver.”

Kylo got to his feet, extending a hand. “How do you do, sir?”

“How do you do,” Merril mumbled, shaking on it. “Where do you hail from, Mr. Ren?”

“Salem, Massachusetts.”

“And where is that?”

“The United States of America,” Kylo said slowly.

Bess clapped. “I knew you didn’t sound like anyone from the Empire!”

“Yes, Mr. Ren has a certain exotic appeal,” Thanisson noted, going up to the horses. “Makes him rather popular, I gather.” He patted Finalizadora’s nose and gave Kylo a pointed stare: *I see you for the cheat you are, the villain, the rascal—*

“He also has exotic...tastes,” Bess said, “but let’s not discuss that. Will you spend the night in town, Gideon?”

“I am forced to do so.”

“Will you spend it alone?”

Ren interjected: “Will you forgive me chatting with your lady friend if I pay for your time with her?”

Thanisson coloured again, and Merril, impatient with their nonsense, grumbled, “If we’re to reach —shire to-night, I suggest we start out at once, Mr. Ren.”

“Coming right away.” Kylo bowed his head. Merril went to get his horses, so Kylo turned back to Thanisson, who looked quite torn. “Give my love to the one I keep close to my heart,” Kylo said. “Know that I wouldn’t do anything to be unworthy of those affections that were shown to me.”

“You just parted with—” Thanisson started, swallowing the word *him.* They locked gazes and reached a silent understanding: a truce in verboten love’s name.

* * *

Kylo wished he’d brought some books from Hux’s splendid library; the journey was long and tedious, Merril not all too enthusiastic to converse. They travelled odd roads to avoid rogues and dawdling scalawags, although Kyo felt assured that he could best them all in combat, even with his bare hands. Hux’s kiss gave him the most unexpected power: he felt it crackling at his fingertips, flaring up in his chest. He was insurmountable, eager to test his strength. His restless sleep in the jostling carriage brought him glorious dreams: he caught the magpie and plucked it in the kitchen, just like Mrs. Mitaka had taught him; he cooked it for dinner, but ate its heart raw—still beating on his tongue.

The sky started bleeding as dawn approached: a sublime crimson glow awakened Kylo. He looked out of the little window, squinting at the moors. It was familiar territory now, the sky reflecting back on lazy puddles, pale flowers nodding their heavy heads. The air was sharper, cleaner than in Stormfield, but wet and unpleasant. Kylo felt ensnared, ugly dread blowing out the candlelight of his self-assurance. He was back where he started, getting smaller and smaller as they approached Lowood. Oh, detestable place of a thousand sorrows—of misery and grief; hateful reminiscence
wouldn’t leave him, no matter how fervently he summoned the memory of the resurrection of Augustus Burns: he saw him on horseback, pursued by a storm, surprising him on the road. His friend was alive; he was a man now; he had kissed him good-bye. But you’re all alone now, the tall grass whispered. Forsaken, without a confidant or a single soul who would care about you. Go back home.

He pursed his lips, grunting out directions whenever Merril got lost on the muddy paths. Lowood Institution emerged on the horizon; a pitiful sight: mossy walls still crumbling apart, the garden barren, the gate barely hanging on its hinges.

The wind almost knocked Kylo off his feet when he stepped out of the carriage; how he weathered the seasons as a child here, he couldn’t fathom. He had left but a few months ago, but he had already grown unaccustomed to the hardships of this place.

It was early, but the pupils would be already rising; and there would be no sugar and tea and sweet coffee for breakfast, no kind fires and soft carpets in the schoolroom, no chatter and friendliness—nothing of the comforts of Stormfield Hall. Walking up to the gate Kylo felt like he was expected to teach here again. If that were his fate, he’d keep looking around to find Millicent, to see her hand raised and hear her clever answer, only to be met with the blank faces of bored boys, deaf to the words of knowledge, and also mute.

Merril followed him into the building. It felt wrong to have someone from his new life here; his past and his present weren’t supposed to meet, but Merril had the right to ask for a glass of water and a place to rest. Kylo had paid him generously for his troubles, but then began to worry that he was being too charitable with the sum Hux had allotted him Alas, he didn’t know his way with money. He was aggravated by it as he took the stairs to Luke’s little room: what if he didn’t have enough left to get back to Stormfield? Was he to stay here forever, trapped in his past’s surroundings as if the elapsed months had never happened? Would Hux answer him if he wrote pleading for help? He was in the habit of not sending letters.

Enough, he told himself. Never doubt him again; all will be well. Believe it with all your strength. He got to Luke’s door and opened it without touching the knob. For a moment, he was dazzled; everything was exactly how he remembered it: the old cellar-smell of the cold walls, the cast iron hearth, the robust writing-desk, the bed by the window:. For a moment, he fancied seeing Augustus’ figure, trembling under the covers, a mop of red hair spread over the pillows—but no, it was blond: it was Luke.

“Uncle, it’s me,” he announced, and after a brief moment of hesitation, added, “Ben. You taught me so much under this roof; but you haven’t taught me my most important lesson yet. I came to learn about witchcraft.”

Luke made a strangled sound, and peeked out from under the wrinkly duvet. He had a beard, which startled Kylo; it wasn’t exactly well-kempt, and it was streaked with silver, making Luke seem older than he was.

“What sort of dream is this?” he croaked, and tried to pull himself up. To Kylo’s horror, he was missing a hand: a stub wrapped in dirty gauze pushed uselessly at the covers as he muttered, “What sort of nightmare—”

“I am really here,” Kylo said, voice thin. “What happened to—?”

Luke’s eyes—too blue, too clear—met his. They were the first blinding colour he had seen after he had regained his sight from the magpie. They were warm then, welcoming; now Luke levelled him with a distant gaze, head slightly tilted toward the window as if he was trying to pull away from
Kylo.

“What did I tell you?” he asked coldly.

Kylo gulped down a trembling breath and tentatively stepped forward into a dusty ray of sunlight. “You told me to go back to my mother. You told me to forget everything about witchcraft. I didn’t; I couldn’t.”

Luke closed his eyes, and Kylo felt a curious pressure on his temples, something he never noticed before when Luke peeked into his mind. He tried to focus on the details of the story he wanted to share: Millicent’s abilities, his own careful attempts, the ghosts; but the pressure grew, threatening to crack his skull. A violent passion overtook him and before he knew what he was doing, Luke was ejected from his mind—he pushed too hard, earning a weak whimper from his uncle as he was smashed against the window pane.

Kylo stood horrified but righteous: filled with anger, filled with power.

“I can tell you everything,” he said softly, voice taking on an almost sing-song quality foreign to his own ears. “You don’t have to steal it from me.”

“You want to know what happened to my hand?” Luke asked. The longer Kylo looked, the smaller and older he seemed; he must’ve been like this before—not a wise master, but a frightened fool. Kylo bit his tongue. *Careful now,* he warned himself. *Don’t rage against the only person who might be of help.*

“What happened to your hand?” he asked flatly, not particularly caring about the answer. He hadn’t come here to be lectured, but to be taught; and he couldn’t return without a result—not after his promise to Millicent, not after the cocksure exit that had made Hux chase after him.

His vision shifted just enough to make his pulse jump; he saw the moor from above, broken trunks of trees like thorns, wet grass and sharp stones. He had the sensation of floating, as if he was just an indifferent cloud stretched over the scene of a tragedy. A pony was dying. She was trapped in the mud, neighing and tossing and shaking, her owner tugging at the reins helplessly, thus entangled in her demise. He’d have to let go, or neither of them would survive. He didn’t give up. He couldn’t afford to lose her, his wife’s favourite; he couldn’t *stand* the thought. His love was too strong.

That love called to Luke; that hope, that desperation. Kylo saw him approach in his flapping black coat, blue eyes burning through the dusk. ‘Do not be afraid,’ he said. ‘I came to help.’

‘Help me, help me! Get somebody! Help me; we’re going to die. Help me!’ the man was crying, struggling with the frenzied pony. The mud was as high now as his waist. Luke started circling around them: calm, slow, measured, his eyes closed. ‘Help me,’ the man begged.

Three circles; then repeated, clockwise, slower. The pony’s eyes were white with fear. Luke halted, facing her; he crouched down, scooped up the mud, and tasted it. He spoke with the black, black mud rolling down his chin, ‘Release them.’

The mud listened. The pony jumped out, as readily as if she was being lifted; her owner stood still. Luke reached out for him, saying, ‘Come to me.’

‘Go away, witch,’ the man said. ‘What do you want from me? Go away, go away, go back to hell.’

‘Come to me,’ Luke repeated, hand outstretched. The man had an axe on his back and a frightened little thing in his head screaming, ‘He’s a witch, he’s a witch, he’s a witch; he’s of the devil.’ He saw his pony dance like it was possessed: a wild thing, frantic, rabid. He reached for his axe.
Kylo found himself back in the room, the air knocked out of his lungs as he lay on the floor; he couldn’t recall falling down. Luke was sitting on the bed, regarding him silently, sunshine caught in his hair.

“You mean to tell me this is the price we pay,” Kylo said, wheezing as he got up to his knees.

“This is what happened,” Luke said, measured; his composure was unbearable. “Make of it what you will; you will have the time to think, for I must regain my strength, and need rest.”

“I promise I won’t take long,” Kylo entreated. “I just need your guidance.”

Luke pulled the covers tighter around himself. “I need to think this over. The next time you come back, please be accompanied by Dr. Antilles,” he said, “and have comfrey with you, a bouquet of it; we will need it. Now leave me.”

Before Kylo could say anything, he was standing in front of Luke’s door. He blinked at it, bewildered. He had underestimated Luke’s powers—and he had certainly underestimated his stubbornness.

* * *

He was informed that Dr. Antilles would arrive around eight p.m.; it left him plenty of time to gather the weeds Luke had requested and to contemplate his bleak future. He was naïve to expect a swift return to Stormfield; Luke could keep him here as long as he pleased. He took his vexation out on the moor’s vegetation, kicking at hawthorn and heather, cursing and screaming with not a soul there to hear. He used his powers to lift rocks and crumble them; if some spying know-nothing decided to come at him with an axe, let him try, let him die.

He was in positive agony thinking that Hux might not wait for him; what if regret comes a-knocking, making Hux retreat from him? What if Hux decides to follow mind and duty instead of heart, and marry Captain Phasma after all? There were a thousand ways their shared moment of joy could be forgotten in his absence, and Kylo lamented all.

It was more than a kiss, he told himself as he headed as far from the school as he could get. He and Augustus used to come here, lie in the whispering grass and trade secrets. Remember his friendship; his trust. Phasma knows nothing of Millicent’s condition; his European lovers or the guests of the mollyhouse are likewise left in the dark. You alone are his beacon; be strong for his sake. Learn. Wait. Earn his welcoming kiss.

He returned to Lowood late in the afternoon, clutching a handful of sturdy common comfrey. He still had too many hours to waste, and he mostly spent it dodging his former students, hiding from them in shadowy corners and trusted cupboards. He couldn’t stand the sweaty stink of them, their hundred questions, their enthusiasm. He couldn’t hide for long: he was caught, and the boys latched onto him, celebrating what they thought to be his return, talking over each other. Oh, it was unbearable. If he were back in Stormfield, he’d be having tea now; there would be no noise but the soft clicking of porcelain and polite conversation—or maybe his routine would be changed; maybe he could be in Hux’s arms, drinking sweet confessions from his sultry lips.

The good doctor—a young fellow with heavy-set brows—arrived finally. Kylo broke free of his nagging students, grabbed his arm, and escorted him to Luke’s room, introducing himself on the way—heir manners were already forsaking him in this hellish place. Luke was delighted to see them—delighted to see Dr. Antilles, to be exact. Kylo lingered by the hearth, listening to their prattle as Dr. Antilles re-dressed the wounds. There was a hint of flirtation. Glancing at them now and again, Kylo noticed how tender the doctor’s touches were, how Luke arched into his palm. It was nothing short
of a personal offence how eagerly Luke seemed to abandon the memory of Han. Kylo was still brooding when the doctor left and Luke beckoned him closer.

“You know the risks,” he said, eyes still too bright. “Despite knowing them, you made the decision to practice witchcraft; there is no going back, but I would rather you experimented with harmless magic. I can teach you how to heal.”

“Healing is not my main concern,” Kylo growled.

“Well, it should be,” Luke said, somewhat softer than Kylo expected; his mood was eased, although his mind was still troubled. Kylo could almost sense it—not by the merit of his own abilities, but by Luke projecting it. Luke wasn’t willing to let go of caution, or retract anything he’d already said, even if he regretted it. In that respect, he was just like his sister. “Let us make a new deal: I will educate you on what I find paramount for your own protection, and for every lesson learnt, you may have a question answered.”

“On your word,” Kylo said, and Luke repeated:

“On my word.”

They didn’t shake on it out of a practical consideration.

That night, Kylo was introduced to the cunning women’s art: herbs to restore health, ward off evil, and soothe nerves. He found little joy in it; it was hardly magic. The herbs had healing properties on their own, and all he had to do was enhance or cleanse them. Moonlight and song were his aid; he worked tirelessly under Luke’s scrutiny, sitting on the floor with a mortar and pestle, books with pictures of goldenrod, mistletoe, horsetail, buttonweed, St John’s-wort, a hundred flowers with beneficial properties open all around him in a half-circle. They were the most tedious aids for witches in his grudging understanding.

He was making a mush from the comfrey, which, conveniently, was to chase away the phantom pains of chopped-off limbs, when Luke yawned midway through his careful instructions, and announced he would retire. Now was the moment to ask a question, but he had a thousand.

“Is it possible to visit someone else’s dream?” he blurted out before he could think better of it. He should’ve started with an enquiry regarding Millicent’s abilities, but the question had been eating away at him for too long now.

Luke made an impatient sound. “You know it is; you already did it.”

Kylo bit his lips, turning away on instinct. He didn’t want Luke to see what was only for him to behold: Hux with his corset and cigarette, loving, tempting, ethereal. He heard Luke clear his throat and say, “Give my regards to Augustus—I see you’re reunited. However—”

“Please, know some decency,” Kylo interrupted.

“—I meant your mother. You and Leia came to me in a dream—can’t you recall it?”

Kylo admitted to a vague memory, barely muttering. He wanted to leave; this torment wasn’t worth it—he could feel Luke’s condemnation, thick like oil pouring over him—*he was a wicked boy, and he never changed.* Luke wouldn’t understand it; wouldn’t understand how even the smell of herbs reminded him of Hux and the tranquil times they had walked the moors, how the only part of the late lecture he took an interest in was advice on how to use turmeric and arnica to ease the spasms of a twisted ankle.
“When someone is in an altered state of mind,” Luke told him, “you might find it easier to slip into their consciousness, given that you’re in a similar state yourself; however, if you’re not trained well, your vision will merge with that of your friend, and the absurdities of dreams and half-formed visions will occur. Promise me you won’t practice it without guidance.”

“I promise,” Kylo lied through his teeth.

That night he could hardly fall asleep, although he yearned to test his abilities; it was dreadful to be back in the teacher’s quarters, with three creaking beds pressed close together. His former colleagues paid him no mind evidently, he had been rejected from their circle and regarded as a traitor for seeking a better future. He listened to them coughing, snorting, snoring, tossing and turning—how he missed the blessed solitude of a room of one’s own! He pulled the greying covers over his head, breathing in their moldy air. Eyes squeezed shut, he wished to be in Stormfield Hall with all his strength, and as sleep finally claimed him, that’s where he found himself.

The third storey unfurled in front of him from a strange perspective: the walls were too tall, the arched windows sky-high. He heard sobbing, choked-off, faint; it came from Millicent’s room. The door kept opening and closing as he neared it; a strong draft was rattling it, although the air of the corridor was still and stifling. He reached for the knob and grabbed it; it was unnaturally cold to the touch. He looked over his shoulder, eyeing Hux’s room. He wondered if he could find him there, ask his help to comfort Millicent—but there was no time for it; even a minute would be an eternity for a weeping child.

He entered. “I’m here now, Miss Millicent,” he announced, voice ringing clear. “I’m not going anywhere.”

The room was different—a nursery with bright wallpapers, a crib, a hobbyhorse, and more dolls and toys on the shelves than he remembered, watching him with eerie gazes; the vanity table was the same, however: gilded mahogany laden with knick knacks. Millicent sat there, in her mother’s lap.

Kylo’s heart sank.

Maratelle appeared as a skeletal figure combing Millicent’s hair with sharp fingers, the eternal smile of a skull reflected in the mirror as she regarded her daughter, head tilted. Millicent was trying to keep her composure, but her sobs escaped in weak hiccups; her teary eyes were transfixed on Maratelle’s ghastly features and her shoulders trembled with every high-pitched breath.

“You’re dreaming,” Kylo told her with urgency. He tried to rush to her, but found his limbs frozen; he was as helpless and immobile as the dolls all around, and just as useless of a guardian. “You’re having a nightmare.”

“What does it matter whether it’s real,” Millicent said, voice shaking. “What does it matter? I’m here. I can’t look away. I close my eyes and she’s still— She’s—”

“I’m so sorry,” Kylo said, “I’m so sorry you have to go through this; but remember: you’re a witch —” He saw Millicent flinch and Maratelle’s fingers still. “I promise it’s not a bad thing.”

The skeleton turned to him as her hands sank lower, covering Millicent’s ears. She was silent, grinning, but Kylo knew exactly what her meaning was. A danger was looming, and he’d have to escape before it got to him, trapping his soul in an eternal phantasm, a nightmare so horrible that maybe he’d never wake from it.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Kylo repeated, staring down Maratelle. “It’s your dream, Miss Millicent; you can shape it. Think of a place you’d rather be; think of a happy memory. Whatever this spirit is,
your imagination is stronger than her, I reckon.”

“I’ve never done it before,” Millicent said, crying still. “Where would I go when I can’t find safety in my own home?”

Kylo took a deep breath. “What makes your home a sanctuary?”

The edges of his vision were darkening. His mind would be consumed soon; he was sure of it. He also knew he wouldn’t succumb without a fight, and that he could absolutely not leave Millicent behind.

“I feel safe here because Armitage is near me,” Millicent said.

“Then let’s go find Armitage.”

Trees erupted from the ground; there was a scream, sharp and hellish, and then music, cheery, booming. Kylo found himself in a garden—Chandrila, he recognised, in black and white. The windows of the colourless mansion were open, pouring light and song over the monochrome flowerbeds. Kylo was dressed in a coat and a mask, the same he wore on the evening of the ball, and Millicent was with him in a white dress embroidered with black lavenders. She reached for him, exclaiming, “We escaped!”

“A marvelous demonstration!” Kylo said, lacing their fingers. Millicent squeezed his hand, looking at him with her hand thrown back, streaks of tears still shining on her cheeks.

“You’re a good friend, Mr. Ren, and a great teacher,” she said, and tugged at his cuff, demanding to be held. Kylo hauled her up, and they set out, safe and content together as the nightmare evaporated.

“Dreamwalking is a skill I’m just learning myself,” Kylo said. “My uncle tells me it’s dangerous, so I don’t recommend trying it just yet—but you can certainly master the ability to shift your dreams; look at what you just did.”

Millicent nodded, peeking around curiously. “I can’t recall where Armitage was hiding.”

“Don’t worry; we are sure to find him.” Kylo comforted her. The garden was constructing itself as they ventured deeper, roses springing into existence, a fountain materialising, the evening horizon expanding; light and shadow mingled to present a perfect picture.

“Will Armitage be real, like you or me?”

“I’m afraid not; it’s not his dream, therefore he’s likely to merely be a recollection you or I have of him; unless he too knows how to dreamwalk. But I gather he has no occult powers.”

“No, he’s like…a stone,” Millicent sighed. Kylo tried not to chuckle, but a snort escaped. “A very agreeable stone!” Millicent hurried to add. “I was wondering that maybe it’s due to his scepticism that terrors avoid him; he seems to repel them, to an extent.”

“A solid theory,” Kylo muttered. They had reached the faded fountain. Kylo carefully lowered Millicent, who started splashing away directly, with the intrusiveness of a cat hunting frogs on lilypads.

“What else did your uncle tell you, Mr. Ren?”

Kylo grimaced. “Not much. Careful please, don’t fall in. I’m afraid it might take me a while to be given a valuable lesson, but I will teach you everything I learn. Sadly, to-day was wasted on herbs.”
“I love herbs,” Millicent said, watching how water dribbled from her raised fingers. They coloured, and as they fell they painted the water with their azure hue. “I love nature. I feel a oneness with it.”

“That would certainly explain your abilities,” Kylo mumbled, surveying the garden. No sign of Hux yet, but Millicent didn’t seem to be worried about that, preoccupied with her game. Sometimes Kylo missed having the weather-swift changeability of a child’s mind.

“Will you come visit every night?” Millicent asked. “Since I can’t seek you out myself.”

Kylo adjusted his collar nervously, and cleared his throat. He had plans to enter Hux’s dreams, hoping to share tender moments, remembering too well the lingering touches and earnest confessions in the mollyhouse. If he could spend time with Hux in his sleep, his stay in Lowood wouldn’t be so horrid; but he had promises to keep—and he had vowed to teach Millicent, and to keep her safe.

“Yes,” he said, defeated. “I will visit every night.”

“Wonderful.” Millicent nodded curtly. “Now tell me all there is to be known about herbs; my interest is much piqued.”

Kylo massaged his temples, trying to recall a single line of Luke’s rambling. He didn’t seem to remember anything of substance. Something to do with…catnip…no, that wouldn’t be advisable, would it now?

He noticed a drop of colour in the corner of his eye—red and white. As he turned, he noted Hux approaching in his general’s uniform, and couldn’t help but jump to his feet. He was here—a memory of him, anyway; and even this fragment, this shadow of his being filled Kylo with want and yearning. He was stunning, vivid, and soon, within his reach.

“The time is up!” Hux called, and Millicent started laughing as she noticed him.

“You won!”

“You let me win,” Hux said, as his gaze wandered to Kylo. He frowned, buoyant recognition flaring up in his eyes. “Do I know you, sir?” he said, and looked Kylo over once again. Their gazes met; a coquettish smile tugged at Hux’s lips as he added, voice dropped to a teasing whisper, “I certainly wish to make your acquaintance.”

Before Kylo could answer, he was awakened by the schoolbell. With a groan, he rolled to his side and stayed there, fuming, curled up—that is, until Mr. Quattlebaum quite rudely poked his ribs.

“You won!” he said. “The Reverend Skywalker wishes you to teach some classes.”

“What now?” Kylo muttered, sinking deeper into the lumpy mattress. Maybe if he could go back to sleep, he’d have a chance to continue his thrilling conversation with Hux, or better yet, visit him in his own dreams. But there was little hope for that; Hux was an early riser, and with his guests still under his roof, he’d be up at the crack of dawn to oversee the flawless running of the household.

“Make yourself useful,” he was told; and so he soon found himself giving a geography lesson to a roomful of rambunctious boys. They wore him down promptly; by the time the period was over, his throat was sore, his head dizzy. He felt much older than he was, and suspected he might be able to find a few grey hairs.

He was pacing the corridors to calm his nerves when he bumped into Dr. Antilles, who was smoothing down his hair by a mirror, coat still on, evidently getting ready to enter Luke’s room and make a pleasant impression. Kylo grabbed his elbow; now was his chance to learn a lesson he
“Doctor, a word,” he muttered, and with that, half-dragged Dr. Antilles into the nearest empty classroom despite his protests.

“What is the meaning of this?” Dr. Antilles demanded as Kylo barricaded the door with a chair. Kylo looked at him with such intensity that he swallowed further objections, and just stood there anxiously, awaiting his fate.

“You’re a man of science,” Kylo said.

“That, I am.”

“You swore to protect the secrets of your patients.”

Dr. Antilles’ shoulders dropped. “Is it syphilis, sir?” he asked warily.

“No,” Kylo said, furrowing his brows. “I wanted to ask you a hypothetical question, in private.”

“Please go ahead.”

They measured each other in the ensuing silence, Dr. Antilles clutching the handle of his bag with whitening knuckles.

“Suppose there are two men,” Kylo said slowly, “two men who are rather close to each other; how would they go about being intimate?” He hastened to add: “I understand buttocks are somehow involved.”

“Oh dear,” Dr. Antilles said, and pulled out a chair for himself. He indicated that Kylo should do the same, and asked him whether he ever examined his own member when aroused. Kylo answered in the negative. They spent the whole afternoon there.

* * *

The days dragged on — Kylo was made to teach and made to learn, and all without avail. He was desolate, homesick, heart aflame; he had to make frequent visits to the moor to scream his frustrations. Every night, he accompanied Miss Millicent to the ball in Chandrila, a memory she preferred to return to. He told her about the vague answers he managed to get from Luke, whose advice on Millicent’s condition wasn’t particularly useful: similarly to dreamwalking, the key seemed to be to keep one’s consciousness separate, lest the human soul be trapped in the body of an animal, or vica versa—as it happened to Millicent; but this solution was too simple, and not at all precise. All that it required was practice; but practice was dangerous. Kylo warned Millicent to wait for his return so she could attempt transformation under his supervision.

He didn’t tell her what he learnt of ghosts: how their minds could be accessed once one elevated their consciousness; that not all of them were malevolent. Luke had rambled about an Old Ben and Master Yoda and had fallen silent when he accidentally mentioned having met the spirit of his own father. When Kylo had asked him about exorcism on the next occasion he was permitted to pose a question, Luke had just begun to fret, and to interrogate him on the circumstances in Stormfield Hall. Kylo had closed his mind off, and told him half-truths, for he feared Luke would prevent his return if he sensed Kylo was in danger.

Luke’s sense of responsibility was a burden; he had gotten it into his head that all of Kylo’s troubles would be gone once he was reunited with his mother—ignoring how the magpie had found him in his own home all those years ago. Kylo sensed that Luke was drawing a veil over his eyes or
outright telling lies—all for his sake, admittedly, which made it all the more infuriating; for he was a
grownup now, and didn’t need protection like a child.

During their lessons Kylo’s gaze often lingered on the stump of Luke’s hand, trying to find it in
himself to feel pity for his loss and pain—but he couldn’t do it. He loathed how Luke used even this
as an opportunity to preach, to implant paranoia in his mind: that any person he tried to help with his
abilities would be his ruin. Luke told him stories about witch hunts and mass hysteria, about the folk-
belief that taking a witch’s right hand would mean taking his powers. The only point of interest in his
horrendous tales was when he mentioned the use of the wych elm—a tree favoured as protection
against conjurers. Kylo made a note of that.

He contemplated bringing up Rey’s prophecy; he was anxious it’d reveal something he wasn’t
prepared to share, so he merely asked, “Do you happen to know about a wandering Gypsy—by the
name of Rey, I believe?”

Luke said, “I know Rey,” and that was that; they didn’t discuss her or her soothsaying any further.

Kylo’s grievances mounted. Talking to Luke was like wandering around an endless corridor and
finding all the doors locked. Behind them was the promise of riches he’d never get to know, no
matter how tirelessly he knocked, how he pleaded, how he tried to pick the lock. Keep out, he
seemed to be told. Only the wise can enter, and I will never make you that, for your powers are too
monstrous to risk perfecting. Be ignorant; be safe.

A week and a half was gone when change presented itself in form of a letter. Mr. Watkins went to
Lotown to check the post, and was surprised to learn that there was a message waiting for a Mr.
Kylo Ren. He handed it to Kylo just as he was reluctantly crawling out of bed. A mere look at it sent
Kylo’s soul soaring: he recognised Hux’s sigil, a weasel with the family motto in Latin, I won’t be
bested. He was struggling not to break the red wax seal right away as he muttered a short Thank you.
The teachers flocked out, one-by-one, with only Mr. Goodwin staying behind to remind Kylo not to
be late; he was supposed to give a lesson on arithmetic.

But to hell with that.

Once he was on his own, he lowered himself back to bed, gulping down a shaky breath. Turning the
envelope, he could make out Hux’s script in the humble light of morning; he followed the curves
with the tip of a finger, as if he was caressing their master. He imagined Hux by his desk, penning
out this letter just for him alone. Was it impatience that prompted him to grab a quill; was it some
sudden event; or—he hoped—fondness? He wished Hux was there with him to disclose his
motivations, although Kylo was wearing nothing but a borrowed nightgown with his coat thrown
over it; he hadn’t even combed his hair or washed his face yet. When he met Hux again, he wanted
to look his best. Fat chance; but he was optimistic Hux wouldn’t mind his beggared state,
appreciating him just as he was.

On the other hand, the letter could bear news of his engagement.

Kylo tore it open, and unfurled the sharp corners urgently.

Dear Mr. Ren—
You will no doubt be surprised to receive a letter from the one who neglected to send you words when you needed them the most; but I am quite ready to prove my ability to soothe your worries in writing. Should you wonder if I live: I do. Should you wonder if I love: I do.

You are my sympathy. I am bound to you with a strong attachment, you—you strange—you almost unearthly thing! A fervent, solemn passion is conceived in my heart; it leans to you, draws you to my centre and spring of life, wraps my existence about you—and, kindling in pure, powerful flame, fuses you and me as one.

These are the words I should have told you in person:. I should have uttered them as soon as I suspected this was the way I felt; now I am convinced—but my lips are still sealed, for the object of my admiration is absent, and I have not the chance to confess.

I crave your presence. I hope that having learnt my affections you will hasten to come back to me, for I am solitary in company, and even more so since they left yesterday. I am quite ready to beg for your return—but not so fast, for it would be detestable to deny help for my sister. She tells me you are in contact; it is beyond me how, but I am lead to believe you are quite ready to leave. If that is the case, do not hesitate.

Ever your most affectionate,

Arkanis

Signed General the Right Honourable Lord Arkanis, etc.

* * *

“I am leaving,” Kylo announced. Luke glanced up at him quizzically. He was in a much better shape that morning, hair combed, beard trimmed, donning his priestly garments as he sat by his desk, leafing through a leather-bound journal he had hastened to close shut when Kylo had entered. Candles were floating around him, cloaking him in golden brilliance.

“How come?” he asked. Kylo was holding the letter and raised it in evidence, as if Luke could read it from a distance.

“I’ve been summoned,” he said, closing his mind up; the particulars weren’t Luke’s concern. Luke frowned.

“When are you leaving?”

“Right away. I just stopped by to say good-bye.”

Kylo was out of breath, his chest heaving. He had come running; there was not a second to waste. He had nothing but his hastily packed trunk and the remainder of his allowance in his pockets, ready to set out posthaste.

“Why the hurry?” Luke asked, looking him over. Kylo’s hair was still tousled and he could tell his eyes were probably crazed, just as was the grin he couldn’t scold into a pleasantly mild expression. “I thought we had an agreement: that I was to teach you.”

“I thought that too, but evidently, I was wrong.” With that, he pocketed the letter, hiding it in his coat above his heart. He put his hand over it, just to make sure it was safe. He’d keep it on his person
always; he’d be buried with it.

“What do you mean, pray?”

“This was a waste of time,” Kylo said as he gestured vaguely at the room, implying Lowood Institute as a whole.

“We’ve barely begun,” Luke told him, drumming on the mysterious journal anxiously. “You must be patient; you didn’t learn to read in one day. And similarly—”

“I had my childhood to waste,” Kylo interrupted him. “Now I don’t have the time. It’s evident you’re keeping secrets from me, greedily hoarding and guarding knowledge. I have had enough of begging for crumbs of instructions.”

He didn’t actually mean to tell Luke any of this, let alone so plainly; but impatience made him careless, and once the words were out, he realised he didn’t regret them. Admittedly, there was even a particular pleasure in seeing Luke pale, abashed and stunned; oh, he really had no clue—and it only made it worse.

“Has it ever occurred to you,” Luke croaked, “that I keep some things from you in order to protect you?”

“Has it ever occurred to you that I’m an adult?” Kylo said. “I’ve been earning my own bread since I was eight and ten; I should be married and with children, if that sort of thing interested me. I don’t need anyone else to make my decisions; and it is my best interest to leave this ghastly place behind.”

“Ghastly!” Luke repeated, appalled.

“Dreadful and abominable!” Kylo spat. His passion fused with his rousing rage; how right it felt to hurt Luke with every hissed syllable, how just.

“This used to be your home!” Luke said, getting to his feet. “How can you speak so ill of it? I did everything in my power to provide for you—”

“I am provided for by a baron,” Kylo fired back.

“Listen to yourself! You’re the son of a duchess; don’t sink so low as to be—”

“Sink low!”

“—the plaything of a cruel lord—”

“How did I sink low?”

“Armitage Hux is rotten,” Luke raised his voice. “He’s wicked and selfish!”

“You won’t speak of him like this!” Kylo bellowed. Luke wanted to answer—he couldn’t; he was just gasping for air, an invisible rope tight around his throat. Kylo wanted to break his neck; he wanted him to hang, but he didn’t know how to make that happen. Luke broke free of his ensnarement, pushing Kylo back; Kylo slammed into the door, which shook with the force of the collusion. His mind rattled, murderous intent gone as swiftly as it had overtaken him, but his fury still kept burning.

“Never do that again,” Luke said in an even, calm tone. “You don’t understand what it means to give in to the darkness; what you risk; what happens if the magpie comes back.”
“Make me understand!” Kylo screamed. It echoed in nothing, and he was engulfed by ceaseless night, something bearing him down and down. He spun and was tossed to the ground which whirled around, a sunlit room tearing through the vertigo of shadows. There is a cacophony of voices until one of them emerges, that of a tearful woman. He sees her in white, and recognises her to be his grandmother.

“Anakin, you’re breaking my heart,” she cries, chest heaving, hands over her round belly, protecting it. She’s thinking of hooks—hooks in the vault and what she saw hanging on them upside-down—

“They had to die so I can protect you,” Anakin says, reaching for her. She pulls back, even though it means she’s pressed to the cold, cold marble walls.

The creaking of hooks and the drip-drip-dripping of—

“I saw you die in a vision,” Anakin goes on. “I saw you die a thousand nights; and only life can pay for life. It had to be done.”

He told him never to go there but she opened the door.

“I hardly know you anymore,” Padmé says. “Let me through!”

After all, Naboo was her home; it seemed insane that her husband should dictate what she could do with her own estate.

Anakin doesn’t step back (stands there; his sweet face: wounded, open). She hits his shoulders, fists closed, weakly, meekly, begging.

She thought he might be preparing a surprise—a crib for their baby, maybe. She was so pleased. She wanted a peek.

“Let me through,” she sobs. “Let me—”

“Hush now, hush. Where would you go?” Anakin puts his hands over her trembling fists, drawing soothing circles over the knuckles. His lips are pressed to her forehead.

“Away from you,” Padmé says; the words are dripping with contempt.

Drip-drip-dripping.

Anakin is a monster.

“Don’t say that.”

“You will never see me again; never hear from me again; never know your son or your daughter—” The words pour out. Anakin closes them off, grabs her throat. You have cursed yourself, she tries to say, but instead of words there are pins and needles; she's coughing them up.

Anakin steps back.

This is her chance to break free.

Time is short and the corridors are long. Anakin chases after her, shouting something. All is muted by the drip-drip-dripping of thick blood and a black, black black substance. She makes her way through the vast hall to the gate. Anakin stops short on top of the stairs and screams, voice inhuman, “I am more powerful now than you can imagine; there is no running from me!” His cloak turns with a flutter: he erupts into crows, all flying towards her. She slips out at the last second, bolting the gate.
She holds onto it, gritting her teeth as tears drip drip drip.

Old Ben comes out from hiding, comes running. “How did it go?” he calls, not seeing her face yet.

“You were right,” she says. “He’s lost; my love, my all, my heart, my joy.” The door rattles. “Forever lost.”

She always felt she’d die leaving Anakin; leaving what remained of him still shatters her, but doesn’t kill her. So she lives with shards in her heart. She leaves for America and lives for America, fighting for the causes of democracy with the Organas. Her twins grow and something else matures within: melancholia. It fills her; it’s in her brain and in her blood, and it never goes away.

Leia watches her waning mother with increasing worry. More and more often, she and her brother are sent to Alderaan or to Uncle Owen’s farm when it is impossible for Padmé to look after herself, let alone her children. Luke doesn’t take it well—he’s such a sensitive, enchanted boy. He cries all night long for his mama, so Leia tries to be strong, because somebody has to be, and it might as well be her. The reunions are always marvelous: Padmé is spirited, kind and determined, and it is as if the intermission never happened. They go on outings, visit exciting acquaintances, sleep all huddled together, and Padmé kisses them a thousand times over; then the bad days come again.

Leia is six and ten when the bad days are all she knows. She could pray to God to make them stop, but she doesn’t like him very much. She could try to use her powers, but magic, for her, is detestable—the heritage of a despicable father. Whenever Padmé tells them about him, she centers her attention on the mellow memories she has of him, but one mention of what he did was enough to make Leia scorn witchcraft. Thus she feels incapacitated when Padmé comes down with fever, the side-effect of the countless medicines her doctors made her swallow. They’re all in her bedroom, and she’s lying trembling under covers embroidered with blood-red roses, taking gulping, rapid breaths, muscles unnaturally rigid, and Leia can’t do anything to ease her suffering.

The fever hasn’t gone down in six days. Padmé can’t drink or eat and can seldom sleep. Luke keeps vigil, hand over her forehead, murmuring spells; they’re no help—he’s never learnt the craft. The air reeks of bitter sickness.

At three a.m., Leia leaves for the nearby woods. She slipped away unnoticed, holding a wet cloth as an alibi—just needed to rinse it out, heard a noise, went to look; she’ll make something up. She sits on a stone in her nightgown, and, with her legs pulled up to her chest, she cries. She’s been holding back tears for over a year and they come flowing as she keens.

“Please let Mama stay with us. Please let Mama stay with us. Please let Mama—”

There is not addressee; she calls to the night; she calls to vacant heavents; she calls to whomever might listen. A magpie is watching her. What can she offer?

“This is my most desperate hour. Please help me.”

The magpie drops to the ground in front of her. Ruffling up his feathers, he gets bigger and bigger. He transforms into an old man—bald, blue-eyed, deformed—and he doesn’t stop growing until he’s as big as the trees.

Leia watches him with her mouth open in a silent scream.

“Don’t be frightened; you called for help, so here I am; What is it you desire?”

She collects her courage and tells him everything as he looms above her: tells him of sickness and begs him for help, and asks him to name his terms of the bargain. The man laughs and it freezes her
blood.

“I want your firstborn.”

“I don’t have children,” Leia tells him, “and since it is unlikely I’ll ever have time enough to fool around and fall in love, I doubt I could ever give a child to you.”

“If you do,” the man says, voice low, “I’ll come collect it If you don’t, you’ll be free of the bargain.”

Leia contemplates it, but time is ticking away—every second brings agony to her mother and despair to her brother. She can’t stand it any longer, so she says yes.

Dawn is breaking when she gets back to the house. She’s drained entirely. There’s been a ritual and a pact has been made. She drags herself up the stairs, thinking the man’s words over: what’s the catch? Was he fairy foul or fairy fair?

She opens the door and surveys the room. Her heart is in her throat when she notices Padmé sitting in her favourite chair, hair done up, wearing her nicest gown, deep in thought. She’s well! Who cares about the price of it? She is saved! Leia turns to Luke to see him smiling again; how sweet it will be to rejoice with him after all the gloom and anguish; but what she sees sends chills all over her body. Luke is sitting beside the true Padmé, who’s in bed; she’s dead. Leia turns to the figure in the chair again. Peaceful and radiant, she is a spirit who doesn’t even know where she is, who is deaf to the silent sobbing of her son.

*Please let Mama stay with us.*

And it’s not easy to send her away; it breaks the hearts of the twins, having to say a final goodbye to their beloved mother twice. When Luke leaves for England in pursuit of knowledge, Leia goes to live with the Organas for a short while, guilt-ridden and dazed.

“Yallery Brown won’t come for your baby,” Luke tells her. “I will learn how to stop him.”

“I’m never giving birth,” Leia says. “I’m cursed.”

She falls in love with a gunslinger three years later. Three more years, and her brother returns. He’s late.

“I haven’t bled,” Leia says in whispers. “What will happen?”

“We’ll slay the monster.”

They embrace, and long to stay like that forever. It’s impossible to let go of each other. Luke stays with her in the old house in Salem, and so does Han. Luke gets to know him. He’s enamoured slowly and irreversibly.

“I must go back to England.”

“No, you musn’t; never ever—our marriage with Han isn’t like that. I won’t be jealous or envious. He can be husband for both of us. You can’t go now.”

Luke remains in Salem; months go by; Ben is born. Leia sleeps with a gun filled with silver bullets; she doesn’t know whether it’ll be of any use, but she thinks it best to give it a shot. One month; two; three; the debt is not collected. The monster is absent, but Luke is still fighting with demons; he’s off to England for good. His ship leaves, and the very next morning, there’s knocking on the door.
Leia doesn’t move; Threepio will get it. She cradles Ben in her arm, kissing the top of his head and taking in the sweet smell of his hair. They are connected in a way that cannot be explained, their bond unbreakable. She knows no fear, for as long as she’s around, Ben will be safe—she’s sure of it.

“A Mr. Snoke came to visit,” Threepi announces, entering. The nightmare-man creeps behind him, dressed flamboyantly, dressed as if he was human; but Leia remembers his eyes and sees them darken as he looks at Ben. Magpie-eyes in the face of a man.

“You let him in,” Leia whispers, hiding Ben in her embrace. Nothing and no one will take him away. Nothing and no one is safe from her fury if they try.

“I came for an old debt,” Mr. Snoke says, leaning onto his cane.

“I don’t owe you anything,” Leia spits; her voice could break stone, chase away lions. “You never fulfilled your promise—you tricked me, liar. Be gone; you’re not welcome.”

Mr. Snoke looks up, away from the scene, away from Leia getting to her feet and Threepio shouting for help. He doesn’t mind Han rushing down the stairs; he looks directly at Kylo, a man grown. He can feel himself solidify; he’s in that old old room, but he’s from the present. Everything around him is a memory; but Mr. Snoke is real.

“Look at you, my paltry present,” Mr. Snoke says, lips unmoving but voice still booming. “Look at you and your weak attempts; can’t learn yourself and can’t learn from a master. I could’ve made you great, but she chased me away. I could’ve made you in your grandfather’s image; I came for you twice and visited you many times. The next time I come I leave with your eyes, but first, I’ll make an offer. Listen, boy; listen, just listen: will you accept me as your master, will you claim that power? A yes is a yes; a no’s price is your eyes and then your tongue and then your heart. Be wise now. Be wary. Here he comes to put you in jeopardy.”

Luke pulled him out of the vision at that moment; reality came tumbling back and he found himself by the door, quivering with violent convulsions as Luke shouted his name, cupping his face with his good hand. “Kylo Ren, come back!”

Kylo shoved him away, yelling incomprehensibly. He started pacing to and fro in the little room, huffing like a beast and fingers flexing. He could feel Luke’s remorseful gaze on him; he met his eyes and snarled at him.

“You understand,” Luke said, measured, “that this is not going—”

“Liar!” Kylo shouted, not letting him finish the sentence. He grabbed Luke’s chair and smashed it to the ground. Luke flinched, but made no attempt to stop him. The desk was next, and all its contents: Kylo flipped it over and kicked at the ink pot falling down. It drenched valuable papers in black.

“I understand that learning your past is upsetting,” Luke started again.

“How long did you plan to wait, pray?” Kylo shouted. “How long, if I hadn’t provoked you?”

“I would have waited until your reaction was different,” Luke said. “Until you’re ready, that is.”


“You have to realise that the decision you make now will impact your fate tremendously,” Luke said.
calmly, tipping his head back to look at him. “I would still advise you to return to your mother; she can prevent Snoke getting to you, unless you let him in.”

“So it was my fault now, was it?” Kylo gritted.

“She gave you up when you didn’t yet exist; she lost you when the magpie tricked you. I deemed you ready to leave on your twenty-first birthday, but the path you chose to walk might just lead you back to him.”

Kylo stared him down, unblinking, on edge. He could’ve torn him to shreds. “I will not form my decisions based on the mistakes my doomed family made,” he said. “I will not spend my life hiding from a pact gone awry. From this day on, I will have nothing to do with you all. I will not occupy myself with adjusting your wrongs. Have I not a right to live freely? Have I not a right for happiness? You think you’ve suffered? Think of me. So I am cursed. Let it be. It shall not stop me.”

He sidestepped Luke and pulled the door open with a wave of his hand. He turned back; Luke was watching him expectantly, awaiting mercy or a coup de grâce. Kylo was silent. He reached for the journal Luke has been studying, and it floated to his hand. He bowed curtly, and left.


* * *

The journey back to Millcote was much troubled. Kylo managed to nod off as he was waiting for the mail coach, and was lucky enough to catch Millicent, who was still asleep, in a dream; but he brought such a turbulent and jittery energy with him that he didn’t dare stay long. He couldn’t be certain whether Millicent got the message that he’d be home shortly.

Dark musings occupied him while the coach made its unhurried way through —shire; he always thought his parents loved him, and he still believed it. He could see how Leia was a victim of a long history of desperation, how the magpie found her the same way he lured little Ben into making an unfair pact. It wasn’t exactly the past that bothered him, but its implications for the present: that Han and Leia were well-off in Massachusetts, not even a tad worried that their exiled son never came back.

To be fair, it was impossible to know exactly how they felt without a line of communication; they didn’t have Kylo’s address, but he’d be damned before he wrote to them first. He remembered their awkward visit, then started wondering why didn’t they come more often—didn’t they care? Of course, they had business with the Resistance, but was that more important than their own child, blood of their blood? Leia used to write letters and send dreams to him—when did they stop, and why?

He’d been an unwanted child; what if he was still that? The thought hit a nerve—oh, it was torment; his mother decided to keep him and yet he was lost still. He was chewing on his lips, forehead pressed to the coach’s window. The landscape blurred.

What did it matter anyway; he’d meant what he told Luke: he was ready to choose his own family and his own destiny, and let the past die.

He arrived in Millcote at dusk, still feeling bitter and raw. He walked around like an unholy shadow, spreading his misery; he imagined it poisoning the mist, mixing with the water of the sewers, suffocating the whole town. It’d be oddly gratifying; how did his grandfather put it? Only life can
pay for life. But enough of grotesque fancies; his grandfather was a detestable man, buried six feet under, and if Kylo could escape his family and the anguish that was their heritage, he’d know peace.

He visited the George Inn, took a deep breath of the almost familiar stench: gin and ale and meat and sweat. The inn was packed. He made his way through the crowd confidently until he reached the bar and pressed the bell.

“Was there an enquiry after a Kylo Ren?” he asked as a waitress came out of the kitchen balancing a heavy tray. She nodded towards a far-off corner.

“Gideon’s been looking for you, sir.”

Kylo turned and surveyed the room: people were huddled close to the fireplace, and that’s where he spotted Thanisson, shoulders pulled up, still cloaked and shivering. He must’ve arrived recently; Kylo never thought he’d be happy to see him. The days wasted at Lowood and the upsetting vision made it seem like a dream that he’d be back at Stormfield Hall again. He touched Hux’s letter above his heart, his darling talisman; it was still there; it was real. Two hours and he’d behold Hux again. He closed his eyes and felt his broken heart overpour with molten gold, repairing itself.

They set out.

It might have been just a trick of his imagination, but Finalizadora seemed to sense how he felt; she raced through the night with him on her back, and never once complained. Thanisson gave up trying to tame them with shouted orders, and joined the gallop through darkening roads. It was like Walpurgisnacht: nature fled from them, terrified by their frenzied speed and savage yells. Kylo never felt his powers more acutely, expanding over the roaring trees, the sleepy stars, flickering up in the whirled dust. He let the wind tear at his hair, make his coat furl out like a victory banner. He wanted to brew a storm and announce his presence thus; and laughed wildly when he noticed heavy steel-coloured clouds gathering at the edges of the horizon, above Stormfield Hall.

He kept picturing the same scene: jumping out of the saddle, taking the stairs by two, rushing up to Hux’s room, opening the doors wide, hearing him cry out in surprise. An embrace would follow—he saw Hux clinging to him, and finally, his lips would seek out his.

He and Thanisson entered the garden through the Eastern gate. The wych elm was twisting and groaning in the wind; Kylo didn’t expect to see a figure near it, and he almost shouted out before he recognised it was Hux, in a fur-lined coat and top hat. Kylo made Finalizadora halt, and just stared at him: his glinting eyes, his firm smirk. He heard Thanisson mutter a greeting and scurry away; he hardly registered it.

“Is it really you?” he asked in whispered tones, awed.

“Have you forgotten how I look?” Hux said with a mocking pout as he walked up to him, limping. Kylo reached out, touched his fingertips to his. Both of them were wearing gloves, but he still shivered.

“Your darling hand,” Kylo said. Was he dreaming? Was he allowed to have this? Hux pressed close, putting his forehead to Kylo’s knee. Kylo reached out to touch his hair and found that the top hat was in the way; he smacked at it, making it fall from Hux’s head. Hux scoffed.

“What do you have against hats?”

“Needed to see your hair,” Kylo said. They both looked at the top hat rolling around on the dirt road, a toy to the wind.
“Fetch it, will you? I can’t allow to lose another one.”

“Is this how it’s going to be?” Kylo asked. “Do you plan to order me around?”

“No, if you learn how to behave,” Hux said, smacking his knee. He stepped back, lacing his arms behind his back, expectant. His hair looked to be glowing, and was softer than Kylo remembered; he really needed to run his fingers through it. It was still so strange that he’d be permitted to do so; their love grew while he was absent, and now, reunited, it seemed too big to bear.

He dismounted hesitantly, avoiding Hux’s gaze. He held onto the reins as he went to pick up the hat, and then he was just staring at it dumbly, unsure what to do with it. It looked rather nice, to be honest. He put it on his head, and turned to Hux with a devilish grin.


He set out, and Kylo followed, heading to the building on foot, Finalizadora in tow. There was silence, save for the fall of their steps and the nightly noises. Kylo kept glancing at Hux’s hand; he wished to hold it. They haven’t even kissed. He was really looking forward to a kiss.

“How was your stay?” Hux asked, not turning to him. Fine; it just gave more opportunity for Kylo to stare at him blatantly, admiring his profile illuminated by the full moon’s shine.

“Positively dreadful,” he said. “I’m never leaving again.”

A private little smile tugged at Hux’s lips, and then it was gone. “Millicent will be pleased to hear that.”

“Is she still up?”

“God, no. Wore herself out with running all about.”

Kylo waited a beat, wetting his lips. His voice was dry when he asked, “And you?”

“Well, obviously, I am awake, and I didn’t partake in playing hound and hares with Mademoiselle Unamo. I had some important matters to—”

“Are you happy to see me?”

They halted. Hux turned to him, frowning.

“I recall a letter being sent to you,” he said. “Haven’t you received it?”

Kylo tilted his head, tugging at the reins inadvertently. Finalizadora snorted; he ignored it. “I have; I must confess that the sentiments expressed there make me wonder about this cold welcome.”

“Cold!” Hux exclaimed. “I’ve been waiting by the gate for almost half an hour, frost-bound. I made special care to meet you where you first saw me again. We touched hands; what more could we do without risking hypothermia, dear Mr. Ren? Pray tell!”

“I can think of something which would warm you up, poor thing,” Kylo said, voice dropped strategically low.

“You will address me properly,” Hux snapped, then added, “You will also show me what you mean. Mind you, I’m not removing a single article of clothing.”

“I’ve almost forgotten what a vexing creature you are, Mr. Hux.” Kylo met his eyes—}
look in them thrilled him! “I wish to give you a kiss.”

“Make it three,” Hux responded briskly.

Kylo chuckled, leaning closer. The air they breathed mingled, and Kylo whispered, adding to the white little puffs, “Show me where.”

Hux indicated his cheek, and Kylo obliged him with a playfully quick peck. He expected the other cheek, but Hux indicated his ear. Kylo took his time with that, exhaling slowly and then nibbling at it leisurely with the slightest press of teeth. The clean smell of Hux’s hair sent his heart racing, his mind drifting; he was overtaken by the mad desire to smell him everywhere like some animal, rub his nose to his neck, his wrists, his loins. The thought made him growl low.

Finally, Hux pointed at his lips. Kylo put his fingers under his chin, tilting his head up, and then made his lips part with a lick. He had paid good money to learn that trick. Hux gasped, and Kylo swallowed the sound. He was overtaken by the warmth and softness of Hux’s mouth; it made him abandon all finesse—judging by the little sounds Hux was making and how he grabbed Kylo’s collar to pull him in deep, he didn’t mind his brute attempts terribly. Someone did: Finalizadora attempted to walk off, clearly bored, and drew Kylo after her with force. Hux snickered at them as he adjusted his scarf, attempting to look dignified; but he couldn’t hide his excited blush.

They walked to the stables in a stunned, fragile silence blaring with wonder. They weren’t holding hands still, but Kylo felt their souls to be connected. It seemed sacrilegious to break the content hush, but he had to ask, “What made you write that letter, Mr. Hux?”

“I was drunk,” Hux answered simply, avoiding his gaze. “Drinking makes me bold and honest.”

“Isn’t a nobleman always honest?” Kylo teased.

“What an adorable idea.”

They had reached the stables and handed Finalizadora over to Thanisson, who waited for her with a bucket of water and grooming supplies ready. Hux scratched her ear and whispered good night; Kylo used the opportunity to hide the offending top hat in the goat’s stall. They headed to the building together, and finally, Kylo could offer his arm as he helped Hux up the stairs. The hall was empty, but the gas lamps were burning brightly; Hux had probably requested to be left alone. He supported his weight on Kylo’s shoulder, unabashedly utilising his strength.

“Please excuse my stink,” Kylo told him. “You’re familiar with the circumstances at Lowood and the hardships of travel. I had but a bowl and a wet towel at my disposal, and a sad, broken bar of soap.”

“It’s quite all right,” Hux said, peering up at him. “Maybe I can bathe you myself.” Kylo gulped, shocked and aroused. Hux’s lips brushed over his ear as he leant in to whisper, “Would you like that, Mr. Ren?”

“I believe so, yes,” Kylo said in a rush, earning a soft chuckle.

He was back home, but all seemed changed: as if Stormfield Hall now truly belonged to him on Hux’s merit. He no longer minded the stairs creaking under his stomping feet; he didn’t feel nervous and out-of-place passing the portraits of titled ancestors. He was the gentleman of the Lord Arkanis, lead to his room to receive his treasured attention—but he was no merely a kept Jezebel; he was his equal.

As they passed the second storey corridor, he chanced a quick glance. Maratelle wasn’t present, but the wych elm was there: hanging from the ceiling, expanding roots and branches. Was it a good
omen? In his optimism, he took it to be, and a secret smile tugged at his lips. A couple more steps and they reached the third story; now just a little farther away—it seemed to take whole centuries, but finally the door to Hux’s room creaked open. He took in the silent quarters; he felt light as feather, finally falling into the palms of a benefactor.

Hux pressed a kiss to his jaw, and said, voice silken, “Undress now, please; I will get the water running.”

Before Kylo could say anything, he pulled away; Kylo watched him leave, gaping, wanting to say, *Surely, I am not to get completely naked?* Hux had never seen him so much as without his frock coat; but how else was he supposed to bathe if not in the nude? He heard the pipes gurgle, and removed his gloves; that was a start.

Dr. Antilles assured him that the majority of intimate acts happened with unlit candles and under covers, and that nightgowns were to be worn; he had begun to doubt the good doctor’s expertise. The coat was next; he looked around, debating where to hang it. Should he just lay it over the sofa? As usual, Hux’s room wasn’t quite in perfect order—journals, letters and empty cups were scattered all about, but to toss his coat over the furniture would still be an act of utmost disrespect. He ended up hanging it on the knob of the door while he peeled off his frock coat, shirt, and waistcoat, and stepped out of his trousers; then he gathered up all the articles of clothing, boots included, and resolved to hold them. At least they covered his nakedness.

Was his physique desirable? He was tall, but too muscular—robust like a barbarian. Respectable men were ought to be slim, but he always cared more about strength and the pleasure of exercising. He realised his mistake now. His hips and legs were fine, he supposed, if a bit too toned; but how to hide his wide chest, his massive shoulders? Were they to be hidden? Hux’s taste seemed to favour antique, athletic bodies like his—he made himself think of the hidden contents of Hux’s drawers, but it just made him all the more nervous. He wasn’t the size of the ivory phallus, falling about two inch short and not comparable in girth.

Hux found him with his shoulders slouched, holding the garments still, trying to appear smaller than he was. Oh, but Mr. Hux looked perfect in his waistcoat and pressed trousers, sleeves rolled up, willowy and elegant. He stopped short, looking Kylo over, eyes round; Kylo was getting ready to mutter an apology, but Hux walked up to him with an expression bordering on the manic, and pronounced, “You look like a god.”

Kylo wanted to say something, but Hux claimed his lips. His kiss was hot and hurried, suffocating. Kylo pulled back, breathless, and whispered, “Hephaistos or Apollo?”

“Ares,” Hux said, captivated. “Drop your garments; let me worship you. Remember John Donne.”

“Hephaistos or Apollo?” Hux quoted, putting his hands over Kylo’s and easing their grip. “All joys are due to thee, as souls unbodied, bodies uncloth’d must be to taste whole joys.”

The bundle fell with a soft thud. Kylo noted softly, “You don’t seem to take your own advice.”

Hux hummed, stepping back to take in his form. His lips parted as he gazed upon Kylo’s cock, limp as it was in agitation and fear. He looked Kylo in the eye with a fierce expression, and hissed, “You were hiding this from me?”

“I shouldn’t have?”
Hux scoffed and pressed close to him. Kylo took a sharp breath as he felt the texture of Hux’s trousers on his exposed and sensitive flesh, and his hardening cock against his thigh. “You’re enormous,” Hux told him, whispering it like a frivolous secret. “I suspected you would be.”

“I’m not that big,” Kylo said, wondering whether phalluses were made to satisfy unrealistic expectations. It seemed to be the case. Hux laughed, grabbing a fistful of hair as he yanked him close to kiss his neck. It sent a bolt of pleasure down to his groin, and he moaned his feral joy.

“Come, Mister, come,” Hux said. “All rest my powers defy, until I labour, I in labour lie; the foe oft-times having the foe in sight is tir’d with standing though he never fight.”

“That is a rather graceful way to describe an erection,” Kylo said, and let himself be pulled towards the bedroom. Hux rubbed his knuckles with a sympathetic thumb.

“Am I making you nervous, Mr. Ren? Should I be less forward?”

“It’s just my first time,” Kylo confessed. He expected Hux’s smile to falter, his eyes to betray disappointment—chastity was certainly not as alluring as it was advertised to be—but Hux merely nodded.

“We will adjust our progress accordingly,” he said. “I expect you to tell me if you’re uncomfortable.”

“I am uncomfortable; but still, I want this.”

The bath waiting for him was steamy and fragrant; Kylo stepped into it presently, eager for the hot water to ease his tense muscles. He could hardly fit into the copper tub with legs pulled up; he felt idiotic, but didn’t miss Hux’s admiring gaze. Hux got himself a chair and a bar of violet soap, and set to work, foaming up Kylo’s back.

“Is the temperature to your liking?” he asked. Kylo couldn’t even tell whether the water was cold or hot, he was so focused on Hux’s touch.

“It’s very pleasant,” he said. His arms were next: Hux rubbed his soaped hands over them, feeling the solid muscles.

“It’s like you’re carved of alabaster,” he noted. Kylo leant back to look up to him, smiling slyly.

“Am I cold and unresponding?”

“The opposite; you burn like a furnace—is that typical of witches?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Kylo muttered, wriggling around a bit; the water almost splashed over the edges.

“When did you realise that I am—?”

“Mm, Millicent shared her suspicions shortly after she discovered you unconscious in the garden. I thought it made perfect sense. There is something preternatural about you; it’s as terrifying as it is enticing. There.” He handed over the heavy bar of soap. “I will wash your hair; I suppose you’d prefer to take care of yourself from the waist down.”

“Yes, thank you,” Kylo said, rather disappointed. He was looking forward to feeling Hux’s intent touch on his most private parts, of discovering how they responded to proper stimuli; but maybe there’d be time for that later. He was quick and efficient, while Hux took his time with his hair, combing the wet locks with clever fingers, massaging the foam in. It was rather nice, but also titillating; a moan escaped from his lips as Hux’s fingers ghosted over his nape.
Hux answered with a patient rub, and asked, “All finished, Mr. Ren?”

“Finished,” Kylo said. Hux gave him a towel and watched him dry himself. Kylo entertained the idea of keeping the towel on, but decided against it; he felt more and more comfortable unclothed and wanted to explore his new-found confidence to the fullest. He kept glancing at the bed; what was next? He remembered Dr. Antilles pressing the importance of preparation by fingers, but surely, something came before that—more kissing? And would he be receiving or giving in the final act? He was definitely more intrigued by the prospect of giving.

“Will you please follow me?” Hux said, offering his hand. Kylo took it, and he was lead back to Hux’s sitting room. Odd; he was fairly certain that intimate acts were to be performed in the comfort and privacy of the bedroom. The unnatural worry that Hux would hand him back his garments and send him on his merry way overtook him; surely, he could expect more than a bath? But to be fair, that was all that has been promised. “Can I tempt you with a drink?” Hux asked him.

“No, thank you,” he answered without thinking and immediately regretted his refusal.

“Would you mind if I drank alone? With measure, of course—just to add a certain buzz.”

“I wouldn’t mind, no,” Kylo murmured. He was ill at ease, but didn’t want to show it—Hux might take it personally, thinking himself to be a bad host. He didn’t know how to sound more collected or what to do with his hands; he kept trying to cross his arms and then abandoning the gesture.

“Please be seated.” Hux indicated the ice-blue couch; how scandalous—and how exhilarating! Kylo took his seat and arranged his limbs artfully while Hux got himself a bottle. He usually sat with his legs spread, but now he crossed them, imitating Hux’s usual manner and hiding his cock—most of it, anyway, for it was swelling and stiffening rapidly; the bath almost seemed innocuous compared to what they were doing now—how Hux put him on the spot just to be admired. He felt exquisite, desirable. Hux settled over an armchair facing him, pouring some wine out, eyes hardly leaving him.

“So, Mr. Ren,” he said.

“So,” Kylo repeated. Hux took a sip of the wine and chased the taste with his pink tongue. Kylo couldn’t wait to have those lips again; all he had to do was to be patient and as attractive as he could manage. He suspected he was doing well. He inclined his head, letting the wet strands of his hair brush over a shoulder. It was just like drawing, manipulating his poses so his body showed its most flattering angles.

“Tell me about your experiences.”

“If you would listen to an entertaining tale, choose another topic, for I have none.”

“I understand you’re a virgin,” Hux said, mock-toasting him with the glass, “but what else? Have you been kissed?”

“Only by you,” Kylo said. He felt like it gave him power, a singular claim to Hux’s kisses.

“What would you like to happen to-night?”

“I have no preferences; what do you normally do with your boys?”

“That’s different,” Hux said, not rising for the challenge. He sipped on his wine again, contemplating something as he let it roll down his throat. Kylo noted the beauty of his neck; he was quite taken by it—but then again, he was also enthralled with Hux’s hands, his voice, his lashes, his hair.
“How is it different?” Kylo asked.

“You’re different.”

“You won’t win my favours with cheap flattery.”

“Well, it’s true,” Hux said, raising a slender shoulder. “Remember, drinking makes me honest.”

“You hardly drank anything.”

“Can I show you something I learnt in Florence?”

“Is it pleasurable?”

“Quite.”

Kylo looked him over. He wanted this man with all his being, all his strength; he had no idea how to begin to touch him, what was enjoyable, what was permitted, so he said, almost begging, “Show me.”

Hux got to his feet and stepped to him, holding the glass. Kylo adored the way he walked and the earth he walked on. He dropped to his knees; Kylo liked that too. Hux put a hand over his knee, making him part his legs. “I wish to taste you,” he said. “Can I?”

“Anything,” Kylo told him.

Hux took a swig from the glass and leant in to take him into his mouth; the realisation of what was about to happen made Kylo whimper. He slid in easily; the wine was cold and thick—as Hux applied suction, the pressure grew in the most delicious way.

Kylo thrust his head back involuntary, eyes fluttering half-shut; but he wanted to see—for it was a sight to behold, Hux getting drunk on his cock, bobbing his head, still dressed but visibly affected. He swallowed around the shaft; a violent tremble shot through Kylo—it was so unlike anything he ever experienced. And now that the wine had gone down Hux’s throat, he could feel the velvet heat of his mouth. It was driving him wild; he thrust up, cock gliding over the palate. Hux reached out to hold him down, and let his cock pop free from his swollen lips.

“Please be still,” he asked him. “You might choke me with this thing.”

“That’s certainly not my intention,” Kylo said, panting raggedly. Hux smiled up at him with devilish delight, then put the glass to his mouth, took a sip, and set back to take him apart. Kylo yelped and clawed at the couch; bliss seemed so near—but any time he thought he was about to finish, there was more to it. His pleasure kept mounting, unbearable, overwhelming.

He never dreamed he’d ever be worshipped like this. Every touch of Hux’s tongue, even the tightness of his throat, was benediction; it was like he was created for the sole purpose of performing this ritual, and on nobody but Kylo: for they belonged—for he filled Hux perfectly and Hux was the only one who could be his match.

He cupped his face, eager to touch him, and let out a moan; he could feel his cock probing at Hux’s soft cheek from the inside. Hux met his gaze; his eyes had never been so clear and green before.

“Look at you: you’re utterly beautiful,” Kylo said, “and wholly mine. Aren’t you, Mr. Hux?”

Hux hummed, sucking harder; he seemed to be reveling in it—Kylo noticed how he arched his back
as he knelt, how eager he looked to be penetrated. Kylo wanted to fulfill his desire: to step behind
him, pull down his trousers and have him on his hands and knees—but the thought alone made him
reach the peak.

Hux swallowed his release; he savoured it and gulped it down like it was no different from the rich
wine, and then lapped at Kylo’s cock, drinking up the last droplets.

“Greedy sylph,” Kylo said, utterly spent. His spirit was elevated, wandering in unknown regions; he
was slow to notice that the cups and letters he spotted earlier were floating in the air. If Hux observed
it, he politely declined to comment; he climbed into Kylo’s lap, straddling him proudly as he laced
his arms around his neck.

“Some things are too good to let go to waste.”

“Is it delicious, then?”

“An acquired taste, but I one that pleases me—would you like a lick of it?”

Kylo didn’t answer, just dipped in for a kiss; soon, he was pulling back, coughing, “Phew! It’s vile!”

“You’ll get used to it and then learn how to appreciate it,” Hux told him. Kylo had his doubts, but
didn’t voice them; for this dazzling creature, he’d do anything.

“May I reciprocate?” he whispered hotly.

“A most wonderful offer, but I have to decline—it’s an act that needs mastering. We will get to it,
eventually; but now I merely require the assistance of your hands.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?” Kylo asked, but already, he was making work at the buttons of Hux’s
trousers.

“Why would it be dangerous?”

“Seeking release without being buried in somebody; that is masturbation, effectively—one of the
leading causes of death.”

“I doubt those statistics are correct,” Hux said. His cock was finally free; it was the most delectable
little thing Kylo had ever seen, shy and pink. He didn’t have base for comparison, but it must’ve
been on the small side—instantly, Kylo was protective of it; he cupped it, wanting it to be warm and
safe.

“If you are willing to take the risk, I’d be glad to indulge you.”

“I have touched myself many a time,” Hux said. “Look at me: I’m still here.”

Kylo stroked him with his fingertips, experimentally; he found Hux’s reaction to be satisfactory and
continued to caress him, sometimes brushing the neat orange hair over his groin. Everything about
him was utterly lovely—Kylo could spend the whole night fondling him.

“Like this,” Hux breathed and made Kylo curl his fingers, tug and yank.

Kylo soon found a rhythm; Hux’s whole body danced with it, moving beautifully, and the sounds he
made were music.

“I will keep you in my dreams,” Kylo told him. “I will remember you just so, for I have never seen
anything more deserving of admiration—and I admire you.”
Hux arched his back with a wet gasp, his hair falling to his face. Kylo kissed his neck, his chin, the corner of his mouth, never ceasing his ministrations. Hux was riding his thighs, thrusting up and against him. Soon, he became frantic; Kylo put a hand on the small of his back to support him and felt the firmness of a corset. His cock twitched.

“Are you wearing your posture strays?” he asked, voice rich with desire.

“You seem to have grown fond of them; don’t you like them?”

“Can you breathe?”

“I don’t need air,” Hux said, putting his hand over Kylo’s fist and making him pick up the pace. “I need you, I need this—oh, please, prove that you’ll accept me! Please, make love to me!”

“I will; every night, if you want—your wish is my command.”

Hux cried out, spilling over Kylo’s fingers; he was stunned by how hot the fluid was, and how abundant. Panting and trembling, Hux collapsed on him, burying his flushed face into his shoulder. Oh that they could give this perfect gift to each other, the boon of pleasure: what a privilege! Kylo held him, caressing the small of his back with his left, reveling in his closeness. This moment was of pure happiness.

“I’m not letting you go,” Kylo said. “I want to stay like this forever and a day.”

“Here,” Hux muttered, taking out his silk handkerchief with feeble fingers and passing it to Kylo.

“Maybe I could bathe you,” Kylo offered as he swiped his hand.

“I thought we’re to stay here always,” Hux teased. “You and I and my couch; by Jove, what a night.”

“Surely not the wildest you’ve ever had,” Kylo said with some edge. He let the spoilt handkerchief drop to the ground.

“True; but I’ve never enjoyed the company quite so much.” Hux pulled back, getting a hold of Kylo’s chin so he could take a proper look at him. His thumb brushed over his lower lip, feeling its plumpness. “I told you you’re different—singular—and I do like you. Take me to my bedroom.”

Kylo arched a brow and sank his hands down to Hux’s little buttocks. Recklessly, he grabbed them as he got to his feet. Hux squealed in delight, as if he doubted Kylo could really support his weight. To prove him wrong, Kylo walked to the bedroom as Hux clung on, expression amazed and half-crazed with want. Kylo lowered him down, and tested the water’s temperature.

“Still tolerable,” he announced.

“I think I will refill,” Hux said and reached to remove the plug. Kylo watched the water being drained away: what a waste! He didn’t quite know why the pointless luxury excited him, but oh, it did. Hux didn’t just add hot water: he began to refill the whole tub, and if that wasn’t enough, he also poured in Turkish oils. Kylo couldn’t wait to pamper him.

“If you still mind the taste,” Hux said, handing him salt and tooth powder. Kylo thanked him, and began to clean his mouth as Hux did the same, sitting over the tub’s edge. The familiarity of these minutes was stirring; Kylo was reminded of washing their faces together every morning by the long table at Lowood. He hadn’t just earned the favours of a lover: he had gotten back his long-lost friend.
The tub was full. Kylo watched Hux remove his waistcoat and put it over the back of a chair; his corset was revealed: white, with green ribbons.

“Let me help take it off,” Kylo offered as Hux turned back to him. A strange smile appeared on Hux’s lips.

“No need,” he said, and reached for the clasps at the front. One by one, he undid them as Kylo watched, inflamed and provoked.

“You villain!” he exclaimed. “You deceiver! You could undress by yourself this whole time!”

“Not being able to do so would be thoroughly impractical,” Hux noted as he reverently put the corset aside, handling it with the care Kylo had denied it the time he was allowed to touch it.

He found himself filled with a blatant giddiness, as much as it hurt to be tricked. Hux’s chest was revealed next, and his soft stomach; Kylo couldn’t stand waiting any longer. He stepped behind Hux, not to be in the way, and snuggled close as Hux packed his garments away. His hands explored, grazing over his lovely skin. Hux was delicate everywhere and reveled in being touched.

Kylo washed him kneeling by the tub, taking care of him fully. He wanted to do this every evening: be of Hux’s service and be serviced by him. He kissed his nape, his ear, his wrists. He scrubbed him down well, and, having noticed that Hux liked a healthy amount of manhandling, picked him afterwards and lifted him up from the tub. He toweled him down himself and carried him to bed, laying him out over the soft covers and climbing atop him.

They kissed as if they had a lifetime to waste. Hux kept stroking his back, feeling the firm muscles there. Kylo was achingly hard, and found Hux to be in a similar state. “May I touch it again?” Kylo asked. In answer, Hux enclosed his hips with his long legs.

“Let us try this,” he proposed, pupils fat and lips spit-wet. He thrust up, swollen cock sliding up against Kylo’s. Kylo choked on a moan, and responded with a push of his own. Soon, they were moving together, Hux’s graceful fingers encircling them. It was not how Kylo expected lovemaking to go based on Dr. Antilles’s description, but he didn’t mind terribly—it chafed a bit, but pleasure far outweighed the slight pain. He slammed down hard, hips jerking, abandoning the last pretence of composure; he felt untame and free—Hux loved him just like this.

His release came swiftly; once again, Hux couldn’t bare waste it, and used it as lubricant to chase his own climax. Kylo watched, enthralled; it seemed a dangerous act, as if Hux was daring death and madness to come claim him—and then got away with it. Kylo drank his boldness from his lips, kissing him through his orgasm.

Hux kept clean cloths in the unlocked bedside-table drawer; he asked Kylo to get one, and they cleaned each other up. They embraced, still slightly sticky, and Hux pulled the feather blanket over them. It felt like a loving hug. Kylo was rather uncomfortable at first—he wasn’t used to sleeping without a nightgown, or keeping another person close, but Hux clung to him, and he’d rather have perished than push him away.

“I will never have to use a bed warmer again,” Hux mumbled, his face pressed to Kylo’s chest.

“Is that all I am to you?”

“Yes.”

Kylo flicked his ear and Hux mewedled. He thought he wouldn’t fall asleep; why dream when his present situation was far better than anything his mind could conjure? His consciousness slipped
away without notice—one moment, he was counting Hux’s breaths, fingers caressing a narrow shoulder, and the next, he found himself in utter darkness.

“Good evening,” he called out. The echo of his voice was swallowed by the gloom. He turned around; nothing to see. Could it be Miss Millicent’s dream? It didn’t feel like it. He seemed to be dropped into an emptiness, a station between the waking world and sleep. He started walking around, but the scenery was unchanged: walls of nothing. “Good evening,” he said again. Once more: no answer.

Then the howling began.

The noise was unbearable: a hellish scream, and wailing and roaring. Somebody was in unfathomable pain, beastly, vulgar voices escaping them as life was being torn out of their chest. Kylo put his hands over his ears; it was no help. He crouched down, doubling over, as the voice grew and boomed and devoured.

He jerked awake; he could still hear it, with Hux in his arms and cold sweat running down his back. It came from the attic.

*The wind in the chimneys,* he told himself. *Nothing but the wind.*

It sounded more like somebody being flayed alive.

Hux touched his face. “Go back to sleep.”

Chapter End Notes

**Content warnings:** pony in peril (she survives!) / canon-typical mutilation of hand / past domestic violence, includes short scene with a character coughing up pins / character suffering from depression tragically dies of drug-induced malignant hyperthermia / a character seems to not want kids and then ends up having one; this is in no way to imply that anybody who’s not planning to become a parent will inevitably change their mind / the usual period-typical doses of ableism and elitism / Kylo and Hux continue to be pricks

Special thanks to @Gefionne for betaing on such short notice and to @bioticnerfherder for proofreading my Least Favourite parts. Any and all remaining mistakes are my fault.

I’m happy to present these gorgeous artworks:

* Mr. Hux being an exceedingly respectable gentleman by Jesus
* "Ooh Mr. Hux: A Fanfiction" by Jesus (which sums up the current chapter pretty well :D)
* "Seven for a Secret" - Kylo, the magpie and folklore by msbeeinmybonnet
* "A Stormfield Fashion Plate," featuring Millicent and Phasma from the previous chapter by msbeeinmybonnet

Thank you so, so much girls, your work and enthusiasm means the world to me!

Find me on tumblr @longstoryshortikilledhim // there’s a moodboard for the chapter
Seven's for a Secret Never to be Told

Chapter Notes

**Trigger warning for animal cruelty:** in the long part in italics towards the very end of the chapter a cat is mentioned who meets an unlucky end; it’s only one paragraph, I suggest skipping it if you’re sensitive to such things. A very brief reference is brought up again later, but it’s only a suggestion that a cat had died. For further **content warnings** please refer to the end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more **notes**

It was December, the bleakest yet most jubilant of months. A thick snow had fallen over Stormfield Hall, transforming its sharp spires and buttresses into icicles and slides of ice. The trees were veiled in white, looking like merry wives; even the dreadful wych elm gained a blithe air thus adorned by crystals of snow. The willows stood frozen guard around the mirror-like lake, watching over two skating figures: Kylo in all black, holding onto Millicent.

“Mind your balance,” he said, clutching her gloved hands. Only her bright eyes and red nose peeked out from the bundle of scarves and furs, but Kylo could still tell she was smiling ferociously. “Now, back to geography—”

Maybe his attempt to make the lesson more captivating had gone too far, but Millicent had begged to go to the garden as soon as she perceived that fresh snow had covered the premises overnight; Kylo knew he wouldn’t have her attention unless he obliged. They had set out, ice skates in hand—brand new Imperial Club sets for the both of them. Hux had promised to order one for Millicent and asked Kylo whether he’d like skates as well in an off-handed manner. It was a simple trick to make him accept gifts, but it worked every time.

“Let’s hear the capitals of the British Empire and their main exports,” Kylo proposed as he slid backwards, pulling a waddling Millicent after him.

“New Delhi, tea,” Millicent recited dutifully, gasping for air here and there. “Islamabad, rice; Nicosia, citrus fruit; Ottawa, maple syrup—”


Millicent frowned. “I’m hungry.”

“Shall we go and break our fast, then? I heard there’d be scones to-day and ruby tea with a generous serving of sugar; *apropos, where is sugar exported from?”*

“Kingston, is it Kingston? Oh, I haven’t even done a spin yet, Mr. Ren; let us stay a little longer!”

Kylo doubted Millicent’s ability to stay upright, let alone do tricks, but he didn’t voice his misgivings. He glanced towards Stormfield Hall; a gaslamp was burning in Hux’s quarters to chase away the wintry darkness; it was calling to him like a beacon.

Since their first night together, he’d always slept there; each time, it was harder to part come dawn. To-day he’d left a pilant and blissed-out Hux behind, stated from an early climax given by Kylo’s
generous caressess. He himself was left unsatisfied. He’d thought it was reward enough to watch Hux come undone from his touch, arch into his palm, rub up to him whimpering sweetly, head thrown back, clutching the sheets with whitening fingers—but the memory of it was only tormenting him.

Nightly embraces were no longer enough; neither those kindly, secret moments in the morning; he had beheld the fount of fruition, and mere droplets from the lustrous ripple were now insufficient to quench his thirst.

His addiction was as terrifying as it was thrilling; he could hardly think of anything but the next occasion he could hold Hux in his arms, steal a kiss, grant him pleasure—and they hadn’t even gotten to the act of the final union: that of penetration. Hux was being careful and patient, teaching Kylo step-by-step how to yield his body to delight unabashed; but it just made him yearn for more, and from wavering virgin he’d been transformed into a crazed beast, tearing at the leash of consideration holding him back from fulfilling his desire.

He would wait no longer. He was resolved to state his request, and beg.

“What’s Wellington’s main export?” he asked, keeping his gaze on the building as he forced his mind to go over the list, Baghdad, animal skin, Kabul, horses, but all he could think of were Hux’s ample lips parting for a wet moan.

Millicent eventually exhausted her little self and they headed back to the kitchen to regroup before her next lesson began. Mrs. Mitaka promptly presented them with the promised treats as Mademoiselle Unamo called from the hearth.

“I’m not taking my eyes off you,” she told Millicent, “provided you keep close to the fire.”

“Monsieur Ren can mind me,” Millicent said; she walked to Unamo and knelt down by the rocking chair to rest her head on her nurse’s lap while munching on a scone. Unamo combed through her hair with gentle fingers and scoffed.

“Her poor ears are cold! Do you hear me, Monsieur Ren? Why would you brave nature on your own volition in such godless weather!”

“It gives one a sense of adventure, I suppose,” Kylo said, tossing a scone in Unamo’s direction; she caught it, and bit into the fluffy pastry begrudgingly. “Just pretend you’re about to discover Antarctica, and you’re bound to be entertained.”

“It can be left undiscovered for all I care, thank you very much. Have you seen the birds who dwell there? We took Millicent to the zoo some two years ago—they’re monstrous, I tell you!”

“French is such a musical language,” Mrs. Mitaka observed as she set about cleaning the countertops. “I daresay it sounds like you’re furiously singing at each other.”

“We best leave Mademoiselle Unamo to her sweet tongue and sour mood,” Kylo said as he dusted flour off his fingers. “Come, Millicent; let’s bring the scones and tea with us.”

“You won’t be the one cleaning up the morsels,” Mrs. Mitaka muttered, but winked good-naturedly when Kylo opened his mouth to offer his apologies. Millicent sprang to her feet and quickly explained to Unamo that she was free to spend the morning by the fire if it pleased her.

“I have to, Unamo explained. “It is my solemn duty as the only European present to express my concerns about the English weather; otherwise all your cheerful yodelling and ice skating would go to its head. See you after elevenses; and Monsieur Ren, take care.”
Kylo promised to be a responsible guardian, took a tray, took Millicent’s hand, and led her to give her a special lesson on levitation.

Their exercises in witchcraft had to happen in utmost privacy, but it was near impossible to find in such a busy household especially now that everybody was keeping indoors. The countless rooms provided no tolerable hiding place: Slip or Nines would just saunter in waving their dusting feathers, or it’d be Mitaka entering unannounced with a bundle of linens. Thanisson took up the insufferable habit of spending time in the library; he couldn’t even read, so Kylo knew it was just yet another way to get on his nerves. He claimed he liked the view, which was ridiculous. Mandetat and Rodion were even worse: they were in charge of shoveling snow and gathering firewood, which meant that even though they lived in the nearby village with their families, they could burst into a room any minute carrying large chunks of wood and complaining about the weight loudly—which prompted Kylo to take it from their hands and carry it to the fireplace himself, just to show them how easy a task it was. He had begun to suspect that the gardeners were exploiting his strength.

He and Millicent stepped into the main hall, taking in the twin staircase snaking up to the first storey and dead ancestors looking on. Millicent put her head back to measure the distance: high and high up, to the cursed attic. She scrunched her nose, but her eyes shone with single-minded determination.

“First, the cloaking,” Kylo reminded her.

They closed their eyes, hand in hand, as it was advised in the book of spells Kylo had stolen from Luke; they focused their consciousness on being light as air and just as transparent. If no place could be found where they were able to practice unobserved, they had to become unobservable themselves; invisibility took them a good month to master, but now it was no different than slipping behind a curtain during hide-and-seek.

Kylo started to walk on the air, clutching Millicent’s hand and balancing the tray; then he let it levitate and swim after them as he whispered instructions, “Imagine that the staircase is beneath your feet; you’re walking on solid steps—if you slip, I’ll catch you, but you won’t, because there’s nothing to pull you down. You command gravity, and you tell it: leave me be.”

“I’d be floating free if that were the case,” Millicent told him, and looked up; she wavered for a bit, but Kylo was holding onto her firmly.

“You may do that, if you wish; but I advise to practice moving in a way already familiar to you. Come on: just to the first storey, and we’ll rest.”

Millicent followed his steps cautiously, keeping her eyes on her shoes as if she was learning a dance. Kylo’s chest swelled with pride as they got higher and higher up; it felt like nothing could stop them, as if they could open the roof and step into the morning air if they so pleased.

Kylo stopped at the level of the first storey as promised. They were suspended in the air where the staircases met; Kylo set the tray down to nothing and made Millicent’s cup of tea levitate to her hand.

“Get the saucer,” he instructed.

Millicent scowled and reached out her hand, fingers spread. Kylo nodded in encouragement; a gesture was a fine idea—it always helped. Presently, the blue and white china danced towards Millicent, and she grabbed it with a victorious grin.

“Wondrous,” Kylo congratulated her. “I think a good breakfast is in order, as reward for both of us.”
They made to sit; Millicent almost tipped over and startled, so Kylo offered to settle bck-to-back, hoping it’d make her feel more secure. It worked; she put her weight against him safely, and started on the tea. Kylo’s own had gone tepid, but the successful experiment was much more important than the proper enjoyment of some overpriced beverage. The scones were still heavenly, at least; warm, soft and salty, melting in his mouth. He enjoyed the taste, contemplating how to proceed with the lesson. Given Millicent’s history with the sycamore tree he’d been wary to teach her anything remotely related to flying, but the lessons on herbs, summoning objects, cloaking, transforming and dreamwalking couldn’t satisfy her curiosity any longer.

She seemed content now. Kylo could swear she was purring. He smiled to himself, then tensed as he heard a door creaking open. Nobody sees us, nobody knows, he repeated the simple spell in his head. Uneven steps were heard; his heart jumped to his throat. It must’ve been Hux. There, coming into his field of vision: darling Hux, just out of his laboratory, goggles pushed to his forehead, adjusting heavy leather gloves while looking around—limping still, his bad leg affected by the cruel weather and the morning’s tender dalliance.

Abruptly, he halted. Kylo held his breath, and so did Millicent.

“Is that you?” Hux whispered, craning his neck and squinting at nothing. The colour in his cheeks was rising; how beautiful he was—flushed like he was mere hours before, writhing under Kylo’s attention, so eager to surrender to pleasure. “Why is a cup floating in the air, pray tell?”

“What the deuce, you can see the cup?” Millicent hissed, becoming visible in a blink.

“Language!” Hux said. “Also: cease your hovering please, it looks dangerous.”

“Ceasing it abruptly would be more dangerous,” Kylo said, revealing himself. Hux’s gaze met his; Kylo was half wild with delight just to behold him, and the way Hux bit his lips betrayed he felt similarly—still, his eyes twitched with annoyance. What a delicious combination: desire and anger.

“She knows what I meant,” Hux said slowly; he stepped closer to the railing, and extended his hand.

“You’re doing admirably, Millie, but please, for my sake, come hither.”

“Can we continue later?” Millicent asked, taking his hand. She ascended to the railing as softly as a drifting feather; Hux reached under her arms, hauled her over and put her safely to the ground.

“I won’t question Mr. Ren’s methods,” he said. “But I simply can’t watch. Besides, I must steal him away for a minute—is that all right, my child?”

Millicent contemplated it, then nodded seriously. “We’re out of scones anyway.”

“Go get some, and revise your Latin—we’ll be back shortly.” Hux pressed a kiss to her forehead, making her titter. Kylo walked towards them in the air, pleased to be seen like this, to scare and amaze Hux.

“How may I assist you, sir?” he asked.

Hux looked him up and down, daring him with his glance. “I need a helping hand,” he said, voice silken. A shiver raced through Kylo’s entire body; he stepped onto the railing eagerly. No assistance was offered to him; Hux had seen to it that Millicent was watching her steps as she headed downstairs, while she complained in whispers that she just attempted something far more dangerous than going to the kitchen unattended.

Kylo got to the ground, called the tray to hand, set it down, and stood there waiting, slightly swaying. Just being near Hux made him dazed—he was drunk on his smell, pulled down by the
vertigo of his presence. Hux spared him a fleeting look, then headed to lead the way back to the laboratory.

“She’s getting rather unmanageable,” he noted, not turning to Kylo; there was humour in his voice—he sounded almost proud.

“She’s getting stronger. Her powers are not to be tamed.”

“I was under the impression that was that you were attempting to do—regulate the outbreaks.”

“Yes, but control doesn’t mean mastery.”

Hux peeked at him again as he reached the door, resting his hand on the knob. “I take it you have a lot to do; are you certain I’m not holding you up?”

“Quite certain,” Kylo growled, voice heavy as he took a step forward; he cornered Hux, pushing him up against the door.

“Good,” Hux said, hooded eyes flicking over Kylo’s features. They stumbled into the laboratory, half-embracing and half tearing each other apart. An acrid smell was hanging in the air, just as overpowering as Hux’s kisses. They collided with the burnt writing table, making the various tubes and vials jingle.

“I daresay I was going mad without this,” Kylo said, panting into Hux’s eager mouth. “Just the mere thought that you were moving about in this house, waiting to be touched—”

“I was actually experimenting,” Hux interjected. “I think I made adequate progress with shrapnel shells—”

“Shrapnel shells,” Kylo repeated, his hands roaming over Hux’s figure, desperate to touch him everywhere. He brushed his knuckles over the soft grey waistcoat, feeling the heat of Hux’s skin beneath. “No corset? Why, Mr. Hux—are we getting lazy?”

“Getting practical,” he said, pressing himself closer. “If you wish, I can wear my posture strays for you to-night—that, and nothing else.”

“The signet ring also,” Kylo requested as he popped a button open on Hux’s shirt. “And the burgundy dressing gown with that quilted shawl collar.”

“Oh my, am I to dress up? What’s the occasion?”

One more button, then another: Hux’s collarbones were revealed. Kylo ran his thumbs over them, admiring how fervently Hux trembled. It granted him confidence to say, “I have made up my mind: I wish to be inside you.”

“Am I not already?” Hux frowned up at him; Kylo averted his gaze, and undid Hux’s cravat, hiding behind his hair. “I see: you want something, yet you cannot utter its name. Are you certain you’re ready for it, if that’s the case?”

“I wish to be inside you, Mr. Hux,” Kylo said, peeling the waistcoat off him.

“Give me my name then,” Hux teased. “Say Armitage.”

“I wish to be inside you, Armitage,” Kylo said, bowing his head; Hux scoffed, complacent, but then he yelped with delighted surprise as Kylo pressed his lips to his uncovered nipple. His hands flew
into Kylo’s hair, tearing at it, but he didn’t make him pull away. Kylo lapped and suckled messily, exactly how Hux liked it; he waited until his breathing became ragged, then spun him around.

“Mr. Ren!” Hux cried out. Kylo pressed his hard cock to Hux’s supple buttocks, wishing there were no layers of cloth to separate them. Hux squirmed nevertheless, and got hold of the table’s edge.

“I wouldn’t say that the act is complicated,” Kylo said, thrusting forward. Hux swallowed a shallow moan; Kylo cupped his chest to get another lovely wail out of him, pinching the peaked nipples between his fingers. “I just put it in you,” he whispered, “and in, out, in—That’s it; wouldn’t you like it?”

“A motion resembling the waving of the ocean is advised,” Hux said, arching back against him and rubbing over his burning crotch. Kylo pushed forward again, making a vial on the table fall down and shatter.

“Is that the reason of your withholdal?” he asked. “You don’t think I possess the talent?”

“You’d make up for it with brute force alone,” Hux breathed, awed; he searched for Kylo’s hand blindly, found it, and guided it down to the front of his tented trousers. “I just wanted to make sure it’d be pleasurable for the both of us; but it’s yours—” He ground against him again, making him feel the softness of his arse as well as his cock’s rigidity. “If you deem yourself prepared, all you have to do is ask for it nicely.”

“Then I want you now,” Kylo decided, waving his hand to clear the table; Hux’s chemistry set and his papers flew up into the air as if an invisible explosion disturbed them.

“Don’t!” Hux cried out with that delicious mix of fury and fascination. “Put those down Mr. Ren, gently—More gently! That’s it—My banker may arrive any minute, and I expect more callers—It’s impossible.”

Kylo watched the writing desk settle back to order, a pout fixed upon his lips. “Why did you call me here, then?”

“As I said—I expect a helping hand.” He rubbed over his palm with a hopeful little jerk; Kylo squeezed his cock in answer, making him whine.

“How greedy,” he said, easing his grip. “You’d demand pleasure all to yourself, despite what you preach; Mr. Hux, you will go down on your knees.”

“After,” Hux barked. “I beseech you—I’d perish if you denied your touch now.”

“Can’t you do it for yourself?”

“Consider it practice.”

“What made you so aroused, pray tell.” Kylo started to work Hux’s trousers open; it was a complicated matter, but his practiced hands soon succeeded. Hux kept holding onto the table as Kylo bared him to the dim sunlight; glancing over Hux’s shoulder he could see the short hair of his loins looking aflame.

“I was working,” Hux managed, self-consciously adjusting the goggles pushed to his forehead; that was all the explanation he offered. He stood proudly with his trousers pooling around his ankles, the hem of his half-open shirt barely covering his arse. He was so deliciously dignified.

“Work arouses you?” Kylo asked, taking his little cock in hand.
“Breakthroughs do,” Hux confessed. “I was telling you about the shrapnel shells—they’d be much more efficient if, ah, if they weren’t made of cast iron—Make the walls thinner and—The production—Harder, harder! My banker will arrive any minute.”

“What does he have to do with it?” Kylo asked, twisting his fist expertly.

“That’s it! That’s it—Ah—”

“I asked you something.”

“Insolent sylph!” Hux hissed. “If you must know— The night before yesterday, half-asleep in your embrace I dreamt: I dreamt about a factory manufacturing weapons in Arkanis. I could start such a project; I know exactly where the factory should be built—there’s a rye field—Mm—Many depend on working there, but the factory would grant them new jobs—A better income—And besides, that land is mine—if I so wished I could just set it on fire!”

“Extinguishing the fire would grant you a marvelous opportunity to test your hydraulic pumps,” Kylo noted with just the barest hint of sarcasm, picking up the pace.

“Ah, that was a waste of time!” Hux cried. “Mr. Krennic was right: agricultural projects are no fit for my talents; they don’t advance the Empire’s glory, there’s no challenge—But I was uninspired—Been uninspired for so long—then you came along—my muse.”

“Yours alone,” Kylo said, keeping his grip firm and repeating it like a litany, yours, yours, yours. They merged in pleasure: the tremble of Hux’s soft stomach felt like his own, the twitches of his cock made him jolt in sympathy; even their ragged breathing was matched. Kylo put his chin to Hux’s shaking shoulder, taking in his lovely scent as he mouthed at his bared neck. Hux moaned, and after a teasing twist of Kylo’s fist, he was finished. Kylo caught his release in his palm, holding him through the aftershocks.

Stunned and whimpering still, Hux glanced at the window. “That must be my banker’s carriage,” he noted, and with that, slid down to his knees.

“Mr. Hux,” Kylo said, stunned; his spirit was soaring far away, chasing after Hux’s shadow, so close to his own orgasm—but his body was left on Earth; he could see and feel Hux lapping at his soaked palm, even if he couldn’t quite comprehend it. After a few hot passes of his pink tongue Hux deemed his job done, and swiftly began his next task: working Kylo’s trousers open. Kylo looked out to the garden: the carriage was no longer visible, but he could clearly make out the tracks in the snow. “Your banker will be here any minute,” he croaked just as Hux managed to free his erection. Gloved fingers circled it, their touch soft, but not as soft as Hux’s mouth pressed to the tip.

“You’re close, aren’t you?” Hux asked, looking up at him with round eyes, feigned innocence glinting in them—but his impish grin betrayed his true intentions; he teased his tongue over the slit, chasing the beading precome, then swallowed him down.

Kylo bit his lips and reached for the table blindly—he was unable to tear his gaze away from Hux’s face, the playful, provoking joy on it; how could he argue reason, how could he say, stop, we’ll be discovered—how could he ruin the game?

He tried to keep his voice down—he failed; groaning and moaning, he pleaded with time. The banker would be admitted by Mitaka; his coat and hat would be taken. He’d be offered fire and refreshments, polite questions would be asked; he’d be led into the office or the sitting room, and Mitaka would come to fetch the master, presenting the visitor’s card on a silver tray—he’d come a-knocking any minute, count to three, and, used to Mr. Hux being too preoccupied with his
experiments to hear him, he’d open the door presently. Would he even be surprised, finding them like this—would anyone be? A secret is a secret—but Kylo felt it was too evident that they belonged, that a simple glance could speak of their history—and this: Hux on his knees, saliva smeared on his chin as he sucked on Kylo’s cock—there was honesty in it, and in its honesty, the beauty of beauties.

“It’s a shame we have to keep the door closed,” Kylo said, cupping Hux’s face and sliding deeper down his tight throat. “You’re so pretty like this: isn’t it selfish to keep such a sight solely to myself? Wouldn’t the good people of England deserve to steal a glance?”

Hux pulled free, Kylo’s cock slipping over his cheek and leaving a wet trail. “That’s truly depraved,” he said, voice hoarse. Kylo pulled his swollen bottom lip down with a thumb, and slid back into the enveloping heat.

“Waste no time—it’s your turn now; you love the taste of come so much I bet you wouldn’t want me to leave without giving you at least a few droplets.”

Hux huffed through his nose, the air trickling Kylo’s skin and making him gasp; there was amusement in Hux’s eyes and something else: love. He looked up at Kylo with an expression that said, you’re dear to me—everything you do, everything you say is dear.

There was a knock on the door, making Kylo buck forward. Hux gagged and pulled off, heaving. “A minute!” he cried, holding onto Kylo’s hips, not letting him recoil in surprise or shame. His lips were back on him, apologetic, kissing up the thick shaft; he put it back into his perfect mouth like he never wanted to taste anything else but his lover.

“Mr. Beechworth from London has arrived,” Mitaka said, voice uncertain. Hux squeezed his eyes shut, annoyed, throat tightening around Kylo’s cock—unwilling to let go and so possessive; it made Kylo cry out softly—he had to bite his hand as his abundant release hit the back of Hux’s palate. He fumbled to pull out—too quickly: his come rolled down Hux’s chin, dribbling to his undone ascot and naked chest.

“Droplets, hm?” Hux whispered, wiping it off with the back of his hand. Ears burning, Kylo patted himself down in search of a handkerchief to no avail: he’d left it in Hux’s room in the morning, crumpled on the ground.

“Are you quite all right, sir?” Mitaka called, knocking again. “Do you require assistance?”

“Not yours,” Kylo murmured. Hux scoffed, and pushed him towards the other door leading to the adjoined billiard room. Kylo went in a boneless heap.

“I’m all right,” Hux cried, “but I’m working with explosives—for your own safety, please don’t knock again. I’ll be downstairs promptly.” He opened the door with his elbow, nudging Kylo through it; he stood his ground and got hold of Hux’s wrists.

“Let’s make you presentable,” he said breathlessly, reaching for his brass buttons to do them up one by one. Hux swatted at his hands.

“I have it under control, thank you; go, shoo. I’ll see you to-night; arrive late—we’ve caused enough of a hubbub for a day.”

“And whose fault is that?” Kylo asked, leaning in for a teasing kiss. Hux swooned into it, parting Kylo’s lips with a quick lick.

“I also wanted to tell you that we’re going to Millcote tomorrow,” he said in a rush. “Pack a bag.” Before Kylo could say anything, he closed the door in his face.
Kylo blinked at the carved oak. A surprise—a welcome one. He stood there for a few minutes, telling himself he was waiting for the right opportunity to leave unobserved, but it just felt good to linger and listen to Hux fuss. Kylo was still hot all over, yearning to curl up with his companion and share the pleasant heat. Getting his cock sucked had become one of his favourite activities: it was the first kind of erotic service Hux had offered to him—it was special, and Hux had such an able tongue. They both relished in its talent.

He left thinking about the night ahead—how a carnal embrace with Hux would feel—and the next morning, Millcote: being seen together. Hux had sent his measurements to a tailor a few days ago; he had insisted on buying new clothes for Kylo. Maybe they were ready for the first fitting. Kylo touched his frock coat nervously. He had spent his first earning on it, back in Lowood—it was of good quality, although used; but surely, Mr. Hux’s beloved deserved better than good.

He took the steps by two, spring-heeled, tempted to soar on the air. He turned into the kitchen biting the corners of his mouth, so his beaming smile wouldn’t betray him and he’d look as moody as always. There was no tricking Unamo; she shot him a glance, and he knew he was in trouble.

“You led me to believe I was free until eleven,” she said; Millicent was sitting by her with a volume of the Aeneid, which she lowered.

“Am I being a burden, Mademoiselle?” she asked, tone surprisingly level but eyes too wide.

“You could never be a burden,” Unamo said. “I just prefer my friends to keep their word.”

Kylo licked his lips, wanting to say something—but it wasn’t his secret to share, not entirely; his involvement with Hux, the ghosts, witchcraft, Millicent’s shapeshifting and whatever was in the attic: all the confidential mysteries had begun to outgrow him. He was saddened to see his only friendship disintegrate because of this, but it was a small price. The last time he spoke with Unamo privately, he’d asked her about the voices in the attic—he remembered listening to it with her once, but she said she only heard it in windy weather. They were inevitably drifting apart; despite minding the same child, their worlds had become too different.

“Monsieur Hux requested my assistance,” he said feebly.

“Was it to do with the trip to Millcote?” Millicent said, then hastened to add in English, “Don’t tell me; I love surprises.”

Kylo attempted to look mysterious, and merely raised a brow. Of course Millicent would be coming, he thought. Christmas is near.

* * *

The day had wasted its sultry fires and lazy moonlight rose—but midnight was slow to approach; Kylo grew restless with anticipation. He was finished with his duties, had done his set of exercises and preparations for tomorrow; now he was pacing the room like a trapped beast. He stopped from time to time in front of his mirror, bowed or practiced a line of dialogue, and frowned, vexed. How to greet Hux for this occasion? How to conduct himself? He combed his hair and combed it again: a hundred passes to make it shine and frame his face just so. He cleaned his teeth and shaved; put on his best silk, then a watch chain Mitaka might sorely miss.

The hour drew close; now it seemed he needed more time. A few more restless circles, then stillness:
what if the servants could hear him thrash thro and fro? Maybe it’d be best to wait—but Hux always demanded punctuality. *Come now, coward,* he told himself. *You’ll visit him as if it was any other night, and enjoy his company tremendously. What that enjoyment entails—the technicalities—is of no importance; should you be too scared, he’ll understand; should you fail, there’ll be no blame; just don’t leave him waiting—he must be just as anxious as you are to be reunited after the eternity of the day.*

He set his teeth and waved the door open. It turned on its hinges soundlessly; he slipped out like a shadow. The corridor was gleaming in the snow’s glow, reflected from the line of arched windows. He walked over the shining checkered floor, mindful to only step on the dark squares, hoping it’d bring him good luck, and resisted the urge to slide. He watched the tip of his shoes and only lifted his head when a cold draft pushed at him.

With a creeping certainty, he knew Maratelle was there.

Her ghost would linger at the far end of the corridor and watch him steal away in the dead of the night; he made a point of walking fast and never looking back, chanting a silly song to mute her miserable moans.

“*Ring-a-round the rosie, a pocket full of posies,*” he began humming under his breath as he picked up his steps. “*Ashes! Ashes! We all fall down. Ring-a-round the rosie—*”

A choked-off wheeze. It sounded near. He chanced a quick glance over his shoulder: the corridor was vacant. He turned back: Maratelle was in front of him, blocking his way to the staircase.

“*Ashes! Ashes!*” he muttered, looking up at her as the wych elm grew with her tortured body hanging from the sharp branches. “*We all fall down.*” He attempted to sidestep the tree; the roots snaked closer, twisting into a thorny barricade.

“I see how it is,” he said. “I’ve been ignoring you; you’re hurt. I’m dreadfully sorry, but I’ve been busy—and now if you’ll excuse me, I’ll be late; but maybe some other time—” He stepped into the other direction. As he surveyed whether he could slip through the thick branches, he felt hot breath on his nape—a last exhale. Exasperated, he craned his neck to peer up at Maratelle.

“This is ridiculous,” he said, staring into her dead face, the unseeing eyes and the horror beyond. “I have no patience for your macabre show to-night. I command and compel you to let me through.”

Maratelle didn’t move. Kylo turned to her fully, put his chin up, and approached, humming as if it was a threat, “*Ashes! Ashes! We all fall down.*” She didn’t waver—Kylo reached out his hand, and walked through her as she dissolved like deadly smoke.

He let out a victorious little yell. For a second—a beautiful second—he thought that was all it took: he’d passed through her ghoulish guard and was now free to fly upstairs—but there was no staircase; no corridor; no Stormfield Hall. He was standing in complete darkness, rid of his senses.

“This is death,” he realised.

“Not for you,” a voice rang. He blinked; he couldn’t hear, but knew what was said; he couldn’t see, but knew what scene enfolded in front of him: the wych elm, blooming, and Maratelle sitting under it, sewing something. She looked alive—she looked like the night Kylo found her on the stairs, heart bleeding and tears red. “Do you know how the song goes?” she asked on a voice like wind.

“The song,” Kylo repeated.

“*Ring-a-ring o’ roses, a pocket full of posies,*” Maratelle sang. “*Hush! Hush! Hush! Hush!*”
“We’ve all tumbled down” Kylo finished, reaching out to the darkness. It was endless; it had no
temperature, nor the softness of air. It was just there. “I’ve tumbled down.”

“You did,” Maratelle said. “I’m not sure what you were expecting, touching a ghost like that.
Walking through me. The disrespect.”

Kylo focused his attention on her again. She was sewing a doll. It had orange hair.

“Enough,” he said. “I don’t belong here. You’ll release me.”

“I’ll do what I please and only what I please, he-witch,” Maratelle told him. “You don’t command
me. I could hold your soul here for all eternity, to keep me company. As you can see, I’m terribly
lonely.” She pouted, and turned the doll’s head towards her. “Isn’t that right?” The doll nodded.

Dread was taking hold of Kylo, seizing his lungs and making him whimper. He knew he shouldn’t
allow it to spread through him; fear made ghosts all the stronger. He swallowed down his begging
(please, please release me) and said, calmly, “What do you want from me?”

“A promise made to the dead is not a promise you can break,” Maratelle said, continuing her work
on the doll and hardly minding Kylo. “I want to tell you a story about little old me and Millie and
Armie and Brendol and his whore all living in this big-big house. It’s hard to do without lungs. You
said ‘some other time.’”

“I’ll listen,” Kylo vowed, curling his fingers into a fist. He couldn’t feel his own flesh. He was
nothingness. “I’ll find a way to communicate—”

“I know what to do,” she said. Her needle flashed. “You have to be in your room. It used to be mine,
did they ever tell you that? You have to be there and when I come knocking, you have to let me in.”

“I’ll let you in. Give me a week. We’re about to travel, I don’t know when I’ll be back.”

“Six nights,” Maratelle said. “Six knocks. If you don’t respond, you won’t have to worry about
where you go and when you’ll be back, since you shall be right here with me always. You’ll wait for
me, you’ll hear my tale, and you’ll present me the attic’s keys.”

Kylo wanted to ask her about the keys—he opened his mouth to speak, but when he did, he found
himself by the staircase back in Stormfield Hall, gaping uselessly. It felt like he was never gone, not
even for a second; but he knew better, and began to run.

* * *

“Ah, Mr. Ren; you look rather troubled,” Hux said as Kylo stormed into his room bewildered. “I was
beginning to wonder where you were.”

“Hold me,” Kylo demanded. He needed to feel human touch, to ground him in the certainty that he
was alive, flesh and blood. He looked around Hux’s quarters, frightened that he’d discover a
crawling darkness in the corners, consuming reality. He made note of the cheery fire, the burning
candles, Millicent’s framed drawings on the wall—they’d made them together—and there, his
portrait of her; statues and a clock with its calm pendulum swinging softly; Hux rising from the ice
blue couch, wearing his burgundy dressing gown just as Kylo had requested. He opened his arms
and Kylo flew into them, burying his face into a fragile shoulder, breathing in Hux’s sacred scent.
“Come now, come,” Hux whispered, caressing his arched back and rocking him gently. “What frightened my stalwart knight so, what midnight terror?”

“If only I could name it,” Kylo said; *what an abominable secret to have—but he can’t know, darling Hux—it would send the sanest man into raptures!*

“Was it an owl?” Hux enquired.

Kylo tensed for a moment, then, with a weak laugh, he pulled back to look at Hux’s face, his nose wrinkled, his eyes dark with worry.

“I don’t know how they keep getting in,” Kylo said, leaning in for a kiss to seal the lie. It was bitter on his tongue, but made sweet by Hux’s relief.

“It’s beyond me—All the windows are closed,” Hux said, and rubbed Kylo’s shoulders. Their tension melted away under his clever fingers. “I’ll make sure the corridors are appropriately bird-free,” he promised solemnly. “You shall have no more nasty surprises. Come, if you please: your bath is ready—I think you’ll find it revivifying.”

Kylo allowed himself to be led on Hux’s arm; he was beginning to enjoy all the attention very much. Worries of eternal damnation could wait; Maratelle had no power over these quarters, and the unholy noises from the attic hadn’t yet began their shrieking. He was being undressed—there was such comforting familiarity in it. All was tranquil, amicable, the bathwater warm and fragrant, invigorating him completely. He let himself be soothed by Hux’s touches as he washed him sitting on the tub’s brim, the sleeves of his gown rolled up and exposing his milky skin. Kylo couldn’t take his eyes off him. As long as he beheld Hux’s treasured frame, he was safe.

“You’re very handsome to-night,” Hux noted as he soaped up the sponge and touched it to Kylo’s chest.

Kylo tipped his head to the side and strategically lowered his lashes, voice deep as he asked, “Would you choose me?”

“What do you mean?” The sponge made a pass over a strong arm; Kylo knew how much Hux enjoyed its firmness and flexed it a little as he put his arms around the copper tub’s brim.

“If you didn’t know me,” he said, luxuriating in his position, “if you just walked into a room full of eligible bachelors, of all classes, dressed nicely for the evening—if you could make your pick, for they all looked at you with adoration, begging for your attention, from prince to lamplighter—would you choose me?”

Hux hummed, thinking about the answer as he chased the foam glistening on Kylo’s skin. “I sometimes have a strange feeling with regard to you—especially when you are near me, as now: it is as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in the corresponding quarter of your frame.” He brushed his fingers over the spot; a dark freckle was there, as if to mark its place. “If it were snapped, I have the nervous notion I should take to bleed inwardly. I don’t want to think of a world where I don’t know you, my dear Mr. Ren; but I would choose you always.”

Their eyes met; Kylo fancied he could feel the pull of the string, too taut even when they were this close. He stole a kiss to relieve the tension, and found absolution on Hux’s lips. *Try, oh try to take me away from him, he dared invisible powers. I know you’re frightened of him, as you should be: there’s no version of reality where he wouldn’t fight for me.*
“Do you still wish to try what you so readily suggested this morning?” Hux asked him, only a breath away. His golden lashes fell to his pale cheeks; Kylo kissed their shadow, then his eyelids.

“Yes; a thousand times yes.”

“Maybe not a thousand times,” Hux said with an anxious smile. He wetted the sponge, and resumed to clean him.

“I was thinking—” Kylo began, but his words halted. He licked his lips and peered up at Hux, who was listening patiently. “Before we do that—I want to know how it feels for you; I want to experience that sort of pleasure so I can give it back to you; so let me propose—Mr. Hux, would you mind going first, and penetrate me?”

“Why, I’d certainly be honoured,” Hux said, “Although I must add I don’t think I compare to this.” He reached below the water’s surface and grabbed Kylo’s heavy cock.

Kylo rubbed up against his palm. “You have something that does.”

* * *

Kylo was on his hands and knees—exactly where he wished to be—the pale blue canopy of Hux’s bed was drawn, the candles’ glow looking like early stars blinking in the sky. He arched into Hux’s touch on the small of his back, and pushed against the slick fingers inside of him. It was such a foreign, inexplicable sensation—thrilling and marvelous.

“Easy now,” Hux said, soothing. “Savour it.”

Kylo kept glancing at the ivory phallus in its cushioned case that Hux put just out of reach. It seemed impossible that it’d ever fit—but it had to; the size of his own cock looked as if it were too much for Hux’s petite arse, but he’d assured Kylo it wouldn’t be a problem. He had to believe, and ready himself for the experience.

“Add another,” he pleaded. “I should think I can take it.”

“But do you enjoy it?” Hux asked, scissoring his capable fingers. Kylo squirmed—the shiver of pleasure raced through him, so sharp and burning it stole his breath for a minute. “The point is not to push your limits, but to find delight.”

“It feels as if it’s not enough,” Kylo confessed. “I want to be full.”

A third finger slid in, coated in thick oil, almost too easily; Kylo moaned and squeezed around it, earning Hux’s chuckle.

“Patience is a virtue, my dear Mr. Ren.”

“Virtue has no place in our bed,” he retorted.

“But of course it does,” Hux said, curling his fingers. “Open for me so, you’re currently practicing courage; I, waiting for my turn, generosity; and don’t you have faith in me, and is there no hope in your heart?”

“Curse your clever tongue,” Kylo panted. Hux brushed past a sweet spot that made a bolt of blinding
pleasure surge through him; he cried out, and Hux answered with a tut. “Curse you,” Kylo repeated. “How do you account for the noted absence of chastity?”

“Why, I’m still wearing my modest dressing gown,” Hux said, much amused.

Kylo pulled off his fingers, the oil rolling down his trembling thighs. He laid himself out on his back, legs spread with Hux kneeling between them, befuddled. “Uncover yourself,” Kylo commanded. “Show me the state you’re in.”

Hux arched an elegant brow, and reached for the dressing gown’s belt. Kylo writhed, restless; he wanted Hux’s fingers back, his attentive touches, soft whispers; but he had an argument to win. Hux bared himself with grace, the open gown revealing peaked nipples, a white corset hugging his torso, and his cock standing proudly, pearly precome beading at the tip.

“There you are,” Kylo said, voice dropped low. “There’s what I made of you.”

“There’s no sin in desiring you,” Hux said, drawing closer. Kylo held his breath as Hux lowered himself onto his elbows, his hair falling over Kylo’s forehead, his gown brushing his torso, his cock nearly nudging against his entrance. “You’re God’s perfect creature, a singular masterpiece declaring his glory; isn’t it holy to adore you, when you’re so beautiful, when your soul was made to fit mine?”

“Praising me you praise yourself,” Kylo whispered, pushing his hips to meet Hux; his eyes lit up when he felt the hot rigidity of his length digging into his thigh. “Praise be; claim me; make me yours as I’ll make you mine, so you and I forge into one, and one’s esteem will be the other’s pride.”

Hux’s gaze locked onto Kylo’s; they both gasped as he pushed inside, slick, hot and perfect. Kylo’s toes curled, eyelids drooping and breath hitching again as Hux grinded ever deeper. They smiled at each other, wordless for a moment.

“Good evening,” Hux said finally, his cheeks a bright pink.

“Good evening,” Kylo clenched around him. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“Should I—” Hux reached for the phallus’ case, but Kylo grabbed his hand and put it over his heart instead.

“Let’s stay like this a little longer—only move, please, for that feels rather wonderful—Just so.”

Hux rolled his hips; Kylo watched his face contort with pleasure, his perfect lips part for a sweet moan. He’d never seen him so radiant, so divine. The dressing gown slid down his left shoulder, exposing its frail beauty. Kylo surged up to taste the skin there, then to taste Hux everywhere, lick at his hollow chest, his white throat, his lovely chin, as he moved inside him with confident slides.

It didn’t take him long to climax; a hoarse cry, and Kylo felt the hot flood of his spend, making him moan in answer. Hux pulled out, but pushed his fingers in. His pupils were wide as he looked at Kylo and opened the case with his free hand.

“Shall we proceed?” he asked, still very much winded. Kylo nodded sharply, close to his own release and eager to reach it.

Hux lined the phallus up and pushed inside. Kylo’s jaw dropped, and he clawed at Hux’s back, pulled him closer with his legs, more and too much both on his tongue—and it was still only the tip. Inch by inch, Hux began to work it into him, the oil and his come easing its passage. Kylo felt as if his whole body was on fire; he thrashed and writhed, hips twitching as the thing spread him open and filled him to bursting. His orgasm hit when it wasn’t even halfway in, sudden but all the more
forceful for it.

“Armitage!” he screamed, unthinking, spilling over his trembling abdomen.

“I’m here,” Hux said; he didn’t pull out the phallus yet, just kept it there allowing Kylo’s spasming body to relax. He pressed a kiss to Kylo’s forehead, who sighed.

“My apologies; didn’t mean to—I just liked how you made me call you that this morning—”

“It’s all right, Kylo,” Hux said softly; it was music on his lips, a dazzling melody.

“Kiss me, please,” Kylo urged; his wish was met. It seemed natural: it seemed genial to be so well-loved, so often kissed by him. Kylo rolled him to his back, not minding how the phallus shifted inside of him with the motion, and began unclasping the corset to ease Hux’s breathing. Hux laughed at his urgency, but allowed him to undress him. The whalebone left red impressions over his ribs—Kylo caressed the marks and followed them with his lips reverently, his dark hair spilling over the fair skin. He marveled at the contrast when he noticed, nosing at Hux’s navel; he adored their differences and how they still fit together. His hands seemed huge on Hux’s gentle torso. He spread his fingers, taking up the entire span of his waist.

“You’re quite lost in admiring me,” Hux noted.

“It’s my body now, just as it is yours,” Kylo said, pressing down with his thumbs. “I wish to know it well.”

“It is my solemn duty to inform you that anal sex, in fact, does not have such transformative powers,” Hux drawled. He playfully swatted at Kylo’s hand with the dressing gown’s belt, which reminded him to peel it off of Hux promptly.

“It has whatever powers we grant it,” he explained. “And since marriage is impossible, another ritual has to be invented for a perfect union.”

“Is it our wedding night?” Hux asked as Kylo bared his arms.

“I mean to lay claim to you to-night—your thoughts, conversation, and company—for life; I don’t have a name for it,” Kylo said, adorning his shoulder with a kiss; with a flick of his wrist, the shedded clothes swished away.

“Sounds like marriage to me,” Hux said as he watched his gown and corset dance through the air.

“So let it be marriage; don’t you want to spend your life with me?” Kylo asked, kneeling back to look him over. Hux lay there, yielding his body; but more had to be offered. Kylo wanted to open up his chest with a golden key and hold his heart in his hands as if it were a darling bird beating its wings. “Don’t you love me?”

“I am influenced—conquered; the influence is sweeter than I can express, and the conquest I undergo has a witchery beyond any triumph I can win.” Hux put his feet to Kylo’s shoulder and pushed at him smiling. “I do love you, and for I love you, your proposal is denied.”

“What!” Kylo cried out, grabbing his ankle. He yanked him closer, making Hux shriek with delight. “You devil! Little bungler! Provoking puppet! You refuse me so discourteously—and laugh at my misery!”

“I laugh at your wounded passion,” Hux said, poking his chin with his toes. His smile was infectious, and Kylo had to school his features so he wouldn’t join his snickering; his heart was
beating and bleeding, but hope was keeping despair at bay—for he knew Hux’s affections to be genuine. He needn’t have a ring to prove it; no oath, no kiss; Hux could curse him to his dying day and sneer at him, and Kylo could still espy love in the glint of his eye or how his hand wavered.

“Look at me,” Hux pleaded, gloriously naked beneath him and his come still dribbling down Kylo’s thighs. “Kylo—dearest; I know you better. This is not how you want to ask for my hand, with that thing up your comely arse and mind muddied by a vigorous orgasm. I’ll be sworn you have a speech prepared somewhere, and that poetry is included; that tears will be shed, and you’ll be properly dressed; that you’ll disregard my rank and go down on your knees yourself—and I’ll say yes.”

“I may propose first, for I am a duke,” Kylo said, reaching to remove the offending member that made his proposal undignified.

“Sure you are,” Hux replied, much entertained, and dropped his legs from Kylo’s shoulders to watch him struggle.

“My grandmother was the duchess of Naboo.”

“Ah, I see, you’re English now.”

“She was forced to leave the country when she discovered my grandfather practicing black magic.” He put the phallus on the nightstand; Hux’s glinting gaze didn’t leave him for a moment. “My mother bargained my infant soul for her survival; a vile spirit tricked her—he’s been chasing me ever since; he stole my eyes when I was five, and that is why I had to come to England, pursued by him disguised as a magpie.”

“What happened really? How did you wind up on this strange island? You never told me.”

“I just told you,” Kylo said, crawling over him. Hux ran his hands up his side, stroked his broad back.

“I always had this idea about you,” he said, “that you’d been left in a shipyard—when I close my eyes I can see little you sitting on a large cabin trunk, feet dangling, waiting for parents who’ll never come fetch him because they’ve been claimed by the sea. The circumstances varied, but I always imagined something tragic.” He cupped his face. “They left a lost boy for me to find. I pictured it sometimes—coming up to you, taking you home. I would’ve kept you as a pet.”

“If you’d stuck around, you would’ve met my parents,” Kylo said, holding his gaze as Hux started playing with his hair idly. “They came to visit on my sixteenth birthday and took me to a castle.”

Hux flicked his ear. “A castle! You talk such nonsense. I was being earnest for a moment.”

With their eyes locked, Kylo caressed his arse; a beat, and he dipped his smallest finger in. Hux gasped, tearing at Kylo’s hair. It urged him to push deeper. “Wherever I come from,” he said slowly, “whoever I am, right now, I am your dependent; but I will still go down on my knee—and you’ll still say yes.”

“Yes,” Hux echoed, squeezing around Kylo’s finger.

“I might be a lowly teacher, but you’ll refuse the Lady Seyre for me, or any other illustrious party,” Kylo told him. His thrusts grew more forceful, and a second finger was added without the aid of oil. Hux cried out, pulling his hair—but pulling him closer. “You’ll spend the rest of your life with someone who is not even deserving the name of a gentleman; people will point at you and whisper, ‘the Lord Arkanis has gone mad—’”
“No,” Hux snapped, chest heaving and a fierce sparkle in his eyes. “If they saw you they’d understand—”

“They wouldn’t care for my pretty features,” Kylo spat. “This is the face of a mere commoner.”

“Curse them,” Hux said, and with that, he pushed Kylo back onto his shoulders. He was upon him in a blink, straddling his strong hips and grabbing for the vial of oil. “I don’t care for noisome rumours, or strains on my reputation—words aren’t tangible, but here you are, something I can touch—” He wrapped his fingers around Kylo’s cock, who answered with a hoarse moan. “Something I care about.” The vial was uncorked; he poured the oil over his hand and grasped Kylo’s cock again, slicking him up in a furious hurry. The oil was warm and thick, and smelt of sunny roses; Kylo could hardly afford it, and now it was wasted on him. “You asked me if I’d choose you,” Hux said.

“Yes,” Kylo breathed, his cock twitching in Hux’s slick fist.

“Every moment I spend with you, I make a choice; and every time, assuredly and invariably, I choose you.” With that, Hux slid down onto his cock—no patience, no gentleness, just an unadulterated rage burning in him that could only be pacified like this.

Kylo couldn’t move at first. He laid still, just gaping up at this ferocious creature. He seemed to be a fairy summoned by Kylo’s righteous anger at the world, answering his viscous call with a demand of his own. His secret passage was velvet-soft and tight; he fit just right—he belonged perched on Kylo’s cock.

Kylo reached for his hips zealously; he grabbed them, feeling the sharp bones probing at his palms. He made him dance, up and down on his straining length, bouncing with a savage abandon, wordless as his spluttered declarations still hung in the air.

“Armitage Hux,” he said, like an invocation; he’d have another name for him soon—husband; his second self—his best earthly companion. Hux answered not with words but movement, swaying and picking up the pace, grabbing Kylo’s shoulder for leverage. His signet ring pressed into Kylo’s flesh; never before did Kylo feel so owned, yet so utterly in control. He wanted to leave a mark of his own; he got a fistful of Hux’s arse, squeezing hard enough to bruise.

“More,” Hux asked; Kylo squeezed again, then slapped at the other jiggly cheek. Hux jolted, biting his lips, hard enough to make them bleed. “Again,” he demanded.

“I should put you over my knees,” Kylo growled.

“That’d require you to remove your cock from my arse, which I forbid you to even think about,” Hux retorted. Kylo smacked his rear as requested, enjoying the sharp sound of it and how deliciously it made Hux tense around him. He wanted the soft flesh of his arse to be burning red and tender so Hux would be squirming in the morning on their way to Millcote, restless in the cushioned seat of his carriage; he wanted him to be well-fucked and pilant, dozing on Kylo’s shoulder, too tired to move—he’d have to be carried around.

His wishes proved to be not very far-fetched.

* * *

It was an immense pleasure to observe Hux’s growing discomfort as he pretended to be civil and sit
still. He was failing rather spectacularly. Their knees were touching; Kylo was seated facing him with Unamo on his right, and Millicent half-reclining over Hux’s lap. It was a shame that they had an audience, for Kylo was burning with the desire to make an observation on Hux’s sore buttocks. As it were, he focused his attention on the tranquil white landscape, only occasionally peering at Hux and relishing the obvious way he was wriggling, and clutching his walking stick.

“Are you quite certain we can’t head to London, or Bath, or even Whitley Bay?” Millicent nagged. “I’m afraid Millcote bores me a trifle.”

“I’m fairly certain,” Hux said with a tight-lipped smile. “I don’t travel in the winter if I can help it.”

Millicent pouted, peeping at Kylo from under her bonnet. She must’ve seen something encouraging in his answering grin for she proposed, “We must take Mr. Ren somewhere exciting. He’s only ever been to Salem, then on the sea, then Lowood, and now Stormfield Hall and Millcote, isn’t that right? That’s but five places altogether, in all his existence, and he’s an adult. He shall sojourn at Paris, Rome, and Naples: at Florence, Venice, and Vienna. He knows all about places he’s never been to; that’s not fair.”

“And you would join him on these little trips, wouldn’t you?” Hux asked, bemused. She nodded self-importantly.

“Why, of course; it’d be for my education, not just his alone.”

“I’m sorry to inform you that Mr. Ren and I shall move to the moon soon,” Hux said, glancing up at Kylo with a peculiar glint in his eyes. “Therefore there is but small chance we’ll visit all these earthly places.”

“Where will you live? The moon has no houses, no cities.”

“I shall seek a cave in one of the white valleys among the volcano-tops, and Mr. Ren and I shall live there together.” His foot nudged at Kylo’s ankle; he shivered at the contact. Take me there, he wanted to cry. Let us escape from this planet that forbids me to touch your hand or behold your face and betray my emotions in front of onlookers; we have to sit apart and be still—so let us fly away.

“He will have nothing to eat on the moon,” Millicent observed. “You will starve him.”

“I shall gather manna for him morning and night: the plains and the hillsides of the moon are bleached with manna, you know.”

“He will want to warm himself: what will he do for a fire?”

“Fire rises out of the lunar mountains: when he is cold, I'll carry him up to a peak, and lay him down on the edge of a crater.”

You’d break your back, Kylo mouthed, unobserved by Millicent. Hux read the teasing words from his lips and gently kicked him. Millicent hummed, deep in thought, a frown over her brows.

“But his clothes, they will wear out: how can he get new ones on the moon?”

“How would a white cloud answer for a spruce toga virilis, you think? And one could cut a pretty enough toga trabea out of a rainbow.”

“But you can’t get him there; there is no road to the moon: it is all air. And you cannot fly, only Mr. Ren.”
Kylo glanced at Unamo nervously, but she was preoccupied with gazing at nothing, in all probability debating the strange sounds of the English language.

“If you get a hold of my left shoulder, and Mr. Ren grabs the right, we could all fly to the moon,” Hux decided. “Or I could just build a catapult for us.”

“Am I to come along, then?” Millicent asked, delighted.

“By all means,” Hux nodded. “I wouldn’t want to live without you by my side.”

“Or Mr. Ren,” Millicent supplied.

“The three of us shall be inseparable. When you grow up, I’ll build you a house on the moon, and you shall come visit us—and while we’re here on this earthly plane and you’re still a child, sister, and ward, we should be able to appreciate each other’s company, whether we’re in London, Calais, Cairo, or Millcote; for what matters is that we can spend the day together jovially, and it shouldn’t be a concern where we are located. So forgive me this dull outing; Millcote might be an uninspiring little town, but I am convinced that we will have plenty of fun nevertheless.”

Millicent contemplated it, surveying Kylo again, maybe trying to judge whether a new foundling had a place in their orphaned family. Kylo was assured she’d decide in his favour; the way Hux explained it, two men living together didn’t sound too odd: even geographical concerns had greater consequences. Kylo could see understanding in Millicent’s eyes without the mention of prohibited love or inconceivable marriage.

The prospect of raising a child together—none other than his amicable student—filled him with the utmost joy; he could barely contain it within his chest, laughter threatening to spill over from his lips. A bright future was within reach; he was resolved to be done with dark dealings as the year came to a close and start afresh: say farewell to ghosts and curses—and welcome happiness.

“Can Mademoiselle Unamo come live with us on the moon?” Millicent asked after a long pause.

“She is contractually obliged to mind you,” Hux said, “so I believe the answer is yes, until you’re old enough to take care of yourself.”

“How may I be of service, sir?” Unamo perked up as if awakened from a deep slumber, frowning in befuddlement. “I heard my name mentioned.”

“We will go to live in space,” Millicent explained; Unamo crossed herself in answer.

“God help us!”

Kylo could feel Hux’s gaze upon him; he met his eyes and smiled warmly. *Did you mean it?* his soul whispered. *Would it please you to take care of me as long as we live, and expect nothing in return but for me to do the same? If I asked you to marry me again, would you say yes—right this instant—could I have that cherished answer?* He had the impression that Hux could hear him clearly: he inclined his head and blinked, the brief flutter of his lashes hiding a wink.

“Armitage confided in me that he wishes to live with Mr. Ren on the moon,” Millicent disclosed. “There’s nothing to do about it: it’s his heart’s desire.”

Unamo gaped at Kylo, much amazed before she could put back the polite mask of disinterest, and merely said, “Why, Monsieur Ren, you never told me.”

“It’s true,” Kylo said, almost apologetic, hoping that delayed honesty might help mend their fractured
friendship. Unamo just hummed, and turned her attention to her weather-worn purse, rummaging through it wordlessly, only her cheeks burning. She got a ball of yarn, probably preparing to distract herself with knitting and escape any upcoming scandalous reveal; when she noticed Millicent’s interest in what she was holding, she cut off a piece and proposed to play cat’s cradle with her.

Naturally, Kylo was excluded from the game; Hux didn’t seem eager to keep up a conversation—nor was he obliged to make an attempt, as no adult present matched his rank as far as he was concerned. The situation might be somewhat awkward now, Kylo told himself, but soon, all will be well. He reached into his coat’s pocket and pulled out Macbeth—he made sure Hux caught sight of the title before he began reading it, tilting his head just so, letting the glow of the snow reflect on his pondering face. He could feel Hux’s attention on him throughout the whole trip.

* * *

Milocote was a town transformed: with the fair snow covering the roofs of factories and the terraces of the many back-to-back houses, it almost looked clean—although there were muddied puddles on the unpaved roads, and the sidewalks didn’t look any better. They passed the poor parts Kylo recognised and ventured deeper; the streets grew wider, the buildings taller, and charming shop fronts could be spotted; the stink of the sewers disappeared, replaced by the crisp smell of wintry air with a whiff of smoke every now and then. They drove past a mighty cathedral and the imposing town hall, the largest constructions Kylo had ever beheld; he craned his neck to gape at them from the carriage’s hazy window, and Hux chuckled at his amazement.

They came to a halt by a grand square with silver birch trees and a statue of a man on horseback—Kylo didn’t recognise whom it might depict. Hux helped him alight from the carriage, then lifted Millicent out, who had no desire to be put down; Hux had to hold her as he discussed practical matters with Thanisson. Kylo paid no mind to their conversation but enjoyed hearing Hux’s voice without making out the exact words, as if it was music played in a dream. He turned around slowly to take in the square and its surroundings, the simple, symmetrical classical houses competing with the daring gothic and cheap red brick buildings: it was an astounding, mismatched dynamism; he felt he could spend the whole day exploring the architecture and regretted not bringing his drawing utensils to capture it.

Hux tapped his elbow to get his attention; such a simple touch sent shivers up Kylo’s spine.

“We’ll visit the tailor first,” Hux announced, his breath white puffs of hot air. “Meanwhile, the ladies shall occupy themselves in the silk warehouse—I hope you’ll find many beauteous fabrics, Millicent; but remember that I’ve already ordered you new dresses from Paris for Christmas, so be selective.”

“I shall find something nice for my doll,” Millicent decided. Hux adjusted her blue velvet coat to ready her for the venture.

Kylo wondered what sort of clothes he’d get—Hux paid close attention to fashion; if he was so careful about what his sister was wearing, surely he’d be twice as thorough in choosing the attire of his lover. An apprehensive excitement settled in Kylo’s stomach: it still seemed unnecessary to throw out his perfectly good wardrobe, but he wanted to be handsome for Hux—and it wasn’t just that: when he came back from Millcote dressed in modest finery, the servants of Stormfield Hall would surely be able to put two and two together if they didn’t already know; they were the ones changing the sheets and washing the linens, after all.
One secret less: a weight lifted. Kylo already felt lighter as he and Hux headed for the tailor’s shop on foot, arms linked. The air was brisk and clear, the glimmer of snow dazzling. Kylo’s elevated spirit was anchored by Hux’s touch; as they passed busy people on the streets Kylo wondered whether they could tell they were more than affectionate friends, whether they wondered about the contrast of Kylo’s battered coat and Hux’s expensive outerwear.

A bell’s ring announced their presence when they entered the shop; Kylo could hardly take in the wooden shelves reaching up to the ceiling laden with fabric and the cast iron stove with its cheery fire when a clerk called out, “General the Lord Arkanis and company!” — at that, the shop exploded with a flurry: people came bowing, rushing them to a fitting room away from the public eye. A pair of gilded chairs were presented, refreshments offered; soon, the ancient master tailor sauntered in, his moustache waxed to a point and eyes sharp behind round spectacles—his apprentices trailed him like frightened chickens behind an estranged mother hen.

“Ah, there you are,” Hux said from his seat, setting his cup aside. “Jolly good.”

The tailor greeted him and said, “I’m afraid we’re not quite ready for a fitting yet, my lord.”

“I read your letter; I didn’t expect you to be ready,” Hux said with a fleeting smile. “We merely wish to have a fitting with what you have—inspect the shirts and hope that you can present us with a smart frock and matching waistcoat for the evening; my good friend Mr. Ren and I are expected for tea.”

“Yes?” Kylo perked up; he’d been slouched in his chair, sipping on some thoroughly unsatisfying tea. He could see the tailor looking him over from the mirrors surrounding them: surprise, despair, then determination crossed his features.

“If I may remark,” he said boldly, “the Lord Arkanis wasn’t exaggerating when he gave us your measurements; stand, sir, if you please—we must begin with your evening attire; if it’s the wish of the Lord Arkanis, it shall be ready to wear posthaste.”

It didn’t escape Kylo’s attention that the apprentices looked close to fainting and that the tailor’s old hands were trembling—he couldn’t guess the amount of money Hux paid them to prioritise his order or the number of nightly hours spent pedalling a sewing machine; for a brief second, he was ashamed, thinking that all this was wasted on him.

Two glorious waistcoats were brought in: one crimson with a high, turned-up collar and the other a low-cut black—they were held together by pins in places, but their lines were perfect. Kylo felt like an awkward adolescence as they were put over his old shirt; a silk cravat and dark frock coat followed, and finally, a layered cloak sweeping the ground and lined with crimson silk. His embarrassment dispersed as soon as he looked into the mirror: he cut a princely figure with broad shoulders and a tightly cinched waistline, towering over the assistants around him, commanding respect and something akin to fear. He held his chin up and stood taller, taking in his reflection: this is how Ben of Naboo would’ve looked if he stayed home, and this is how he looked now: Kylo Ren, claiming his rightful heritage—while everyone around him thought he was just posing as a gentleman. He was ready to prove them wrong.

“Mr. Arkanis mentioned you are American,” the tailor said. “I have lived in Maryland for a short while in recent years and attempted to draw inspiration from there, fusing it with what’s en vogue in England: American fashion is bolder, more extravagant—and I shall think it suits you well, sir; the daring cuts, the splash of colour.”

Kylo opened his mouth to compliment him, but before he could speak, Hux said, clipped, “Leave us.”
No question was asked; everybody straightened up and left in a cordial hurry. Kylo watched them scurry away while Hux sat with his legs crossed, not even looking at them, and found himself rather shocked—it was a rare display of power; home in Stormfield Hall, Hux was more a hermit than a lord. The door closed; Hux got to his feet with the aid of his walking stick. Kylo held him in his gaze; his confidence didn’t waver—if anything, it was strengthened by having such a powerful man admiring him.

Hux stepped to him as if he was pulled in by an invisible, irresistible power, and touched the front of the dark waistcoat fondly. A gentle caress, then a hiss: his finger was pricked by a pin. “My rose has thorns,” he noted; Kylo brought his fingertip to his lips, and kissed the drop of blood away. “Oh, he’s no flower: he’s a vampire,” Hux remarked.

“Wasn’t it your intention to make me look like one when you chose this attire?” Kylo teased, enveloping him in the embrace of his cloak. Hux wrapped his hands around Kylo’s neck, and turned to the mirror with a mock-quizzical look.

“There’s your reflection: the illusion is ruined—but I do love men who are somewhat dangerous.”

“Vampires are no men. We are undead.”

“Isn’t it enough that I have given my love to a witch? Must you insist that you’re yet another sort of supernatural being?”

“It was you who made that connection; take the responsibility, you cunning thing,” Kylo said, dipping his head to gnaw at Hux’s throat. His teeth grazed over his Adam’s apple above the white cravat Hux was wearing, earning a stifled moan. “Why did you send everybody out?” he asked, then bit down. Hux gasped, grabbing a fistful of Kylo’s hair. They were pressed close under Kylo’s cloak; he could feel Hux’s erection probing his thigh—that was answer enough; but hearing it would be even sweeter.

“I needed to kiss you,” Hux said; with that, he licked at Kylo’s exposed ear. Kylo turned to glare at him, affronted; Hux caught his lips with his.

“You’ll delay the process,” Kylo whispered into the kiss.

“Then I suppose you’ll have to come to tea naked,” Hux murmured, scanting his hips to chase some delicious friction. “I wouldn’t mind it one bit.”

“You never told me we were expected for tea.”

“I hadn’t made up my mind on whether or not to accept the invitation.”

Kylo hummed, his hands sliding down to Hux’s waist and pawing at the corset hidden under his frock and greatcoat. “Why is that?”

“You don’t seem to like my friends very much; but I want to get you introduced—brag a little; they’re nobody important, just the local gentlemen’s club; still: I wish to socialise to-night.”

“A gentlemen’s club, huh?” Kylo thought of the molly house—were they headed for an orgy? Surely, Hux should’ve told him. “I’d appreciate if you involved me in making such decisions,” he said, cupping his chin gently.

Hux frowned at him, genuinely confused. “What for? I make all my decisions on my own. That is who I am, the essence of my very being: whether it’s the battlefield, the fate of the country, or personal matters, I decide what’s the best course of action—so just allow me to take care of you; that
is all I ask for.”

Kylo tightened his grip. “I can take care of myself perfectly well.”

“I never questioned that,” Hux said. “I just want to be of help. I know what’s the best for everyone. You have no idea—you cannot fathom—what I did to be in this position.”

A chill raced through Kylo. Maratelle had said six knocks: six knocks, the keys to the attic, and he’d know. “I think I can make an educated guess,” he said. “Regardless: I was under the impression you viewed us as equals, since we share a bed and plan to share a life—was I mistaken, pray tell?”

“We are equals.” Hux pressed closer. “Equality means we employ our respective talents to keep each other on the same level: all I’m saying is that decisions are my forté—thus you should follow my lead, especially when it comes to such trivial matters, and enjoy where it takes you, for all I do I do to please you.”

“Equality means equality,” Kylo growled, dropping his hand. “You needn’t be so authoritative, so English about it; I do not like it.”

“I thought you liked me being so English,” Hux said, a coy grin playing at his lips. It was impossible to win an argument against him when he got like this, so Kylo let it be.

“Invite the tailor back in,” he said, turning with a dramatic swish of his cloak. Hux obliged; that was a battle won, but not the war. Maybe he was being unreasonable, but ever since he’d started practicing magic, it had gotten harder and harder to control his emotions.

* * *

The tailor made a solemn vow to ready Kylo’s attire for the evening and redouble his efforts with all the articles Hux had ordered: shirts, trousers, waistcoats, and a new coat; by the time they went to fetch Millicent, Kylo was in a far better mood, but still apprehensive about the evening. What awaited them in the gentlemen’s club? What happened in those sort of establishments? Once his offended anger was somewhat tamed, he realised he could always ask Hux; if he didn’t like what he heard, he could decline to come and wouldn’t be forced to attend—but his pride forbade him from enquiring.

He accompanied Millicent to a shopping arcade sullenly and ate lunch in a restaurant for the first time in his life without truly relishing the experience; Hux shot him increasingly worried glances that he answered with polite smiles, pretending that all was right—but Hux knew him better. He wanted to follow through Hux’s method just to prove him wrong: that surprises were no way to operate and he was to partake in the process of decision making; it was the only way to overcome the obstacle that Hux was his employer. Yet he didn’t know how to phrase the problem, so he remained silent.

It wouldn’t matter in a few days; he was never disturbed by the imbalance of power at home, where he had so much to do and so little to worry about—where even evil spectres became part of everyday matters; now all seemed changed. He was sorely aware that without Hux, he couldn’t afford to wear fine clothes, eat nourishing food with proper silverware, or travel by hackney carriages—but he’d be free to make his own plans.

They were at desserts when Hux surprised him by asking, “What would you like to do next, Mr. Ren?”
Kylo nearly dropped the pudding from his fork. He cleared his throat and peered around sheepishly, as if the question could be aimed at anyone but him. Millicent was looking at him expectantly, and so did Hux—there was a longing in his eyes just to hear him speak; ignoring it would be an act of cruelty. “We could go ice skating,” he proposed, fixing his stare on Millicent who jumped in her seat delightedly and clapped; then she turned to Hux.

“Can we, Armitage? Please, please kindly let me—I’d be ever so careful, and Mr. Ren would look out for me.”

“I can’t see why not; it’s a fine idea,” Hux said softly; Kylo could feel the heat of his intent gaze, and hid behind his hair as he turned his attention back to his pudding—but he couldn’t drown out the conversation. “The weather is so mild to-day: it’d be a waste not to take advantage of it.”

Millicent cheered and in a happy rush said, “I love you, Armie,” as a way of thanks. Kylo peered up to observe Hux’s reaction: he looked taken aback for a moment, then responded with a tight smile—but could not find words. Millicent must’ve perceived that she embarrassed him, for she put her head against his shoulder in a penitent manner. Hux hesitated before he caressed her hair; he seemed to only touch her when he either needed to fix something in her appearance, or to reward or comfort her.

Kylo huffed and put his foot against Hux’s beneath the table. Hux met his glance, his strained smile easing, a hopeful little glint shining in his eyes.

*I’m still rather upset with you,* Kylo mouthed.

* * *

It proved to be rather challenging to stay waywardly upset with Hux, for he was at his most pleasant behaviour as they went to collect their ice skates; he was also wearing long boots because of the snow, and they looked wonderful on his shapely calves. Kylo attempted not to stare and managed for a while on their way to the graveyard—there was a frozen pond there that the local enthusiasts of the sport frequented.

His control slipped as he watched Hux light a pipe; the embers illuminated his darling features, the pucker of his lush lips around the mouthpiece calling intimate moments to mind. He stayed behind to smoke with Unamo while Kylo and Millicent braved the ice. Kylo kept glancing at him over his shoulders at every turn: he cut such an attractive figure standing by the decaying tombs and groaning oaks, greatcoat hanging on his gentle shoulders. Kylo wished to hear his conversation with Unamo, but he had obligations. Entertaining Millicent was an easy feat under the present circumstances: she was fascinated by tricks the other skaters did, and attempted to copy them as Kylo held her hands and offered polite instructions. Nevertheless, his attention remained divided.

“How do you know you’re in love with him?” Millicent asked; Kylo nearly slipped.

“Why,” he said, clearing his throat and dropping his voice low, “I know this to be love because it has the power to ruin me utterly—nobody and nothing else has that sort of influence over me, because I didn’t give it to them; but I granted it to Mr. Hux.”

Millicent scowled. “That doesn’t sound tolerable.”

“It is exceedingly tolerable most of the time,” Kylo said earnestly. “It is the act of utmost trust, like
presenting a knife to someone and daring him to put it to your bared throat—knowing full well he’d
never harm you.”

“Why would I ever do that?”

“Once you have such a person in your life, somebody who could wound you but chooses to heal
you instead, you have a loving, loyal partner; although there may be...several obstacles, it is but a test
of your bond’s strength to overcome them together, for no other reward than the company of each
other.” He made a turn and pulled Millicent along, sliding effortlessly, boundless, and free—yearning
to stand on the stable ground with Hux, or drag him to the ice, anything but separation; a
compromise would have to be made soon. “I’m sorry if you were hoping that Mr. Hux would marry
the Lady Scyre,” he offered. Millicent’s state of confusion had reached its limits; she burst out
laughing.

“Why would I want that still?”

“I’ve heard you express a desire for their union with my own ears.”

“That was just a particular consideration,” Millicent said, and gestured towards a group of children
zigzagging with their crude skates merrily. “Look: I could never join their games—I can tell by their
clothing they’re not of my circle; if I approached them, they’d either be terribly polite and bore me to
death, or they’d be rude and distant. No children in these parts are even close to my rank; therefore,
I’m terribly lonely. The Lady Scyre has the advantage of having a niece close to my age and above
my position; a match would be desirable for that reason—but I am not opposed to your person, for I
still consider us friends, and although you lack rank, your education is superior to many. I suppose I
can just marry the Lady Scyre myself if I want to be close to Frey, or even Frey herself.”

Kylo opened his mouth to explain that it wasn’t quite how things worked, but then reconsidered the
jab—it was a logical conclusion that if two men could love each other, women could do the same. A
lecture on what the law thought about that could wait. “I’m afraid there is a considerable age gap
between you and the Lady Scyre,” he said.

“For now, yes; but when I grow up, she’ll still be a grown-up, and that is a match.” Millicent
announced with confidence.

Kylo had to close his eyes for a moment. He was teaching rather complex arithmetics to her, yet it
was evident she had no grasp on the correlation between the sum of one’s years and aging; but that
was the way of children: wisdom and ignorance coexisting in a rather adorable paradox. Looking
down to her he wondered about the adult she would become; she’d be clever and capable, he’d see
to that—but would she still be lonely, as lonely as he was as a child until he met Hux again?

“I’ve been wondering about your living arrangements,” he confessed. “It is my understanding that
you have a place in Arkanis; are there no children there you could socialise with?”

“My family has been living in Stormfield Hall for over some centuries now,” Millicent said. “I’ve
been to the manor in Arkanis—it’s terribly damp, and in a sorry state; there’s also something to do
with mortgage, I believe, or maybe taxes? Armitage has been threatening to give me a lesson on
finances; in any which case, the family prefers Stormfield Hall; it was built by my great-great-great-
grandfather—give or take a few greats—he loved to hunt here, and so we stayed.”

Kylo looked around the graveyard and once again his gaze found Hux between crosses and stone
angels: young and resurrected, overpowered by the presence of death.

“I suppose your family is not laid to rest here, then,” he said slowly. That’d be just marvellous: more
Hux—relatives to haunt him.

“No; our remains are sent back to Arkanis—that’s where we belong, after all; Armitage often jokes that all that mold had sent us into exile. We have a mausoleum—there’s only one place left, so Armitage said we’d have to curl up and hold each other when we die.” Kylo must have made a face at that, for she added, “Don’t worry: if you’re to marry him, we can make place for you for sure.”

“That is very generous of you,” Kylo said, banishing the grim thought that Hux or Millicent would ever stop living—they had become his entire world, his North and South; if he didn’t die on the same day as them, the same minute, his soul would walk the Earth forever, directionless.

Millicent wanted to say something—dismiss the compliment, probably; but before she could speak, a dog dashed past them, dragging its leash on the ice, its owner far behind. Millicent recoiled and hissed; her voice wasn’t human. Kylo grabbed her shoulders, and made her look at him: her pupils were too thin, snarling teeth sharp.

“You’re safe,” Kylo told her, cupping her face with both of his hands. “You’re here with me, your brother is near; no harm can come to you as long as you see me—can you see me?”

Millicent blinked; her eyes returned to normal, and there was recognition in them. “I can see you, Mr. Ren.”

“Look at that cur skiddle and fall over; it’s not as agile as you are—it cannot even walk on ice—how could it ever harm you?”

“I know, I just can’t stand dogs,” Millicent complained, tense all over, but not shedding her human frame again. Hux must’ve perceived that something has happened, for he called from the shore. “Take me to him,” Millicent asked, and Kylo obliged, gathering her up. She felt so light, as if the wind could pick her up and carry her away any minute—so Kylo held on strong, skating to where Hux waited, agitated. He handed her over; Hux allowed her to cling to his neck and bury her face in his shoulder. No question was asked while she was so shaken. Kylo couldn’t resist but embrace the both of them, never minding the onlookers. The worst thing they could spy on was the truth: that they were a family.

* * *

The hour of the tea party drew near. Kylo found himself somewhat placated, but not exactly in high spirits as he paced the hotel room he was to share with Hux. The separate beds worried him; he was looking forward to embrace Hux and find solace in the heat of his naked body, no matter how the day progressed and what unpleasantries were to be suffered. The idea of an orgy filled him with hateful jealousy; he might’ve proposed the idea that the whole of England should be granted the pleasure of witnessing Hux’s beautiful ecstasy back in the laboratory, but that was a nonsensical thought; surely, Hux should know. It agitated him to think that he might have to share even the sight of him. May the world be blinded; they had no right to lay eyes on Hux, much less their mouth or hands, for he belonged to Kylo now.

He wished they could be as they were yesterday evening, hidden behind the bed’s canopy, buried in each other, breathing together, finding mutual pleasure; that’s how they should always be—not just equals, but one flesh and united hearts.
The door opened; Hux entered, carrying a bundle Kylo recognised to be his new clothes, folded. He was at ease, smiling jovially. Kylo turned his head, peering out of the window as if he was seeking escape in the soft fall of new snow.

“That’s enough,” Hux said, hushed, letting the door close behind him. Kylo heard him set the clothes on the table and saw a vague reflection of his movements in the bumpy glass. The luxurious clutter of the room surrounded Hux like a chaotic mosaic; he didn’t belong here, among emerald and gold and an oppressive amount of garish decorations—the subdued colours of his quarters suited him better, the vastness of Stormfield Hall, the orderly garden. Kylo longed to be back there and pressed his palm to the cold window as if he could reach for their shared home.

“That’s enough,” Hux repeated, walking up to him. He put his hands over Kylo’s arms; he was in his shirtsleeves and thus could feel the pleasant warmth of Hux’s palms. He let out a slow exhale as Hux leant close and whispered to him, “I can see that you’re troubled, despite my best efforts to appease you; how did I offend, and how may I amend the injury? You shall tell me at once.”

“I told you already,” Kylo said gravelly. His body forsook his pride and he found himself pressed close to Hux, feeling the heat of his groin, yearning to feel him as completely as when Hux was making love to him.

“I’m afraid there’s been a misunderstanding,” Hux said, dropping his hands so they were on Kylo’s stomach. He pulled him closer; Kylo bent his knees slightly as if it would make him smaller and easier to handle. “This evening I wish to present you as my partner—that is, my equal; although we have different understandings of the term, I want to grant you a debut.”

“What if I deny your wish?”

“You may; but know that it would wound me deeply.”

“It would please me to stay behind,” Kylo proposed, voice bored by design. “This room is comfortable enough; I suppose I could pass the time by reading. I might doze off by the time you return; you’d find me in a chair, tired and useless, donning my old ratty clothes. What would you do then?”

Hux thought about his answer; Kylo liked that about him. He liked his hands caressing him, his sweet breath on his neck, his closeness; but resented that they might be denied of him for the evening, even if it was out of consideration of his wish. “I’m afraid I couldn’t carry you to bed,” Hux contemplated, “so I’d have to wake you—but I’d tuck you in if you were too knackered to do it, and kiss you good-night.”

“How about the morning?” Kylo asked, nagging.

“The hotel’s restaurant serves a most excellent breakfast.”

“What if I didn’t want to eat?”

“For goodness sake, Kylo,” Hux grunted; hearing his name on his lips had Kylo swallow around a soft moan. “I’m no tyrant; you’re free to do as you please; you’ve always been; our involvement doesn’t change that. I may have some proposals—”

“Several of them,” Kylo interjected, earning a pinch.

“Nevertheless,” Hux said sharply, “disregarding my decisions is always an option, for you’re an adult; you’re my dependant, not my servant; and you’re my love.”
“But you’re my lord, love,” Kylo said, turning to face him. He tugged at his white cravat; Hux made a choked-off sound, but arched his neck as if demanding more of the rough treatment. “Maybe I should just spank you again to sort out this regrettable imbalance,” Kylo added in a whisper.

Hux shivered, letting his eyes flutter shut and parting his pink lips slightly; Kylo was very tempted to kiss him.

“I wish that could be arranged,” Hux said. Kylo’s resolve broke and he claimed his mouth; a wet pass of Hux’s tongue, a gasp, and then: “My sister is next door.”

“Accomplished little witch as she might be, she can’t see through walls,” Kylo assured him. Hux was holding onto his shoulders, but didn’t pull him back.

“It is a modern building—the walls are thin; she wouldn’t have to see, for she could hear everything clearly. Patience; wait until the night has fallen and all slumber.”

Kylo scowled, confused; he was certain Hux wouldn’t wait until so late—but he obliged him by dropping his hands. Hux adjusted his cravat, licked his lips as if to chase Kylo’s taste. The tempting display made Kylo’s blood run hot.

“So, Kylo,” Hux said, turning his attention to his cuffs, “I will ask you one last time—and I promise I will stop bothering you with the request, whatever your answer may be: will you accompany me for tea?”

“Seeing that we have nothing better to do,” Kylo said, teeth set.

Hux glanced up at him, immensely pleased. Kylo folded his arms and peered at the window, as if agreeing to the scheme after a whole day of sulking didn’t import anything.

“Is that a yes?” Hux purred.

“It is a ‘do what you please.’”

“But I want to please you.”

“I’ll go!” Kylo snapped, then added, “You’re intolerable.”

Hux simply winked, and began his preparations for the evening.

* * *

The scene was set—but hardly for an orgy. Kylo was amazed to be greeted by a butler; his gloves and hat were taken and, sadly, he had to part with his glorious cloak. He looked around, astonished; quiet servants were all about, and the room upstairs was invitingly open, laughter and chatter pouring out—the noise of joy, but not of secret ecstasy.

“We’re fashionably late,” Hux noted; he was immaculately dressed in a blue coat with gilt buttons and white pantaloons that brought one’s attention to his perfect legs. It was to be an informal function, nothing more than a pleasant evening with friends—frivolity appeared to be absent.

Kylo refused to accept his probable mistake; as Hux offered him his arm and they took the stairs he readied himself to be greeted by the sight of tangled bodies or curious gentlemen disappearing into
private quarters with their lovers. They were admitted to a mint-coloured room where a tea table was set in the proximity of a cheery fireplace. A couple of gentlemen were conversing as the host walked around; he clapped his hands gleefully when Hux was announced.

“Welcome, welcome!” he cried out, voice faint and hoarse. He had fair curls and sideburns, round eyes a watery blue, teeth white and narrow. He had to be quite young, his dimples disguising his age further. He shook Hux’s hand warmly, who said, “The Venerable Archdeacon of —shire, Zachariah Chattoway; this is my companion Mr. Ren, a teacher and an artist.”

So we came to have tea with an archdeacon, Kylo thought, shocked. Be assured: no orgy will take place here; face it—your jealousy had been unwarranted; your rage that dear Armitage would involve you in such an indulgence without your consent likewise groundless; oh, you unfortunate idiot! A day wasted on brooding—although Armitage could have saved you from an irascible mood, if he’d been more forthcoming and less commanding.

“Aren’t you handsome?” the archdeacon interrupted his musings, reaching up to touch his face. On second thought: an orgy might very well be in order after all. “Come, come: meet everyone.”

He was led to the table in a gracious hurry. Hux greeted everybody as old acquaintances, while the archdeacon introduced Kylo—the honorary title of an artist Hux had given to him stuck and gathered much interest. The list of guests consisted of an elderly viscount who appeared to be the archdeacon’s partner, a barrister, a navy officer, two gentlemen of prose and poetry, and a man by the name of Mr. Dameron who was far better dressed than the rest but seemed to have no rank or distinguished occupation worth mentioning.

“He’s a dandy,” the archdeacon explained.

“I’d advise you to stay away from him,” Hux piped in.

Mr. Dameron raised his hand in a theatrical gesture, laying it above his heart. “You wound me, Arkanis.”

Hux sneered at him. Kylo couldn’t decide whether it was the satirical banter of confidants or something far more serious, so with a parting glance at the immaculately coiffed dark hair of Mr. Dameron he took his seat next to Hux. The table was laden with delicates: crystallized fruits, cakes, sandwiches, and bonbons matching the colour of the centerpiece made of roses and the decorations on the tea-urn. Kylo took an interest in the punchbowl instead, needing the warm comfort of alcohol.

He could hardly take two sips when the viscount turned to him and noted self-importantly, “By your accent I perceive you must be Canadian.”

“American, my lord.”

An excited whisper passed around the table; the viscount smiled amicably. “Here’s a toast, then: to our estranged nations to be united once again under one sovereign crown.”

“Hip, hip, hurrah!” the archdeacon said. Kylo was resolved not to raise his glass to that.

“I’m afraid the subject might be sensitive to a son of a democratic nation,” Hux interjected before anyone could empty their glass. An awkward pause followed, broken too soon by Mr. Dameron.

“Do you believe in democracy, Mr. Ren?” he asked; he sounded earnest, but Kylo sensed a trap.

“I have no opinion on the matter,” he said.
“Perhaps a more appropriate topic would be that of the weather,” Hux interjected. The viscount, for all his respectable years, looked chastened, and the chatty host and all the guests sat in silence with the exception of Mr. Dameron, who chuckled. Kylo began to suspect that this circle of friends didn’t so much like Hux as they were intimidated by him; frightened, in some cases.

“The weather in the States is actually quite fascinating,” Kylo said, relieved not to discuss politics with imperialists, but unsure whether Hux’s authority was extended to him and he could be unpleasant on his merit; best not to risk it. “You see, we have earthquakes, hurricanes and avalanches; and you must’ve heard about what the Year Without a Summer did to us.”

“Have you ever lived through such catastrophes?” the poet asked him, reaching for his punch; the rest of the table did the same as if they just remembered they were free to eat and drink. Hux sat by Kylo’s side without touching anything. “America is such a wild place; the very landscape is treacherous—in the best sense possible—it really captures one’s imagination, doesn’t it?”

“I was quite young when I left. I remember storms, ungodly storms.” His gaze wandered, staring at nothing; what he saw were yellow clouds on the day the magpie arrived. Getting swept away by reveries didn’t halt the conversation; it surrounded him like the murmuration of the sea separating him from his motherland. If only he could take Hux there; if only he could return without giving up the life he’d built for himself.

He could feel Mr. Dameron glancing at him on occasions—maybe he felt a kinship with him, since both of them were outsiders: Mr. Dameron’s accent certainly wasn’t English, yet he proved to be more knowledgeable of local news than the Britons at the table. Kylo joined in when an engaging topic was brought up and wandered back to silence when a dull turn had been taken. Nobody’s opinions could capture his attention as much as when Hux was speaking—educated but excitable, always looking for an argument. Kylo found it endearing how he squirmed in his seat when he was restless to speak. He caressed the small of his back when he got particularly overzealous, rubbing it with his knuckles and watching Hux regain his composure and getting boneless from such a simple touch.

Glasses and cups were emptied, sweets and sandwiches consumed; it was time for games. Kylo didn’t see much point in getting up just to wander to another table in the room, but followed the company dully. It had gotten too warm and his limbs felt like jelly. He wanted to go outside, lead Hux on his arm, loiter around the nocturnal city and allow the benign coolness of the air to clear his heavy head. They took their seats and a pack of cards was presented by their host to the navy officer’s immense pleasure.

“I propose a game of Whist,” he announced.

“Do you play, Mr. Ren?” Mr. Dameron asked; Kylo didn’t appreciate being thrown into a tizzy.

“I only know Snap and Old Maid,” he grunted dourly.

The writer made an amused face at that, and the barrister went as far as to say, “That wouldn’t do at all: we shall teach you.”

“Who else is to play?” the poet asked.

“Count me in,” Hux said, placing a banknote in the middle of the round table; it was covered with a green cloth, making it look like a furious whirl ready to swallow the bills put on it as more players joined in.

Mr. Dameron doubled Hux’s offer, noting, “I’m not betting on myself, mind you; I bet that Mr. Ren
can master the game, even if he doesn’t win.”

Kylo glared at him; Hux squeezed his knee under the table in a reassuring gesture. “Let me introduce you to the rules,” he said softly as the other players debated over penalties and scoring. And such rules they were; Kylo’s head was spinning merely two minutes into the careful explanation. He had to ask for several clarifications, face burning knowing that Mr. Dameron was likely to overhear his doltish questions; he spotted him smirking as Hux went on patiently. Such indignity was insufferable; he got to his feet before he could think better of it. All eyes were on him. A nervous tremble twisted his stomach, and he said, voice hoarse with emotion, “Place your bet elsewhere, Mr. Dameron; I’m afraid this game wouldn’t entertain me.” He bowed curtly, and headed away without seeing where he went, and not hearing if anyone called after him.

Leaving the room would be unthinkable; he wandered to the tall windows as a last resort, pretending to be occupied by the city scene while his vision swam. He felt homesick, but to his wonder he was no longer yearning for Stormfield Hall’s comforts or even the remote States, but Lowood; Lowood as it used to be: just him and his Augustus, engaged in their simple games. It had always been just the two of them, accomplices pretending to be adversaries. Tic-tac-toe. Thumb war. Sleeping lions. It was clear from the beginning that his friend was merely indulging him: at five-and-ten he deemed himself too old to find much amusement in them; his willingness to play just for Kylo’s sake made it all the more precious. Not even the cruel, decade-long hide-and-seek could ruin those precious memories.

“Hullo,” Hux said softly; Kylo didn’t hear him approach. He almost expected him to say you’re It, let the chase begin as Hux placed his hand on his shoulder. “Are you quite all right, my dear?”

“It was not my intention to cause a scene; I just wasn’t much interested.” He glanced toward the table; the cards had been dealt out, and the game was afoot. Kylo scowled. “You opted out? Wouldn’t that make you lose your bet?”

“I couldn’t let you be miserable on your own, could I?” Hux said softly.

“Then we shall be miserable together,” Kylo answered, making Hux smile. Smiles suited him; Kylo watched the crow’s feet in the corner of his eyes wrinkle, mesmerised.

“Do you like chess?”

“I wouldn’t know; I never played.” His gaze dropped to Hux’s lips, then his neck, his chest, his shoulders: there were so many places of conquest—he had kissed him everywhere. A last thought was wasted on the prospect of an orgy; he was now of the opinion that he would’ve quite liked it, or even a scene similar to the one he had spied on in the molly house, if it provided him an opportunity to get his mouth on Hux posthaste.

“Shall I teach you? I promise the rules are not that demanding.”

“We’ll see.”

Hux showed the way to the chess board with a playful flourish, more charming than humorous. The set had its own little mahogany table with two leather chairs; Kylo chose the one not facing the players, but he could have sworn he felt Mr. Dameron’s intent gaze on him nevertheless.

“You don’t seem to like Mr. Dameron much,” he noted discreetly as Hux set up the figurines. Hux’s easy mood was broken for a moment; his face darkened.

“An accurate observation,” he admitted. “I wasn’t informed he’d be present.”
“May I ask why are you opposed to his person?”

Hux glanced up, checking if they were being looked at, then said, voice dropped low, “I suspect him to be a Resistance spy.”

Kylo watched him line up the pieces: a tower, a queenly figurine. He was somewhat alarmed by the answer. Politics were of no particular interest for him, but he remembered his mother’s secret visitors and vague lines in her letters; the business that kept her away to visit more often, to care.

“You don’t suppose you’ve ever crossed paths, do you?” Hux asked. “He looks at you as if he remembers you.”

“No,” Kylo said, then repeated, “No. He looks at me as if he suspects me to be somebody, but can’t decide whether his assumption is right.”

But how could that be? he mused. I’ve never met him; and should he be mother’s associate, how would he know my likeness? My own parents are unaware—they last saw me when I was hardly more than a boy. I have my mother’s eyes, for sure, my father’s laugh; but that is not enough.

“Is he right?” Hux asked slowly. “Could he be tasked with locating a lost orphan?”

“I believe he is looking for a child,” Kylo said, meeting his searching glance. “But I’ve grown up.”

* * *

They formed an allegiance as the game progressed, which was rather curious considering that Hux never let Kylo win; he was ruthlessly competitive and would show no mercy for even such an inexperienced player. Kylo was cheered and charmed; he could almost forget that they were not alone in the room, although the merrymaking of the other guests was impossible to ignore.

A loud huzza announced that the Whist was over; the navy officer had won and sprang up from his seat, demanding dance and music as he waved his winning set of cards around. He was applauded and his wish was greeted just as warmly.

“A waltz, a waltz!” the archdeacon begged. “I’ve been dying to dance the waltz!”

“Wouldn’t that be a trifle scandalous?” the viscount asked.

The archdeacon looked at him meaningfully and said, “That is the precise reason I’ve been looking forward to it, darling. Get the tables out of the way! Tune the pianoforte!”

“Would you be interested in dancing?” Hux asked Kylo, who was distracted by the noise and the possibility of taking Hux’s rook—but it would mean sacrificing his knight, and he was getting attached to it.

“I can’t say. I’m afraid it’s yet another talent I regrettably lack.” He made the decision to make the move. Hux wasted no time taking his knight off the board, who had to join the vast cemetery of fallen heroes and pawns.

“Give yourself some credit; you’re doing admirably for a beginner, and I reckon you’d cut a dashing figure on the floor; whether you move correctly and with grace would almost feel like an
afterthought.” He smiled slyly. “I must confess I enjoy turning the tables and teaching the tutor. I’d say that the first lesson I’ve ever given on a subject foreign to you yielded spectacular results.”

Kylo pictured their first time together—wine dripping from Hux’s lips, so lovely on his knees. He made a noise Hux found most amusing. He was already eyeing the dance floor, dividing his attention between their game and the preparations.

“I propose we finish the match,” Kylo said sharply; his voice got softer when Hux’s gaze was back on him. “If I win, we may dance.”

Hux made a face at that; Kylo grinned at him and arched an eyebrow in challenge. Although it visibly pained him, Hux attempted to fail; but Kylo was not going to let him get what he wanted without a proper fight—he played atrociously, making Hux lower the stakes even more. They were so engaged in a mortal battle trying to underperform each other that both of them jumped in surprise when Mr. Dameron materialised, reaching out a hand to Kylo.

“May I have the pleasure, Mr. Ren?”

“We are not finished with our game yet,” Hux said with a slight snarl; his show of teeth would’ve made a lesser man recoil, but Mr. Dameron stood his ground. “If he wins, the first dance will be mine.”

“I am eagerly awaiting the conclusion of your match, then,” Mr. Dameron said, taking his hand back. Kylo noticed that his palm was rather rough, like a labourer’s. He hid it behind his back, and watched them play with a complacent interest.

The fun was drained from the game; Kylo could feel his eye twitch, irreversibly irritated by Mr. Dameron’s presence. It made him predictably mediocre, his jaunty miscalculations forgotten; it would’ve been easy to defeat him—it was even easier to deliberately lose to him.

“Checkmate,” he announced, Hux’s king standing in a rook’s shadow, cornered by Kylo’s own monarch—his last two figurines. Hux submitted to defeat gladly, just the faintest hint of a grimace twisting his lips; Mr. Dameron had the gall to sigh.

“Maybe some other time,” he suggested.

“We’ll be heading home early, I’m afraid,” Kylo said, getting to his feet. He offered his hand to Hux who took it timidly, his gentle touch a warning, We don’t have to run away; we shan’t be intimidated.

Kylo didn’t take the silent advice. He was no tactician, had no patience to placate a spy; he led Hux to the dancefloor positively stomping, challenging anybody to dare tear them apart. The curtains had been drawn so no outsider could spy on a group of bachelors dancing with each other; the gas lamps had also been turned off, only the gold flicker of candles illuminating the room, so no pair would cast a suspicious shadow. Kylo found solace in the glowing darkness, watching the gilt buttons of Hux’s blue coat glimmer, taking in his lithe frame. He was standing next to him, a step away, holding hands; he was expected to be lined up, walk through figures and changes, unite with his partner for a touch of fingers, then losing sight of each other again.

“Forgive me for prying: how familiar are you with ballroom dancing, exactly?” Hux asked him, stepping closer to face him. Kylo was baffled, but saw that the other pairs assumed a similar position as Mr. Dameron took his place at the pianoforte.

“I have observed it on...occasion,” Kylo said. It was, in fact, just that one occasion in Chadrilla.
“I’d advise you to follow my lead for the time being, in that case,” Hux said. “You’ll find the rhythm rather simple: one-two-three, one-two-three; step back with the right foot as I step forward with my left, then place your left foot back, feet parallel; touch your feet together, step forward with the left; make sure that your shoulders are relaxed and that your back is straight. You shall hold me like this.”

Mellow music began to be played; Hux pulled even closer, their chests almost touching, guiding Kylo’s hand to his shoulder, holding the other up in the air. Kylo held his breath. He was desperate to impress Hux after his many misjudged decisions and poor deeds during the day; this dance would be a peace offering—a gift to each other. Smiling apologetically, Hux surged forward with perfect, posed elegance; Kylo was ready for him and retreated, allowing Hux to guide him to the next step.

His heart was beating with the rhythm of the song; it was their melody now—they moved together with such instinctive precision as they did in bed, inexplicably interconnected, their very souls adjoined. *It has always been a dance*, Kylo realised. *Pushes, pulls, and missteps.*

They were walking around a triangle—the very symbol of heavenly harmony. Along the lines of it was conflict and movement; regardless: it was unaltered. Kylo looked into Hux’s eyes in utter amazement, lost in their shifting colour. He leant in for a kiss, then thought better of it; he just let his lips linger, pressing his forehead to Hux’s, breathing the same air. He could tell he’d missed the beat several times—but he couldn’t be bothered. He was holding Hux and swaying with him, light as thought, adrift in their own universe—dancing on the moon, perhaps.

The music changed; Kylo was roused, his mouth dry and throat tight. He glared daggers at Mr. Dameron’s back, displeased that a new set began. He shielded Hux with his body so no one could ask for his hand in dance; Hux pulled even closer as if he had the same thought, hiding his face in the crook of Kylo’s neck.

“Do you feel ready to lead?” he asked, lips brushing over the exposed skin above his cravat. It was too provoking in their present situation; Kylo made sure Hux could feel how affected he made him, pressing against his thigh.

“I would like to try, but be warned: I might make several mistakes.”

Hux looked up at him, pupils dark. “Let us take the risk,” he said.

* * *

They danced through the streets on their way home, like midnight bats fleeing early, dark cloak and coat whirling around as they spun on the silent snow. They got some pointed looks from the passers-by but didn’t mind it, hearts full with song. Kylo’s mirth was more like mania; he could see the same frenzy in Hux’s gaze. They must’ve looked drunk; maybe they were, but not on spirits.

The hotel was not too far. Kylo resented the small distance. He wished to waltz through the world, across oceans, through the aether, in the volcanic caves beneath the surface and among the distant crystals of stars; they would hear such music no human has heard before, and there’d be a relished violence to their dance, passions unleashed.

Up the stairs now; there was a falter in Hux’s steps. His bad leg must’ve pained him; after they greeted the porter and Kylo perceived there was no-one around on the corridors, he hauled Hux up and proceeded to carry him to their room on the second storey. Hux bit his lips lest his laughter
escape, clinging onto Kylo’s neck and attempting to look appalled, but his shining eyes betrayed his
delight.

They halted by Millicent’s room, listening for a minute; nothing—her and Unamo must’ve been fast
asleep. Kylo tiptoed to the neighbouring door so he wouldn’t risk waking them. Hux fumbled for the
keys and, after seconds bleeding into eternity, they were finally in private. They lit no lamp or
candle, undressing each other in the velvet darkness with a sense of keen hurry; Kylo was just
beginning to unbutton Hux’s pantaloons when there was a noise—not from Millicent’s room, but
their other neighbours: they had completely forgotten about them. Kylo groaned; their invisible
neighbour coughed as if in answer, and took some squeaking steps to settle on the edge of his
creaking bed. It sounded as if he was in the room with them, and then a woman’s voice was heard.

Kylo’s fingers lingered over the buttons. He needed to be with Hux to-night, his body and soul both
aflame. He was convinced he’d perish without it, and started thinking about ways magic might save
them from scandal—but Hux gently pushed his hands away, undressing himself. Kylo stood forlorn,
taking in the moon’s blue shine on Hux’s skin—if only he could be light to touch him, air to caress
him, fire to warm him! Hux got a hold of his wrist, and led him wordlessly to the basin. A hopeful
smile tugged at Kylo’s lips; it was just like in their childhood, washing side by side.

There were two beds; Hux headed to the nearest one once they were finished, pulling Kylo along.
He put on his nightgown and handed Kylo his own: he wasn’t convinced it would be any sort of
saving grace were they to be discovered, but he dressed himself nevertheless to oblige Hux. Hux got
into bed, but Kylo waited before following him, hoping it wouldn’t raise suspicion this way. In the
meanwhile, he searched his trunk and fished out jar of arnica balm. He held it up in question, the
light of the embers from the hearth catching on the glass.

“What is that?” Hux asked, barely more than a whisper.

“For your leg,” Kylo answered with a bit more confidence; surely, there was nothing wrong with a
friend helping to ease the pain of his roommate.

“How thoughtful,” Hux said, tone cordial yet somewhat distant; but the way he parted his legs was
unmistakable. Kylo stood entranced; soft thighs, milky skin, delicate ankles—offered for his
admiration; he knelt down beside the bed as Hux assumed a sitting position. Kylo recalled the first
time he applied balm to Hux’s bad leg, not quite recognising the fierce passion that had threatened to
overtake him yet. He had a name for his emotions now; he was unafraid to name them. He put his
lips to Hux’s knee, kissed his way down to the injury, softly, softly; scooped up the balm with two
thick fingers and rubbed it in.

“This is my own making,” he told Hux.

“You made it for me?” Hux whispered. Kylo answered with a nod and pulled his hand back,
keeping it over Hux’s ankle in the air. Hux gasped as the balm warmed up seemingly on its own—it
responded well to witchcraft; embarrassed by making a noise, Hux glanced at the wall.

“Does it hurt?” Kylo asked loud enough that their neighbours were sure to hear it.

“It hurts,” Hux said; to sound more convincing, he added, “It’s very cold.”

Kylo clenched his fingers as a bird of prey closes its claws around its victim; he pulled, taking Hux’s
pain away from him, making the balm soak it up. Hux watched him with unguarded amazement and
a charming hint of annoyance. Kylo scooped up more of the balm; his gaze must’ve betrayed his
intent, as Hux spread his legs even further apart, leaning back on his elbows. Kylo inserted a finger,
making Hux gasp again.
“I’m sorry,” he said, doing his best to sound like a fretting friend. He pushed deeper leisurely, up to the knuckle; Hux’s nightgown was obscuring the view, but Kylo found he quite enjoyed doing this in stealth, wearing their sleeping attire, under the cover of darkness. The obscene wet sound as his pointer joined the index finger could pass for someone massaging in the balm meticulously; he moved his fingers slowly, opting to scissor them instead of loud in-and-out bravado. Hux was biting his thumb as he watched him, his erect cock pushing against the nightgown. Kylo grinned when he noticed a small, wet spot there, and leant in to mouth at it. Hux’s moan was muffled.

Kylo pulled back with a parting lick at the fabric and eased his fingers out. He climbed over Hux, the bed only creaking once. He lifted up the hem of his nightgown to show Hux his full, meaty cock aching for release; Hux made a needy sound just at the sight of it. Kylo covered his mouth in answer with his hand, searching his gaze to see if Hux was opposed to it. His eyes were dark with desire, eyelids drooping. Kylo fumbled to line up, probing at Hux’s entrance with his cockhead before he could ease it in, letting Hux adjust to the girth.

Kylo opted for short, shallow thrusts, reveling in the tight pressure around his cock—wanting more of it; but he was certain he’d lose himself if he pressed in any deeper. He would try to unmake Hux with an abandon, not caring about consequences; he’d let the whole hotel know what was going on, perhaps the entire town. He felt Hux’s breath on his palm: he was positively panting—he wouldn’t be able to hold his voice, exceedingly sensitive as he was. Kylo swallowed back his moans and grunts, and when Hux reached to get a hold of his shoulders, maybe claw at his back, he shook his head—it’d be too much now, the pleasure unbearable.

Hux dropped his hands, spread out beneath him like a striking figure on a painting. His graceful fingers grasped the dark cover above his head, his long legs were pulled up to his chest; the nightgown slid up to his marble torso, revealing his bobbing, dripping cock. Kylo was overcome looking at him, taking in his scent, feeling his heat. He wanted to learn everything there was to be known about lovemaking just so he could share more sensous joys with Hux.

The balm was far less accommodating than the oils Hux used, but Kylo enjoyed the friction and burning sensation. He always believed that being intimate was supposed to hurt, much like giving birth—that it was God’s punishment for the sin—but God had long ago turned His gaze away from them, and the pleasures were so abundant the pain hardly amounted to anything. He caressed Hux’s face nevertheless with the tip of his fingers, checking how he was feeling.

“Comfortable?” he asked. Hux nodded, then licked at his palm. Kylo released him right at that instant.

“We could try it this way,” Hux whispered, rolling over to his stomach. Kylo was dumbfounded for a moment: Hux’s buttocks was an exquisite sight; he kept thinking he’d just conjured up a perfect picture of it, that his doting memory had fixed the blemishes: but it was petite and perfect, fitting into his hands snugly. He pried the pink cheeks apart, watching the shiny balm trickle down. Soon, he’d fill Hux with his come, get him wet with it—prepare his hole for himself in the morning, hope he’d still be ready for the taking and might even return the frivolous favour.

“I hope you’re not finished healing me,” Hux said, looking over his shoulder and giving his arse a little wiggle. Kylo moaned; pretended it to be a cough. He lowered himself onto his elbows, covering Hux with his body; he pressed his palm over his mouth again and pushed right back in sharply, just a few inches. Hux mewled, stifled as Kylo’s hips twitched into his tightness. He began moving on his own, rubbing his cock over the firm mattress. There was an untamed elegance to it, something refined yet brutal. Kylo put his weight into his thrusts, making Hux feel the power of him, arching and writhing to get more, moaning into his palm.
Kylo wished to continue in this manner for hours, really tire themselves out—hoping they might hear their neighbours start snoring and could thus forsake the last remains of decency. He’d sit back on his heels and pull Hux into his lap; he had been so thrilled when Hux had ridden him the previous night, taking his own pleasure from him greedily like a succubus.

He rocked into Hux, noticing that a tremble was slowly overtaking his limbs and it got harder to support his weight; something tightened in him, then it snapped—he was spilling with a startled gasp. He was beginning to pull out as soon as he regained his senses, shivering all over.

“Stay,” Hux whispered urgently. “Stay with me, just like this—”

Kylo was much too unsteady to obey—he had to hook his arms under Hux’s armpits and pressed his forehead to his nape, spent cock resting in the creak of Hux’s soft arse. He kissed Hux’s shoulder blades as he chased his release beneath him. He held him through his climax, feeling every shudder as his own, whispering into Hux’s hair, “Dearest, dearest.” He knew that from now on, when he thought about peace, he’d be thinking of this: Hux in his embrace, calmed by his caresses, unguarded, safe, beloved.

* * *

The foreign noises of the town kept him awake well into dawn. There were no trees nearby to whisper lullabies; the skies were brighter and the rooms warmer, oppressively so. Hux was asleep, making gentle noises; he couldn’t get out of bed without stirring him, and disturbing his precious dreams was unthinkable. He sank deeper into Hux’s embrace, who was pressed to his back, and proceeded to count sheep until the boom of a distant clock told him it was three o’clock—the witching hour.

There’d be a knock on the door of his room; four more, and he’d be doomed—but he’d gathered from Millicent that they’d be back in Stormfield Hall just in time, so there was nothing to worry about. Maratelle had requested that he bring the keys to the attic—that posed some difficulty, but a plan was forming in his mind—if only he could sleep; for there was a curious charm in Luke’s spellbook under the heading “Conversations with Vader.”

This section was mostly filled with Luke’s notes on black magic, scribbled around a drawing of a haggard figure on stilts, long cape billowing in the wind: Vader tells me about possession; petrified, I listen—violating someone’s mind in such fashion is unforgivable; yet I must grant my pardon if I am to save him. The ghastly magic is connected to dreamwalking—but one must walk all the way before stepping into the consciousness of his victim, steal through the shadows, spy on the sleeper & fall upon them like darkness, surround & swallow them. The practice might result in madness. “Not if you can truly master the dark arts,” Vader says, his wheezing voice stirring my pity but the repugnant words making me recoil from the touch of his skeletal hands. Save yourself, reader; black magic will taint your human heart — and so on.

Luke’s cowardly whining didn’t amount to anything. Kylo had recognised the figure’s face, burned and wounded as it was—and if his grandfather could exercise his powers in such ways, Kylo should be able to do the same with the instructions that had been unwittingly preserved in Luke’s account.

Eyes closed and breath even, he imagined a baaing sheep stepping out of the hotel room; two sheep walking through the corridor, crying for their companions; three sheep down the stairs, eyes bright in the dark; a black goat waiting for them outside; a carnival of animals leaving Millcote; and when
there were about a thousand of them, the scene transformed, and he saw himself riding through the slumbering fields on a black stallion breathing fire. He couldn’t feel the chill of the dawn, although he was in his nightgown, a crown of twigs his only embellishment.

The skies were red when he got to Stormfield Hall, but the shadows were long. He dissolved into darkness, crept in through the chimneys, silent and vast. The third storey corridor opened up for him; he passed through Mrs. Mitaka’s door. She was an ideal subject: she’d worked there under Maratelle and was a sleepwalker—in the mortal sense; no one would suspect a thing if they heard her moving around. Still: Kylo hesitated a moment hovering above her resting figure, so peaceful and undisturbed. Her kind face spoke of tranquil dreams. The risk of lunacy was too great a gamble; but he had to trust his own abilities, and he had to find the keys. He descended slowly, seeping into her blood and her mind like a parasite.

*Open your eyes,* he whispered. Mrs. Mitaka obeyed, blinking them open blearily. Her vision was uncertain, but making her put on his spectacles would ruin Kylo’s cover. *You will help me search for the attic’s keys, wherever they might be; you will forget that I’ve asked you this. You don’t recognise me as something Other or Separate; I am your consciousness. I think we should get hold of the keys your son carries on his belt and examine them.*

“They’re not there,” Mrs. Mitaka said, voice a strange mumble. She sat up, looking for her slippers. Anxiety rushed through Kylo, weakening his influence; she stopped, confused as to why she was trying to get up in such an ungodly hour. Kylo seized her senses anew with much more force.

*Get them,* he hissed.

“Go, go, you silly old cow,” Mrs. Mitaka murmured to herself, stifling a yawn. Her frilly nightgown was too big on her fragile frame and the braid of her grey hair reminded Kylo of his mother: the frost on her temples he’d noticed when she had come to visit; how the mark of time and worry terrified him.

*I’m sorry,* he whispered, then made her forget he said that.

Mrs. Mitaka’s steps were slow but determined: she knew exactly where she was headed, so Kylo didn’t pry. He reasoned that the less he rummaged around, the better: it’d be easier to restore her mind. Down the stairs they went, the house silent around them—there was something unsettling in it, as if it was listening.

They reached the hall. Kylo expected Mrs. Mitaka to go to a secret little room: uncover a trapdoor hidden beneath a carpet, lift a tapestry and present an obscure entrance; but she walked straight to the front door, unbolted it, and stepped outside.

The snow was gloaming ominously under the bleeding sky. Mrs. Mitaka began to tremble as she trodded through it, teeth chattering. Kylo promised himself he’d suggest a nice cup of tea to her in a whisper when it was over, and would leave her sitting by a fire, a blanket over her lap. She was headed east past treacherous heaps, frozen flower beds and groaning trees. The iron arc of the eastern gate stood awaiting witch its warden: the wych elm.

Kylo wanted to pull back then—leave this deplorable scene as if he was never here. But the cost of dastardly alarm would be eternal damnation. He could try tomorrow night, but he suspected Mrs. Mitaka wouldn’t be so suggestable on the next occasion—if she could sense something was amiss, even without being able to explain it, her guard would be up and occupying her mind would be a violent process.

Kylo watched her drop to her knees and unearth the roots, digging with her trembling fingers.
Frightening memories begin to overtake her consciousness, disjointed images rising to the surface: blood on the tree’s bark; blood on petals; the sound of her own breathing, digging, digging, digging; poor Dopheld watching, the keys in a tin—he was never the same after that day, he’d become so jittery; there should be no possibility of discovery; she should’ve tossed them into the lake but what if somebody needed to go upstairs one day; what if it was necessary, or requested; come, come unearth the evidence of cruelty and mercy; a mercy killing, honest—

She took a shaky breath as she looked at the tin. It seemed unblemished. *God save our souls,* she thought as she clicked it open. Three keys, all in order.

*You did well,* Kylo thought. *Go back inside where it’s warm. Place the keys in Mr. Ren’s room, in the nightstand drawer. You’ll forget you put them there. You will forget coming to the garden. You will forget that I visited.*

Mrs. Mitaka marched away like a puppet. The snow would cover up her steps. The house was waiting for her, watched her take off her slippers and carry them in her hands, leaving droplets that didn’t lead anywhere. They’d dry up. She was still trembling. She’d be all right.

She walked up the stairs, mind numb to things she allowed herself to rediscover. *Put away the keys,* she told herself. *Forget. Sleep.* Her tired eyes found Kylo’s door—she couldn’t see what Kylo did through her eyes: Maratelle standing there, spying through the keyhole. She was free of the tree, almost alive.

“I can see you, he-witch,” she said without turning towards them.

“I’ve got the keys,” Kylo said. “I’ll be back shortly. You will tell me what you promised—”

“We shall talk now.” She pulled back from the door, her gaze settling on Kylo. She could see *him:* nightgown, twig crown and all, standing behind Mrs. Mitaka with his shoulders drawn up like a child caught in his mischief. He was no longer all-powerful darkness: they met on Maratelle’s plane of existence, a soul facing a soul: the dead was reigning here.

“Release her first,” Kylo asked.

“I will do no such thing. If she wakes you’ll vanish.” Maratelle tilted her head. The angle was all wrong. “It appears we have a guest.”

The door opened on its own accord. Maratelle signalled them to enter. Kylo swallowed his fury and got hold of Mrs. Mitaka’s wrist. He’d think of something. They’d escape. He lead her inside and sat her down to the chaise lounge, making a preemptive attempt to get her comfortable. She sat unseeing and unmoving, trapped in the scene. Maratelle was hovering by the threshold, her frock billowing and hair flying.

“Invite me in,” she said. Kylo’s first instinct was to refuse: he was in his room—he’d always been safe within these walls; all the nights he spent here, Maratelle could never reach him.

“You may come in to-night,” he said, “but you will leave at my request.”

Maratelle scowled. How sweet it was to have even the smallest victory—to outwit her, just for a second, and not grant her permission to come and go as she pleased; it made Kylo bolder, and he stood taller as Maratelle stepped inside, bringing the coldness of crypts with her. The door closed. Kylo refused to feel trapped.

Maratelle peered around, taking in the well-made bed, the books in neat order, the bright blue curtains. The sun was coming and she’d have to leave soon.
“I chose those,” she said. “Chiffon. I liked the colour.”

“While I would be thrilled to hear more about your past, I’m afraid it’s not your decorating choices I would prioritise.”

Maratelle regarded him coolly. The expression was similar to the face Millicent made when she found a joke distasteful. “What are you interested in?”

“How did you die?” Kylo demanded, folding his arms. Maratelle only replied with a sigh, long and ragged.

“I will show you how I lived; from that, you’ll be able to tell how I died—I can’t bear going through the details of that event; I’m forced to do so every night, and that is quite enough, thank you very much.” She reached out her hand. Kylo scowled at it. “Come on; one must touch hands to share visions. How can you not know this? Who taught you witchcraft?”

“I teach myself, for the most part,” Kylo confessed, approaching her carefully.

“It shows,” Maratelle scoffed.

His senses screamed at him to stay away, but Kylo reached out haltingly, touching his fingertips to her’s while they locked gazes. She smiled, and grabbed his hand.

* * *

I am one of seven. All girls. And Devonshire. Grandmother in the well. Only I could talk to her. I was an enchanted child. Secretive. She taught me skills. I wasn’t to show anyone. They’d hang me, she said. Hang me and throw me in a well.

Our mansion, more like a cottage. Money was sparse but we had each other and had our title. You wouldn’t understand the happiness we had. Paradise on Earth. Our garden of Eden. All the animals. I’d take care of them with my sisters. I’d wonder what would become of them when we left.

Ethel was nine-and-ten. Ready for marriage. I’d be next. I’d marry a rich man and be able to support my family. This was always how I pictured it: a means to an end; that my days with them would never end, not really. We’d be dutiful adults for as long as need be, but then we would come back in our carriages, lift our petticoats as we walked through the muddy garden, rush up the stairs giggling as Papa begged us for just a moment of silence, gather in the sunniest room and tell tales of happily-ever-afters.

An officer came to town. It was said he fought Bonaparte at Trafalgar. He was a baron. A good party. The Lord Arkanis. He had been invited by my father. He asked to see the eldest daughter. He had an intent to marry. Ethel went to see him. We were eavesdropping upstairs. It didn’t go well. She was trembling with fury when she came back. The Lord Arkanis found fault with her features. Ethel, Ethel, bless her: she was rather plain I’m afraid, but she was the kindest soul, and so capable. We were all offended on her part. The Lord Arkanis asked to be introduced to the other girls. Papa told us he’d refuse. I stepped forward. I was seventeen. Second in line. If I married well, all my sisters would have better chances. “Let him see me,” I said. I was petite, but I had a good figure and a pretty face and good nature. I could make him like me and I would try to like him in turn, despite the injury done to Ethel.
Like me, he did. The engagement was made. I knew no-one was fond of him after such a first impression, but they tried, on my behalf. They told me I’d never have to worry about money when I was the Lady Arkanis. That I could visit as often as I pleased. That I would live with servants and have carriages and ribbons in my hair. My sisters Pearl and Imogen sewed my wedding dress. Prudence did up my hair. Octavia picked me flowers. Maud placed the veil she made on my head. I cried because I ceased to belong to them. I was the Lord Arkanis’ and I was to call him Brendol and dote on him. I dried up my tears because I had duties.

He didn’t bring me to Arkanis. He had a house called Stormfield Hall in dull old Lancashire and we were headed there. The journey was dreadful but I tried to be in high spirits. I wanted to keep smiling not only to please him but to make myself believe I was happy. My wedding night was in a tavern. Brendol commented on my wedding dress when he took it off me. I thought it was the prettiest thing. He didn’t agree.

Stormfield Hall seemed a pleasant prison. I shared a room on the third storey with Brendol. I rarely saw him. I enjoyed being in charge of the household. It gave me something to do. I felt useful. I didn’t mind mingling. The servants called me lady but I didn’t feel like one. Centuries ago a dead king gave land to my family and I married a man whose ancestors were given bigger land. It had nothing to do with me. I took pride in the work I did myself: my embroidery, sewing, poetry, pottery, my able riding. I had a horse at home. I was there when her mother delivered her. I helped. Brendol didn’t let me bring her along. He called her a “country pony.” I was given a stallion who didn’t like me very much.

I started spending time in the kitchen. I loved conversing with the servants. I noticed that the cook was pregnant. She had no husband. I wouldn’t shun her just because she was a fallen woman. Above all, she was human. I offered to teach her how to write; she was most excited, for she saw it as opportunity to pen down her stories. We spelled her own name first, M-o-l-l. She asked how to spell Armitage. She liked the name, said it was ‘very aristocratic.’ I showed her how to write it. Asked what will she call it if it’s a girl.

“Brendol wants a boy,” she said. Then: “Oh dear. You didn’t know about us?”

What I didn’t know was this: that Brendol would reverse the practice. When a servant gets pregnant with her master’s bastard, it is custom to marry her off as soon as possible. Save everyone from the scandal. Brendol would’ve been jealous of a husband. He wanted Moll all to himself. He loved her in an all-consuming way. He brought home a bride so when the child was born he could say it was from our union. The household wouldn’t talk. Everybody loved Moll.

I was alone in my hatred. She tried to placate me. Explained that she told Brendol to ask my consent. It was a laughable lie. No-one would agree to be in such a hopeless and humiliating situation. And yet there I was. Where I wouldn’t want my worst enemy to be.

My grandmother taught me how to get rid of a baby. I supposed it would work on someone else. I didn’t try. The child was innocent. The mother would get her punishment. God was watching her. He was angry with her. I could tell.

I couldn’t harm her myself. Brendol would know. He would send for her to spend the night together. Even when she got heavy and could hardly navigate the stairs. I got a small room on the second storey so I wouldn’t disturb them. I threatened to tell everyone about my mistreatment. He said I’d bring shame to my own head.

I got letters from my family. They asked me how I was doing. I didn’t want them to know about my unhappiness. It’d upset them. I told them all was well. That I was given love and respect.
Moll wanted to be friends. But she was a liar. She wasn’t to be trusted. Her cordiality was an attempt to make me complicit in this detestable and immoral scheme.

I’d have nightmares about the baby I was to parade as my own. It’d latch onto me like a leech. I wasn’t allowed to leave or have callers. This way no-one could perceive that my stomach was flat. Brendol had no guests either. For months and months we were trapped in this asylum together.

I hoped Moll would miscarry. I told her so. She stopped being friendly. She didn’t know about my mercy, that I wouldn’t curse her. She’d sing and tell distasteful tales to the servants. She fell silent when I approached. She grew nervous around me. It served her right. I felt I was her muted conscience. Her angel. She would look at me and perceive how sinful she was.

She went into labour early. Brendol wasn’t home. He had business in town. Moll made him promise he’d bring shoes for the baby. They kissed by the gate. I wanted them to choke on each other’s tongues. I didn’t say the spell. He was a different person with her. Malleable. He’d do anything she asked. I daresay she enjoyed it tremendously. Her big, dumb Brendol-bear. His puppy love. Their worm of a child.

She died in childbirth. A maid and the other cook were trying to save her, but God had his will. And the baby: a small, pitiful thing, trembling and screaming. No wet-nurse had been appointed yet. I gave it cow’s milk, fresh and foamy. It wouldn’t drink. I held it in my lap when Brendol arrived. I suspected it wouldn’t survive the night anyway, so I was rocking it as gently as if it was my own babe. It was marked for wickedness. It wasn’t wicked yet.

Brendol bawled like his infant bastard when he learnt that Moll had passed. He hugged her corpse and wouldn’t let go. I asked him if he wanted to see his son. He didn’t.

The child cried all night, but it survived. I got it a nurse myself. I got a priest to christen it. I gave it the name Armitage. It was a gift it didn’t deserve.

Its mother was blind to my charitable act. She came to haunt me. Only I could see her. I refused to be frightened. I behaved like a good Christian. She could fault me for nothing. I stood proudly in her damning gaze.

Armitage grew like weed. He was one year old when his father put down the bottle long enough to remember he was to be introduced to society. Having guests provided Brendol with more opportunity to drink. He called it mourning. At one occasion Armitage knocked his glass of brandy over. He backhanded him so hard Armitage’s face was swollen for three days. I asked him why he did it. He said Armitage had killed Moll and he’d never forgive him.

His bastard was not the heir he planned to show around. At three, Armitage was still skin and bone, his eyes hollow. His hair was a horrid orange, like his mother’s. I started calling him little toad. At first, I said it with a sad affection. Then I just said it.

I hated the very sight of the child. I still pitied him. He came running to my room once as I sat reading. He jumped into my wardrobe with an urgency. I demanded to know what was going on. He just begged, “Pretend I’m not here—tell him I had moved away, or say that I died!”

Brendol came in raging, livid. I never learnt what Armitage’s mistake was that time. I pointed at the wardrobe silently. I watched Brendol pull him out by his ears. I resented being complicit, but Armitage had started showing the first signs of wickedness. Lying and cowardice were two of them.

He called me mama. I never called him son. I didn’t have to spend too much time with him; it was the nurse’s job. I sent away the first one when Armitage was four. She was a young, pretty thing,
and I caught Brendol make advances towards her. She laughed them off, but it was better not to risk anything. One bastard was more than enough. Armitage learnt to stay out of my way. I got him a decent Christian governess. She was strict. Unseemly. Ancient.

The ghost in the kitchen watched her son mature under the care of simple-minded servants like her. If she hoped to give birth to a little lord she must’ve been disappointed. The governess told Brendol and I in no uncertain terms that she suspected Armitage to be an idiot. Brendol had come to the same conclusion. Doctors were called to examine him in stealth. Nothing came of it.

Armitage was a dull, dumb and uncomely child. His frustrations with his own self came to the surface around the time he was four-and-ten. More than a decade. It all eluded me. From the time I learnt that he was to be born, I had known no peace. He was a burden. The cross I had to carry, with no sins to repent. My sense of self diminished. I had no future while he stood in its way.

My only hope was this: he was sickly. I told myself; surely, God would take him. He wouldn’t let him suffer much longer. I imagined he could be one of his angels, cleansed of the dirt of unholy lust that had created him. It became evident that he was more of a devil. It wasn’t grace that saved him from his numerous illnesses. It was his cunning, greedy will to live.

He began to resist his father’s punishments. I admit they used to be unnecessary and excessive. Oftentimes even cruel. But Brendol was changing. His mind got clearer the less he drank. I began to notice certain qualities in him that were appealing to me. One of them was his discipline. Armitage’s vices were beginning to get stronger than Brendol’s hands or his governess’ cane and ruler. A new method was to be introduced. Brendol would drag him up to the attic, by whatever force necessary. He was to remain there without food, water, and entertainment for days, if needed. Chains were implemented. It disturbed him more than ordinary punishments, especially when he was sick; thus it yielded better results. At first he’d scream, demanding to be let free. He learnt quickly that it’d only earn him more time in shackles.

Raising a child brought Brendol and I closer together. I have long ago stopped thinking about him as husband. He never regarded me to be his wife. So we had become friends. Although the governess didn’t like the idea, I proposed to send Armitage to school. A small one, a distant one, where no-one would know his name. It was to teach him humility. Let his teachers see him for who he was. Brendol took my advice. For the first time in the fifteen years of Armitage’s existence, I could breathe again. Be again. Moll’s ghost was beside herself. I just started avoiding the kitchen. She had no control over me. No one did.

I took to riding again. The fields looked endless. The horizons were expanding. I was me; free, free, free. Armitage had fallen ill just when I really started enjoying it. As if he timed it. Brendol suggested we leave it to the vicar to resolve the issue I said: let us bring him to Brighton. Let him heal. If God wants him to live, he will. I was ready to face him.

The Lord decided that my test wasn’t over yet. I sat by Armitage’s bed. The windows open to the sea. I wiped sweat from his forehead. Told him that I’d find him a new school, in a more forgiving place. He was being ungrateful. I told him he might have a sibling soon. That he wouldn’t be the only heir. He’d no longer be protected by privilege. I told him we didn’t need him. I watched him cry. He could no longer shed tears of fear or sadness, but he could cry from anger. He still called me mama. “You shan’t send me away, mama, I have friends here. Please, I’ll be good, please let me go back to Lowood.”

I watched him bawl his eyes out. I didn’t feel a thing. No disgust. No pity. I was no longer bound by emotions. I knew that I had passed the test.

Brendol and I tried for a child. I wouldn’t take. The disappointment of it forged a bond between us. I
never knew him to be gentle before—but he consoled me when I bled, and told me pretty things about our future. He said we’d have a daughter just as clever as me. He loved my practicality, my ideas, my understanding, my body. Then he loved me.

I wanted to give him a girl more than anything. It seemed I couldn’t. He found himself a daughter on his own. A ward. The Lady Scyre. In Armitage’s absence and during my barren months he took an interest in her. I was fearful. She had a pleasant enough face for Brendol’s tastes. She was a lieutenant. Brendol was set to help her advance the ranks.

My jealousy had made me desperate. I had been neglecting my witchcraft. When I was a girl, I thought it a harmless secret. My grandmother’s heritage. Being over thirty I knew it to be from the devil. Still, I rode out in the evening. It was a full moon. The flowers were in bloom. I rode into a forest and shed my dress. I lit a fire. I called upon a sacrifice. I heard that sheep and deer might listen. A little orange cat came. I was waiting with a long knife. It pained me to take its life. I painted myself with its blood and danced, offering death for a birth.

I was sickened by the act. I half-hoped the spell wouldn’t work. I wanted to repent. A child would mean I was forgiven. I came to Brendol the next night. I became pregnant.

I wish I could say I was happy. The nine months were spent in dread instead. I couldn’t believe that I’d really have a baby. That I would be allowed to keep it. Brendol had no concerns. He was overjoyed by the prospect of starting a new family. He wanted a child, and not just a murderous changeling.

We chose the name together. Millicent. All I could think about was teaching Moll how to spell her baby’s name. For the first time in years, I ventured into the kitchen. She was waiting for me there. Maybe I wanted her to scream curses at me. She just stood watching. A knowing smile was on her lips. Foreboding.

I gave birth in the comfort and safety I had denied her. I spent twelve hours in labour. I thought I would split open and die. Then my daughter was laid to my bosom while we were still connected by the cord. I knew that nothing could snap that union. She was mine. She smelled mine. She looked mine. She had hardly any hair and hadn’t opened her eyes yet, but I could tell she would grow up to look just like me. I felt her precious heartbeat and cried in gratitude. I couldn’t let her go. I wouldn’t let the nurse near her. Brendol had to plead with me to let anyone see her.

When he held our daughter in his hands it was like I saw him for the first time. I liked that he was tall and strongly built. I liked his fading, red hair. The wrinkles around his eyes. His soft stomach. His strong hands. I liked his smile best. When he looked at me like that I could tell that he was proud of me. That he loved me.

We were allowed a full three months of perfect happiness. A letter came. Brendol’s first instinct was to hide it from me. Then he presented it with the most sincere apologies. The seal was broken although the envelope bore my name. I forgave him not just for nosing around, but for everything. We were different people than when we met. The letter was from Armitage. I could forgive him Armitage. He demanded to be introduced to his sister. I was irked that he’d regard her to be his relation. They only had a father in common. A father who denied him the day he was born. He couldn’t cast him off. Now all was changed. I told him so in a letter. I disclosed I wasn’t his mother. I didn’t care whether the letter fell into the wrong hands. I was done living with the shame of him. I was done with him.

He came a-knocking in a fortnight. He was accompanied by a certain Admiral Sloane. His mentor. He was dressed in a uniform and had a sword on his person. I didn’t like that he’d come armed. The admiral said, “Armitage will be admitted to his own home to welcome his sister into his family.”
Her hand was on his shoulder. He was much taller than her. Eight-and-ten, still too boyish, lank with a big head and round face and mouth too soft for any respectable man. His hair was coffied in a complicated manner. He didn’t even look English. He didn’t look like anyone I knew.

Sloane had a word with my Brendol. I stayed behind to watch Armitage approach my babe, lift her from her crib. I’d curse him if he harmed her. I’d curse him forever. He was smiling. He had his mother’s smile. I never noticed before. He had no reason to smile around me.

“Darling Millie,” he said.

“Millicent,” I corrected. I didn’t want him butcher her name. We didn’t pick it so he could ruin it. She was looking at him with that uncertain wonder babies have. Then she opened her mouth to a toothless smile, and laughed. It was foolish to feel betrayed, but that’s how I felt.

Armitage stayed for a year. He tried to steal my baby from me. When she cried out, before the nurse or me could rush to her aid, Armitage was already holding her. He was making indecent comments about nappies and burping. Things a polite person would never mention. He began to address me as mother instead of mama. If it was possible, I hated my new title even more. I could never decide whether it was irony or denial.

Every night I prayed that he’d go away. Leave us be. Let us be happy. He and Brendol would argue endlessly, but Brendol never raised his hand at him again and the attic remained closed. The lack of proper punishment made Armitage insufferable. He walked around as if he was master of the house, often greeting guests in his robes. He had numerous callers. He was smoking in the room. He had his tea whenever he pleased. Millicent would crawl after him as soon as she figured out how to do it. He’d laugh and haul her up into his arms. They sat together whenever Armitage was leafing through the papers. Millicent would tear at the pages and try to lick them. I was certain she didn’t understand a word of what Armitage was reading to her. He let her stay anyway.

I began noticing that whenever I got a chance to hold her, she seemed to be looking for someone else, either the nurse for nourishment or Armitage for entertainment. I was her mother and I was thoroughly uninteresting to her.

Brendol heard my pleas. He promised me to do something. Just around Millicent’s first birthday he managed to send Armitage to a campaign in India. Saying his goodbyes took him forever. He knelt by Millicent and told her he’d be back while the butlers and the carriage stood waiting. I was embarrassed on his behalf. When the door finally closed behind him, Millicent began crying and screaming. “Ammie, Ammie!” Her first words were the name of her bastard brother. As she wailed I noticed that the chandelier was shaking and the pictures were turning upside down. The entire hall rearranged itself around her rage. I intervened with a little magic to stop it, but I couldn’t console her. My art never included that.

I wouldn’t risk teaching her witchcraft. She was too young. I thought about my grandmother’s well often. I dreamt about Millicent down there. I woke up to my sobs. I couldn’t tell Brendol what I went through. I said I was afraid she’d miss Armitage. Brendol told me she’d forget him within weeks. He also told me he was unlikely to return from war. He was weak and unskilled. He would perish.

While I waited for an envelope with a black seal Millicent trotted around the house with growing confidence. Her goal was always Armitage’s door. She settled to wait for hours on end. Her patience wasn’t like any ordinary child’s. I was reminded of the cat I sacrificed as I watched her spend whole afternoons by that door. I knew with a sickening certainty that Armitage wouldn’t be forgotten.

“Ammie” came to mean all good things. She would point at a picture book and pronounce it
“Ammie.” She would beg for biscuits and tell me they were “Ammie.” She even regarded her favourite doll worthy of the category. Not me, naturally. I was mama and it took her one and a half years to learn it.

I felt abandoned by her. It made me all the more anxious to seek her approval. I’m afraid I spoiled her. Even her sweet nurse was a tyrant compared to me. When she was two I found a French girl for her. She would learn her mother tongue from her mother and no one else. Brendol showed no interest in the process. He still congratulated her warmly on her developments. We celebrated her first climbs, her wobbly steps, skinned knees not followed by crying and following simple requests. Brendol was pleased with her. He said she was bright and pretty. He mentioned in passing that he was hoping she’d be like the Lady Scyre. “Military seems fitting,” he added, observing Millicent practicing her kicks.

I had other plans for her. She was such a beauty I hoped she’d have a talent for dancing and singing. I had her dressed in the same colours I wore, brushed her hair myself on weekends. She had a wild imagination. She would come up with complicated and at times frightening tales. I tried to turn her tastes by making the nurse read gentler things to her. Being with her was as elevating as it was demanding. It was impossible to follow her pace. I took her to visit my family when she was two and a half. For four months, I had nothing to do but to travel from residence to residence while one of my sisters spoiled Millicent rotten. I’d been hiding my shame and misery for them. Now I was free to brag about my happiness. Finally it was honest. I discovered with a thrill that I was missing Brendol quite terribly while we were away. Upon my return he greeted me as if I came back from the dead. He wouldn’t let me out of bed.

Millicent and I started going on little treks. I asked the nurse to stay behind and tried to find out more about Millicent’s abilities. All the time she would tell me nothing; then one morning I woke to find a cat on my chest. I shooed it away without thinking. Brendol didn’t even stir. I realised my mistake and peered under the bed. Millicent was there, trembling and naked. I wrapped her in a blanket and brought her to my room on the second storey. I no longer slept there, but I loved to sit there and sew or read. It was safe.

“You musn’t come to mama’s room in the middle of the night,” I chided her. “You musn’t turn into animals.”

“I was ugh, I was scared,” she said.

“What of?”

“Armitage was, he’s been shot.”

My steps faltered. I wondered if my prayers had been answered. I was ecstatic for a moment. It was like the skies had opened.

“You don’t feel sorry,” Millicent said.

“I’m very sorry,” I lied; she looked at me and I could tell she knew better. We were connected, forever. There was no hiding from her, but she was too little to understand my reasons.

“You don’t feel sorry for, no, you don’t feel—you are not sorry for all you did and, and if he died you would rejoin—Let me go, let me go, let me go!” She slid free; a cat dropped to the ground and scurried away. I was holding an empty blanket. We didn’t see her for a entire day.

She never brought it up again, but she began to be noticeably cold with me. Brendol told me that children her age would rebel against parents. He found her little tantrums adorable. I was scared of
Armitage came back. He made general. It was some consolation that Brendol never congratulated him. He said a promotion earned on the sickbed didn’t amount for anything, and that any praise given to a twenty years old was just praise to the father. Millicent disagreed. She patched up faulty sentences to reprimand her father and told him that Armitage had earned a promotion because he had been very brave. Brendol was amused by her passion and laughed. I was frightened that he’d rile her up enough to make her turn. It started happening more and more often. Never when Brendol was present. Or me, for that matter. She would storm off, Armitage would follow to placate her. If he wasn’t successful, I could hear meowing.

I believe she didn’t feel safe enough with us to let her emotions go unchecked. I hated that Armitage knew her secret. It used to be ours alone. They were thick as thieves again. As if two years spent apart was just a mere interval. Millicent would never leave his side and he never ran out of patience. He loved to hear his own voice and fancied himself clever. He would answer all her nagging questions, read the same book over and over again, play word string and the most mind-numbing games. Once again, I dimmed.

What is there left to tell? I faded, I faded, I faded. I had no life outside of my family. My daughter detested me. My husband found it funny. I wished I could ride away. It’d been years I’d been on horseback. I knew the horizons closed, the fields shranked. I began to find nature frightening. It reminded me of the night in the forest. The fire. The knife. The cat. I shouldn’t have.

Six—I remember it was Millicent’s sixth birthday. I got her a gorgeous blue dress, just like my own. I made the petticoats myself. She chose to wear a horrid pink affair bought by Armitage. I told her pink didn’t go with her hair. The Lady Scyre was one of the guests; Brendol insisted, and Millicent liked her. It was night. The other visitors had gone. I’d had too much wine. I snapped at Millicent when she wanted to go upstairs without holding my hand. I wouldn’t let her take the stairs on her own. They were dangerous. She hugged her hand to her chest and turned her back. I wanted to shake her. She was never such a brat, only with me. With Armitage she was on her best behaviour. But I spoilt her. Back when I wasn’t afraid to love her.

We heard yelling from upstairs. It was nothing out of the ordinary. Brendol and Armitage. Armitage was three-and-twenty and deemed himself mature enough to yell back when his father so much as raised his voice. He was disrespectful and rotten. What was being said had caught my attention, however. Brendol accused him of something—He shouted back—and Brendol bellowed, “I’ll shoot you down like the dog you are, I’ll shoot you down.” Then bang bang bang down the stairs. He must’ve kicked Armitage’s bad leg. He rolled down the steps. Millicent screamed and wanted to run to him. I held her back. Brendol came after Armitage, pistol in hand. Our eyes met but I could tell he didn’t recognise me. He grabbed Armitage’s collar, pulled him to his feet and pressed him to the wall, to his great-grandfather’s portrait. He put the pistol to his forehead. “Cur!” he screamed. Armitage surged forward and bit the hand holding the pistol. Brendol screamed. Armitage tore off a piece of flesh and skin. A gasp betrayed the Lady Scyre was watching. She did nothing to stop the fight. Armitage’s chin was bloody. So were his teeth. Brendol hit his head with the pistol and cursed him. When Armitage tried to regain his balance he hit his skull again. Again again again. Armitage snarled and jumped at him. Grabbed his throat. Tried to crush his windpipe. There was a click and Brendol aimed the pistol at him. I hauled up Millicent and ran. She was crying. “Papa is going to kill him, he’s going to kill—”

I heard a bang and I heard footsteps. I didn’t stop. I didn’t know where I was headed. I would go as far as my legs would carry me. I’d bring my daughter with me.
The wych elm by the eastern gate was blooming. It was spring. I died in spring.

I died because I was foolish. I continue to exist because I am being punished. I regret certain things, but this was the life I lived. I refuse to denounce it.

Cardinal took me off the tree. I was still alive but I couldn’t breathe. I remember the sky clearly. It was dark and very distant.

Moll was waiting for me in the kitchen. They brought me there. The servants were standing around. Our loyal servants laid me over the table. The help from George Inn stood frozen. The Lady Scyre came in, then Armitage with the cook. He was holding Millicent. The housekeeper arrived last. Just in time to take my pulse. I’d be pronounced dead soon. There was not a single thing they could do.

“Brendol,” I called. “Brendol, where’s Brendol—”

I don’t think anyone understood me. Millicent wouldn’t look at me. She buried her face in Armitage’s neck and cried, wretched, shaking and miserable. I wanted to hold her. I wanted to tell her it was going to be all right. The living began to fade. Moll stepped closer. She was standing behind her son’s back. They had the same smile as they looked at me. Armitage’s face was still bloody.

Witch boy, this is what I can tell of my death: it was revenge.

Kylo’s eyes flew open; he was levitating and watched himself levitate, suspended above his hovering self who twisted in the air, hair fanning out, eyes open wide and white, the blanket swirling around him—and he saw Hux sitting up in the bed, legs pulled up to his chest, trying to be brave in the face of such a bizarre occurrence. This was what pulled Kylo’s soul back into his body—Hux needed to be consoled.

There was no elegant way to do it: he dropped back to the bed with a loud thud, and smiled at Hux sheepishly. He returned it, a bit uncertain, but teeth showing. Kylo half expected them to be red.

“Good morning,” he mumbled.

“Hardly; you gave me such a fright,” Hux said, kicking him gently. Kylo glanced to the window: the snow on the roof reflected back a shy pink—it couldn’t be past four yet. His heart sank to think that he inadvertently left Mrs. Mitaka behind; he could only wish she’d escaped—and that Maratelle had no reason to hurt her; but his hopes were thin and his heart was beating too fast. The keys were recovered just like she asked, he reasoned. Mrs. Mitaka wasn’t a part of the bargain. The last bit of the mystery will be resolved; I have several suspects, and I am certain that the attic’s prisoner would name the murderer.

His favourite suspect was in bed with him.

Chapter End Notes

**Content warnings:** Animal cruelty / Hux and Kylo have quite a number of smut scenes - the one in the laboratory includes the possible trigger of a brief public sex fantasy; the one in the bedroom has them sharing a sextoy (don’t do that without condoms!) and
consensual spanking; during the one in the hotel they’re afraid they might be overheard (I headcanon however that their neighbours are blissfully unaware and they go through all that trouble for nothing :D) Powerplay is a recurring theme and they both get off on it. /Kylo shittalks a perfectly good dog / Child-abuse mentioned regarding Hux’s past; the person telling the story keeps justifying it / alluded alcoholism / infertility and miscarriage mention

A million thanks to bioticnerfherder for her beta work and suggestions, and to favomancer and Anna for their help with fashion!

* Sasheenka made a marvellous manip for the story, I can't stop screaming
* Check out Miss Octopus' adorable illustrations of Millicent, her big brother, and even bigger teacher, book cover and embroidery ;___;
* Here's a moodboard for chapter 7!
The idle days spent in Millcote were wasted; its very hours were numbered. There was no putting off the event that approached: Christmas Eve. All preparations of its arrival were to be overseen by Hux; he returned with his company to Stormfield Hall early in the morning to see to his duties. Their travel was swift and easy, for the snow had melted, much to Millicent’s chagrin. She was inconsolable over the clement weather and had to be taken to her room by Kylo and Unamo to divert her attention by a long-awaited reunion with her toys.

Once Kylo deemed her mood bright enough, he left her with the nurse and set out in pursuit of the Mitakas, anxious at heart. He suspected he was to help with decorating, but of graver importance was to learn how Mrs. Mitaka was faring—they’d received no word of any ill fate befalling her, but Kylo dared not take it as evidence of good luck. Possessing her was a precarious gamble; the consequences may have been dire.

He entered the kitchen still wearing his traveller’s attire, brand new coat and all, and halted anon. Mrs. Mitaka was present, and to his surprise, so was Hux, who never ventured here in his experience; and standing next to them by the counter was the ghost of Moll MacGowan, sunlight shining through her, eyes on her son.

“Twelfth cake and mince pie, plus the pudding, of course,” Hux was saying. “I suppose you could forego the wassail-bowl, for I don’t expect company.”

“There’s no Christmas without a wassail-bowl, sir,” Mrs. Mitaka objected, positively appalled. Hux gave her a quizzical look, so she schooled her features and bowed her head.

“She’s right,” MacGowan said, startling Kylo. His gasp betrayed his presence; Hux’s gaze found him and his face lit up—he look almost as radiant as the figure of MacGowan. Her features were uncertain again, but she spoke clearly. “You shall have beef, bread sauce, and sugar plums; a solitary celebration is no reason to let go of yourself, my sweet.”

It was evident that Hux didn’t hear her, for he tilted his head and frowned in confusion. “Is something the matter, Mr. Ren?”

“I’m just rather taken aback that you’d consider celebrating without a wassail-bowl,” he managed, face heating up. He stepped in, pointedly avoiding MacGowan’s searching gaze.

“Oh please,” Hux sighed. “We’ll have more than enough to eat and drink as it is.”

Kylo touched the laden counter as he rounded it, coming face-to-face with Hux. “You don’t know my appetite,” he pronounced in a whisper.

“I do know your appetite,” Hux said meaningfully. Mrs. Mitaka coughed politely while MacGowan chuckled, arms crossed over her chest. A glance at Kylo’s pout, and Hux sighed again. “Fine:
“Let me do it,” MacGowan said, heading to the pantry. “Upon my word, Polly’s sop is outright intolerable—you’ll forgive me for saying so, darling, for you know it to be true.” She was gone in a flash; Hux shivered, as if he was suddenly void of warmth.

Kylo placed a gentle hand on his shoulder, squeezing it in encouragement, and glanced at Mrs. Mitaka, who hastily busied herself with slicing the bread. It must’ve been freshly made, judged by the savory smell and the crust’s crunch; Kylo’s stomach was too heavy with worry to register hunger, otherwise he would’ve stolen a pinch.

“How are you, Mrs. Mitaka?” he asked with a casual air.

“Me?” she said, blinking owlishly. Her eyes were cloudless, but wandering; she appeared just as jittery as it was her son’s habit, the knife trembling in her hand. “Why, I am very well, thank you; I had a little accident, I just told Mr. Hux—”

“Oh yes,” Hux said, pulling back apologetically. He walked to the iron hearth, rubbing his hands together. He shivered anew when he stepped on the spot where his mother had bled out. Kylo’s heart sank at the sight—curse it that he couldn’t offer his sympathies.

“You might be aware that I’m a sleepwalker,” Mrs. Mitaka said, face draining of colour. “I don’t know how it happened, but I found myself in your room a few days ago—and I had the most terrible vision!”

“She means she saw my late mother,” Hux said. MacGowan was just coming out of the pantry, carrying an invisible basket—she halted, frozen in place.

“The Lady Arkanis?” Kylo asked, gaze darting between mother and son.

“Apparently,” Hux confirmed. MacGowan’s light dimmed.

“It had to be a dream,” Mrs. Mitaka hastened to add, redoubling her efforts with the bread. “It was just so terrible; my eyes were open; I could feel my limbs, only they were numb and non responding. I was immobile, but wide awake—or so it seemed.”

“A frightening experience, surely,” Hux said in a conversational tone, but Kylo interrupted.

“An experience I’m all too familiar with.”

It was out before he could think about it. Hux looked at him over a shoulder, and Mrs. Mitaka ceased her work; MacGowan was still motionless and faint. Kylo swallowed back words that’d dismiss his own confession—he and Hux owed honesty to each other; Hux owed it to more than one person. A farewell to all lies, however well-intended they might’ve been; Hux was strong and brave, stronger and braver than Kylo ever knew him to be before hearing about his perturbed childhood—he was a survivor, and hardly a helpless one at that. Kylo met his eyes, pleading silently: forgive me for having kept this from you for so long—I had a thousand reasons; chief among them was my love—a love that deserves to bloom forever; for this reason: secrets shan’t come between us any longer. I will tell you all; then it’s your turn.

“What do you mean?” Hux said, smiling, but Kylo could read his disquiet from the tremble of his lashes, how his fingers curled over his chest—it pained him to cause even such trifle distress.

“I mean to confess that I have had several encounters with the ghost of the Lady Arkanis myself,” he said softly, eyes not leaving Hux for a moment. “I’m afraid she haunts my corridor.”
He expected Hux to be flabbergasted, perplexed, or bewildered, but he just scowled as if the information revealed to him were not peculiar at all—merely distasteful. “You shan’t make light of Polly’s situation, my dear Mr. Ren,” he said. “What she experienced has an explanation beyond the occult, for physiology offers a scientific account on nightly terrors; indeed, incubus hallucinations are fairly common among stagnant sleepers. The cause of such visions is a bad diet, nothing more; I must say joking about it is rather rude.”

“But he is not joking, is he?” Mrs. Mitaka said hopefully, clutching the knife with knuckles turned white. “Dopheld heard my screams and sobs and entered the room—he didn’t see a ghost with me, but he can confirm—oh, the horror, the horror—I’m sorry I have to say this, but a black substance might’ve been pouring from my mouth, eyes and ears.”

Kylo nodded solemnly. “Ectoplasm, no doubt.”

“You should have yourself checked out,” Hux said dryly. “I’ll alert Dr. Finn at once. Don’t fall for fanciful explanations, Polly; Mr. Ren has quite the interest in the preternatural—his obsession amuses him greatly, but it might make him insensitive to the effect such fancies have on a more susceptible person than his learned self.”

“If we may speak privately—” Kylo offered, but was interrupted.

“We may not.” Hux turned to him, standing at parade rest. Kylo had observed that he fell back to military habits when he was particularly anxious; he bit his tongue, for he knew that it’d be impossible to have a civilised argument now, but the urge to grunt or grit his teeth was great. “I know exactly what you are going to say, Mr. Ren,” Hux said, sharp, flippant. “It won’t sway me; I can believe a great many things, but I draw the line at my mother’s ghost. Good day.” He marched off without a second glance.

The ghost of MacGowan had disappeared.

* * *

*I could open up my heart, and you’d talk about ventricles and atriums, Kylo fumed, trotting up the stairs. My revelations are all dismissed; do you love science, or do you love me? Such regrettable duality; I cannot duel with science—so how shall I win your mind? Your heart is mine, but your mind is married to your discipline; you think all that exists can be measured; tell me the weight and balance of my ire then!*

He pushed the door open with a wave of his hand and began untying his ascot as he entered his room. He’d need to change, and soon: there was plenty to do and only so many hours until eight o’clock and the bells chiming ‘Old Father Christmas.’ He hardly registered that something was dreadfully amiss as he stepped to his trunk thrown by the foot of the bed. He unclasped it methodically, sensing that his motions were being observed; expelling the thought, he pulled out a new frock and a smart waistcoat, laying them atop his blanket. He took a step back, nodded to himself, then he couldn’t stand it any longer—he looked behind his shoulder.

Maratelle looked back.

She was sitting on his chaise longue, posture utterly unnatural, like that of a rag doll which had been carelessly dropped there: her mouth was hanging open, the branches of the wych elm piercing through her torso—the tree had overgrown the chaise longue and threatened to engulf the room, its searching roots spreading over the parquetry.

“Can’t you leave me be?” Kylo hissed. “It’s day.” He pointed at the window; the curtains were
burning blue, framing a dazzling wintry landscape. Maratelle paid no attention to him, hollow eyes fixed on invisible terrors, welled with tears. “It’s day, it’s day,” Kylo repeated, dropping his hand. “It’s your dying day forever. Back in your loop now, are you?”

He stepped closer, softly, stealthily, holding his breath; Maratelle didn’t stir. He crouched down to have a better look at her tormented face. “Trapped in eternal agony,” he said slowly, and huffed. “Serves you well, you monster of a mother. You cannot speak; you couldn’t, when you were at death’s door. Keep knocking, Lady Arkanis.” He looked around, observing the wych elm’s pulsing tendrils. “The ritual was interrupted before I could expel you; you drove Mrs. Mitaka out—finally, you’re in your old room, your familiar shelter; but it protects you no more. You are no longer bound by night, at least; I’ve broken the spell, it seems. I suppose that’s what you wanted. Maybe you want something more, and could offer more secrets as a bargain; I would know the end of your tale, if I left my body and sent you my spirit as I did some nights before; souls can talk—body and soul cannot. I could touch your hand again; but you’d pull me down to where you dwell, to nothing, nowhere, and never.”

Maratelle’s lips formed words Kylo couldn’t decipher; wheezing followed, so woebegone and miserable that Kylo couldn’t help a sigh of sympathy. He stood up, surveying the room once again: the wardrobe, the little basin, borrowed books, and burnt candles. “I won’t miss this room,” he decided. “You’ll be no doubt appalled to learn that I share Armitage’s quarters—I don’t mind if he’s your murderer.” He glanced at her; the name had an effect—she had covered her eyes, twig-like, too-long fingers clawing at clammy skin.

“You can’t see. You can’t see.

“Don’t think I haven’t taken Mrs. Mitaka into account, untangling your grim tale,” Kylo said. “I also spared some thought to her son, and our little witness, and of course: the wych elm itself. A conspiracy is to be suspected; the truth is buried with you; I’ll unearth it to put my mind to ease—but your soul shall not find rest. Armitage won’t deny anything once I reveal what I’m privy to; I just need the final piece. Where did you put the keys?”

He didn’t expect an answer, but the drawer of his nightstand flew open; the motion was so forceful it toppled over, upsetting the candleholder and the pitcher of water atop it.

“You are a proper poltergeist, I’ll give you that,” Kylo admitted. He sidestepped the glinting shreds of the broken pitcher, feeling Maratelle’s gaze on his back again. “However, I cannot congratulate you on your performance as stepmother,” he added to avoid misunderstandings. He spotted the tin containing the keys; he called it to his hand with a flourish. “You see, I am presently rather cross with darling Armitage: he’s stubborn and supercilious and, at times, impossible to approach; still: I would never think to hurt him—for when love is countered with anger, respect remains. You wouldn’t have to be in love with him to realise that he’s a human being, deserving of decency—and so much more, I can assure you; if I could, I would give him all the sparkling stars, adorn his skin with them like so many celestial freckles. You had sought to destroy him; you had perished, but he shall live with me in happiness, if not in harmony—we’d get tired of that, in any case.”

He pocketed the tin after his speech, sparing a last glance at the drawer’s spilled contents—there was an envelope there he didn’t recognise, ivory-paper with an orange seal. “Please tell me ghosts can’t write,” he said, rather desperate. “If I could’ve gotten you to sit down and pen a memoir all this time—” He turned to her; she was gone, only the overgrown tree occupying the room. “Hiding, I see. Well, I’m sorry if you can’t bear to listen to me; your awful scratching and wheezing kept me up many nights, so I’d say we’re even; moreover—” His words halted.

The letter was addressed to His Grace the Duke of Naboo. A shaky cry escaped his lips. He
squeezed his eyes shut, then blinked them open. The envelope was still in his hands.

* * *

He escaped to the bastion—a reckless endeavor, but one motivated by the most desperate of necessities: no privacy was to be found within the walls of Stormfield Hall with all the servants dashing about and no doubt searching for him already. He would have to make haste, and be as discreet as possible. He tore the envelope open, but didn’t dare to unfold the letter just yet. A strong wind was blowing; it played with the paper, mocking him.

He took a tentative step forward, his coat and hair whirling about. The roof looked like a little town, the gargoyles its residents, the chimneys and spires like miniature houses. He minded his footing; the stones of the bastion were treacherously slippery. A look around the garden below; not a soul in sight—the lake gleamed ominously, and in the distance, he could espy the wych elm, twisting in the wind as if it had come to life. He counted to one, two, three, then began reading.

* * *

My Lord Duke—

When I inform you that your Lady Mother the General is one of my most intimate friends and a constant correspondent, I suppose you will no doubt be unfazed, for I am certain that the Lord Arkanis had shared his suspicions of my allegiances with you. It is in the Duchess’s name that I beseech you to read further.

I am certain you had reasons to attempt to vanish and live under your old pseudonym, posing as a poor tutor; I will not implore you to share an explanation—it is not I whom you owe one, but General Organa, who has been wounded greatly by your unaccountable absence, your grace. I have attempted in vain to learn your whereabouts from Mr. Skywalker; he insists that you shall be left to your own devices, and that any sort of interference is detestable; he cites a cosmic will that will guide you home if that is indeed your destiny—but I am afraid I cannot share his optimism.

You are in dangerous company. You will demand evidence; I will have to excuse myself and confess that I cannot offer any in confidence. I know not where your sympathies lie; maybe you know nothing of the Lord Arkanis’ policies and the dark deeds concerning his family; maybe you know more than I do, yet you chose to be his beau. Be as it may: should you find yourself in need of an escape route, head to Fleetwood and enquire about the ship Oscuro Uno. It can take you where you need to go. This is all I can do to help you; God save your soul. You have refused my latest gamble: allow me this bet on your redemption.

I wish you a cheerful and at times even a merry Christmas.

Yours faithfully,

“B8”

“B8,” he mouthed. Of course: his king was on B8 when Mr. Dameron had interrupted his game with Hux. Damn the man; he read the letter again, more displeased by the content and the tone by the minute—the cheek of him! Addressing him as a duke, but then proceeding to comment on his deeds and the company he kept! Kylo had his parents’ address—if he chose to, he could write to them; he
needn’t cross the ocean. The vague accusations with regards to Hux were especially infuriating, the height of hypocrisy—no soldier was innocent; they all had blood on their hands, including Leia, whom Mr. Dameron admired so much. Kylo grit his teeth and rolled the letter into a ball. He contemplated tossing it at a gargoyle to vent his frustrations, but maybe that wasn’t the brightest of ideas.

“What are you doing here, pray?” a voice called; it was Millicent, peeking out from the trapdoor, only the top of her head and dark blue eyes visible.

“Being furious,” Kylo explained, shoulders sagging. “I cannot be close to anybody when I get like this.” It was true, partially; Millicent nodded with understanding.

“I shall leave you be, in that case.”

“Wait just a minute,” Kylo implored; Millicent perched up, excited, and emerged up to her torso. “Do you happen to know who handles the post? I’m afraid I got a letter that wasn’t addressed to me.”

“Oh, that happens,” Millicent said. “It’s Dopheld’s duty, who can be quite absent-minded.”

“An absent-minded butler,” Kylo murmured, contemplating the balled-up letter. Maybe he should keep it; he wanted Hux to know his identity—he only wished his words were proof enough; besides, he wasn’t ready to reveal his rank to the entire household. The confusion would be intolerable. Would he have to start having breakfast in bed? Would he be allowed to dress himself and comb his own hair?

“Dopheld is the housekeeper,” Millicent corrected, interrupting his reveries. “We no longer employ a butler.”

“Right,” Kylo muttered. He pocketed the letter, putting it next to the tin containing the attic’s keys; all he needed was a twig from the wych elm and a magpie’s feather, and then he would be carrying the sum of his secrets around. He couldn’t wait to be rid of them. Cardinal, the quondam butler, relieved of his duties, he listed. Dopheld Mitaka, who was never the same after that day; Polly Mitaka, burying the keys; Armitage and the blood on his chin as he was grinning at his dying stepmother; Millicent trying to unsee what she’d witnessed, burying her face in his shoulders; Lady Scyre, the guest who hesitated to help. The body being carried into the kitchen. The people who entered after. The wych elm was blooming. Brendol Hux was missing.

“Do you suppose we’ll have a white Christmas?” Millicent asked. She had emerged completely, standing in the wind in the pink-and-white dress Hux had gotten her from London, the ribbons in her hair swirling about.

“Aren’t you cold?” Kylo said, shredding his coat without waiting for an answer. He covered Millicent, who all but disappeared under the heavy weight of the wool. She stepped forward, dragging the coat behind her as if it was a queen’s cape, surveying her empire: the garden.

“Do you suppose we could make it snow?” She peered up at Kylo, a mischievous glint in her eyes. Kylo sighed. “I suppose we could try.”

“How would we go about changing the weather? What does your uncle’s spellbook say?”

“Nothing useful, I’m afraid.” He stood behind her, reaching to hold her hand, lest she fall over. Millicent took it graciously, knitting her brows as she weighed her plans. Such a pensive look was almost comical on her little face; Kylo swallowed back a grin, and banished all dark thoughts. It’s
“We could ask really nicely,” Millicent decided. Kylo squeezed her hand, staring ahead at the silver skies.

“We could certainly plead our cause.”

Millicent coughed politely. “Dear weather,” she said then, voice ringing clear, “I’d be much obliged if you could kindly make it snow; for Christmas Eve is near, and our garden is miserably barren.”

“It’s positively parched,” Kylo chimed in to help. Nothing happened, as expected. Millicent pouted. Kylo poked her nose to make her smile; it had quite the opposite effect—her frown only deepened. “Now, remember,” Kylo said, “a lady asks; a witch commands.”

“Weather!” Millicent screamed, startling him; he rarely heard her so much as raise her voice. “Skies up high, deep azure, you mighty clouds! Open up now—send a blizzard!” She thrust her arm forward, and looked at Kylo, uncertain, while her cry was still echoing around them.

“She implores you,” Kylo said.

“I implore thee!” Millicent yelled, curling her hand into a fist. The clouds opened as if she had gutted them; a strong gust of wind rushed towards the bastion, carrying a flurry of snow, thick and blinding white. Millicent whooped in delight; Kylo hauled her up and headed to the trapdoor. He could hardly see where he was going. “The sky obeys my will!” Millicent was boasting. “Oh, it’s snowing! Isn’t it quite wondrous? Wait—I shall tell the elements to keep it up all day!”

“You shan’t,” Kylo gritted; he was frozen to the bone without his coat, assaulted most intolerably by the winds. The blizzard was frightening, but beautiful in its untamed fury; Millicent couldn’t stop smiling and laughing.

“I didn’t know I was capable of such powerful things! Oh, I wished a bit too hard, I’m afraid—next time I shall think of a gentle snowfall, tiny flakes dancing in the mildest breeze; a picturesque landscape, soft slopes of—ah, there goes a birch tree.”

“This way,” Kylo said, yanking the trapdoor open; he had to employ some of his own magic to fight the wind as he lowered Millicent back to warmth and safety. He grinned, teeth chattering—after all, the pupil’s success was the teacher’s pride.

* * *

“It’s judgement day out there,” Mitaka said gloomily. Kylo made a vague sound of agreement; he was leading Millicent downstairs; Mitaka happened on them halfway, carrying such an enormous bundle of evergreens that he looked like a walking tree. Kylo knew exactly what would happen next; his fate was inescapable. “Mr. Ren, would you be so kind as to help with the decorations? You are the tallest, you see—also, Thanisson and Mandetat encountered some difficulties with drawing in the Yule log; your strength might also need to be utilised, if you don’t mind.”

“Why would I?” Kylo smiled, bidding farewell to a cozy afternoon spent in the library, reading Horace’s Odes to Millicent while Unamo busied herself with knitting; he could picture the lazy, languid idyll of it so well—but as long as Mr. Dameron was the only one calling him “your grace,” he couldn’t exactly refuse to help out.

Grudgingly, he parted with Millicent and headed to the hall to collect the evergreen garlands. He decided to prioritize decorating, insensitive to Thanisson’s peril with the log. He started on the banisters, finding comfort in the rich scent of spices and oranges Slip and Nines had strategically
placed in neglected corners. He pointedly ignored Maratelle’s portrait as he passed it, humming to himself to muster up some Christmas spirit.

His mind kept returning to his ghost-infested room and the attic. He was much tempted to postpone his investigation; there was no reason to ruin a perfectly good holiday—yet he knew there was no time for delay. He reached the first storey and placed holly berries and ivy on the doorways; he stopped in front of Hux’s laboratory and, after brief consideration, let himself in—it would be a nice surprise to decorate the mantelpiece, a sensible peace-offering. He was surprised to find Hux inside, and deep in work by the looks of it—but Hux was unfazed and visibly pleased.

“There you are,” he said cheerfully, turning off the lamp burner. By the smell of it, he’d been heating alcohol; maybe that was part of his Christmas preparations.

“Here I am,” Kylo said, lightheaded; he expected that there’d be a day when Hux’s presence didn’t affect him so greatly; maybe he’d have to wait a hundred years, for presently, his knees were weak and his cock twitched hopefully. Hux walked to him, rubbing his hands off on his leather apron and smiling in a hesitant way that Kylo found endlessly endearing.

“I hope you’ll forgive me for this morning,” he said cheerfully; Kylo had all but forgotten their disagreement, too focused on the lilt in Hux’s voice. He only sounded like this when it was the two of them: he spoke softer, slower, his jaw relaxed. “I’m afraid I’m an incurable sceptic; but whatever my conviction is, it gives me no right to bereat you—is that mistletoe?”

Kylo blinked at him, and peered down at the basket he was clutching, overflowing with various greenery. “I do believe you could find some if you were so inclined,” he confirmed.

“Did you come to steal a kiss?” Hux teased. “Couldn’t you wait till evening?”

Kylo arched a brow. “Do I have something to look forward to?”

“Of course you do; it’s Christmas.” With that, Hux leant in, pressing his lips to Kylo’s for a delicious second; he pulled back all too soon, plucking a bright red berry with a wicked grin, and pocketed it.

“Shouldn’t the mistletoe be hung for the kiss to count?” Kylo said with a taunting edge. Hux didn’t waver; he kept their gazes locked as he broke off a stem with waxy leaves, and put it behind Kylo’s ear, brushing his hair away. He kissed him again, longer, deeper, fingers playing with a curl in a mischievous manner. Kylo moaned into his mouth; Hux swallowed the sound, gracing him with a parting slide of his wet tongue. He touched the mistletoe he had placed in Kylo’s hair, and spoke in such hushed tones Kylo could feel his sweet breath upon his tingling lips.

“There,” he said. “Now I may kiss you whenever I please.”

Kylo huffed a laugh, cupping Hux’s chin. His eyes flicked over his flushed face. “Will you kiss me again even if I keep insisting that I can see the ghost of your mother?”

Without a moment of hesitation, Hux licked at his lips; Kylo was stunned enough to part them, allowing Hux to deepen the kiss. It most certainly wasn’t a Christmas peck; it was something intimate, unholy, a claim: you are mine; I want you just as you are.

“Regard it as your consolation prize,” Hux said, breathless. “If you can see her, I pity you; I’m afraid she wasn’t an amicable person, God rest her soul.”

“You don’t believe in God,” Kylo murmured, backing him into the room. His objective was a velvet stool, one that hasn’t been tested for lovemaking—yet; an inexcusable negligence.
“I don’t believe in ghosts either, as we have established.” Hux explained, rushed. “But as I won’t interrupt the midnight mass to tell the believers how foolish they are, I won’t contradict your beliefs either, however nonsensical.” The back of his knees hit the stool; he dropped onto it, and Kylo climbed atop him posthaste. The stool groaned under his weight; he ignored it, straddling Hux’s legs and pressing closer, demanding to be petted. Hux knew what he needed, and began stroking his nape just how Kylo liked it, almost ticklish. “You’re such a clever man, when you put your mind to it,” he whispered into his hair. “Such a shame; such wisdom to waste.”

Kylo pinched him. “You just told me you wouldn’t ridicule me.”

“I told you I wouldn’t contradict you; that means I won't attempt to lecture you—but I maintain the right to pester and mock you, for it is an immense pleasure.”

Kylo pinched him again, face buried into the crook of his neck. “You’re cruel.”

“I can be that,” Hux said lightly.

“Cruel, ruthless.”

“Maybe you have talked with dear mama, you sound so much like her; do ghosts talk?”

“Occasionally,” Kylo muttered.

“What did she say?”

Kylo shifted his weight uncomfortably, nearly making them topple over. Hux grabbed his shoulders for balance. There were so many confessions to make; he decided to guide the conversation to the most recent revelation, and work his way back from there. “She agrees with the living: that I’m in dangerous company,” he said, sneaking his hands under Hux’s waistcoat. Feeling a corset under the silken material made him cut his story short. “I’ve received a letter from Mr. Dameron who urged me to stay away from you, preferably by sailing back to America.”

Hux chuckled, arching into Kylo’s touch. “The nerve of that little—! Will you take his advice?”

“Nothing could make me stay away from you, Armitage; nothing, nothing.” He embraced him, protective as if he was shielding that maltreated little boy he’d seen in Maratelle’s memories; he wanted to surround him like benevolent darkness, hide the sobbing child, the banished youth, the returning soldier, and the adult he dearly loved—oh that they couldn’t reunite sooner!

“I don’t know what it makes me, but I don’t mind if your hands are bloody, he thought. I’d just lick them clean.

* * *

Despite Kylo’s unwillingness to ever leave the laboratory, and more precisely, Hux’s lap, the decorations were ultimately finished: every sideboard, mantle, and banister were adorned with rope upon rope of evergreen garland, and mistletoe embellished the chandeliers; the stockings were hung, the candles lit, the table set. Hux invited his household to the dining room and each servant was given a generous carving of the twelfth cake, much to Kylo’s wonder; such generosity was uncommon among lords, as far as he knew.

Once dinner was heartily consumed, they flocked to the lavish drawing room and sat around the Yule log’s blazing fire, bathing in warmth as they savoured the wassail. Kylo was given the best armchair facing Hux’s own; Millicent sat on the armrest next to her brother, making faces at each spicy sip from her dainty cup—but she drank with her pinky up, and her back was straight as ever, the perfect picture of a proper little lady. Kylo swelled with pride to see her behave so well; his delight was amplified by the familiar faces around him and sweet laughter in the air, louder than the
vehement winds rattling the windows.

Christmas at Lowood had always been a sordid affair: they had attended their classes and were given stale bread, peanuts and a single slice of orange at dinner—they’d regarded it as such an exotic delicacy! Even as a teacher, Kylo had only received milk in his coffee to mark the festive occasion and had spent the night shivering under itchy covers. He had been delighted when daybreak had come and he had been sent to shovel the snow—the rigorous activity had kept him warm, at least.

Now he sat comfortably with a full stomach, finely dressed, body clean, hair fragrant; he reminded himself never to take such luxuries for granted. He stole a glance at Hux, then looked around at the servants standing around in a semicircle. A gathering of conspirators, he mused. Still: there is nowhere else I’d rather be than in this company.

Conversation was idle and mostly focused on the room’s features, the fire’s pleasantness and observations on the fiendish weather (Millicent took a too big gulp of her wassail whenever the latter was mentioned). A fine way to pass the time; then of course, Thanisson had to open his mouth.

“Did you know,” he said self-importantly, swaying a bit, a blush high on his cheeks. “Did you know that it is the German habit to bring in a fir tree and decorate it with various items of food?”

“How ludicrous,” Kylo scoffed, picturing a tree with stips of meat hanging from it.

“His Royal Highness would disagree,” Hux remarked, making Kylo scoff again. The betrayal! “If rumours are to be believed, a tree will be set up in the palace to honour his Saxon ancestry.”

Thanisson opened his mouth to make a no doubt dull remark, but Kylo hastened to interject, “Have you ever been to the palace, Mr. Hux?”

“Why, of course,” Hux smiled. Millicent jumped in her seat a little.

“Can we visit Her Majesty this year? I’d so love to see that tree!”

“May I bring your attention to our garden that showcases quite a number of such curiosities as trees?” Hux said, indicating the window and the violent sway of firs in the distance.

“But are they German?” Millicent fired back. “Can you find delicacies on them?”

“If it is your wish, we can certainly ask Mrs. Mitaka to serve your breakfast atop an oak or the sycamore.”

“Just avoid the wych elm,” Rodion remarked, chuckling darkly; a lull fell upon the company, making Kylo tense in his seat. Rodion’s eyes were too bright—he was undoubtedly drunk. The strange silence only lasted for a moment, but it was heavy with significance.

“That old, rotting tree,” Hux tsked; his face didn’t betray anything, but Millicent got deathly pale; despite her disturbed state, she managed to speak calmly.

“I want to leave,” she said, almost serene. “Could we please go visit Mr. Erso, or maybe the Tarkins? Wouldn’t that be merry?”

“I’m afraid the snow has blocked the roads; besides, I wanted to spend this Christmas with my family.” He reached for Kylo’s hand; he took it without a pause. Hux caressed his knuckles with a thumb, making his affections clear for the household. They stood silent witness to Kylo’s answering smile and the mirth in Hux’s eyes.
Kylo and Hux retired early, for once refusing to wait until the servants had withdrawn to their rooms; they left them playing parlour games, both of them bold on wassail, but sober enough to alight the stairs without incident. They only stopped to exchange quick kisses; there was no-one around to see them, but being this brazenly affectionate was still a singular thrill.

“Do you trust me?” Hux asked when they reached the third storey.

“With my life,” Kylo said, letting Hux pull him into his quarters. The decorations here were moderate: a rope of ivy over the marble mantelpiece, a pretty wreath upon the bedroom door, and some more candles than usual. Hux grabbed a silver candelabrum and lit it; the only light was the glow of it and the fire from the marble hearth.

“Don’t you think I’m dangerous?” he asked, looking quite crazed with the flames casting dancing shadows over his face, pale eyes ablaze.

“I love you all the more for it,” Kylo confessed.

“Strip,” Hux ordered him on a military tone, biting and sharp. Kylo obeyed, wondering leisurely if Hux would put on his uniform if he asked; but he looked so handsome in his blacks and whites it’d be a shame to make him change. Hux shed his frock and waistcoat, undid his ascot, then stopped there—the high collar open, the corset over his shirt on full display, trousers and boots still in place. “Come here,” he said.

Kylo was still waddling a bit from their passionate embrace in the laboratory, as pleasantly sore as he suspected Hux to be—they had taken turns riding each other on the stool, and had finished on the floor: ecstatic, entangled, breathless.

Kylo came to stand behind the ice blue couch, resting his forearms on the back; he made sure his spine’s lazy curve drew attention to his firm buttocks. The plan succeeded, for Hux placed a gentle hand there, and squeezed a cheek as one of his long fingers slipped in, probing at the entrance. Kylo moaned readily, widening his stance. Hux laughed lightly and withdrew his hand.

“I have something different in mind for us to-night; do tell me if you don’t find it agreeable.”

“I’m listening,” Kylo said. He hoped it involved something being put inside him; he felt hollow, in need to be filled anew—a tongue, fingers, Hux’s lovely cock: anything would do. Espying a bottle of oil on the table left him assured that his fervent wish would be met soon.

“I have found that hot wax can feel rather nice on the skin,” Hux explained. “The sensation is on the border of torment and tenderness; these new candles would feel especially good—their wax are not so intolerably hot.”

“Do you want to cover me in it?” Kylo asked, looking at him quizzically even though his stomach twisted with arousal.

“Just play around a short while,” Hux said, settling his palm over Kylo’s arse again. His touch was light, his hands soothingly cold; Kylo arched into the welcome contact, but pretended to weigh his decision, lips pursed.

“And after that?”

“Then it’s your turn to have a request; it’s only fair.”
“I want your cock,” Kylo blurted out all too readily, earning a teasing squeeze.

“Do you want me to fuck you?”

Kylo nodded sharply, cock filling just from hearing the vulgar word. “Yes, please,” he said, voice low. “Yes.”

“Then we shall prepare you properly,” Hux decided, setting the candelabrum aside. He put it on the table, in the direct line of Kylo’s sight—it must’ve been intentional.

He watched the dripping wax while Hux fetched the oil and smeared it over his fingers. He knelt behind Kylo; it would’ve felt less jarring if he remained standing. The intimacy of it was striking even after spending so many nights together. Hux easily inserted two fingers, moving them unhurriedly as Kylo’s bliss began building. He eased into it, busy mind drifting—murders and mysteries forgotten for the moment, suspicions abandoned; he came back to himself with a piercing cry when Hux bit into his left cheek.

“Your shoulders were dropping,” he said.

“I’m fatigued,” Kylo explained, muffled by his arm that he used for a pillow. “I woke up early, and it has been such a, ah, hectic day, with the travel and—drinking, and Christmas.”

“Should we make it last, or make it fast?” Hux twisted his fingers, sending a jolt of pleasure through Kylo’s body.

“Make it last, please,” Kylo pleaded. “I need you to—Oh, I need you!”

“I’m here,” Hux said, pressing a tender kiss to Kylo’s tailbone. He stood up and wiped his hand on a handkerchief, then went to fetch the candelabrum. Kylo caught sight of the pile of his discarded clothes on the ground; the keys and Mr. Dameron’s letter were still in the pockets. When would it be best to reveal them: the attic’s secret, the title on the envelope? The sooner the better, if he wanted to ask Hux’s hand before the new year—but how to go about it? Mitaka had been giving him odd looks all day; even if he suspected the letter to be a particular joke, he might ask about it before Kylo’s second confession was ready.

He was so occupied with scheming he hardly noticed Hux returning, and just grunted when he was asked if he was ready; the first drop hit his skin, and all thoughts were forgotten.

“By Jove!” he yelled, fingers digging into the couch’s cushioned back, threatening to tear it open. Hux put his palm over the small of his back.

“How do you find it?”

Kylo blinked a few times. His cock was slick with precome, arching up to his belly; but the pleasure was so unusual he couldn’t quite reflect upon it: he had the sensation of being outside his own body, the prickling burn of the wax his only point of contact.

“Again,” he asked.

Hux carefully tipped the candles to the side; four hot droplets fell on Kylo, making him hiss, mouth slack, mind ecstatic.

“I must say the splatter looks quite enticing,” Hux said, trailing the stiffening beads. “You look as if I came all over you already.”
“Oh!” Kylo gasped, the very thought making him dazed. He clenched around nothing, pressing the heel of his hands into the couch. “More.”

“What do we say?”

“More, please.”

“Et voilà, he has manners. Good behaviour shall be rewarded.”

Kylo closed his eyes, relishing in the contrast between the hot wax and Hux’s cool hand on his lower back; he started moving his hips involuntarily—Hux made him still, denying him the friction the couch provided. It prolonged the pleasure, allowing Kylo to relish the sensations until he grew restless and began to push back, rubbing his ready arse over Hux’s crotch.

“Careful, Kylo,” Hux said. “Wax is almost impossible to get out of clothes.”

“Then shed them,” Kylo advised, thrusting back again. Hux laughed fondly, caressing Kylo’s buttocks, his gentle touch welcome on the burning skin. “Fill me,” Kylo asked. “Please, I want you in me, want you now, want you deep.”

There was a low intake of breath. “How could such wish be resisted?” Hux asked, words measured but voice hoarse.

He disappeared to place the candelabrum back on the table; Kylo reached behind himself blindly, sliding his fingers in and gasping softly when he felt the wetness there. The burning skin of his behind was numb, pulsing pleasantly; his consciousness was ebbing, flowing away—Hux grounded him when he came back, touching his face and anchoring him in the present.

“Kiss me,” Kylo whispered, craning his neck.

Their lips met as Kylo held himself open and Hux slipped inside. The rigidity of him was both exquisite and familiar; Kylo moaned, head lolling back, enjoying the stretch—what Hux lacked in length was made up by the girth of him. He kissed Kylo’s nape, his ears, then proceeded to bend him over the couch for a better angle. Kylo was biting his lips to withhold the whimpering, but they were no longer in the hotel—he could be as loud as he pleased.

“Harder,” he growled.

“You’re so pilant and drowsy; are you certain a rough treatment is what you crave?”

“Please,” he said, eyes fluttering shut, groaning at every vicious thrust of Hux’s hips, savouring how the soft linen of Hux’s shirt felt against his skin, and crying out when Hux grabbed his cock, squeezing and rubbing it the way Kylo needed.

“You deserve this,” Hux whispered into his ear. “You deserve to have your wishes met. You’ve been so good to me. It’s intoxicating to be mmm, in charge of you—it’s just as sweet as it is to submit to your will.”

“Let me come now,” Kylo begged; Hux twisted the base of his cock, hips twitching deeper, and Kylo climaxed with a yell that would’ve had him reported back in the hotel. He was ready to collapse; Hux held him through his orgasm, whispering honeyed words, and pulled out despite Kylo’s half-hearted protests.

“Oh no, look what you’ve done to the couch,” Hux said.
A dark spot blemished the velvet; Kylo sank to his knees and lapped at it, sucking his come out of the fabric, confident that Hux was watching him. He remained kneeling as Hux stepped to him, tipping his chin up, hand working on his own cock; his come spluttered over Kylo’s face, his drooping lashes and pouting mouth. Feeling the hot seed on his skin felt like a blessing, like being exalted with anointing oil.

“You should see how beautiful you look like this, marked as mine,” Hux said, thumb rubbing at Kylo’s chin. He purred.

“Hire a painter.”

“As if. I suppose you could make a self-portrait. Here.” He dabbed at his face with the silken handkerchief.

Kylo grabbed his wrist, keeping his eyes closed and murmuring, “I’m much too tired to clean up; can’t we sleep here, like this?”

“Out of the question,” Hux said, but switched to lap at Kylo’s face, which was preferable to the scrubbing.

His spent cock twitched in his lap; he pressed closer once Hux was finished, taking a hold of his hand and guiding it to his own crotch—just to feel the lovely warmth of his palm. Hux cupped his cock gently while pressing tender kisses to his neck. Kylo melted, feeling pampered and immensely cherished. He thought he’d be urged to collect himself, tidy up, and go to bed, but Hux remained on the floor with him, as if he felt no pressure to reclaim any semblance of dignity.

Kylo must have dozed off while he was being caressed so; it remained a mystery how Hux had navigated his dead weight onto the couch, but when he startled awake around midnight, he found himself there, wrapped in heavy blankets and a sleeping Hux half atop him, drooling over his chest, long legs dangling over the edge. Kylo had only a moment to appreciate his darling face scrunched up in sleep, the sleek fall of his hair tickling his skin, then he realised what woke him—what infernal noise, what raw screaming.

He glanced at the ceiling, exasperated. It sounded as if the attic’s inhabitant was both trying to lure him in and scare him off—there was knocking, clawing, thumping footsteps; inarticulate cries for help and such shrieking that’d keep any sane person away. He’d just have to get to his feet, dress, grab the keys; but he’d disturb Hux’s sleep. He was surprisingly heavy splayed atop him like this, burning feverishly under the shared blankets; but Kylo would rather be uncomfortable and ignorant forever than see the disappointed twitch of Hux’s nose that signalled that he was awake.

You are making Hamlet’s mistake, he reminded himself. Postponing the inevitable; go, just go now—brave destiny; demand the answers you deserve; be done with obscurity; what are you afraid of?

Then Rey’s voice: Blood in the kitchen. The hanging tree in the garden. He keeps hidden.

You slaughter.

“To-morrow, to-morrow, and to-morrow,” he whispered into Hux’s hair. “Remember? To the last syllable of recorded time...And all our yesterdays...A walking shadow...Heard no more.”

He let his eyes fall shut.

Out, out, brief candle.

(I cannot forgive what happens in the fire. And what comes after.)
“We are never sleeping like that again,” Kylo announced, cracking his back and grimacing at the popping of joints that followed the movement.

“I’m sorry, who begged to spend the night on the floor? Who should be obliged that I hoisted him up to the couch?”

It was easy for Hux to speak; he looked well-rested for once, dashing in a richly embroidered dressing gown, fresh shirt, and neat trousers; Kylo was in yesterday’s clothes, hair tousled, a limp evident in his steps as he took the groaning stairs.

“You weigh a thousand pounds,” he complained.

“That is simply not true: I’m airy and ethereal—I do not weigh anything at all.” Hux performed a perfectly executed pirouette to illustrate his point, spinning on the flight and coming to rest at a most graceful pose, hands up in the air resembling a swan’s wings. Kylo pretended not to be impressed, and passed him as if he didn’t think much of his skill.

“That is your trick,” he murmured, “you pretend to be lithe to trick honest men into allowing you to sleep on them, succubus; but when they wake they find they can’t breathe—your heaviness crushes their chest!”

“I’ve never met such an ungrateful, disagreeable man!” Hux said, mock-offended as he rushed after him, limping a bit. “Never slept with one either; such gentle lovers I had; doves, all of them; meek, lenient—”

Kylo turned sharply and seized his exposed wrist, yanking him closer. “Maybe you should go back to them,” he growled; the dark spark in his eyes ignited a responding flame in Hux’s gaze. His hold tightened, thumb rubbing at the fair skin. “Leave me for your sun-kissed European cavaliers, your sweethearts in the molly house, the lovers-in-arms you’ve left in India; you tell me they’d make better suitors—so go.”

“I’m going right away,” Hux said; his coquettish provocation called to Kylo—he hauled him up, putting him over a shoulder; Hux made a show of protesting, kicking in the air and losing a monogrammed slipper in the process—but he gripped Kylo’s frock coat, holding onto him tightly.

“Abduction!” he cried. “Mr. Ren, cease your misdemeanour!”

“I’m delivering you myself,” Kylo announced, heading down the stairs, enjoying how Hux bounced on his shoulders; he couldn’t feel his weight at all. “I’m bringing you back to your courteous admirers, watch you kiss them; you’d taste tedium and indifference—it’d be upon your own lips, poisoning the kiss: I’ve ruined you for anyone else, haven’t I, Armitage?”

“Kylo, you menace,” he gasped, “you have.”

Kylo smirked to himself and swatted at Hux’s buttocks—just as they reached the last step, and were faced with a lethargic Mitaka. An awkward pause followed; Hux didn’t see who halted Kylo’s steps, but he probably guessed. He slipped off his shoulder with as much decorum as he could muster, pulling his dressing gown around himself. Mitaka’s gaze dropped to Hux’s naked foot, then he looked up as if he hadn’t seen anything out of the ordinary.

“Good-morrow, sir; I was just about to ring, breakfast is ready,” he said, monotonous.

“Excellent.” Hux cleared his throat and blinked a few times in quick succession. Kylo could feel his own cheeks burning, but refused to give in to embarrassment: their love was honest—therefore there
was nothing improper or shameful about their affair; it didn’t matter if anyone begged to differ. God knows Stormfield Hall had seen much worse.

Hux put his chin up and took the first brave step; Kylo was ready to follow him to the end of the world, but a gentle cough by Mitaka interrupted the attempt. “A word, Mr. Ren.”

He halted, but only half-turned, keeping his gaze on Hux marching through the sunlit hall. “How may I be of help?”

“There was a letter,” Mitaka said, swallowing audibly. Kylo elected to ignore it.

“A letter,” he said slowly. He hoped to buy some time until Hux was sufficiently out of earshot; his repeated confession must happen on his own terms. Mitaka swallowed again.

“No-one would claim it,” he explained, “and it was certainly not addressed to Mr. Hux.”

“Certainly, it wasn’t.”

“Therefore I put it in your room.”

“You did.” Kylo finally gave him his undivided attention; it was evident it was the last thing Mitaka wanted. Kylo took the last step separating him from ground level; he was still much taller than poor Mitaka, whom he promptly cornered.

“Have you found it?” Mitaka asked, back pressed to a carved wooden panel. It must’ve hurt.

Kylo waited a few beats; nothing could be heard but the faint tickling of the pendulum clock and Mitaka’s rapid breathing.

“What are you trying to say?” Kylo asked softly.

Mitaka hunched his shoulders, but his eyes were defiant. “Are you living here under false pretenses?”

“Why would I do that?”

“Are you not with the police?”

Kylo didn’t allow his surprise to show on his face. “Is there something to investigate?”

“No, Mr. Ren,” Mitaka said, with more force than Kylo expected of him. “However, a man with multiple aliases is either a detective or a criminal.”

“Or a duke earning an honest living as a tutor,” Kylo supplied; Mitaka laughed mirthlessly.

“That’d make an unlikely story!”

“Huh. You needn’t fret.” Kylo stepped back, head inclined. “It was just a peculiar joke by an old schoolmate of mine; some rollicking for Christmas.”

“What’s so amusing about it?” Mitaka asked, rubbing at his chest nervously as if trying to ease the flow of air, suffocating in Kylo’s presence.

“That nobody would suspect me to be the Duke of Naboo.” Kylo smiled to himself. “Isn’t that funny?”
After a rather tense breakfast of cheeses, lard on bread, and watercress, Hux led his company to the drawing room. He attained a glass of early wine, which he held up to give a toast. Kylo settled back in his seat for a good ten-minutes speech, as was typical from Hux, and surveyed the room to divert his attention. The servants stood around, and certain mysterious boxes were on the polished table with ribbons upon them. Millicent was eyeing them curiously, head tilted, but without her usual eager restlessness, which signalled that the gifts weren’t for her. She was in a mint-coloured dress with complicated ruffles, one of the many boons Hux had lavished upon her; her shoes were new and so were her lace mittens and the ribbons in her hair; she was clutching an ivory fan with such jealous piety as if it was a treasure to be guarded from dragons. She put her head over Kylo’s chest as Hux’s speech continued, praising loyalty and perseverance with colourful similes.

Kylo began to suspect that some celebration was in progress. The room’s grandeur would fit any occasion, and the household looked dignified enough: even Thanisson managed to put on his better pair of trousers and not leave the braces hanging around his hips; Unamo’s grey frock was one that Kylo had never seen, and Mitaka’s gloves—reserved for special occasions—had made an appearance. They were all quite solemn, but that could have been on account of Hux’s endless toast, delivered with rising passion but getting more and more abstract in the process, now raging about the subject of honest work and mankind’s general diligence from the perspective of the French revolution. Mrs. Mitaka was the only one paying proper attention; she was moved to tears, dabbing at her eyes behind her round spectacles. Kylo made an effort to concentrate, but his attention slipped three sentences in; Hux was still in his dressing gown but had retrieved both of his velvet slippers somehow. They looked enticing on his dainty feet.

“In short,” Hux said, “thank you for your service—your efforts do not go unnoticed, nor are they unappreciated. Dopheld, please step forward.”

Kylo was jolted from a daydream about sucking kisses on Hux’s ankles as Mitaka passed the sofa he and Millicent were lounging on, and stood in front of Hux, head bowed. Hux set his glass of wine on the mantelpiece and got a box from the table, handing it to Mitaka.

“Such a prudent and earnest housekeeper is rare to have; you have taken great pains to accommodate my whims and keep Stormfield tidy and ready at all times; my guests have praised the order that pervades my home, and my callers were impressed by the glamour you worked to preserve. You made me proud; thank you.”

“My family have served the Huxes for over a century; I am glad to continue such a noble tradition; it is a pleasure and a honour indeed.” He bowed, the box pressed to his chest. Hux replied with a gracious smile and a tilt of his head. Mitaka turned to walk back to his place, and his eyes found Kylo. You cannot take this from me, his gaze said. I’ve been here longer than you have.

The servants were called one-by-one and were given warm words of gratitude and congratulations, also the boons; their contents turned out to be various delicacies, scarves, handkerchiefs, a fine bottle of spirits; Unamo couldn’t be happier with her brandy and tobacco; Thanisson definitely didn’t deserve a new pair of boots, although Hux’s remark on growing up fast at least showed some well-deserved confusion over Thanisson’s age. Soon, there was only one box left on the table—a small, unassuming thing with a crimson ribbon.

“I thank you again,” Hux said over the excited chatter. “Now please, leave us; we’ll take dinner at twelve. I expect no visitors or callers, and I don’t think beggars or carol singers will brave the weather; still, I expect the rooms to be at an impeccable state, and the snow should be shovelled; Gideon, if the blizzard stops, I’ll want to take Finalizadora out for a ride.”
“I’m sure it’ll stop,” Millicent peeped, making Kylo stifle a laugh. There was an inexplicable nervousness in his heart as he watched the dependents walk out with their boons; he realised it felt awry not to be among them, obeying orders.

“Kylo,” Hux said gently. He turned to him, abashed; Hux’s russet hair was glowing by the fireplace’s light and there was a radiant smile upon his lips. “I hope you don’t mind—I didn’t want to put you on the spot; besides, you’re family now—you have your place with us.”

“What did you get?” Millicent asked, eyeing the little box. Hux tsked.

“Manners, Millie; don’t be nosy.”

“I didn’t get you anything,” Kylo said slowly, a peculiar warmth spreading over him, embarrassment and contentment mixed. He was sitting in a splendid room with a noble family (the last surviving members of it)—he was treated as equal before he could prove to be one; Mr. Dameron’s letter was burning his pocket just as much as the tin with the keys.

“You weren’t expected to.” Hux took his seat in an armchair facing the sofa, crossing his feet at the ankles and drawing Kylo’s attention on them again. “If you felt obliged, you could make the drawing we discussed,” he added lightly.

“A portrait?” Millicent perked up. “Whom will it depict?”

Me in the nude, I’m afraid. “A dear acquaintance,” Kylo murmured, making Hux chuckle. Their eyes met; heat flared up in Kylo’s chest.

He could draw the both of them in carnal embrace, Hux’s pale thighs around his thrusting hips, head thrown back to wail his pleasure. His inspiration would be the statues of Bernini, twisted marble, gripping fingers; he’d seen depictions of his San Lorenzo and Neptune in Hux’s lewd art album. The last page would be occupied with Kylo’s drawing, a fitting end and a new beginning to Hux’s sensual adventures. A new album could be opened, recording their most memorable experiences as husband and husband.

“Would you like to open your present?” Hux asked, eyes hooded, plush lips parted as if he was already posing for a frivolous drawing.

Kylo quickly glanced at Millicent, wondering if she should be sent out of the room as well, but it seemed the gift wouldn’t be ruinous of her innocence. He fetched it from the table and unfastened the ribbon without much ceremony; the box was entirely too small for a book, even for pencils or charcoals—as the box opened Kylo realised he had everything he could have wanted: he had Hux, he had Millicent. Whatever was there could be nothing but insignificant; then he noticed the glint of a pocketwatch, and his breathing stopped for a moment.

It was silver, which he very much preferred to brass or gold—but only mentioned his inclination to Hux once, and in passing, not expecting him to take note of it; following the ornate engravings with trembling fingers, feeling the weight of the watch in his palm was like holding evidence of Hux’s attention. The chain was as delicate as lace; the tickling as soft as a lover’s sigh.

“Oh, it’s pretty,” Millicent whispered, as if she was afraid that loud words would injure such a gentle object.

“Open it,” Hux said. Kylo was afraid his hands would prove to be too big and clumsy for such a task, but the lid lifted with an easy click, revealing an inscription.

I will love you until the end of time - A.H.
Kylo let his eyes fall shut. “Is this a proposal?”

“It could be, depending on your answer,” Hux said. Kylo looked up just in time to see him drop to a knee, a determined expression on his face.

“Up!” he yelled, jumping to his feet. Within two steps, he was by Hux’s side, hooking his hands under his arms to haul him up, the watch safe within his grip; Hux was shaking with laughter. “I said up, Armitage,” Kylo growled, but his words were bubbling with a need to echo Hux’s snickering. “You sly devil; you can’t propose to me if I propose to you first.” With that, he lowered himself to a knee, just to be kicked in the shin by Armitage.

“My dear angel, proposals can be made standing. Will you marry—”

“I will be marry to ask for your hand, yes,” Kylo interrupted. He grabbed Hux’s dressing gown and pulled him down to the ground. Hux fell onto his buttocks with a painful thud and started laughing so heartily Kylo could barely make out his words.

“You will be marry to ask for my hand—in the future; but I ask you now: Kylo Ren, be my—”

He had to be silenced. Kylo surged forward and closed his lips with a kiss, climbing atop him on his hands and knees.

“Ew,” Millicent said. Then she added, “You’re like children.”

“Kylo, you’re corrupting my sister.”

“There’s nothing wrong with kissing one’s spouse,” Kylo said, pulling back but still straddling Hux’s hips. “Are you my husband, or are you complicit in your sister’s ruin?”

“Posing such a challenge is cheating,” Hux hissed, eyes blazing.

“I’m leaving,” Millicent announced.

“There’s one thing you should know before you give me your answer,” Kylo said, but the rest got caught in his throat. I’m the Duke of Naboo. Why did that sound so utterly ridiculous? He recalled the way Mitaka looked at him when he suggested it; the same expression on Hux’s face would be intolerable. He bit his lips, noting how Hux’s eyes darted to them as if by reflex.

“What is that?” he whispered.

“I will love you forever as well,” Kylo said, defeated.

He got back to his room around eleven o’clock, still sullen, but resolved to turn his day around. He spotted Maratelle sitting on the windowsill, the curtains rippling around her; she had a simple dress on, her hair in a chunky braid.

“Does the room help you remember who you used to be?” Kylo asked; she had no reply, lost in the past. “So there is escape from hell,” he muttered. “How incredibly reassuring.”

He set to packing—no matter how placid Maratelle proved to be at the moment, he couldn’t count on her permanent goodwill. Hux was most enthusiastic about the suggestion of sharing rooms, and Kylo was likewise excited to give up his solitude for good. Hux was a superb companion; he never grew tiresome, always granting Kylo enough space, knowing when he needed it without asking. His
conversation was entertaining and thought-provoking, and his silence reassuring. In the last days spent in Millcote, Kylo had gotten into the habit of using Hux’s bare buttocks as a pillow while reading his last chapters for the day—Hux had enjoyed the jaunty intimacy of it just as much as him. The prospect of sharing similar moments, and so often, filled him with a giddiness; secrets were the only thing still separating them, coming between their linked souls like a wall of mist.

“I shouldn’t find it this taxing to reveal my identity to him,” Kylo said, addressing Maratelle and the aether. Both were silent; Maratelle hadn’t stirred since he entered the room, forehead pressed to the glass, a lifeless hand dangling down from her lap. “I did it once without thinking; he believed I was jesting. Scepticism wouldn’t be enough to stop me from trying; but there is my own fear.”

He walked to the mammoth wardrobe to pack away his new clothes. They suited him so well, yet their fineness was still foreign—the rich colours, the touch of silk. “The Duke of Naboo is Ben,” he said, holding up a white shirt for survey. “I am not him, nor do I want to be; I despise the bastard—he seems to me like a twin destroyed in the womb. He no longer has a place in existence; no identity; there is only me. If there’s something left of him, it’s just tiny bones I carry.”

He got the clothes off the hangers, folding them neatly. Ben Solo wouldn’t know how to fold—Artie or some other servant would be in charge of his wardrobe. “I’m glad the magpie got him,” Kylo said softly. “I’m glad he died that day. I’m afraid that claiming his rank would be like reviving him; that I’d have his borrowed robes, step into his shoes, affect his manners; Kylo would be no longer—I was born of misery and dismay, but I am free. I would rather be a free man marrying Armitage than a pampered good-for-nothing. I want to remain a tutor; and when Millicent is sent to school, I’ll find other ways to be of service. Maybe I’m like you in that way: I can’t stand idleness.”

He closed the trunk; the clothes were done. Maratelle’s corpse was still sitting in the window. The veins of her arms were like frail branches. Kylo got to the ground, starting to sort through the books he’d return to the library and the ones he hadn’t finished. “On the other hand,” he went on, “the Duke of Naboo never was; I grew up in America—my rank was hardly significant; the land I had could be on the moon for all it mattered there. Therefore my reasoning is this: the duke would be whoever I make him to be. I might utilise this opportunity to create a novel identity—as I did when I embraced being a witch. My nobility could be on my own terms; the blood I have has always given me a singular sense of importance—even if I want to stay clear of my cursed heritage.”

His heart skipped as he happened on a volume of A History of British Birds. It was volume two—he had been reading on the great auk, always dreading to turn the page and be faced with the magpie, having escaped the boundaries of the volume he belonged in. He couldn’t bring himself to open the book; it was too dangerous. He set it aside, murmuring, “I’d have to tell him all—again; Snoke, mother, how it happened—in return I’ll only want a few answers, confidence for my confidence; but for that end, I’d have to ask the right questions; to ask the right questions, one has to have a grasp on the possible solutions—that is teaching for you; that is teaching…” He trailed off. The attic’s keys were unbearably heavy in his pocket.

* * *

This is how grandmother must have felt going into that basement, Kylo mused as he creeped through the third storey corridor. It was close to noon; soft sunlight was gleaming on the checkered floor and the polished wooden walls. Packing was finished, luncheon would soon be served—these secret minutes felt like time-between-time, an unaccounted period he was free to waste. The sky was clearing, the frenzied storm rolling away with the last rumbles of thunder. He’d just see whether the keys still worked, or had gotten too rotten; if so, he’d employ his magic—get the door open, peek around just to get a sense of what was awaiting him when the Thing would awake in the dread of night, and he’d have to visit again.
He halted by the steps. A short flight; it was silly of his heart to hammer so, his hair shouldn’t have stood on end—Unamo often sat here smoking, without a care for the world. For the first time ever, it occurred to Kylo that she might have been guarding something. He peered up; the stairs seemed to be tilting. He pictured a bony boy being dragged up them by his red hair, limp like the dead, refusing to scream: he’d know that no-one would come to his aid, but he’d be sobbing still, and the echo of his wretched cries called to Kylo, made him take the first step, then the next. He looked back once he was on top of them, his stomach dropping when he noticed shallow scratch marks on the wall—left by small hands and short nails clawing desperately while Brendol Hux was busy with the keys.

“Good day, sir,” Kylo muttered, working to open the bolts. “I believe I’ll find you asleep; then again, you know what the scripture says—no rest for the wicked.”

The locks gave easily, one after the other; there was something almost embarrassing in it—he could’ve come here sooner, but there was always an excuse or an obstacle. When he was finished, he took a deep breath; it proved to be a mistake—the thick dust made him sneeze. He looked around, eyes wide; he had no business nosing around here—even if there was no ghost to face at this time of the day, there was the very palpable danger of being discovered probing at secrets.

Just a peek, he told himself. Get a sense of the place; test the planks for creaking, take a note of any furniture that might be searched later for papers; find somewhere to draw a circle and put candles—a summoning might be in order.

He lifted the trapdoor slowly, revealing darkness inch by inch; it was like a beast opening its yawning mouth, and the bolts creaked like iron teeth gnawing on bones. He was a fool for stepping walking into the belly of the fiend willingly—but it had to be done.

The attic had no windows; the only source of light was coming from the open trapdoor that he’d have to close soon. The ailing beams only showed specks of dust snowing down. Kylo placed his feet on the planks, holding the latch as if it was a rope by which he could be pulled back into the world of the living. Even standing up, he could get no sense of space; he didn’t know how tall the ceiling was or where the walls began—the attic could be narrow like a grave or vast like the halls of hell; he was none the wiser from staring into the impenetrable darkness.

And the smell: a sickening, sweet rot. A dead body had to be here; it had to be here still. He shrugged off his frock coat and used it to keep the trapdoor slightly ajar—he needed a sliver of light so he wouldn’t lose sight of the exit. The door was open only a crack—hopefully, he wouldn’t get caught like that. He remained kneeling by the door for a moment longer than needed, putting his palm over the watch in his waistcoat pocket. Turn-back, turn-back, it ticked. He’d have to return with a candle. The darkness wouldn’t yield its secrets. There was nothing to be done under the present circumstances. Still, he didn’t stir.

Don’t lose the name of action, he kept repeating, waiting for his senses to adjust. If nothing else, he could take inventory of what else he’d need to bring on his next visit: a rope, a knife, a crowbar, maybe a magnifying glass—and a handkerchief, certainly. He undid his mauve ascot and put it over his mouth and nose to filter the repulsive air; his stomach was upturned and he had difficulty breathing.

For the time being, I’ll just examine if there are any doors, he told himself. I will go around and put my hand on the walls. I can certainly do that. I can—

“Armitage,” a voice said. It didn’t sound too far off. Kylo turned, eyes straining with the effort to locate the speaker. He could hear him so clearly—“Armitage, is that you? Did you come to see me?”
Kylo counted to three, forcing his heart to still, and got to his feet. This was it. He felt as if he was walking on a razor’s edge, one hand pressing the ascot to his face, the other reaching out blindly to find something to hold onto. The darkness put him off-balance; his steps faltered and he was all too aware of the chilly air shifting around him.

“Armitage?” the voice tried again. Kylo stopped. No, no, no, no. He had to be standing within arm’s reach. How was Brendol awake, and why?

*You roused him,* his mind supplied, accusing. *You know you did.*

*Ring-a-round the rosie, pocket full of poises.*

*Ashes. Ashes.*

*He touches you. You tumble down.*

He couldn’t breathe.

*You’ll count back. You’ll turn around.*

*Three.*

*Two.*

“No,” the voice said slowly. “You’re no son of mine. Give me light.”

*One.*

He couldn’t run.

“Have you heard me, boy? Give me light—it will do me no good, but you can’t see, can you? There’s a chest of drawers to the left. Find the matches. Now. *Look at me.*”


“I didn’t offer you a choice. I told you to find the matches.”

“What makes you think you can command me?” Kylo said with more courage than he felt; but something else was growing within—cold, calculating fury.

Brendol chuckled; humourless, lifeless. “The fact that you’re still standing here,” he growled.

The stench was getting overwhelming. Kylo wished he could only think—what trick did Brendol employ to make him bound? A sinking realisation followed: it was his own fear taking him hostage; he was ready to flee, but his limbs wouldn’t obey. He searched for the drawer, teeth gritted, trying to come back to his senses as his fingers curled around a box of matches.

*You won’t perish here. Not to-day, not like this.*

He got a stick out, and lit it with a smooth, confident motion. He stood up tall, shoulders curled, crafting a curse to save himself; his righteous anger flickered like the match’s flame. What he saw made him cry out.

Brendol wasn’t a ghost.

He sat on the ground, a big bulk of a man, ragged red hair falling over his shiny forehead, his beard
knotted; he was chained, iron shackles biting into the meat of his puffy hands. He smiled with rotting, black teeth, the skin hanging off his face; a corpse, animated, with bloody scars where his eyes should have been.

“How are you alive; how could you be?” Kylo sputtered. Brendol laughed again, hollow and crazed.

“I keep alive, boy. I keep alive. First, I had to eat my eyes. They were juicy and slid down my throat like slimy slugs. Then I started on my fingers; I sucked them clean of red-red flesh, and my thighs were next. A bit here, a bit there.”

Kylo stared at the raw bones of Brendol’s gnawed hands; then the match flamed out.

“You’re a ghoul,” he said, voice heavy like a stone thrown into the darkness. Brendol hummed thoughtfully.

“I don’t know about that; I’m me. You smell nice: tasty, feisty. You got to have some fight in you; chew-chew-chew, the stronger the life the more I consume.”

Kylo lit a second match, forcing himself to stare into Brendol’s crumbling face. He had Hux’s brows, his cheekbones, his ears; the resemblance was nauseating. Kylo wanted nothing more than to strike him—bash his skull in, smash it until it was an unrecognisable plump, tear the meat with bare fingers and kick his stomach until his guts gushed out.

“You kept your son chained here,” he said. “Your wife suggested it; you thought it was a bright idea. He was to sit here alone in the dark, for days if you saw it fit. Tell me: are you surprised, even just one bit, that you ended up here?”

The light flickered out again.

“Did Armitage send you? Are you here to murder me?”

Kylo chuckled darkly. “No.”

He ignited another match. He could set Brendol on fire. Watch him burn and intervene in the last minute; give him a taste of hell again and again—but something was amiss. Did Armitage—

“Give me just a drop to drink.” Brendol pleaded. “I’ll drink blood, piss, vinegar; I don’t mind, I don’t mind—I had the finest port-wines, bottles and barrels of the best, best, best spirits, and Armitage—he smashed them, the floor was flooded and it looked like blood. He had an axe.”

“Does he know that you’re here?” Kylo said, the fire biting at his nails until it was dark again. I can’t forgive—

Brendol squealed. “Who do you think put me here? Who put his papa in the attic?”

“Who put Maratelle Hux in the wych elm?” Kylo fired back, voice raised. This was madness; there was no air. He’d have to escape—Forget what he saw entirely. Pretend he couldn’t hear—

“He never told you?”

“He never told me,” Kylo repeated. “Can they hear you? Can they all hear you?”

“They can hear the knocking and the wood creaking,” Brendol said. “They tell themselves it’s the house settling, I believe. Only my daughter can hear me scream from beyond the grave. Just her—so I scream and scream to remind her I’m here. Here to stay. She comes to say hello to papa sometimes.
She’s been neglecting me.” He pulled a face.

Match after match, a heap of them, and the truth had yet to be illuminated.

“The keys had been buried.”

“When did that ever stop a witch?”

Kylo felt his face burning. The world was spinning around him. “This is what I pieced together,” he said. “A gun was fired: Armitage shot you. He ran after Maratelle and Millicent. There was a struggle. And the wych elm—it’s alive, isn’t it? It has its own will—it smells blood and it—”

“Wham!” Brendol shouted. “Wham!”

“And the witnesses—the help from the George Inn fled in panic; but all of your own dependants remained. They knew what happened; your wife was dead, you were wounded; they voted to get rid of you. I assumed Armitage executed you himself—hid the body in the attic. Yet here you are: half-dead, half-alive. What made you like this?”

“Isn’t there something you’re forgetting?” Brendol was grinning wide, his gruesome smile like a skull’s.

Kylo went through the sequence of events in his head—Hux biting into Brendol’s hand, spitting out the blood, growling like a mad dog; Maratelle escaping with Millicent; the wych elm by the Eastern gate—the butler would free the corpse from the branches; she was carried inside, laid out; they all stood around. Watched her die. And meanwhile: the Lady Scyre left alone with a wounded Brendol—she’d come in late, tailed by Armitage—who was missing?

“The butler,” he said, realisation dawning. “Cardinal.”

“The butler, the butler,” Brendol parroted. “Light another match. Come on.”

Kylo complied. He knew what he’d see; just a few steps from Brendol—just outside the circle of light. A heap of bones, and nothing more.

“I loved that boy,” Brendol said. “He was a good butler. Loyal. He saw Armitage shoot me—ran after him. One of the things you’re forgetting is this: my son has a limp. Useless child, had himself injured in India—wouldn’t die—came home hobbling, for shame, for shame. I made sure to kick his bad leg. Again! Again! How long do you think it took a capable fellow like my Cardinal to catch him? Catch him and wham, smack him on the head so he’d collapse. Run after my fleeing family.”

“What did he see?”

“How would I know?” Brendol grunted. “I was on the ground, bleeding out. Saw my son get up. Waddle-waddle after him miserably. Well, eventually he reached him, he tells me. Went into the garden, waddle-waddle. Saw Cardinal with my dying wife. He had his walking stick with him. It has a hidden dagger. He’s a coward. Stab-stab-stab.”

“Why did you attack him?” Kylo asked. He almost sounded desperate. “Why that day? You always hated him—you wanted him dead, your own son; what made that day special?”

Brendol fell silent, eerily and completely. Kylo had to stop himself from grabbing his lapels, screaming his questions into his face, shaking the answers out of him. In his quiet moments, Brendol seemed more human; the terrible smile faltered, the all-consuming hunger seemingly diminished, focused on his memories like this; when he was raging, there was nothing but starvation for life, to
eat the world up and come alive.

“I wanted to give him a beautiful gift,” he said slowly.

“Liar.”

“I did, I did. It was Millicent’s birthday—Phasma was our guest. My ward, my pride.”

“You have a lot of love to waste on people who are not your children,” Kylo noted.

“I loved my ward. I loved my daughter. I still do; that’s the curse of it—that I still, I am still—but Armitage is a changeling. He is different. Millicent is the evidence that I can have good children. Capable. Amiable. Obedient.”

“Have you always known she was a witch?”

“Found out after I died.” Brendol pulled his shoulders up; the chains rattled. “If I knew it wouldn’t have changed the fact that I owed her a decent family—I couldn’t allow Armitage to ruin it. He was three and twenty and unmarried. Some great men happen to be bachelors longer—myself included—for a variety of reasons; but there were rumours—he was pretty like his mother. Like a woman. How I despised to see her laughing eyes on his face, the curve of her pink lips, the fire of her hair—it was as if he stole pieces of her after he killed her; stitched them together; made himself in her image to taunt me, haunt me, deceive me—he has nothing of her spirit! Nothing, nothing, nothing! Weak! Sick! Sick! Sick!”

“You wanted to give him a gift,” Kylo interrupted, seeing that Brendol was working himself into a furious frenzy; tears of blood were running down his mangled face—screaming had tore the wound of his eyes open.

“It was Phasma’s hand,” Brendol said with rattled breath. “It was a perfect match. I sat them down to announce my plan; Phasma was pale—told me she had no intention to marry; but I knew she wouldn’t, couldn’t oppose me; not with what I know of her: the war crimes she had committed, and how she maimed her own brother—told her so; shut her up. But my son. My own son. No, he said. He said I couldn’t make him. That he’d rather take his own life than produce an heir. That it wouldn’t, couldn’t happen. Why not, I asked. Don’t you know how to fuck. Can’t you get it up. Or is it true what they say. Are you a sodomite.”

“Ah,” Kylo mouthed.

“Are you now. Are you now. He denied it. His voice was high and shrill. His clothes clung to him obscenely. He had no dirt under his nails. His hair was carefully combed. Yet he denied it. I broke him. I made him confess. Are you a degenerate. If you are not you’ll kiss Phasma. Kiss her now. Who wouldn’t want to kiss such pretty lips. Not with where this mouth had been, he told me. Made me listen to it. How he sucked Keldo’s cock just an hour before, when we left them alone. When we weren’t paying attention. And then I knew. And I knew that I had to kill him.”

“Keldo, huh.”

“Phasma’s brother.”

“Yes, I know.”

The last match burned down.

“I told you everything you asked me. Will you feed me?”
“I’d feed you glass and ashes,” Kylo said. “If I were Armitage, I’d visit you every day and torment your undead body. I’d put a bar in your mouth so you couldn’t even gnaw on your own flesh. I’d tear your tongue out. I’d cut you open, put nails in your stomach and sew you back together.”

“Well,” Brendol said. “I’m glad you’re not him, then.”

“You’re not in luck. I love your son.”

* * *

Kylo pulled the trapdoor closed behind him; he didn’t bother with the keys. When he turned to descend the stairs, it was no surprise to discover Hux and Millicent waiting for him, holding each other’s hands, a cold rage making them sneer. When they were displeased, they looked like twins.

“I see you met Papa,” Hux said, measured.

“I did,” Kylo confirmed, wiping the blood off his hands on his cobwebbed frock coat. He beamed at Millicent. “A fine work of necromancy. Be assured I didn’t ruin it completely.”

“Could you kindly not talk about necromancy here, where anyone could hear,” Hux hissed. Kylo paid no attention to his fussing, gaze fixated on a very aggravated Millicent. Her hair was frizzy like an ambushing cat’s fur; the light was reflected in her eyes in a peculiar way, flashing like a warning.

“How did you do it?” he asked.

“He was dying; he didn’t deserve to die,” Millicent said. Kylo had reached ground level; he crouched to be in her direct line of sight. Her lips were trembling, the evidence of anger fighting with fear. “You must understand, Mr. Ren,” she pleaded. “His mistreatment of my dear brother was utterly intolerable—”

“Hush,” Hux said.

“He didn’t deserve the rest of death. I wanted him to know pain; learn what it was—”

“Millie, please!” Hux’s warning jolted her—she squeezed his hand, who pulled it back. “Go to your room,” he ordered, eyes blazing. “Mr. Ren and I have something to discuss in private.”

“I’m sorry—” Millicent hiccuped.

“You didn’t do anything wrong.” Hux looked at Kylo, daring him to challenge his words, to yell and be outraged, she’s wicked, ruined; she made her father into a horrid monster.

Kylo had to laugh, warm and bright, bursting with love. He felt like he could see his little family for the first time; see them for what they were: lost and reckless, not nearly as collected as they pretended. The need to protect them seized him so strongly it almost ached. He wiped away Millicent’s welling tears, leaving a stroke of Brendol’s blood on her cheek.

“I understand,” he said softly.

“Go wash your face, I’ll be with you shortly.” With that, Hux turned on his heels and headed for his room, fuming still; he didn’t tell Kylo to follow him—he expected him to. Kylo gave a reassuring pat to Millicent, heart heavy and mind much confused.

“All will be well, I promise,” he said as he got to his feet. Hux wouldn’t tolerate any delay; he rushed after him, leaving Millicent by the stairs, alone and distracted—but safe; safe as long as he was near.
Hux didn’t turn when he heard Kylo’s steps behind him, and headed straight to his liquor cabinet once they were in the room. His fury was almost palpable, thickening the air. He poured out wine—just one glass. Kylo was standing by the door, attempting in vain to rub his hands clean. Hux didn’t offer a handkerchief; he walked to the couch wordlessly, dropping onto it with sullen vehemence. Kylo couldn’t help but chuckle; there was something adorable in Hux’s annoyance.

“Don’t laugh,” Hux said, colourless.

“Why are you treating me so?” Kylo asked, walking up to him with soft steps muffled by the carpet.

“It is quite worrying that you have to ask,” Hux said. Kylo dropped to his knees in front of him, wanting to lay his head over his lap; Hux crossed his legs so he couldn’t. He was dressed for lunch, untouchably elegant. Kylo pressed his forehead to his knees, groaning gently.

“I told your sister the same I can tell you: that I understand; I don’t think any less of you for what you committed. I know of your suffering; how you’ve been tormented since you were but a mere infant. Your father had called you a rabid cur when he had assaulted you; he wasn’t right. The sweetest pup would bite the hand that fed it, were it abused like you were; I understand your sister’s empathy—I understand what she did, even more so since she did it unwittingly; she hadn’t yet known what power her wishes possessed.”

“You may understand us,” Hux snapped, “yet I cannot fathom what gives you the idea that I’d be delighted to hear you bragging about how you have violated my trust!” He pulled away and took a generous gulp of the wine. Kylo remained on his knees, wounded by the cold treatment.

“Your alarm is too much,” he said. “It is quite insulting, to be honest. Am I not to be trusted with your secrets? Wouldn’t you have told me?”

“Look at those flashing eyes,” Hux drawled; yet he was avoiding Kylo’s glance, taking a sip again. “Your righteousness is intolerable, Mr. Ren.”

“Don’t deny me my name. Call me Kylo, call me dearest. What, are all your affections withdrawn for a mere argument?” He rose, and placed a foot upon the couch, towering over Hux. He levelled him with an icy gaze, holding onto the crystal cup Kylo wanted to knock out of his clutching fingers.

“It is no mere argument, and you should realise that. Your tactless offence warrants something greater than a scolding. That door has three locks; the keys to it had been buried; what else should I have done to signal you to keep away from my disturbed past?”

“Don’t raise your voice,” Kylo growled.

“I could scream if I damn pleased!” Hux yelled. Kylo was startled, and pulled back, giving Hux enough room to get up. He put the glass aside and began pacing the room, voice as sharp as his movements. “I could forgive a mere accident; happening on something you shouldn’t have—but it had to be planned. How long have you been nosing around?”

“Since I got here.”

“Since you got here!”

Kylo cleared his throat. “At first, all I wanted to unveil was the ghost’s dismaying mystery—”

“The ghost!” Hux shouted, turning to him. He looked positively murderous, eyes ablaze and hair in disarray as he combed nervous fingers through the locks. “Don’t talk to me about ghosts now!”
“How can you not believe me, with a ghoul in your attic?” Kylo shouted back. His sweet mood was utterly soured; he had left the attic triumphant, only to find his pupil in tears and his lover in a fit of fury. It was undeserved—after all he did to protect them, with all the love he felt; undeserved and unfair.

“Reanimating a corpse can be explained with galvanism—” Hux began.

“Galvanism!” Kylo howled. Something shattered; the glass of wine had hit the wall, spilling its contents. He had no intention of moving it, yet he was glad to see it broken.

“Are you out of your mind?” Hux screamed, pointing at the red spot tainting the wallpaper. “Clean that up right this instant!”

“Galvanism!” Kylo repeated. His ire drove him forward; with a wave of his hand, he pushed the table aside to round Hux. The candelabrum fell to the ground with a hollow clang. “Did Millicent use electricity when she revived the late Lord Arkanis? Is she an avid reader of Dr. Frankenstein’s misadventures? Were there turbines and machineries involved?”

“They weren’t—” Hux gulped, frantic gaze dropped to the candles.

“Then how can you talk to me about galvanism?” Kylo reached him; Hux retreated, but his back hit a glass cabinet; the delicate porcelains rattled inside. “I thought you were just ignorant; but after everything I’ve learnt today I have to believe that you have no respect of witchcraft—because you fear it; and cowardice alone makes you a sceptic—”

“How dare you call me a coward?” Hux spat, looking up at him. As there gazes locked something stirred in Kylo’s chest—gentleness, regret; but Hux put his hands on his shoulders and pushed him away. “What are you, then, meddling with my affairs in stealth!”

“What are you,” Kylo fired back, “keeping such secrets from me! Everybody knows, yet you’d exclude me—”

“They think Papa is buried,” Hux hissed. He rushed past Kylo, bumping into him deliberately. He was headed for the liquor cabinet again; with an impatient gesture, Kylo pulled it away from him, sending it screeching across the floor until it hit the wall. Hux halted, stunned.

“Don’t take me for a fool,” Kylo said. “Not with Unamo guarding the stairs—”

“Please, she just goes there to smoke. As I told you, no-one—”

“Not with all the servants protecting you from the disgrace of patricide!”

“Would you rather they didn’t?”

“I know what I had a right to know; that, and nothing more,” Kylo spat. There was a rattle: the porcelains trembling behind him; the hearth’s fire spat dangerous sparkles, the curtains billowed, and the clock halted. He felt taller, stronger, insurmountable. “Ever since I set foot in your home I’ve been surrounded by secrets; every time I thought I found a way out of their circle, I just found myself deeper in a maze, harrowed, driven near insane. Do you suppose this investigation was entertaining to me? No; it was only necessary—I want to be free of the weight of discovery; I want to be free of this pain. I know what happened to the butler who witnessed what the wych elm did; I suspect the missing governess likewise learnt something she shouldn’t have; I know what you do to the ones who wrong you. Don’t treat me as an enemy; your trust was not betrayed, for you never gave it to me. You should be ashamed: I have revealed everything to you—and my most precious secrets were met with disdain and laughter!”
Hux was silent. Kylo collected his heaving breath, looking around in the upturned room. It looked as if a storm had swept through it. The damage would be easy to fix; the same couldn’t be said about their relationship. Hux stood with his back turned to him, hugging himself.

“What the wych elm did,” he said softly. “Oh, you idiot. What the tree did?”

Kylo didn’t answer. He walked to the window, peering out anxiously. The Eastern gate was too far away, but he was certain that if he could spot it, he’d see the wych elm moving, searching branches trying to grasp his despair.

“What a rotten detective you make,” Hux went on. “Mr. Ren, I’ll let you know that a tree didn’t kill my mother.”

“She wasn’t your mother,” Kylo said. His breath clouded the window. He wiped it off and turned to look at Hux. He was smiling with contempt; something else was in his eyes—fear, pity, or defiance.

“I went after them,” he said. “I suspected our mother would drag Millicent away from me. I chased after Cardinal; found him standing and staring ahead—watching Millicent with her arm extended and mother pierced through by thick branches.”

“Of course,” Kylo muttered, squeezing his eyes shut; in the darkness unfolding, he could see it clearly: Millicent screaming, arm outstretched, fingers extended; Cardinal must’ve thought she was reaching for her mother, but she pushed.

“He got her off the tree; she was still breathing. Not for long.”

“You killed Cardinal,” Kylo said slowly. “Don’t leave out that part.”

Hux chuckled, humourless, arms crossed over his hollow chest. “As far as I’m concerned, I killed all of them. Millicent hardly knew what she was doing. She was six, for goodness’ sake. She let her fear control her. She doesn’t mind what happened to papa; she’s quite upset about mother, from what I gather. We hardly discuss the matter. Secrets are best guarded if no-one ever mentions them. I believe her when she says it was an accident—that she didn’t want to go with her, wanted to stop her; and even if it wasn’t the case, I wouldn’t mind terribly. You must understand that with your meddling you don’t just jeopardise me, but Millicent as well; I will not stand for that.”

“For what it’s worth, her mother has forgiven her,” Kylo said. Hux hummed, going back to the couch. He sat down, half-reclined, taking up all the space.

“She couldn’t forgive me for living, yet she doesn’t mind Milie being a murderer—it figures; she always liked her best. I never blamed Millie for it. With everything she had done, she’s still the nice one out of all the Huxes.”

Kylo saw the chatter as invitation to approach him, walking tentatively through the wreckage. He put his hands over the couch’s back; he had stood here yesterday evening, trembling and overcome. Hux peered up at him; yesterday, his eyes were shining like twin stars; now they just looked distant.

“If I didn’t love you I’d have to slice your throat,” he said.

Kylo’s heart skipped. “Don’t say that. Don’t say that in any version of reality you’d draw your weapon at me.”

“I would; I should,” Hux said. “You’re not to be trusted. In my book, that warrants murder—and murder and murder; one is never enough if you want to keep them silent.” His nails dug into his palms as his lips twisted.
“And if I offer a bargain?” Kylo asked. “A secret for a secret.” He reached into his pocket presently, and produced the letter with a trembling hand.

He imagined different circumstances for the reveal: both of them would occupy the couch, Hux in the embrace of his thighs, back pressed to Kylo’s chest as he read the letter, exclaiming in surprise here and there and apologising for not believing him sooner—he’d be given a thousand appeasing kisses. Now he only hoped for a nod of understanding; a courteous dismissal, you were right and now we’re even.

Hux was hardly finished with the first paragraph when he bolted up, face pale, eyes round; Kylo couldn’t discern his emotions, and when he opened his mouth to enquire his thoughts, Hux said, voice nothing more than a tremble, “Are you General Organa’s lost son?”

“I am,” Kylo admitted; how easy it was—how futile. Hux stood up on the couch, staring him down, letter in hand; he was smiling—Kylo returned it, relieved, but Hux’s smile kept widening, growing into a viscous grin.

“Get out of my sight,” he said, eyes crazed.

Kylo stepped back, a pained grunt escaping him. “You don’t understand—”

“Get out!” Hux screamed.

He jumped over the couch which toppled over; Kylo retreated further, but Hux got a hold of his lapels, shoving at him. There was no force in it, but the conviction behind it hurt more than any push could. Kylo kept withdrawing, crestfallen, sudden tears blinding him. He walked into the table; sharp pain shot through his legs. He didn’t care; he stepped atop it, reaching for Hux, begging not to be driven away.

“Listen; look at me; I’m no different—it has always been me; you know me, and you must know me not to be a spy, a traitor of your trust. The family I come from matters no more; I have you. I never told you about my investigation because I wanted to protect you—and that’s what I will do, defend you and guard your secrets as if they were my own; better than that, for I value you more than my own existence. You can’t expel me; I can’t live when you’re not near; I cannot live without my life. You are my breath, my beating heart; you said you wouldn’t kill me—but that’s what you would do, banishing me: sweet murderer, have mercy—what do you say?”

Hux couldn’t speak.

Kylo stood on the table with his arm outstretched, realising with slow, unutterable horror that Hux was choking. He had willed him to listen; to not be able to interrupt with so much as a cough, since he had thought his own words too important: a confession that could save them. He dropped his hand, and Hux fell to his knees, wheezing and tugging at his ascot’s knot. His lips were nearly purple. He looked like Augustus Burns on his deathbed.

The rest was a blur.

Kylo might have said “forgive me;” he might’ve told Hux “I never meant to wound you thus;” but it was also probable that his lips didn’t open—that he stood atop the table with mouth sealed, watching Hux crawl away and curl up, hiding from him like a child.

He didn’t remember leaving the ruined room. He closed the door behind him and stood there; his head was dizzy, sight dim, limbs feeble; inside him was a terrible emptiness, his thoughts reverberations of hollow echoes. What now, what am I to do now. The answer his mind gave
—‘Leave Stormfield Hall at once’—was so prompt, so dreaded, that he stopped his ears; he couldn’t bear to hear such words now. No; he should get help—a doctor, perhaps, or Millicent—send in someone whose presence wouldn’t disturb Hux while he recovered from the heinous attack. He himself should retreat to his room and wait to be called; a hasty apology wouldn’t be warranted. He should atone in silence, and only offer his remorse, shame and anguish once Hux was ready to hear him; and then?

Then you would be forgiven, he told himself, back pressed to the door, hand still on the knob. He’d hear the true pity in your tone, see the deep sorrow in your eyes, the imploring love in your whole look; he’d forgive you all; maybe not in words, not yet; but at his heart’s core, he would. He couldn’t hate you; so you must go—for you don’t deserve his remission.

An inarticulate shout escaped him; he bent in half, shoulders shaking, the knob rattling; he couldn’t let go of it—releasing it would mean he was determined to leave Hux decidedly, instantly, entirely; it was intolerable—he couldn’t do it. Yet every second wasted on self-pity robbed Hux of help; he’d have to collect himself.

“Millicent,” he mouthed, then repeated the name louder; no steps were heard. He took a shaky breath, grip easing and heart sinking, resolved to crack his heart-strings in rending them from among Hux’s. He could see movement from the corner of his eyes: a little orange tabby stepped to him, making a noise of bewilderment, ears perched.

“Go, he needs you,” Kylo said, pushing the door open. He told himself he wouldn’t turn, he wouldn’t look; but as the cat rushed in, meowing in grievous alarm, he couldn’t help but peer inside: he saw her leaping into Hux’s lap—he was sitting on the ground cross-legged, shoulders slouched, like a broken toy soldier. He gathered Millicent to his heaving chest, and looked up—their gazes met; Hux’s eyes were red-rimmed, swimming with tears; the look in them was so hurt, so dejected, that Kylo had to turn away sharply.

Oh if I could go out of life now with a sharp a pang, it would be well for me; if I could collapse under the weight of my deed!

He began running. He thought he heard Hux shouting “wait,” but he couldn’t be certain—his voice was faint and ragged. He took the steps by two, not knowing where he was headed. He reached the hall; the smell of a delicious luncheon filled the air—his stomach turned to think that Hux and him could be sitting by the table now in the course of different events, toasting their engagement. He touched the watch in his pocket. Determined, he marched to the gate—the only way to protect Hux was tearing himself away from him. He found a black cloak laying on the dresser; he seized it and put it over his shoulders as he grabbed the knob. He could hear voices; Mandetat and Mitaka making their way up the stairs. It’d be best to avoid them.

He rushed to the kitchen; he felt like a fleeing burglar, leaving with pockets bursting with precious memories. He should never have come here; never discovered the treasure of Hux’s company; never looked for the prize of his past. A small door lead to the garden—he raced to it, but a scream halted him before he could yank it open.

He turned and saw Moll MacGowan suspended in the air, face twisted, long hair streaming; she wailed like a banshee, glinting knives hovering around her—they were all pointing at Kylo.

“Come, avenge his despair,” Kylo cried, “but know that I’ll hurt him no more; I’d rather cut my hand off than raise it at him ever again!”

The banshee kept shrieking, clawing at the air; but her knives didn’t fly at him. Kylo tore his gaze away from her and stepped outside, into cruel winter. The blizzard was still raging on; he went, and
got swallowed by the storm.

A mile off, beyond the fields, lay a road which stretched in the contrary direction to Millcote; a road Kylo had never travelled, but often noticed, and wondered where it led: thither he directed his steps. No reflection was to be allowed now: not one glance was to be cast back; not even one forward. Not one thought was to be given either to the past or the future. The first was a page so heavenly sweet—so deadly sad—that he knew to read one line of it would dissolve his courage and break down his energy. The last was an awful blank: something like the world when the deluge was gone by.

He skirted fields, and hedges, and lanes till after sunrise, following the curve of the road, wuthering winds pushing him on, the snow falling on meadow, forest and pasture. He didn’t notice the passing of hours, much less the scenery enfolding. He who is taken out to pass through a fair scene to the scaffold thinks not of the flowers that smile on his road, but of the block and axe-edge; of the dissummer of bone and vein; of the grave gaping at the end.

Kylo thought of drear flight and homeless wandering—and with agony he thought of what he left. He could not help it. He thought of Hux now—in his room—watching the sunset; perhaps hoping to spot a homecoming figure. Kylo pined to return: it was not too late. The desire just pushed him on, famished and fatigued as he was, the soreness of his dry throat reminding him of the injury Hux had suffered. The memory of what he did was a barbed arrow-head in his breast; it tore at him when he tried to extract it; it sickened him when remembrance thrust it farther in. In the midst of his pain of heart and frantic effort of principle, he abhorred himself. He had no solace from self-approbation: none even from self-respect. He had injured—wounded—and left his darling.

Don’t go back to receive his judgement, he told himself. You claim to love him; love is selfless. It’d be easier to leave with a farewell; but when he sent you away—just away from his sight, just for a day—you didn’t accept his goodbye: you gripped his throat while you confessed your affections. You unfortunate hypocrite; there’s no going back from this. The mystery is solved; the whole consciousness of your life is lorn, your love is lost, your hope is death-struck; so congratulations, detective. Was it worth it? Was it worth blaming him for not sharing his pain, and torture him for it?

He was weeping wildly as he continued his solitary way: fast, fast he went like one delirious. A weakness, beginning inwardly, extending to the limbs, seized him, and he fell: he lay on the ground some minutes, pressing his face to the wet turf. He had some fear—or hope—that he should die there, but he was soon up; crawling forwards on his hands and knees, and then again raised to his feet—as eager and as determined as ever to trod on. He was following the path through an abandoned village, then into deep woods; tall, thin poplar trees surrounded him, rustling in the descending darkness. He was frozen to the bone, the thick wool cloak not enough to protect him from the icy gale; the hood couldn’t shield his chafed face, and he could no longer feel his fingers.

He should find shelter soon; maybe go back to those demolished houses, or continue on the unknown road in the hopes of finding proper refuge. He thought of the fires of Stormfield; how distant they were, how dim. He fell down again, and remained on his knees, the snow seeping through his clothes. He looked at his numb hands; Brendol’s blood was dry and blackened. He had tried to extract revenge; if he was there that day, he would’ve helped stopping Maratelle’s escape and binding Brendol’s raging spirit; made sure they had no peace, for they hurt his beloved—what did he deserve, then? What should be fitting punishment for the one who injured their love?

A shadow fell upon him, darker than the nightfall surrounding him. He looked up, following the arch of the trees; there was a figure almost as tall as them, standing on stilts, his ragged cloak flapping in the wind with the sound of a hundred wings’ beat. Kylo didn’t move—he felt like prey caught in the hungry eyes of a predator. The earth beneath him shifted; he was being lifted high up into the
twilight, until he was face to face with the monster.

“Grandfather!” he whispered. Sad eyes were watching him from a deathly-pale, scarred face; laborious breathing filled the air, weak yet louder than the shrieking winds and groaning branches.

“You are a far way from home,” he said. His voice was unbearably gentle. “Nobody walks these roads; the people wandered off long ago, and not even birds fly by in the empty sky. This forest is unaccustomed to humans; no, it doesn’t like them. You would be wise to leave it; the trees are going restless with you here.”

“Where would I go?” Kylo said; he couldn’t move his limbs—a stupor was upon him, yet he no longer felt entrapped. Vader had Luke’s eyes, a serene blue whose calm washed over him, cleansing his mind of fear.

“You could come home with me; my rooms are warm, there’s food abundant and flowing wine. Come, come, grandson; bring your broken heart but leave your despair behind. I can’t leave you here; death walks these woods.”

“I’ll go with you,” he said.

As soon as the words were pronounced, he felt as if he had been tossed into a thrashing whirlwind that tore at his flesh. He tried to cry out; he had no voice. He was being dissolved, unmade, his consciousness slipping away.

There was a flash of brilliant light, and then all was gone.

Chapter End Notes

**Content warnings:** towards the end of the chapter expect new levels of body horror, including self-cannibalisation, detailed descriptions of decomposition and graphic threats of torture / on a lighter note: slightly tipsy but pronouncedly consensual wax play /a jealous Kylo pretends to kidnap Hux who pretends to protest; it’s part of their odd mating ritual / 9-year-old Millicent is shown drinking alcohol; I’m sorry to say it was common (but Millie is okay!) / naturalistic description of an (imagined) twin’s death in the womb / rampant homophobia with period-typical slurs / planned prolicide, successful matricide and patricide / heavily implied non-sexual child abuse in connection to Hux’s past continues / a fight escalates between Kylo and Hux (spoiler:  suəddæŋ  Ȗmpɔtɔ)  Ȗmpɔtɔ

A million thanks to my beta, @bioticnerfherder

Are you ready for some art?
* check out this gorgeous illustration by elvisicl for the lab handjob scene (NSFW, may wonders never cease)
* curlygingerbird’s beautiful drawing of the boys waltzing leaves no survivors
* Jeusus gave us Kylo in full witch mode and wow is it a sight to behold!!
* CrimsonBullet illustrated the abduction scene; it's bloody brilliant

there’s a moodboard for the chapter // and a spooky playlist for the fic // find me on tumblr @longstoryshortkilledhim
Nine's for Hell

Chapter Notes

Recap: Remember that part where Kylo met Vader in a forest at the end of the last chapter after he had ran away from Stormfield and he pretty much blacked out? Yeah, we pick up from there.

Please refer to the end notes for content warnings

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was nothing but crystalline light, bleakly bright like the midnight sun. Within it all: the fall of snow, and in the middle, so little that he was almost invisible, Kylo Ren. He felt as if he was trapped in a snow globe; he was falling through the aether without a semblance of direction, falling up, down, through, as the world around him shook and tumbled, blurring into a flurry of eternal winter.

Scattered in the wind, motionless and empty, he dropped down as gently as a tear; he found himself sprawled on a marble floor. Gone was the murky forest with the threatening trees, his grandfather was nowhere to be seen. He was inside a building, a hall so vast he could hardly comprehend it as he staggered to his feet. Dusk filled it, coldness, soft silence. The gilded columns and the golden embellishments radiated an unimaginable elegance; surely, angels dwelled here. He peered up at a faded fresco on the high ceiling depicting judgement day.

“Hello?” he called out. His voice found an echo, but no answer. A draft carried fallen leaves towards him as a chill raced through his body.

“Am I dead?” he tried again. Dead, the echo whispered. “Is this heaven’s entryway? How am I not in hell?”

His throat hurt terribly; his eyes were burning. Bodily pain should contradict his suspicion of being dead; unless it was part of his punishment. He scrunched up his nose; there was a sweet reek of decay, like dust and withering lilies. As radiant as the hall was, it was in a state of neglect; the leaves on the ground moved again, responding to the pull of wind. There were arched windows around; one of them was shattered.

“Curious,” he muttered. He turned around, attempting to re-establish his situation. This hall might have been cheery and welcoming back in the day, but now all the furniture was covered with greying sheets, and the hallways yawned empty. “Curious and curiousest.”

He stood there a moment. What now? How to proceed?

“Do not be afraid,” a voice said, startling him. He spun on his heels, peering into the thick twilight. Anakin Skywalker descended the wide stairs, the damaged chandeliers lighting up as he passed them, casting a brilliant sparkle through the gloom. He was as Kylo had seen him in Padmé’s memories: young and dashing, better dressed than ever in a double-breasted tailcoat over a velvet waistcoat; but the collar of his shirt was too high and too stiff, and the cut of his breeches betrayed their age; he was a ghost from the past, walking down the stairs without his feet ever touching the steps. “I’m so sorry for the unpleasant travel,” Anakin said. “I’m afraid I never quite grasped the technicalities of magical transportation. I hope you are still in one piece? Head, hands, legs; there you
are. Welcome!

He walked to Kylo through the marble floor, beaming like any proud host would; but his ghostly aura brought a chill, and Kylo shivered, taking a step back.

“You’re much altered,” he noted, voice hoarse. It hurt to speak; his head was swimming, his heart pounding; he felt as if he was still in the whirlwind, and he was yet to be convinced that he was indeed alive.

“I have many forms,” Anakin said. He was standing so close Kylo could reach out to touch him, but he didn’t know how it would affect him. Looking at Anakin was like staring into an enchanted mirror connecting past and present. They were of the same height; their physiognomy was likewise similar; yet Kylo couldn’t quite place where the resemblance began. “My spirit wanders the forests,” Anakin explained. “My memory is bound here. I could turn into a murder of crows; I could be smoke, or desert-dust, I could turn into a second sun.”

“Yet here you are,” Kylo said.

“Yet here I am: dead.” Anakin shrugged, pulling a face.

“You found me.”

“It was the other way around.”

“You should’ve left me to die.” Kylo’s voice broke; he turned away, not wanting Anakin to see his welling tears. He took a shaky breath and pulled the thin cloak closer around his shivering figure.

“How could I have?” Anakin said softly. “Flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood, how could I have?”

“I deserved to die.” He wiped at his face impatiently, irritated by his own weakness. At the same time, it was tempting to give into it; to fall to his knees, crumble and scream, tear at his hair and tap his heart three times, mea culpa, my wounded love. He was startled to feel a hand on his shoulder—it had no weight, but coldness crept into his veins; yet the touch was comforting still. There was solace in sharing the company of family—of his grandfather, nonetheless—but he felt wicked for accepting the sympathy, and attempted to shrug off the hand. Anakin held on tighter.

“I promised you fire, didn’t I?” he asked jovially. “If we don’t kindle some flames, your deathwish may very well be met; I can see your breath and how your teeth chatter. I wouldn’t be surprised if you came down with a cold, braving the weather like this—you have a body still and it has a tendency to malfunction, if you don’t take proper care of it.”

“Where am I?” Kylo demanded as he was nudged toward the staircase. It was made of the same marble as the floor, and the railings were cast iron; it would’ve looked wondrous if it weren’t for the faded, raggedy carpet covering it.

“Theed Palace, in Naboo. This is your heritage, I’m afraid. Come, this way—the furniture is not in the best state, but we can certainly find you a place to sit, even if it is on a pile of rubbish.”

Kylo looked down at the hall, the tall columns and the glimmering floor, and pronounced, “This is entirely too big for just one person.”

Anakin’s whole aspect changed at that; his figure became uncertain, only to regain his human shape a moment later. “Believe me, I’ve noticed,” he said with such a doleful sigh that Kylo regretted making the haste remark. He had to reconcile with his dismal state; no matter his torment and sorrow, it was unbecoming to appear so thankless. Under any other circumstances, he would have been
thrilled to make Anakin’s acquaintance—even if it promised danger.

They went through the lavish gallery, and Anakin opened the double doors to a room with cream white walls accented with gold. Kylo did his best to appear impressed; it seemed to be a drawing room of sorts, but was as big as four quarters together in Stormfield Hall. He was still of the opinion that all this space was quite unnecessary, but concealed his opinion with a polite comment.

“I see you favour the classical style, grandfather.”

“There weren’t many options in my day,” Anakin said, eyeing the delicate décor and subdued colours with a certain amount of mistrust. “Either you admired the Greek, or you were seen as a dilettante; I must confess I had no taste whatsoever and would have welcomed colour and comfort like an idiot, but Padmé—your grandmother—had a refined eye. It’s a pity about the dust sheets; there are some remarkable statues and vases hiding there. I suppose I could show you, but you must be starving and weary.”

Anakin lit the fire in the hearth with an easy wave of his hand; there was no wood in it, yet it burned. He pulled a tufted settee close to it with another flick of quick fingers. “Be seated, please. There you are; isn’t it nice?”

Kylo got so accustomed to the cold that sinking into velvet cushions and absorbing the fire’s homely heat seemed rather foreign; a half-day’s worth of journey made his limbs benumbed and heavy. It felt like ice was melting off his flayed flesh—it hurt, but there was relief in the pain. Anakin offered him refreshments, which he refused with a shake of his head. He haven’t eaten since his escape, but was too upset to feel famished. The simple breakfast he had shared with Hux and Millicent seemed a dream; thinking of Hux pained him, yet his mind kept returning to him, like a kicked dog trying to whine back its owner’s favour, howling by closed doors.

“I’m afraid I’ve lost the finesse of a good host,” Anakin pondered, taking his place over the armrest and looking at Kylo with friendly worry. “It’s been a while I had a guest over. You were still an infant when Luke came to visit.” He raised his hands to show how small Kylo must had been; Kylo couldn’t help but laugh at that, a weak, teary chuckle. “He told me the tidings of your birth. I can’t express how charmed I am to finally make your acquaintance; I’m sorry I couldn’t come to help you sooner.”

“Did Luke tell you about the magpie—Snoke’s bargain?” Kylo asked carefully.

Anakin nodded, making a chill race through him. “Dreadful business. I should hope he’s been dealt with?”

“I saw him last in a vision; he told me he’d take my eyes unless I became his apprentice.”

There was a pause heavy with significance.

“Will you be prepared when he makes good on that promise?”

Kylo peeked at Anakin; it was hard to meet his eyes—he was never quite looking at anything, just skimming his surroundings as if everything was in motion and he himself was the only stable point of the universe. “Will you help me prepare?”

A beat again.

“If that is your wish,” Anakin said slowly, nervous fingers drumming on a knee. “Luke had refused my teachings—for you shall be warned: the dark arts have dire demands.”

“Power for power; and blood will have blood.”

Kylo’s gaze dropped to the floor; he couldn’t be certain they were currently above the basement where Padmé had discovered her husband’s bloody secret, but something told him they were. He supposed that the realisation should make his stomach drop, or his hair to stand on end; but he found himself rather unaffected. He tapped on the floor with his boots, as if he expected it to open up and swallow him whole.

“Why would Luke even listen to you, if he was so disturbed by your past?”

“Because my past is who I was, not who I am. Regret goes a long way to change one’s perspective; even if he’s a witchmaster; even if his sins are innumerable. Remember that; you’ll need to remember that, even if you’re determined to damn yourself for a momentary slip.”

Kylo tried to catch his wandering gaze again, tilting his head. “Can you see into me?,“ he asked, squinting. “Do you know the weight I carry: what I did?”

A smile crept onto Anakin’s lips as he folded his arms. “I do: and despite how you blame yourself, I found you worthy of saving. Don’t think of dying, silly child; learn to outgrow your errors.”

“Teach me,” Kylo said, getting to his feet. He was dazed for a moment, but too eager to worry about the possibility of fainting. “Show me the way, show me how to repent, how to make amends; I shall defeat my shadow, then the magpie—return home victorious; I shall—”

“You shall sleep,” Anakin interrupted, getting up as well. “Regain your strength; it’s night-time, and you just had your heart broken—rest is advised. Tomorrow I’ll give you what you asked.”

Kylo dropped back to the settee like a reprimanded child, making Anakin laugh; it sounded far away, from beyond a distant grave, but it was still merry and light. “Oh, beware the dejected look of a Skywalker! I’ve seen that pout many a time—in the mirror! Come now; we have five principal bedrooms—I can assure you they’re all quite luxurious; you could take your pick.”

“No, thank you,” Kylo said, determined to be a burden; the comment on his sullen mood was uncalled for, and the rejection hurt, no matter that it had been sweetened with a promise. “I’m perfectly comfortable here.”

“Will I see you in the morning?” There was some worry in Anakin’s jesting tone; Kylo gave him a tired nod.

“I won’t run away, I promise.”

“Sleep then; it’s the best medicine for the soul’s anguish.”

When he left, Kylo was certain he wouldn’t find rest. The night was still young, and a thousand thoughts were whirring about in his distraught mind as he stared into the fire—but exhaustion won, and within a few blinks, he was asleep, sitting up but head dropped. He could see himself: his dirty clothes, his uncombed hair, Brendol’s blood black on his hands. He looked like a vagrant. His soul set out to wander, leaving the burden of a mortal body behind, and emerging in its ethereal form, crowned with twigs and thorns. He had a destination, and it was Stormfield Hall.

He wouldn’t return—he couldn’t, but he needed a peek, a passing visit just to know how Hux was faring, and what had become of Millicent—had she transformed back to her human form yet? Was she in need of help? Had Hux’s injuries been treated? It pained him to think of Hux in his ruined
room, finishing a bottle of wine all alone; or maybe he distracted himself with experiments in his laboratory, sublimating his pain. Every time he swallowed, he’d be reminded of the grip around his throat—would he curse Kylo? He should, and if he sensed his presence, he should scream at him to go away—he had shouted “wait,” which was the wrong thing to say; it gave Kylo reason for a treacherous yearning to be reunited with him.

He found his way back to Theed’s hall easily; he slipped through the gate, passing through the sturdy wood like dispersing mist. He found himself in the garden—it was so different from Stormfield’s picturesque wilderness: a pleasant park, overgrown shrubbery forming symmetrical patterns and encircling a mighty fountain. All was covered with snow; Kylo loitered, searching for direction. Naboo was in Kent, near Dover; Stormfield in ——shire; that was but two-hundred and eighty miles—it’d take him about five days on foot, for he head no money for a carriage, and no horse. But his spirit was boundless; he could walk into somebody’s dream, or possess a vessel—so up, up! When he last sent his consciousness to roam, it had taken but mere minutes; he had ridden from Millcote to Stormfield, so why couldn’t he set out now?

Why, oh why? His heart was calling, urging him on—but his mind knew better. Logic and loyalty made him stay, hovering by the gate. He had no right to spy on Hux—he forbade it explicitly. The more he ached to be assured that Hux was well, the more he was reminded that he was unworthy of the intelligence. He looked on his cherished wishes, just that morning so blooming and glowing; they lay stark, chill, livid corpses that would never revive. He looked at his love: that feeling which was his master’s—which he had created; it shivered in his heart, like a suffering child in a cold cradle. Sickness and anguish had seized it, it could not seek comfort in Hux’s arms—it could not derive warmth from his breast. Never more could it turn to him; for faith was blighted—confidence destroyed.

I told three lies, he thought. I said I would never hurt you—I was wrong. I said I had nothing to do with my family—and here I am, in the garden of my ancestors. I told you I would protect you—but I know that your pain is greater than mine, yet I cannot shelter you from it in my embrace. My anguish is nothing compared to yours; hatred would be our only absolution. Please, learn to despise me. If you’re right, and you will love me until the end of time—then let all the clocks halt.

Time must stop.

Tick-tock.

On the count of three, you shall be free of me.

He woke with a cry, hot tears streaming down his cheeks; he was afloat, bent in the air above the settee. Anakin appeared, like morsels of dust uniting in the light to form a shadowy figure. He extended his hands, getting hold of Kylo’s shoulders.

“I got you,” he said. “Bad dreams?”

Thus seized, Kylo could gain control back over his limbs; he fell into his grandfather’s arms. Anakin lowered them back to the ground until they were standing upright, with Kylo slumped against him, his head pressed to his chest. It wasn’t solid; Anakin’s figure was luminous, evanescent.

“I miss him,” Kylo sobbed, and kept repeating, “I miss him, I miss him; I miss him so much it’s bound to kill me—my heart is bleeding, injured; with every beat, the wound is reopened. Oh, how I wish it’d stop beating altogether!” A fit of crying overcame him, and he couldn’t go on; his whole body was quivering, and his breathing was laboured; it felt right to be choking on tears.

“I’m afraid I can’t offer you a remedy,” Anakin said, “but there might be some tea to have, and I
could always summon you a feast.”

“I cannot...eat, or drink, I—I think I’m falling ill.”

“Cold or fever? I can’t feel your temperature.”

“Both; we need ah, my god, my god, thyme and sage, elderberry and chamomile; and for the fever, uh, meadowsweet and black haw; but nothing grows in the winter—maybe you have them dried and pressed?”

Anakin shook his head, and helped Kylo to sit, who was wheezing, his voice faint. He welcomed the vulnerability; he’d seen cold and fever try to claim many of his former classmates until Luke intervened; but wasn’t this deathwish selfish? What if Hux somehow received the news of his demise? He’d never recover—they were forever connected.

“I cannot heal you,” Anakin said with regret. “I don’t possess the ability.”

“How could that be? You’re the most capable witch I know,” Kylo argued, making him chuckle.

“The most capable witch you know is my son.”

“Yet he had allowed Hux to succumb to consumption.” He dabbed at his eyes in vain, incapable of drying his tears. Anakin smirked at him, his teasing smile burdened with that sad sort of kindness that defined his whole being.

“What is common cold to consumption?” He bumped his shoulder. “Let it be your first lesson: everything has a magnitude—and in witchcraft, you compensate for what you take to maintain the balance; sometimes the power of your imagination is suffice: the force of it is insurmountable; but when your magic is concerning others, an aid is generally advised—herbs can be of help; touching hands and thus sharing the energy; or calling upon the dark; a sacrifice.”

“You haven’t mastered the usage of healing herbs,” Kylo concluded.

“We each have different gifts; some can be learned; some powers are never to be had by a certain individual.”

“I used to be able to read minds; the magpie took that from me.” Kylo closed his eyes with a heavy sigh; the discussion was exhausting, but a fine distraction, even with his curiosity overshadowed by lovesickness and guilt. “Evidently, I still have something he craves. I wonder why he won’t pester the girl, or Millicent? Why is it that Maratelle never met him?”

“Neither of them are Skywalkers,” Anakin said with a mournful pang. Kylo rubbed his temples, trying to chase away the headache that followed his tears.

“What is so special about us, pray tell?”

“My mother made me of clay.”

Kylo’s fingers stilled. He blinked slowly, heart rattling. “Excuse me?”

“She wanted a child, but she wanted no man involved,” Anakin explained readily, as if there was nothing extraordinary about it. “She called upon the powers governing the universe—”

“Are you some kind of golem?”

“No, bless you, I’m human; she wanted me to be human. She mixed her blood with the clay and
Kylo let his head fall back, hitting the backrest. “Why is it that the more I learn about my family, the more absurd my mere existence seems to be?” he said, addressing the painted ceiling. “Please, spare me more details—it sounds like you’re talking in a fever dream. I need garlic and honey, and a wet towel for my forehead, they should be available despite the season—and a more comfortable place to rest, lest us forget that. Maybe it is for the best that I am separated from darling Hux; my destiny is etched in the book of misfortune, it seems. Just one more thing—and not a word more, not this early—if your creation was so...unique, why is it that the magpie wants not you, but me?”

Anakin allowed for a moment of silence, putting his hand on Kylo’s forehead, soothing and apologetic. Kylo appreciated the sympathy. “It was somebody else, for me. He was called Palpatine. Snoke only came in his wake. My children weren’t concerned about him. They made a mistake.”

Illness soon claimed the entirety of Kylo’s consciousness; as the day progressed, his condition gradually worsened, until he was coughing and sneezing every two minutes, and his head felt too heavy for his neck. Anakin brought him to the biggest bedroom, where the yellow wallpaper was decorated with birds sitting on branches; his frenzied imagination made him believe that they were magpies, a flock of them, watching him from the wych elm’s crown. Their eyes followed him as he was tossing and turning, writhing within the saffron blankets; but in the rare moments of clarity, he could see that they were just blue tits and nightingales.

Anakin was with him, making him drink, smoothing his hair from his glistening temples, offering words of comfort. Nothing seemed to be of use; each day spent in the sickbed made his decision to leave Hux for good more and more irreversible—time was of the essence, and it made an allegiance with Kylo’s conscience. If his resolve had broken and he crawled back the day after he fled, he would have been welcomed; two days or three would likewise be allotted; but as he fought with fever, a whole week passed—and New Year’s Eve with it.

Midnight found him clear-headed, sitting on the edge of the bed, pocket watch in hand; he counted back the minutes, out loud, his throat no longer hurting—it was as if illness had only overcome him to protect him from a selfish reunion.

“Should auld acquaintances be forgot, and never brought to mind?” he hummed. “Should auld acquaintances be forgot, and auld lang syne? Yes they should be; oh yes, they should be.” He watched the delicate hand pass twelve, and trembled. He closed his fist around Hux’s gift, and slept with it pressed to his chest.

Sleep brought no ease; for he found himself back in Stormfield Hall, standing in the second storey corridor. All seemed so real: the familiar scent of wood and stone and burning oil; the warm air, after Theed Palace’s cool vastness; how easily he found his way, how the knob of his door fit into his hand. A twist and a gentle push, forms revealed: his luggages waiting to be taken upstairs to Hux’s quarters, waiting forever; his gifts—the splendid clothes—abandoned; his books, his drawings, his life’s sum, already collecting dust. The floor didn’t creak as he moved; he wasn’t there. The ghost of Maratelle was watching him without interest, sitting on the floor, back pressed to the bed’s end; and on the bed, there was Hux himself.

Kylo turned, tore his gaze away; but he had seen him, bathing in moonlight, curled up over the blankets, Kylo’s old, ragged coat hugged to his chest. Kylo covered his mouth, yet he couldn’t stop the wretched sob that escaped him—so away, away, lest he wake him by any means; but leaving him once had already taken all his strength. He couldn’t do it again, not even in a dream. He stood there shaking, tears falling, raging against this test he was undergoing.

“Mr. Ren?” a sleepy voice called; it was Millicent, rubbing at her eyes as she was standing by the
door in her nightgown, hair wild and uncombed.

“No,” Kylo said, as softly as he could muster, “you’re just dreaming.”

“But you came to us in a dream—you’re here.”

“I shouldn’t be; this visit is a regrettable accident.”

“You musn’t say that.” Millicent took a step forward, determined, but stopping short in her tread. She had to crane her neck to meet Kylo’s teary gaze. “Will you come back, please? Will you kindly return? Please, please, I don’t want a new teacher—”

“I’m certain Armitage will find you someone better suited—”

“I want you, and no-one else; we’re family, we’re friends!” Millicent’s voice was getting a hysterical edge; she ventured ever closer—how Kylo wanted to drop to his knees, enclose her in his embrace! He couldn’t; it was impossible.

“I must be away.”

“Don’t you see what you have made of him?” Millicent pointed at Hux; he stirred. “How can you punish him for your own bad deed? You must come back and apologise; you must, you must, you must!”

Hux stirred again, his golden eyelashes lifted; and before he could open his eyes, Kylo was back in his own bed.

“No!” he screamed; and he yelled and raged, his fury tearing at the canopy, ripping the drapes, smashing the basin and upturning armchairs. Anakin appeared, as if summoned by his wrath.

“What—” he breathed; he couldn’t finish the sentence: Kylo jumped to his feet and pushed past him. “I’m going back!” he announced. “I belong there; they want me, I’m needed. I promised to guard Millicent, I swore my love to Armitage. Leaving them was wrong and cruel!”

“You’re not going anywhere; you’re in your shirt and linens.”

Kylo would listen to no reason; he bared his teeth like some frenzied beast; he felt quite animalistic—he caught scent of Hux, and he knew that just like a bloodhound, he wouldn’t rest until he tracked him down. He got to the door, but found it locked; it wouldn’t give, no matter how he rattled it. With a growl, he turned to Anakin.

“Open it,” he gritted.

Anakin stood calm like a saint’s battered statue, arms crossed over his chest. “You may be an adult, but you are still my grandson; therefore, you’ll do as I say until you’re under my roof. Yes, you are free to leave; but I must be certain that you made that decision in your right mind, not half-asleep, roused from a tempting dream. Dress and wash yourself; when you’re ready, meet me in the basement. We shall discuss your plans. If you’re serious about travel, an hour or so shouldn’t matter; unless you’re just trying to out-run your better judgement.” With that, he dispersed.

Kylo refused to dwell on the advice. He rushed to the wardrobe, and searched it for clean clothes; Anakin and him had a similar build, even though Kylo’s shoulders were much wider—but the loose shirts Anakin favoured fit him, and so did the waistcoat and breeches. The tailcoat gave him a bit of a trouble, but he eventually managed, losing only one brass button in the battle. He told himself he’d
have to look his best for Hux; but his mind said, you’ll never see him again.

“Silence,” he muttered, picking an ascot of the finest silk; he just hung it around his neck untied, and stepped to the basin—only to find it broken to shreds, destroyed by his fit earlier. This is what happens when emotion rules you, he thought. And it is still nowhere near the waste you laid to Hux’s room; do you truly believe a week was enough to forget it?

“It’s a new year,” he argued. “A new beginning.” But his resolve was dimming; it dulled entirely by the time he got to the basement. He descended the winding stairs, steps uncertain, mood sullen, and found himself in a scullery with glinting glassware and polished plates—not exactly the place of nightmares. He passed the servant’s empty entrance hall, made his way through the kitchen with its smoke-stained walls, and started to think he had the wrong direction when he finally wound up in the pantry. It took up a whole room; the shelves around seemed innocuous enough with their labelled jars and storing boxes; but there were hooks hanging from the low ceiling for the meat—Kylo remembered all too well what Padmé had seen hanging from there, women and children and the blood dripping.

“I brought them here,” Anakin said from behind his back, cloaked in darkness. “Palpatine told me the only way to save my wife was human sacrifice. I saw Padmé die in a vision—her, and our two children; I thought I didn’t have a choice, that I’d be a murderer in any case, but I could choose between strangers or my own family.”

Kylo touched a hook’s point; it was still sharp, and the cold air reeked of death. “You wanted me to see this,” he said. He pushed at the hook; it started swinging, the old chain creaking.

“I wanted you to understand,” Anakin said, drawing closer. “This is the scene of my failure. When Padmé stepped in here, she didn’t see my good intentions—and who would blame her? It was just the aftermath of a massacre; in my mind, it had already transformed into the boon of life, a rightful offering. I had to see the horror in her eyes to realise what I had done; it was unbearable. I didn’t beg for her forgiveness—it was too late for that. I reached out with my hand.” His voice failed as his fingers curled around nothing, repeating the gesture.

“I know what you did,” Kylo said softly. “I know that I repeated your mistake. I’m sorry.”

Anakin sobered at his words, and dropped his trembling hand. “When you look at the riches of Theed Palace, don’t forget the basement. This is your true inheritance.”

“I know,” Kylo repeated. How he wished he could deny it; but the fight was gone from him. The walls of the pantry seemed to close around them; suggesting to leave would be cowardice, so he remained by Anakin’s side, surrendering to the ravenous darkness. “Did you ever overcome your guilt?”

Anakin scoffed. “Never; but for years, it was easier to pretend that I was never in the wrong. There’s one thing that allowed me to live with myself.” He tilted his head and measured Kylo with an even gaze. “I never went after her.”

Kylo swallowed his objections: you nearly murdered her; I never wanted to hurt Hux; he settled on, “Our circumstances are different.”

“But our motives are the same: I never followed her to the States, because I knew that a few words of apology would make her return to me. She loved me—she never stopped loving me—nor I her, and for this reason, I let her go. I’m sorry, Kylo: leaving Mr. Hux was the noble thing to do; you set him free. Returning, you’d ensnare him—do you think he’d be able to resist the promise of your company?”
Kylo didn’t say anything; he could only admit defeat. He forced himself to swallow gulps of the filthy air; his past stunk just like this—there was no denying it. He closed his burning eyes and asked faintly, “Is there an afterlife? Is there a possibility that we might reunite with the ones we love, after there is no more sorrow, and no mortal judgement?”

“I do wonder,” Anakin said with yearning.

From that day on, Kylo knew hope to be a delusion.

He had to abandon all thought of Stormfield Hall and its inhabitants; for that, he had to occupy his mind. Withdrawing to the library proved fruitless: when he read about love, friendship, sorrow or remorse, he only thought of Hux; not even the detached words of science could comfort him, for he found himself planning how he’d teach a lesson on the subject to little Millicent.

Thankfully, there were practical matters to consider. It took him over a fortnight to clean the principal rooms proper, and food had to be arranged—first he set out to the local pub for lunch, but soon enough he began to frequent the marketplace instead, recalling the recipes Mrs. Mitaka taught him. The people of Naboo were kind, if a tad proud, and they were too clever for their own good—Kylo knew he wouldn’t be able to keep his identity a secret too long, which meant that servants would have to be employed: a lord fending for himself would be the talk of every town and village. Running a household would be costly: he could no longer rely on mind-tricks, and had to contact Anakin’s bank to claim his inheritance.

By the end of January, he had a staff of five people, who were not to live on the premises; but then February followed, and March. It became evident that living without running water in the upper storeys was a dire peril, so Kylo had to think about installing water-conduits, which required major renovation. The privy chamber and the cupola room were damp and damaged, therefore refurbishments were needed, and as spring arrived, he’d have to find gardeners.

Tending to Theed Palace was the least of his problems: he was lord of the land—tenants came calling, in need of his advice, support, and a thousand permissions. Demands on his time, appearance, and favour became overwhelming; invitations to balls, dinner parties, charity events and visits started pouring in. He hid from them by faking an illness, and telling his dependants he was not to be disturbed. He took cover in the study where Anakin had started residing to converse with him and master his practice in peace.

Anakin was proud of him, he delighted seeing him learn the duties of a duke and the art of a witch; but his praise felt hollow, for there was something Anakin didn’t know: that the dreams never stopped.

It didn’t matter how many practicalities he fixated on, how many visitors he begrudgingly allowed into his new home, how he stayed up practicing spells, how he made calls and chatted with fine ladies—the moment his head hit the pillow, he was back in Stormfield Hall, and back being a poor tutor.

Sometimes, he found he inadvertently projected his consciousness to wander the corridors, which meant he had to hide from Millicent, who sensed his presence and called upon him; he knew his heart would break if he had to speak with her, so he kept hidden. More often, his dreams were just mere dreams: colourful fancies with their own absurd reality, where he was ignorant of past events, and lived as if he had never left. He dreamt about preparing for a lesson, or sneaking up the stairs to visit Hux; he investigated the mystery of Maratelle in the wych elm and wondered about the attic’s noises, as if he didn’t already know the answers; he played with Millicent, shared a pipe with Unamo, cooked with Mrs. Mitaka, pestered Thanisson, but most frequently, he dreamt about being in carnal embrace with Hux.
Waking from those dreams was insufferable. His body had learnt the language of desire; he could never return to cherished ignorance—by now, he was on the level of a native speaker. Sometimes, his control slipped: he refused to touch himself, but awakening, he found himself caressing his cock, humping the mattress or moaning Hux’s forbidden name.

The worst dream was this: it started with dreamwalking—he knew he came to Stormfield Hall by connecting to someone’s dreams—he thought it was Millicent’s mind he entered, so he prepared for the painful routine of hide and seek and having to listen to a child cry for him. It was torment; he loved her like a daughter; denying his affections felt like tearing out his own heart to replace it with a heavy stone. The echo of her calls haunted him even in his waking hours; the knowledge that they’d stop one day was even more daunting. Sooner or later, Millicent would give up on him, forget her friend, outgrow her fondness; his presence in her life would be but a hazy memory.

He thought that maybe one day, years from now, he’d seek her out—when it was safe; when no harm would come of it; when she was an adult, and would look at him with disinterest. He’d embrace her one last time; give her a book of spells, one he would write with his own hands; explain why he had to leave—she’d be old enough to understand and old enough not to care. She’d smile at him politely, ask for his name, and repeat it as if it was something foreign, with affected kindness, pretending to remember.

In the dream, he was running upstairs, steps too loud in the night’s stillness; he was conscious of his own breath and heartbeat, how his stomach dropped when the wood creaked, betraying his presence. Quick, quick—to the attic; he’d lie low there, be just another failed father-figure stowed away, a disturbed part of her past under locks. Her mind wouldn’t go there; she wouldn’t find him.

He reached the third storey—made for the attic’s stairs, but halted as he heard a peculiar noise. It was a moan; a sweet sound too familiar—and then there was laughter and a gasp, and he realised with a heavy feeling that he slipped into Hux’s dreams. He looked at his door, found it slightly ajar, beckoning him with the billowing light of candles. He curled his hands into fists; he should be strong enough to resist, or his penance was for nothing, his months of exile wasted: Hux could see him and remember the visit once awake—there was a possibility still he’d think it was just a dream, but that chance was too slim.

Kylo was resolved to change plans and go to his own room, hush up and wait until sunrise spirited him away; but there was another moan, and he heard himself.

“Is this to your liking?”

It was his voice, no doubt: he spoke deep and slow, accented, with too-long pauses between syllables. He was affronted, perturbed: what was he doing there? How was this possible? He had to see; he marched to the room with righteous vexation and pushed the door open. The interior had the strange dimensions of dreams, the walls leaning in unusual angles, and the bed was in the middle of the sitting room as if it always belonged there; the canopy’s curtain was open to reveal two figures: Hux in his general’s uniform and himself, naked save forrom a bird-mask he was wearing. The hips of his dream-self were twitching into Hux’s heat, who was gasping again, head lolling back and fingers clawing at the dream-self’s broad back.

Kylo remained by the door, holding onto the handle lest he collapse. It was wrong to witness this; it was shameful to the highest degree—he should leave, or at least turn away, but he couldn’t even avert his gaze. Hux was dreaming of him; here: the evidence he wasn’t forgotten, not yet—what a glorious revelation; and how terrible: for it didn’t change anything.

“More,” Hux purred, guiding the dream-self closer and deeper with his knees around his snapping waist. His eyes were squeezed shut, his toes were curled—they always were, when he was enjoying
himself. His gold-red uniform was unbuttoned, revealing his pale chest and the delicate rose-buds of his nipples; Kylo wanted to hiss at his dream self, touch them, he wants you to touch them; can’t you see how he arches his back?

Hux’s head slumped to the side, and he opened his eyes. His hazy gaze found Kylo standing by the door, no doubt with a miserable expression, and Hux must’ve perceived how his aching cock was pressing helplessly at the front of his trousers; he looked at Kylo, mouth agape, and started laughing.

Kylo wanted to run to him and gather him up in his arms; kiss the corner of his lips, the cheery lines under his eyes, swallow the sound of his joy, bless him for being happy, even at his expanse; he was perfect like this—he should always be like this. Now was the time to explain himself; Kylo opened his mouth.

“Will you look at that,” Hux said before he could speak, addressing the dream-self. “There’s two of you; and how forlorn the other you looks—what happened, my gentle giant? Your lips tremble, and the strange passion in your eyes scares me—what is it? Guilt? You look like an unruly puppy caught in his misconduct—come, come, tell me what you’ve done; it’s all right.”

Kylo’s dream-self pulled out with a grunt, his wet cock heavy between his legs; he bracketed Hux’s hips, and lowered himself onto his erection, back taut, blocking his view of Kylo. The message he was conveying was all to clear.

“You belong to him,” Kylo said. “Your dependant teacher, your pet, your friend, your lover; I am someone different—I’m the one who left.”

Hux sat up, preparing to say something; as he grabbed the dream-self’s shoulders, Kylo noticed he was wearing a wedding ring.

Hux wasn’t dreaming about the past.

He was dreaming of a future together.

Kylo opened his eyes, staring at the yellow canopy of his own empty bed, heart hammering in his chest and his erection all too insistent. The dream had already begun to fade in his memory, and he kept grasping for details: the tenderness of Hux’s voice, the smile in his cloudy eyes, the way his long fingers dug into the dream-self’s flesh, grasping, as if he refused to ever let go of him. A dream is just a dream, he told himself. It doesn’t necessarily indicate what he truly wants, or how he feels: indeed, maybe upon waking, he’d consider it a bitter nightmare—so don’t get overexcited.

A vain advice: as he went through the motions if his morning preparation, it felt like he had a flame in his heart, one which he was keen to guard from the gale of self-doubt; it couldn’t go out, for he felt hollow, and this was all that could fill him with warmth. Breakfast was served; he ate alone by the long mahogany table, a monstrous chandelier above his head, the floor-length windows allowing a charming view on the blooming garden. A maid came in with a crystal vase of daffodils.

“Thank you,” he said slowly, watching the colour drain from the petal as he rolled it between his fingers.
fingers; it turned a bruised brown. “They’re beautiful.”

_Pity on you, you beautiful things._

Still: that flame within kept burning—Hux had ignited it. All they had was a half-real chance meeting, yet Kylo felt ready to combust. An idea lit up in his mind; it wouldn’t leave him be, luring his hope in as if it was a dazed moth.

He set out on a walk, clutching his pocket watch in hand, every second ticking past a new beat of his fervoured heart. His grey tailcoat trailed behind him, easy on the breeze—a balmy March morn; the perfect time to make amends.

He crossed the garden with hurried steps, and broke out into an eager sprint as he reached the winding road: the nearest village was just thirty minutes worth of walk away—that already felt like a cruel eternity. He urged himself on, following the will-o’-the-wisp of his determination. Past a pond and over a bridge, creaking beneath his feet; a glance given to the waterfall and the rocks in the river —then a second take. His springy steps halted. There were magpies feasting there.

Dread gripped him for a moment; curse that his journey would lead to this—end with this; an inarticulate yell of anger tore through his throat, startling the birds—for they were just innocuous creatures pecking on a carcass, the hunger of winter still heavy in their stomach. They flocked up, screeching, beating their radiant wings. Kylo took hold of the railing, leaning over it as he counted them quickly.

“Eight’s for a kiss, nine’s for a wish—ten’s for a bird you shall not miss. Shoo, ill omens; you cannot change my mind—I am resolved to right my errs, and be done with idle waiting for never-arriving oblivion.” He pushed himself back; the planks of the bridge were slippery, and he almost lost his balance. With the birds gone, the silence surrounding him appeared oppressive, the patient running of water and the wise whisper of trees mocking his hastiness; but it couldn’t break his courage. He resumed running.

By the time he reached the village, colour was high on his cheeks, and the watch burned his grip, having adjusted to the temperature of his hand. He looked a wild thing, eyes flashing, hair in disarray; he was greeted with bows, but curious glances. He rounded the mill, sidestepping the dirty lumps of hay and horse excess that threatened to besmirch his cream-coloured breeches. For the sake of his dignity, he should really have gotten a horse a while ago; even the plowers passing him on their makeshift carriages were better suited for travel than him; any maybe he’d have to travel soon.

But not so fast; there’s the church, and the little stone-houses with honey-scented lilacs; the Roman wall and the row of willows; eastwards, then turn right: and there—tucked away, as if it was something insignificant, the post office. Kylo entered it as if it was a cathedral, ready to put his fate in God’s hands—and since he thought Him absent: to the hands of someone else he worshipped.

_Armitage—_

Please disregard my misshapen letters—I am writing to you with a borrowed quill and trembling hands, on thin paper. No drafts; no rhetorics or proper calligraphy—I offer you this in exchange: all my honesty, and the privacy of our feelings, safe from the prying regard of dependants whom have not yet earned my complete trust.
Reading this letter you might expect to find an apology; I must disclose I have none to offer, for apologies are generally accepted, and I do not want you to ever forgive me for what I have done. What I can say is this: I am deeply, truly ashamed.

I regret not realising the extent of my offense disturbing your secrets and thus betraying the trust you have granted me unquestioningly and graciously; which I have not returned, guarding my own secrets; I regret ruining the furniture; I regret interrupting your most private moments in dreams; above all, I regret ever hurting you—I will live with the guilt of it until my dying day. I allowed anger to overcome me; I did not realise what I was doing—and that was my mistake; for the lack of intention does not excuse the action. Still: I hope knowing that in acting I betrayed my own will might ease your pain, even if just by a fraction. My last regret is this: that I left you without warning.

I realise now—after long, and often harrowing deliberation that led me nowhere, and a spark of inspiration now that we have met in a realm beyond mortal consciousness, where you evidently still think of me as your husband—I realise that what I believed to be the right thing had inadvertently denied you agency. I thought that tearing myself away from you so forcefully was a necessary sacrifice to make for your sake; but I should have left it to your judgement—instead, I slipped away in stealth, leaving you alone and doubly wounded.

Here, I give you back the choice I have taken from you: I am at your behest. One word from you will seal my lips; I will not seek you out ever again—I will bury all memory—I will fade from your life and your dreams entirely. If you should offer more than one word: I am here to listen. Whatever you have to say, in person or via correspondence, I will be attentive and behave as instructed. If a last goodbye is needed: I will grant you a proper farewell, where we settle all matters. You must know that there is a third option: but I am not in the position to even suggest it.

I told you I could not live without my life—I was right; these past months I have been dawdling, suspending all daily affairs and postponing the progress of my destiny. If you have been in a similar state, we deserve to be set free. Let the past die. Kill it, if necessary; but I cannot go on like this.

You must have guessed where I reside; I beseech you, do not seek me out. Let travel be my worry, should you want to see me; in all case: address the letter to K.R., the post office of Naboo, Kent, not Theed Palace. I will wait for your answer; if I do not get any—I bow my head, and accept it.

Yours most faithfully,

The Lord Duke of Naboo, humbly in your former employ

* * *

March turned into April in a little more than a week; and no response came. Still: the skies looked clearer to Kylo, the colours more vibrant even on the seventh day he came back from the village empty-handed. The world was revived, for he did what he thought just. He kept the letter a secret, even from his grandfather, even from himself—a journey to the post office every day, then he forced himself not to think of it. He could never forget Hux—unless Hux asked him to; for his wish was his command.
Sunday gave him a moment of peace. He had his tea in the garden, listening to the distant toll of church-bells and the splashes of the fountain. This is how he met Millicent—a hundred years ago, it seemed—she was breaking her fast in the garden, and a polite conversation was made; he liked her already; they were both happy and pleased; then winter came. That a few months of bliss could be so formative—that it could change his entire being—and now the rest of his life lay ahead.

He set his cup aside, and rested his eyes upon the path zigzagging through ornamental flower-beds and tall hedges; it all blurred together. He remained in his chair long after the tray was taken away and the wind rippled the lace tablecloth, making it dance. Thunder rolled in the distance.

He was waiting.

* * *

“You're positively drenched!” Anakin exclaimed as Kylo entered the study. It was nearing evening; blue shadows washed over the glass cabinets, the telescope pointed at the window, the large globe; it looked an ordinary room with faded paintings and a large bureau—but a closer glance would’ve revealed the dead animals in jars, the dark matters of the scattered journals, and the ghost sitting atop a cupboard. Kylo didn’t mind the chilling details: he felt safe here.

“It’s raining,” he said, walking to the window to draw in the curtains.

“I can tell that, absurd child,” Anakin replied. He didn’t move from his spot, dangling his legs as he watched Kylo prepare for their lesson. Candles were lit, feathers retrieved, and seashells, burnt wood and strange stones; Kylo arranged an altar for all the elements, and bowed his head. He grabbed a chalk, and began casting a circle while murmuring a spell—he used to be far more spontaneous; but the powers he now was wont to call upon demanded discipline—or there’d be a dire price to pay.

“What will you attempt to-day?”

“Farseeing,” Kylo mumbled. The circle was finished; he knelt in the middle, calling a boline to his hand. It came soaring through the air; Kylo grasped the bone handle. The blade was shaped like the crescent moon; it glinted at him with a promise.

“I will guide you,” Anakin said. “Remember: you shan’t allow visions of the future to inform your present decisions, for they might be riddles or prophecies that’ll never come to be—take it from me. Close your eyes now; breathe, just breathe—follow the rhythm of every exhale; wherever you go, your breathing will guide you home.”

The image of Stormfield Hall emerged; Kylo let it disperse—home was here; home was Theed.

“Cut your left hand,” Anakin ordered. Kylo gripped the blade; a slice—he was bleeding. He laid his hand on his thighs, palm up, like an offering. He let his head fall down, looking deeper into the darkness. He could feel it ebbing, flowing into him through the open, pulsing wound. He could hear the patter of rain, see moving shadows from behind his eyelids. He let it all fade and fall away. Darkness was all, the dusk within.

In his previous attempts, he’d been scared of what he’d see, what awaited; he now felt ready to accept anything. He had submitted to destiny sending that letter.

Something moved in his hand. As he looked down, he saw a white butterfly crawling out of his wound. Its wings were bloodied; it couldn’t fly like this. Kylo counted his breaths as he watched it struggle, contemplating the meaning of the vision, feeling sick to the stomach and rather light-headed. The butterfly was small and delicate, its every movement trembling and uncertain. He should
help it open its wings; but he couldn’t interfere. He heard something dripping, slow and sluggish, the drops heavy. He knew it to be blood, more blood; he didn’t want to look up. The butterfly climbed to the tip of his index finger, desperately trying to open its ruined wings. If he blew on it, he could help it dry. He didn’t.

The dripping continued.

“Come now, follow your breath,” Anakin said. “I will count to ten; by the last exhale, you will be awoken.”

He should chance a glance before time was up. Follow the noise.

“One, two, three—”

He craned his neck. There was a chandelier above him—the same rusty affair Stormfield Hall had.

“Four, five, six—”

Suspended on the arms hung Millicent—lifeless, and looking much like her mother in the wych elm, blood drip-drip-dripping from her heart.

“Seven, eight, nine—”

Her eyes opened. The pupils were thin and vertical.

“Ten.”

Kylo came to himself with a cry, the flames of the candles blowing out. His heart was beating so strongly as if it was attempting to break free of his ribcage; Anakin said something he couldn’t hear, and he shook his head, mumbling I don’t understand, I —

“What did you see?” Anakin asked. He was kneeling in front of him, outside the circle. Kylo couldn’t focus on him, his vision too blurry. He felt delirious. The blood from his hand has soaked through his breeches, drenched the floor.

“Nothing,” he croaked.

“I think I know what upset you,” Anakin said, taking hold of his wrists gently. “You saw your worst fears; don’t let them dishearten you—it might just be a warning not to stray from your path; come, let’s patch you up.”

Kylo shook his head again, and put his forehead to Anakin’s chest, who began caressing his nape, hushing him—but Kylo wasn’t disheartened or upset; he was enraged, ready to tear the world to pieces. It didn’t make sense; if any harm came to Millicent, he’d mourn and rue—but that fury he felt was vengeful and brash.

One thing he knew for sure: something had been set into motion. Something frightening was about to happen.

He searched for Millicent that night, but he couldn’t find her anywhere. She was alive, but something was keeping them apart. Stormfield Hall was an empty ruin in his dream, and the song of magpies echoed through it.

* * *

The next morning he set out early, more anxious for an answer than ever. He knew he’d have to be
careful, that Anakin lost everything trusting a vision; yet the ill bodings allotted him no rest. Dew was still fresh on the grass as he entered the dormant village; at the post office, he was told he’d have to wait, for the letters of the day haven’t arrived yet.

He had three hours to waste. He wouldn’t go home; he walked the distance between the gates of Theed and the village, pacing distractedly. A vexing thought wormed into his mind, chewing on his brains: visions weren’t always about the future—they often concerned an unresolved past, or worse still: the present—the future could be altered, the past forgotten: the present might be hiding deadly secrets.

*What are you trying to tell me?* Kylo mused, crossing the bridge for the sixth time, holding onto the pocket watch as if it was a talisman. *What am I missing? The girl said Stormfield Hall would burn: does my absence change, or fulfill that prophecy? The key must be this: to escape the magpie’s will, and defeat the enemy within: blind anger and righteousness.*

He stopped short, the wet plank beneath his feet creaking. The waterfall was gurgling, the willows whispering—he could’ve sworn he heard another sound: sharp talons on wood. He turned, but found the bridge empty; he surveyed the twisting trees, but couldn’t spot anything, the rustling leaves hiding whatever he heard stirring.

“Are you here?” he called out; the wind picked up, carrying yellow petals. “Magpie, magpie! Are you listening? Snoke; I call your name and invite you: Snoke! You will leave the Huxes alone—it’s me that you want; so come, take my eyes, eat my heart: I dare you to try, bastard!”

He spun around, water, sky and the line of trees blurring together. He searched for that devil bird; he knew he had to be here—there was a mocking, cackling sound he couldn’t quite place. He huffed a bitter laugh.

“What more do you want of me? What is left for you to take?” He was hardly finished talking, and the answer came to him—that mighty Skywalker blood; every single droplet. He might’ve lost the prospect of all joy, but he still had his life to waste. He pressed his thumb to the bandage on his left hand, his thumb digging into the tender flesh, making the wound tear open.

“Come,” he hissed, palm offered in a graceful gesture as if he was asking him for a dance; it would be their *danse macabre*. “Join me; follow the smell of precious blood. I will say your name for a third time: Snoke—and if you don’t answer my call, here: I leave you.”

The forest seemed thicker, the shadows deeper as he stepped off the bridge, pulse rising. He walked slowly, cradling his bleeding hand, peering around, ready for a new encounter. He was being watched; but the magpie didn’t show himself.

He entered the village like a wanderer carrying pestilence, taking odd roads to hide his infectious misfortune. If he was being followed, everybody around him would suffer for it; that was a certainty. The wound ached as if it was a fresh cut, although he had put comfrey root on it the night before, and it didn’t reopen too wide. Still, as he pushed the green door of the post office open, his hand left a smeared, crimson print.

It was a humble, round little building, freshly painted, shelves covering the curved walls and a wheeled ladder waiting to be rolled around—the pride of the village, but the scene of Kylo’s frequent disappointments. People from the surrounding hamlets would come here like devoted pilgrims: they got their benedictions of packages and newspapers, but there was nothing for Kylo, just the purgatory of eternal waiting. He was alone; maybe he was still early—but he might take shelter here anyway, for he dreaded to go back and cross that bridge again.
“Hello?” he called out, his bleeding fist closed and trembling. The door of the clerk’s office creaked open, and he popped out his greying head.

Perceiving Kylo, he bowed hastily, and upon emerging completely, announced: “A letter, my lord!” He opened the drawer of the bulky counter, presenting an ivory envelope with some flourish. Kylo’s heart skipped a beat.

“Where from?” he asked, taking a shaky step forward. The shelves around seemed to be looming, the smell of dust was overwhelming: his fate would be decided here; the smiling clerk was to bear witness to his last judgement.

“Stormfield Hall, your grace,” he said, handing him the letter as he bowed his head again; oh yes—the red seal bore Hux’s sigil, the weasel and the words, I won’t be bested.

Kylo turned the envelope: it was Hux’s handwriting; just seeing his curved letters melted the ice gripping his heart. It was as if it beat for the first time; as if he couldn’t breathe or move until now. He looked upon the letters, and came to life—K.R.; writing that monogram, Hux had named him, rechristened him under the sign of a new religion, the worship of reconciliation. A violent delight seized him: Hux had gotten his letter—had written to him; and there was no sign of hurry or worry, nothing that would betray ill news concerning Millicent or an all-consuming fire.

He put the envelope to his heart, letting his eyes fall shut and whispering thank you, thank you, thank you—the contents were of secondary importance: it could include words of refusal and blame—Kylo would greet them just as gladly as a gentle request for an epilogue. He pressed his lips to the letter: it had the faint odour of Hux’s lavender hand cream.

I might kiss that hand yet, Kylo told himself. I might kiss it even as it reached to pluck all pleasant memories from my mind; I will kiss it, if he consents, and I will tell him: darling, dearest, it’s been a pleasure.

He looked up to praise and bless the clerk: he stood behind the counter unmoving, eyes pitch-black and smile terrible.

Kylo took a step back, mouth open to a cry.

It wouldn’t come.

“You called me, you called me thrice,” the clerk said in a distant voice as Kylo retreated in silent dread. “Aren’t you happy that we share this beautiful moment?” He stepped onto the counter; it was tall, but he grew taller, dragging his too-long limbs along.

Kylo’s back hit the door; he grabbed the handle, but it didn’t matter. He knew that the door and all the small windows were blocked; there would be no escape. It was just Snoke and him.

“Open the envelope,” Snoke said. “Don’t you want to find out what he has to say, before you come with me?”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Kylo answered; his voice had more confidence than he felt. He tucked away the letter in his breast pocket, slipped the watch inside as well; he would rather die than give them up.

He would die.

Snoke loomed above him, a skeletal figure filling the post office, watching him with hollow eyes, unblinking, and still smiling.
“But you were so eager to leave!” he said sweetly; he sounded like a corvid imitating human speech. “It’s true; you wanted to slip away. You thought I wouldn’t notice—you sent that little letter in stealth; but you kept thinking about it, musing, fretting, and I heard you loud and clear. *What’s done is done,* I told myself. *A reply will come; but there will be no Kylo Ren left to answer.*”

Kylo stared at the featureless face above him, the malleable mask of a shapeshifter, and whispered, “Oh my god, oh Jove, it’s you. It’s you, it’s been you all along.”

“And didn’t I take proper care of you?” The horrible figure of the clerk dispersed: Anakin’s ghost was left, hovering close to the ceiling in his full regalia, the sight of him making Kylo sick. “Didn’t I comfort you, shelter you, nurse you back to health? Didn’t I give you wealth and all my wisdom and advice? Didn’t I lap your blood up? I lapped it up from the floor and grew stronger—yes, yes—come now, child, away with that look of betrayal! Your grandfather is gone: his son set his spirit free—you should’ve suspected he wouldn’t leave him alone, surely.”

“I should’ve known; but I wanted to believe your lies,” Kylo replied, pushing away from the door. He stood his ground, facing the false spirit, deep voice resonating as he clenched his fists. “I know that ghosts are bound to one place, that they can’t roam free; I knew Luke would redeem Anakin; but I needed to cling onto hope in my most desperate hour. You have tricked me; you have used me; therefore, you are no master of me.”

“Sweet apprentice, of course I am,” Snoke in Anakin’s disguise said; he started descending, and kept on smiling and smiling; his fingers were pointed like black talons. “I have fattened you on magic; indeed, I have made you my sustenance—I will have your eyes and have your heart; ah-ah, don’t object—you have offered!” Reaching ground level, he cupped Kylo’s face; he snarled at him, making Snoke chuckle. “My patience paid off: look at you—I will eat you up, darling child, drink your tears and suck the marrow of your weary bones; there’s nothing you can do.”

“Nothing?” Kylo asked softly; Snoke released him, and looked him over, apprehensive.

“Such fire, such force and vigor—and oh, the arrogance! I was after you before you were a thought; I was here before history took place. I watched your ancestors crawl out of the water, getting on their hind legs; I was here before the darkness. What can you do faced with such power but tremble and fall to ashes?”

Kylo raised his hand, the bloody bandage hanging half-undone. “I can do what you taught me to do,” he said, and with that, curled his fingers.

Snoke wheezed as the air rushed out of him; he clawed at his throat, trying to peel off the invisible coil. His figure shifted; he looked like an old man again, ancient and damaged, eyes too blue and skin hanging loose.

“By the grace of your teachings I won’t be defeated,” Kylo said, dreamy, measured. “By the flow of my blood, I’m stronger than I’ve ever known.”

Snoke laughed, choked-off; it turned to a darling sound Kylo knew well: Hux’s breathless chuckle. Snoke transformed into him, trembling lips almost blue, eyes gouging out—he didn’t get the eyes right.

“Can you watch your love die?” Snoke asked on an echo of Hux’s voice.

“You’re not him; you could never pretend to be him. You were scared of what we had: you could never have power over me with him by my side.”
Snoke laughed again; he wasn’t choking anymore, shaking the bound of Kylo’s spell off with a crack of his neck. Fooled again; but about one thing Kylo was certain: this puppet wasn’t his beloved. Snoke walked to him, hips swaying—a laughable parody: Hux had a limp. He looked at him, benign and warm: it wasn’t how Hux would regard him now, after what he’s done.

“I could give you everything he did,” Snoke said, reaching for the front of Kylo’s breeches; Kylo gripped his wrist, and twisted at it.

“Don’t you dare lay a hand on me,” he hissed.

Snoke swayed closer, breath hot on Kylo’s lips. “You could do with a little bit of pleasure; it sweetens the flesh. Won’t you at least open the letter? How I wish to pluck that merry flower from your heart that blooms with delight! I wonder how it tastes—but the tang of misery suits me better; it’s a far more nourishing diet.”

“There’s one thing you can give me,” Kylo said, cupping his face. The smile of Hux’s lips was too wide, teeth yellow and sharp.

“Your kind keeps making demands,” he said. “I’m good, I’m good: I can grant wishes—but there are none left for you, not anymore; you have refused to be my apprentice. Fine: I won’t keep you safe now. You called my name three times: you offered your heart, you offered your eyes.”

Kylo stroked the clammy, pale skin, saying softly, “As a matter of fact, I’d like to ask for them back.” With that, he plunged his thumbs into Snoke’s eyesockets.

The scream of pain wasn’t human; it was the screech of a furious bird, coming from Hux’s mouth. There was a moment of hideous doubt: seeing Hux in such anguish was insufferable, even though Kylo knew him to be a shadow and a trick. His blood and the ooze of his eyes were hotter than tears, burning Kylo’s skin. He wanted to console him, pull him to his embrace, rock and hush him—but he mustn’t give in to the illusion.

He was gripping Snoke’s skull, ignoring the softness of Hux’s hair and his pink mouth open to that animal scream that dissolved into a distant noise. The sound of the world muffled it: it was loud with a thousand musings, and Kylo could hear them all, despair, awe, love and wonder in unison and cacophony, roaring, blaring. He fell back, hitting the door as he covered his ears, filthy fingers tearing at his hair.

He got it back—he could hear and see all thoughts—and he couldn’t bear it. He felt like his head would split open, tortured by the vociferous world. He whined and sobbed, squeezing his eyes shut to stop the vertigo; he wanted to claw them out—he’d be blind to the noise then; he trembled and gritted his teeth so strongly it made his jaw ache.

There was a shift of—intent, something malevolent; he could feel Snoke’s consciousness, his anger and hunger, and he opened his eyes just in time to see the swooping magpie. He yelled and ducked, evading the first attack. The voices were still too loud; it didn’t use to be like this—he could manage; there was a range where the voices started fading; he could tune them out—but not now; and again, the ambush of the magpie.

It landed on his chest, tearing at the flesh. Kylo cried out as it tried to burrow into his heart; he grabbed for it, but missed. The magpie soared up high as Kylo rolled to his stomach, groaning and gasping. He needed something to focus on; to drown out the sound. The magpie came again: Kylo was helpless as the talons scratched at his face—he gripped a wing, the waxy touch of beating feathers making him shiver. He wrestled the bird away, and noticed in the turmoil that it was blinded even in this form, bleeding gaps where its eyes used to be.
If only Kylo could calm his breathing and be still, the magpie wouldn’t find him. It flew around deranged, hitting the walls and the hard shelves, leaving behind shedded feathers. Kylo got to all fours, biting at his tongue to keep his noise down. Blood was running down his face, and the deep scar above his heart was spreading sticky warmth. The magpie dived down again.

*Oh god, oh, oh it can smell me,* Kylo realised as he curled up on himself, shielding his face with his arms, head bent down. The magpie pecked at his back, and pecked and pecked, tearing the clothes open, getting to his flesh. The sounds wouldn’t subdue; the magpie wouldn’t retreat; Kylo couldn’t think of a way to shoo him away while his mind was under assault of an army of foreign thoughts.

His trembling hand found his breast pocket; he laid his fingers over the letter, touching it to say goodbye, knowing he might not leave this room alive. Something pressed against his palm, cool and round: the watch.

His breath halted. Tick-tock, tick-tock; he’d just have to find this sound; tick-tock, it’s so soft, you might miss it if you don’t concentrate; tick, tock, an eternity. Kylo closed his eyes and really listened, drowning out everything else, the world’s clamour, the magpie’s attack, his own alarm.

*Tick-tock.*

*Tick-tock.*

*Tick*  

*toc*  

(I will

*love you*

*un-til*

*the end*

*of time.*)

Kylo curled his fingers around the watch. Counted to one, two, three as the magpie was tearing at his flesh, eating what he could get, ripping, shredding, swallowing, skin and flesh and bone soon.

With a rapid movement, Kylo rolled to his back; the magpie shot up, spreading its wings and
screeching—Kylo lashed out with the watch’s chain.

It was pure silver, and it was a lover’s gift. The chain looped around the magpie’s neck, and Kylo pulled on both ends as the bird fell to his chest, thrating and squawking.

“Ring a circle round him thrice,” Kylo chanted, “I am paying back the price; ring a circle round him thrice, I shall discharge of your vice; ring a circle round him thrice, offer him as sacrifice. Dark, light, dark: the magpie is caught!”

He tossed the watch away, the heavy weight dragging the writhing magpie with it. He jumped to his feet and got to the door, stumbling and staggering; he rattled the handle, and after a desperate moment, it gave. He looked back over his mauled shoulder, watching the magpie trying to break free. There was a pang of regret for leaving such a precious thing as the watch behind—but glittery things were for magpies, and it might just save his life.

He jumped over the threshold, and closed the door behind him hastily, laying his palms flat on the wood. His hands were spasming. He tried to catch his breath, summon enough strength to speak, even though his throat felt raw and his jaw was sore.

“You shan’t open,” he croaked, “not to any being, not even me—I command thee!”

He felt the door pulse, and the magpie screamed within; looking at the windows, he repeated the charm, arms stretched up to the silver skies.

He didn’t realise in time that the whole village was watching him. They have gathered around the post office, called by the ruckus: but they couldn’t get inside. Kylo could taste their fear; he looked around, recognising a few faces—honest peasants, kindly merchants, the baker and the real clerk. They all thought him insane, and were startled by his appearance—he looked like the walking dead, his tailcoat mere rags, a deep cut running across his face.

Kylo made certain they all met his eyes, and that they’d never forget how they flashed; he raised a finger, and pointed at the jolly green door of the post office. “No one,” he gritted, and repeated, “no one will set a foot there for at least a hundred years. The door won’t give, but God save you if you try to demolish that building. I locked a monster there. Do you hear me?”

They gave him no answer, but their minds whispered: they were too frightened to ever make an attempt; the Lord Naboo was mad; if they opposed his command, he’d come back to avenge the disrespect.

“Good,” Kylo spat, and took a limping step forward. They all pulled back, as if he was readying for an attack. His feet wouldn’t carry him; he collapsed down to the dry ground, groaning in pain. He had lost too much blood; he felt faint, wounds twinging—but he’d have to carry on; if need be, he must crawl, for he had to put as many miles between himself and the ensnared magpie as he could manage.

He looked around, bruised left eye twitching. See, there is no escape; they won’t help you—they’re afraid to; the magpie is not dead—you’re forever cursed—you will rot here—

He stopped his derisive musings; took a heaving breath, and reached inside his breast pocket with fluttering fingers. The envelope was there: crumpled, bloodied, but it was. He felt a cautiously curious buzz from the people around as he broke the seal; someone asked something—he wasn’t listening. He unfolded the letter methodically, mind vacant, ready for anything to come. This was the fight’s prize; this was what warranted survival—and what a strange award it was: for the letter could include viscous words of refusal. Still: they would bring him peace—for what mattered was to grant
Hux an opportunity to do as he seemed fit, to say anything that would put his mind at ease. That freedom was worth all Kylo had gone through.

He spread the thick paper over his knees; he swallowed around a lump in his throat as he espied that the letter was but one line long. Refusal it is, then, or a farewell; so be it, then. He skinned through it, gasped, and read it more intently, crouching over the letter, mind racing and heart nearly exploding.

*My Lord Duke—*

*I would be much obliged if you would perchance care to kindly drag your esteemed arse home at your earliest convenience, for a discussion seems necessary.*

*Yours faithfully,*

*Arkanis*

A bark of laughter escaped from Kylo’s chest; he couldn’t stop giggling and snickering, delirious and manic.

“He’s possessed,” someone said; he didn’t care for them. He was holding the letter—it was in his hands—Hux had written to him, and he said—he said—oh, home was mentioned—and a discussion—no promises, no prospect of absolution, but this: *at your earliest convenience*—this was an obligation. Kylo licked his lips, racking his brains—he had to be near Hux, he’d been called.

If only he could fly; if only he had learnt from his vile master how to snap his fingers and be anywhere he wished—but he had learnt a great many other things: among them was summoning.

“Gytrash,” he mouthed; a lull came over the confused villagers, and he repeated, shouting, putting the last remnants of his ceasing strength and the sacrifice of his dripping blood into it. “Gytrash, gytrash! Come, come, your master calls!”

His yell was reverberating in the thick air. The little brick houses stood waiting; the crown of lush trees were unmoving; no breeze stirred, and no-one even dared to cough. Dunn: the very earth shook; heavy hoofs approached, and Kylo and the much-disturbed villagers turned toward the sound as if lured.

Down the long dirt road a mighty beast emerged: it was a black stallion, wither higher than the top of Kylo’s head. Its mane was like a dark flame; its eyes were burning, and it breathed fire as it neighed. The villagers retreated like a cowed flock of birds; there were screams, cries, prayers and curses as it drew nearer; but none of them dared run away, standing and trembling, frozen in place. Kylo waited with open arms and a sharp grin.

“Come to me; it was me who summoned thee.”

The gytrash stopped in front of him, bowing down; it had a bridle and a saddle—Kylo wished it to appear like that. He patted its neck, then gripped the reins as he pulled himself to his feeble feet.

“What a fine stallion you are,” he pronounced, short of breath. The world around him was dim, the
sounds of it terror-stricken, and he found himself quite ready to faint—but not now, not here; Hux was waiting. He supported his weight by holding onto the gytrash, telling him, “I will call you Supreme, for you are matchless among horses.” He looked around one last time, a farwell and a challenge. The villagers’ numb alarm was bleeding into hatred; some thought him a vampire; others, the devil himself; and there was someone, a little girl, who saw him for what he was, and thought about witchcraft with unkind dread.

Kylo spat on the ground, and mounted Supreme, sitting tall and proud, only his shoulders sagging despite his worrying injuries.

“Take me where I need to be,” he told Supreme, and felt understanding. It wasn’t just a steed; it was a dark familiar who has been waiting for a witch’s call. It broke into a hearty gallop, rushing through the roused street with a frightening speed.

Kylo prayed his failing limbs would keep him in the saddle, that exhaustion wouldn’t make him drop down. He needed to get out of Naboo; through the noises of terror and panic, he could make out a distant whistling. It was a bird singing.

Chapter End Notes

Content warnings: period-typical thoughts of suicide / ritualistic self-harm (cutting the palm) / body horror: insect comes out of wound / eyes gouged out / Snoke makes a move on Kylo; he’s instantly rebuked (still gross)

Well. This fic was supposed to be 9 chapters, but it got too long, so I thought I'd upload the rest separately. I hope it was a good place to cut it; who doesn't like cliffhangers? (Charlotte Brontë. Charlotte Brontë doesn't like cliffhangers.)

Chapter 10 is coming soon(ish)!

A million thanks to Deadsy for betaing and Ktula for the proofreading/pacing advice!

KatieGhost made an amazing portrait series of the people of Stormfield Hall, check it out:
* Lord Arkanis
* Millicent "Absolutely Not a Cat" Hux
* Local witch boi Kylo
* Mitaka, the world's best housekeeper

Find me on tumblr // there's a creepy moodboard for the chapter
Feverish days passed; Kylo sometimes thought he’d perish on the way home, and at such times he told himself it wouldn’t matter—that his spirit would ride on until it had reached Stormfield Hall, that he’d be one of the ghosts haunting it until he was sent away, but that he wouldn’t rest until he could tell Hux: you have called—so here I am, at your demand.

Taverns, travelled roads, skirts of forests and endless fields: all seemed distant and foreign—but Supreme knew the way. It was a world filled with voices, every being speaking in their own tongue, from wise trees to absent-minded bees, tattling rivers and lakes singing to themselves. Kylo only avoided birds, for he feared the magpie would greet him: I have escaped; who are you to trap such a sovereign soul? And he would say: I am what you made me; in your greed and in your hunger, you have enabled me to be your match. I have something that you lack: my great-grandmother Shmi gave it to me, and my mother and uncle before me, and it was more than hearing thoughts: we can heal. This is how we survive you: for you are dying and sick, but I am young, and I will live to see you buried.

The scene slowly transformed: he recognised a moor, a gentle roll of hills, and there: the towers of Millcote’s cathedral, glinting in the waning moonlight.

“Supreme, hear me: carry me faster,” Kylo said. “Faster than the roaring gale, faster than preying birds or the quick thoughts of men: this is my spell and my command—Stormfield is but three hours away, but I need to be there sooner, for I cannot wait any longer.”

Supreme huffed in answer; smoke curled out of its nose as it prepared for the gallop. Kylo shortened the reins, sitting deep in the saddle and pressing his legs behind the girth as he held on for dear life. He was drained from the journey, still suffering his injuries; as Supreme raced forward, he felt his stomach turn. He was never an able equestrian; as they dashed through cobbledstones, his teeth rattled and he nearly lost his grip, but desperation made him hold on, despite how the leather bit into the wound on his hand and how numb and sore his limbs were.

The orange light of gas lamps blurred into a smudge as they passed them, the wind whooshing in his ears carrying the concerned cries of the townsfolk. Their thoughts followed Kylo: they never saw a horse so fast; it emerged from the evening fog like a nightmare, pitch-black, carrying a sick rider through the empty streets and then, oh horror, it leaped—now it was running on the roof of the houses, sending tiles flying!

“Onwards, onwards!” Kylo cried as Supreme jumped from roof to roof. Windows opened down below as those sleeping, rudely awoken, wanted to see the cause of the hullabaloo; soon, they joined the cries and the shouts.

“A maniac! A witch! Wake the mayor, get the police!”
Kylo was laughing deep, unsettling; he had fought with the magpie—who were mere humans to him now? A gytrash was carrying him home—who could stop such an endeavour?

They leapt back down onto the wide streets: a few turns, and they had reached the outskirts; still, they were pursued by ungodly hollering and distressed thoughts well past the last house. To the fields: a dark, smooth midnight sea, filled with the mysterious chatter of nocturnal beasts, birds, and insects—Kylo tuned them out as he pressed Supreme on—to Stormfield Hall! Oh, just the promise to be in Hux’s presence once more! To see him, even if for the last time; not even the possibility of separation would blemish that blessed moment when they beheld each other again.

Soon he could see the silhouette of the manor house and the garden, and made Supreme ease the gallop to a trot, even though his heart raced on and called for a faster pace. He was nervous; he wanted to come here better prepared and better dressed, not like a beaten, filthy heathen. He told himself he didn’t deserve any better: that the humiliation of his present state suited him—how else should he return, but humbled and crushed?

Still: as he reached the Eastern gate and remembered Hux waiting for him after his return from Lowood—demanding three kisses, leading him up the stairs, washing his body and his hair—a part of him wished he had arrived in a gold-gilded carriage, clad in black velvet, and boasting about his spar with the magpie, mentioning his palace in passing and pretending not to notice the impressed curve of Hux’s raised brows.

He was glad not to be that person: he’d rather be the poor tutor in his raggedy coat who so oft’ loitered around in this blooming garden, mulling over mysteries and what secrets the chambers of his own heart had hidden. It seemed impossible that there was a time he didn’t know he loved Hux; despite the circumstances, he felt warm all over thinking about that love: it was as if he slid into a nursery late at night to gaze upon his sleeping child; behold that darling face, not quite able to believe that there was a time when his precious babe wasn’t part of this world; smiling over it, proud, happy—and then grabbing a pillow to suffocate it with.

“Heard,” he whispered, and unmouted Supreme by the battered stairs. He stroked its mane, assured that it’d find its way to the stable. He watched it go, biding the time, fingers fretting. He’d have to go to his old room, wait out sunrise, then: the inevitable.

He stood there a few moments longer, looking over the darkened garden. The trees were beckoning him; his own cowardly heart was calling to take a stroll, visit the lake, go back to the wych elm he had hardly glanced at upon his arrival—but there was no place to go but to the gallows. A deep breath: a little bit of pain, and then all would be over—he could rest forever knowing that his beloved executioner decided well. Maybe his punishment would be exile; maybe it would be something else—the playful tone of Hux’s letter left some room for speculation; but maybe it wasn’t playful at all, but mocking and malicious. He’d find out on the morrow.

He unbolted the gates with a snap of his fingers; it opened with a claimant creak. He breathed in the welcoming smell of the hall; his exhale escaped as a sob. His shoulders shook as he was still holding onto the handle, and he scorned himself: you have no reason to cry and feel sorry for yourself; weep for what you have done instead!

Even in the darkness, he could make out the stairs he’d passed a thousand times, the portraits, the heavy chandelier; there was the soft tick-tock of the longcase clock, and the moonlight shining through the narrow, latticed windows. The last time he was here everything had been adorned with evergreens for Christmas; now it was spring, but his hopes had withered—there was nothing for him here but torturous memories of festivity and frolic.

He restrained his tongue from exclamation, steps from hasty advance; his fingers hesitated over the
handle—should he steal out as if he’d never been here, or face his bitter destiny? The wind pulled at his tattered frock coat—leave now; but he grit his teeth, and slammed the door shut. It made a sound like a hammer hitting the final nail in a coffin. He listened to the booming echo, telling himself: it’s decided now; so go on—but he was too overcome to move.

“Who’s there?” a voice called—that darling voice, sharp with a threat.

Kylo tried to hold his breath—you cannot find me, he thought; it’s too soon, I’m not ready to see you, I’d go blind, I’d turn into stone—but a treacherous sob escaped again, betraying his presence.

He could see the gleaming light of a candle first, and then Hux coming to the flight of stairs; he was in his nightshirt, limping steps uncertain; a figure from a dream: radiant, unearthly—he couldn’t be real. He looked just as Kylo kept him in precious, forbidden recollections: tall, willowy, bright hair burning. He had a regal posture, soft features; handsome as ever—even more so than Kylo’s memories could do him justice.

You are here, how can you be here, how can you be near, how can—

Hux squinted into the darkness, nose scrunched, and their gazes met.

Kylo felt all his strength leave him, and fell to his knees. Hux’s thoughts were like the sun: bright and remote, warming him, but burning with a fury. Kylo squeezed his eyes shut as if it could help him and bit his lips, breath wet and shaky. He was trembling violently; he couldn’t help it.

“You,” Hux said, toneless. Kylo wouldn’t look at him; he wouldn’t listen to his mind. The light got brighter as if Hux drew nearer, but Kylo didn’t hear the steps creak. Hux must’ve changed his mind; decided to keep the distance between them. “I don’t even know what to call you,” he said. “Are you Lord Naboo, or are you Mr. Ren? Should I call you Kylo, or forgo your name altogether and just say: so here you are—you have come?”

This voice—oh, this voice that used to whisper the sweetest things—it was a call that Kylo’s body and mind responded to against his will: he was inspirited—he wanted to jump up, run up the stairs, and embrace Hux, as if he had any right to do that. His heart beat faster, his spine tingled, and he was shamefully aroused.

“Don’t you have anything to say?” Hux asked him. A creak: he had taken a step forward.

Kylo glanced up; Hux was now standing on the spot where his father had tried to bash his skull in. His eyes were round, his temples pale, and Kylo could feel such exceeding worry coming off of him; he couldn’t take it.

“I don’t know what to say,” he confessed, his own voice foreign to his ears—it was so soft, so weak. Hux took three more steps at that, then halted, raising the candle higher.

“Your face; you’re bleeding!”

“It’s nothing,” Kylo said, turning away. He should never have come here; but he owed it to Hux and who they once were. Hux’s letter was still in his pocket. It had never felt this heavy before; the weight kept Kylo on his knees, pulled down by guilt.

“Were you attacked on the road?”

The question made Kylo laugh; Hux descended further down, standing on the last steps. Kylo fixed his gaze upon his knees. His home was once between them; shapely legs wrapped around his hips—the encounter in the dream—the letter—and now, Hux’s concern.
“We should wash your face,” Hux said. “I’m afraid you will need stitches.”

“I don’t need—*stitches*, I don’t need—”

“What do you need?”

Kylo opened his mouth to answer and scold Hux for offering help he didn’t deserve; he wasn’t here to make Hux feel sorry for him—but how wouldn’t he be sorry? Kylo looked at him and thought, *this man loved me once.* He met his gaze; *oh, he still does.*

“I need us to talk,” Kylo croaked.

“No, you need to sort your priorities.” Hux took the last step and was walking towards him; Kylo couldn’t move, just waited for him to reach him. He was barefoot; his hair tousled, cheeks rosy; he looked like he did on lazy mornings, pilant in Kylo’s embrace; except his eyes were red-rimmed, tired, and troubled. He touched his fingers to Kylo’s chin, making him turn his head so he could inspect the wound.

“It’s worse than I thought,” he muttered. Kylo could only focus on that small point of contact, skin on skin—lustfulness overcame him again, and he dropped his gaze in shame.

“It’s nothing,” he repeated. Hux gripped his jaw with more force, long fingers digging into the yielding flesh.

“Look at me,” he demanded. “Why won’t you look at me? You avoid my eyes—maybe you’re afraid that I’m appalled by your scar?”

“My appearance should be the least of your concerns,” Kylo said with more bite than he should’ve, almost a growl. Hux turned his head to the left with a sharp yank.

“No wonder you’d want me not to take notice of it, you look positively awful. Ah-hah! He’s hurt now, the hypocrite. Don’t you dare tell me how to feel with regards to you, your semblance included; aren’t you here to submit to my judgement, as you have promised in your letter?”

Kylo peered up at him, eyes burning with stubborn tears; damn it, but this man was still infuriating. Kylo was torn between the desire to meet challenge with challenge, enter a quarrel that would excite and aggravate the both of them in equal measure; or to bow his head and put his fate in Hux’s hands with the amenable meekness he expected of himself.

“I am at your command,” he gritted. Hux lowered himself to his knees to inspect him further; there was a hopeless sort of amusement in his eyes.

“My oh my, how aggravated you are. This wasn’t the tone your letter implied.”

“Still: I meant every word of it,” Kylo said, wickedly distracted: Hux’s nightshirt had slid up his long, pale thighs; his clever fingers were still on Kylo’s skin; he looked at him in a peculiar way, and his thoughts were ablaze.

“If you do, why won’t you accept my decision?”

Their lips were but a breath away; Kylo knew they wouldn’t kiss; a torment and a delight. He should be glad to be able to resist; he had prided himself with it—thought it a necessary element of atonement: Hux was all he wanted—so he wouldn’t have him.

“What have you decided?” he asked; Hux pulled back, but only to look over Kylo’s face, his gaze
lingering on the wound. He reached out and tucked a lock of tangled hair behind Kylo’s ear. He’d always loved his ears; he found them utterly and indubitably ridiculous, and he was thinking of just that.

“I must confess I’m not entirely certain,” he said. “I know what I want, but I’m beginning to doubt you want the same. You talk a great deal about how forgiveness is not warranted, yet in the discourse of all your ethical musings, you seem to completely disregard the concept of mercy.”

“Mercy,” Kylo repeated, breathless.

Hux smiled at him, but his thoughts were forlorn and dejected. He pulled his darling hand back.

“I’m afraid I could never forgive you,” he said. “You have violated my trust, lied to me, assaulted me, left me; these cannot be excused—but I can do this: I can have mercy. Would you scorn me for that, love? You told me it should be my choice alone—but I cannot choose us without you. What would you have me do?”

Kylo surged forward without meaning to; he had to make Hux understand he’d never refuse a generous offer like this—but he stopped before he could seal such a vow with a too-haste kiss.

“Mercy,” Kylo said, locking eyes and taking Hux’s hand in his, touch tender and reserved. “Please, have mercy on me.” With that, he bowed and pressed his lips to Hux’s knuckles, kissing each of them for the long months spent apart. Hux hummed: a relieved, cynical contentment echoing in Kylo’s head, making him shiver.

“Pity us, God,” Hux whispered. “Such fools we are.”

He cupped Kylo’s face again, and after a moment of deliberation slid his thumb into Kylo’s mouth, who lapped on it as if by reflex. There was a casual intimacy to the gesture, but he could feel Hux hesitate: will you let me do this? He offered him his index finger, tapping on his lips; Kylo sucked on it eagerly—he would welcome anything Hux was willing to give. He was wrong to think he should make decisions in his stead; whatever Hux stated, he was far from a defenseless fool. He made Kylo’s mouth open for him, and licked into it; Kylo let him, swallowing back his moans, savouring each idle swipe of Hux’s tongue.

“This won’t do,” Hux said against Kylo’s lips.

Dumb with pleasure, Kylo could only blink; to have Hux’s unexpected mercy—to have him near, and to taste him—were all too overwhelming.

“You won’t kiss me back,” Hux complained. “You are withholding yourself; perhaps you’re too used to self-denial; forget whatever you had to leave behind: I’m here—I’ve been waiting—have me.”

“I can’t,” Kylo said. He got to his feet, then just lingered there; even if he could, he knew he shouldn’t try to outrun this discussion.

Hux remained on the floor, unbearably beautiful as he stretched his legs out, peering up at Kylo. He could feel his annoyance; behind that, the fear of loss and abandonment.

“I won’t force you to; but answer me this question: would you ever hurt me again?”

“I’d rather cut my hand off!” Kylo exclaimed, aghast.

“An admirable sentiment, although it doesn’t amount for much: you don’t seem too keen on self-
preservation.” Hux tilted his head and looked him over. Hux wasn’t the one who could read minds now; still, Kylo felt naked under his gaze—unable to hide anything. “Still proves my point: you have learnt your lesson, haven’t you—so what are you afraid of?”

“I don’t know,” Kylo said, taking a step back. “I want you, but what you offer is too good to have—with no penance or compensation—”

“No penance!” Hux scoffed, getting up as well. Kylo noticed he had lost weight; he frantically looked for that soft tummy he used to have—was it still there? Hux’s loose nightshirt didn’t reveal any secrets; he drew nearer and Kylo took another step back lest he got tempted enough to lift the hem. “I doubt I could punish you more than you have punished yourself; nearly five months of exile—by the testimony of your present state, not spent in good company.”

“Indeed,” Kylo muttered, still too focused on Hux’s shape. He needed to concentrate.

“Whatever happened?” Hux asked, voice nearly breaking. Kylo reached for him, and he came to his arms, sinking into his embrace. Kylo held him, thinking, you will find comfort here whenever you need it; I will no longer deny it and say it is for your sake.

“I shall tell you everything,” he whispered into Hux’s hair. It had the scent of the soap they used to share; Hux’s warmth and weight was likewise familiar. Kylo felt himself being remade just by holding him—fitting together again, broken pieces of ice melting into a united spring.

“I will tolerate no more secrets from you,” Hux warned. “You owe me a few, for what you have taken from me; although I must admit I may have disclosed them sooner. I am terribly sorry for that, for what it matters.”

He pressed ever closer. Kylo kissed his forehead, his ticklish sideburns, then his soft cheeks, gathering his courage to give a peck to that plush mouth, open to a moan and waiting for more.

“Kiss me proper?” Hux pleaded; that was all Kylo needed to finally lock lips.

He put not only his perplexity into it, but all his joy and excitement as well. His heart felt like a goblet overflowing with the honey of happiness—he wanted Hux to share the taste. He put his hands on his hips, halting at first, then assertive—he gripped them just how Hux liked them to be braced, making him gasp.

“So much for talking,” Kylo teased.

“Oh, we will talk,” Hux replied. Kylo hummed, running his hands up his sides; he realised this was easier, better—to tell Hux about his remorse and longing in a language without words, letting his touches sing.

Every stroke and caress was another letter addressed to him: he found his belly, and squeezed it tenderly—thank you for waiting; his shoulders—I am sorry for the weight you had to carry alone; his neck—I will prove that I can be trusted. But Hux didn’t want a testimony: he burned with the need to see if he still had the power to be desired; if he could still attract Kylo with a clever flick of his wrist, a smile in his eyes, a coquettish smirk; if he could keep him.

Kylo bent down, lapping at a nipple through the soft cloth of the nightshirt as he rubbed the other with a trembling finger. He never dared dream he would ever get a chance to do it again; but Hux wanted him, and he couldn’t help but respond to that want. What a treat it was, what an immense pleasure to indulge him. Hux sighed contently—Kylo could feel how satisfied he was, and blurted out, “I can read minds now.”
“Good for you,” Hux said, looking down at him. Kylo felt self-conscious about the odd angle, the saliva smeared over his chin, the wound on his face—he’d always been too eager and so sloppy. “What am I thinking of now?” Hux asked softly.

“I can’t tell; I’m merely observing the surface—I should diverge deeper to—”

“Exactly.” Hux interrupted. “You ought to be deep inside me.”

“Ought to?” Kylo repeated, waggish. Hux nodded in answer with a fierce defiance that made Kylo bolder. Hux was demanding to be with him; so let him have it.

He crouched down slowly, putting his head against Hux’s belly as he reached behind him, sliding his hands under the nightshirt. They both gasped at the contact; it was special even after the passionate kisses. Kylo got a handful of each buttock, minding his wounds. Oh, it was bliss to touch them, soft like a peach, and just as appetizing. He squeezed them; Hux’s knees bucked. No teasing, then; ever so carefully, Kylo slipped a finger between his lovely cheeks, then shocked laughter escaped him.

“What is this? You are open, wet and ready—is there another Kylo hiding here, I wonder? Is it somebody else?”

“You met him; he lives in my drawer,” Hux said as Kylo started rubbing at the rim; he was being as pragmatic about sexual relations as ever, which made Kylo’s cock twitch and swell. “You should know I was thinking of you,” Hux went on. “Well—I thought of you often, but ever since I sent that letter I’ve been picturing this: I knew you’d come in the dead of the night—looking possessed and savage—I skipped the part where you feel rather sorry for yourself and went straight to you claiming me again, pressed to the wall as I try to cling on, swept away by your relentless passion. I was nearing my climax when I heard the door.”

“So I was interrupting; I am dreadfully sorry.” Kylo pushed two fingers in, and met no resistance; Hux must’ve put that ivory toy to good use to be this loose; he moved his fingers in and out, trying not to drool too much over Hux’s nightshirt. He should take it slow; not just to enjoy every moment to the fullest, but to—Hux clenched around him, and he lost all coherent thought. “Which wall?” he asked, breathless.

“All that momentum for nothing,” Hux sighed, but already he was arranging himself so his back was pressed to the wooden wall as he clung onto Kylo, legs bracketing his hips. He looked splendid, yearning to be claimed; he unbuttoned his collar ardently, exposing his neck. Kylo groaned and began the complicated process of undoing his breeches.

Hux watched him for a while, then asked: “What sort of trousers are those, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“They were my grandfather’s,” Kylo explained, finally locating his erection. He attempted to pull it out, but Hux kicked his shins.

“Your last word cannot be ‘grandfather’ before we reunite; think of something more sentimental.”

Kylo bit his lips, hand on his cock; the first spurt of semen had already tainted the breeches. “The erm, serene moon was shining like God’s pocket watch as I... rode here... hoping to elude time and
“find a new eternity with you.”

Hux made a face at that. “Thank you, that was a uniquely terrible simile you used there; but it’s a good start—you rode day and night to be with me forever; I like that.”

“I missed you,” Kylo said hotly; he knew his emotions showed on his face. Hux looked at him, lashes lowered, his pupils dark and fat.

“Oh, you won’t know how much you missed me,” he whispered, “until you put that cock in me.”

“May I?”

Kylo was so hard it pained him; he was afraid that the months of celibacy had spoiled his technique, or resulted in some gruesome physical change. Hux pulled him closer as he fumbled and whispered soft words of encouragements while he lined up. He pushed inside, just the glistening, swollen tip, watching Hux’s body yield for him—how eagerly he took him in, how his thighs trembled.

Kylo realised he couldn’t go on; he’d fall apart if he rocked any deeper. Hux was dripping wet for him and so hot it almost burned. Kylo choked on a moan, pressing his head to Hux’s shoulder, hands hooked under his knees, cock hardly an inch deep—he couldn’t move; he simply couldn’t.

“Take your time,” Hux said, stroking the back of his neck as Kylo gulped down a sob.

“I can’t.”

“Shall we stop, love?”

“Please no; please, please no.”

“Should I use you like I used my toy, then? Would you like that?”

Kylo nodded, closing his eyes and holding on tighter. With a graceful, delicious motion, Hux sank down, pushing against the wall as he took him in deeper. Kylo gasped, panting for air as Hux rolled his hips.

“Could you get to your knees, please?” he asked. “I’m afraid this posture is more demanding than I have anticipated; I’d rather sit on your cock.”

Kylo dropped down immediately—which was a mistake; Hux fell with him, and Kylo’s cock nearly impaled him. They cried out at the same time, Hux with his head thrown back. Kylo got hold of his shoulders, and began saying, “I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry, are you all right, are you—”

“No, it was—quite nice,” Hux panted, adjusting himself as he straddled Kylo’s lap. He didn’t attempt to pull back. “Could you do that again? Yank me onto your cock with brute force?”

“I shouldn’t—”

“Kylo, darling, look at me.” It was hard to meet his gaze, but Kylo obeyed; he must’ve looked miserable, for Hux sighed, and kissed his forehead—he always did that when he took pity on him. “Is this what this is about, why you look so melancholy? Are you afraid that you will hurt me again?”

“I’m terrified,” Kylo confessed. Hux squeezed around him encouragingly.

“But see, you won’t; I told you you won’t; I liked it—I might’ve woken the whole household with my proclamation of it.”
Kylo laughed, but it sounded wretched. He hated to be like this; he wanted to be the dauntless traveller from Hux’s fantasy, pin him against a wall, have his way with him—but the thought of causing even the mildest discomfort was intolerable.

“See, this is pleasant,” Hux said, swaying softly, clinging onto Kylo’s shoulders as he moved gently on his cock. “We could try it like this, if you please; but I want to show you how much I trust you—remember how wanton and untamed you used to be? You never broke me; so why would you hurt me now? You said you can read minds—so read mine; should you find something that alarms you, we will stop.”

Kylo nodded, muttered yes; he couldn’t trust himself any longer, but he trusted Hux, and he trusted his own powers. Hux cupped his face, pressing their foreheads together. Kylo let his eyes fall shut as Hux began to bounce, connecting to his mind. Bright like a star, pulsing light—and there, the flares of heavenly pleasure. He made him feel like this; he pleased him well; just by being present and offering himself, letting Hux take whatever he wanted.

“You feel so nice, inside and out,” he muttered, and was met with laughter.

“You say the oddest things.”

Hux picked up the pace; Kylo let him, amazed, breathless, soaking in the radiance of his mind, counting the instances of bliss like wishing stars, until relish and joy was all that was to Hux’s thoughts. They shared the ecstasy of it—worries eased, Kylo allowed himself to enjoy the pleasures of Hux’s flesh, his heady scent, his pleading gasps.

Hux began grinding harder, slamming down at every long, wet slide. Kylo greeted him with broken grunts and moans, tempted to roll them over, rut inside him and fill him with his seed until he was soaked with it—but he wasn’t ready.

“Grab my neck,” Hux panted.

“Beg your pardon?”

“Could you kindly grab my neck, please?”

“What for?” Kylo asked, the cold dread he kept at bay coming back with an engulfing wave.

“Because you won’t squeeze until I tell you to,” Hux said, riding him in earnest. “Because I trust you, and you will release me when I want it—I want to prove to you you can do it.”

It was more than want, Kylo realised; it was a desire and a need. Hux believed in him with an almost religious zeal; Kylo didn’t know what warranted it—but he closed his fingers around Hux’s neck. He didn’t press.

“I can hold my hand right there,” he said, “but I cannot block your breath.”

Hux looked at him with adoration, pushing his body up and against him. Kylo rubbed calming circles over his neck with his thumb, making himself watch. _There: he’s safe with you; maybe next time you’ll dare to do more of what he asks; you will rebuild what you ruined; the signs of renovations will always be visible, but you’ll be happy to dwell in a place of new-found harmony._

As Hux moaned his climax, his mind erupted in a blaze that took Kylo with it, spilling into Hux helplessly, whole body trembling and breath hitching. Even in this mindless moment, his grip didn’t tighten.
“Thank you,” Hux whispered, pulling his legs up to curl into Kylo’s lap, head pressed to his chest. Kylo felt his heart grow three sizes, and pulled him closer.

“I want to be good for you,” he said.

“Just don’t forget to be good for yourself, also.” Hux nosed at his neck, licked at his chin. “Say that you’re here to stay.”

“I am, if you will have me.”

Hux hummed, pretending to contemplate the offer; he kissed the scar intersecting Kylo’s face, making his spent cock twitch and press against Hux’s milky thigh. “I want to keep you, precious stray; maybe you’ll stay if I wash you, clean your wounds, feed you well, and let you sleep in my bed.”

Kylo growled like a dog, which made Hux laugh; but as he made to stand, Hux objected, clinging to his neck. “No, hold me fast just a little longer; I thought you’d never hold me again.”

Kylo obeyed, pulling him to his chest. Hux fit so well into his lap; he should never be anywhere else. His scent was getting Kylo wild—the sharp tang of come, sweet sweat under the cleanliness. It was hard to keep his hands still on Hux’s hips and not to dip back into him, probing and teasing, finger him until he was ready to take him again; this time Kylo would try not to freeze up and indulge Hux with long, burning drags of his hot cock.

Hux huffed, wiggling around a bit. “Getting excited already? My god, your stamina. This poor thing is trying so hard to grow and fill.” He reached down and pulled at Kylo’s limp cock with an impish smile on his lips.

“It’s yours, if you want it,” Kylo said.

Hux looked at him; oh, he was tempted—he stroked it, palmed it, and Kylo could feel his intent to suck on it; just to lay his head in Kylo’s lap, suck him back to fullness, have him again, rolling around on the floor till dawn—make up for lost time—but with admirable restraint, he said, “I should really tend to that wound. What happened, really? Was there a peasant revolt? Oh, don’t laugh—that happens to lords, and you are one now!”

“I’ve always been one; that’s how it works,” Kylo corrected, tucking himself away. He didn’t miss Hux’s desolate parting gaze. He gathered him up in his arms, and got to his feet. The world seemed to spin and tilt.

“Maybe you just fell from your horse,” Hux guessed. “Frankly, love, I wouldn’t put it past you.”

“Thank you for your kind appreciation,” Kylo grunted, braving the stairs. By Jove, he was exhausted and aching all over, the pulsing wound on his back giving him hell—but it didn’t matter; he’d get to Hux’s quarters even if he had to crawl on his hands and knees. Hux’s dangling feet kicked the air, impatient by the slow process, but he didn’t express his displeasure.

“Maybe it was a lover’s quarrel,” he chatted, “and you ended up with a glass shattered against your skull.”

“How can you say that? Don’t you know that I could only ever love you?”

Hearing that satisfied Hux immensely; the sluggish smirk just merely hinted at it, but Kylo could feel it—feel everything—wondering how it was fair; he not only got Hux back—he got back more than he ever possessed: his entire being, endlessly fascinating. Kylo welcomed every knew revelation
with admiration: Hux was much less composed than he ever thought, the pretense of discipline hiding a destitute heart starved for love; no amount of caressess and confessions would ever be enough—but Kylo wanted to give him a constant supply until the day he died. Insecurities, anxieties, fears; he wanted to be there to soothe them away. Pride, self-esteem, ambition with a mean streak; they didn’t bother him; not even the calculating cruelty.

“Was leaving me behind an evidence of your fabled love?” Hux asked; Kylo could see the intent behind it—how it was just a plea for reassurance; so he held on tighter as he rounded the last flight of stairs.

“I won’t leave you ever again,” Kylo promised. “Neither will I treat you in a way that’d warrant you to scar my face or hurt me. I know that we will argue a fair amount, for I am headstrong and you are bothersome and trying—”

“Excuse me!”

“—but it will all be civilised hollering, for I wouldn’t exchange my wayward Armitage for anyone.” They had reached the third story; Kylo put him down and kissed his frowning face.

“I’m glad to hear you are of such high opinion of me,” Hux muttered, and led the way to his quarters.

Kylo followed with easy steps, wanting to jolt and dance. You have no idea of the extent of my regard; if you allotted me a lifetime, I might be able to prove my esteem. Still: I will pretend this very night is everything I have, and give you all the care and fondness I have denied these past months; my good friend, my lover, my husband: here I am again.

The door hardly opened, he closed Hux in an embrace again. His touch was still careful and reverent, mindful of the bounds of Hux’s newly claimed trust.

“I see you’re intent on distracting me,” Hux noted as he turned on the lamp. Kylo stilled, looking around the room, arms tight around Hux’s torso. He feared to find it in disarray, to be faced with the evidence of his deplorable temper—but it was as orderly as ever, only some scattered papers and unwashed cups bearing evidence of restless nights. And there: on the wall, his framed drawings were still displayed—the portrait of Millicent, the still lifes they made together, and Hux’s selection of his favourite illustrations.

“You kept them,” he whispered into Hux’s neck with marvel, who scoffed.

“No more explanation was offered; silent and compliant, Kylo was led into the bedroom, and watched Hux open the tap to fill the copper tub. He stood in the line of light pouring in from the sitting room, suddenly self-conscious, thankful for the shadows. He was reminded of their first night together; he was just this timid and awkward, wondering constantly what made Hux want him.

“Strip, please,” Hux told him. He obeyed wordlessly, peeling away the begrimed layers of once flamboyant clothes. When his chest was revealed, Hux hissed with sympathy, and got a candle to inspect him better. The scratches over his heart were ragged and swollen.

“It was my enemy who did it,” he said.

Hux nodded solemnly, setting the candle aside. “The magpie.”

“You remember?”
“This may shock you, but I do pay attention when we talk. Off with this shirt. What is this?”

His back was on display; Kylo had no notion of how it looked now, but he gathered it wasn’t a pleasant sight.

“You don’t have to deal with it,” he said hastily. “We could call Dr. Finn on the morrow—”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Get in the tub.”

Kylo followed the instruction, feeling clumsy and blundering. The tub was too small for him and he had to pull his legs to his chest. Hux was searching for something in the cabinet where he kept his oils, soaps, and towels. All Kylo could detect from his mood was boundless wrath and thirst for revenge. Oh, Snoke, you’re doomed, he thought, knowing that Hux couldn’t do anything against such a being—but still, the immensity of his vindictiveness was startling, stunning, and in all honesty, arousing.

Hux emerged with a battered tin box that contained gauze, needles, tweezers, yarn and plying, and various vials: he picked one labelled as picric acid, inspected it, and put it back with a satisfied nod.

“Are you confident in your surgical abilities?” Kylo asked him after he failed to assert whether Hux had doubts, whose mind was still preoccupied with bloody thoughts about magpies.

“I was a soldier,” he mumbled. “You have to make do until the battle surgeon arrives to the field.”

He met Kylo’s eyes. “I removed the bullet from my leg myself and crawled through the mud of the jungle back to camp.”

Kylo couldn’t help noting, “You still have a limp.”

“A tolerable alternative to dying and having your corpse torn apart by jackals, wouldn’t you agree?”

He placed the kit on the tub’s brim and pulled off his soiled nightshirt. Kylo looked over his pale, slight frame; he was in awe of it; oh, that such a scrawny body could contain so much strength and rage, but so much tenderness as well; Hux was vulnerable, unbreakable, and Kylo loved the survivor in him just as much as the retaliator.

“Move over,” Hux said as he sat onto the brim of the tub. He put his feet in the water, knees pressed to Kylo’s back. Their bony probing was an odd reassurance; Kylo began to relax, tense shoulders dropping and a sigh escaping him. Hux laughed. “There, there. Hand me the sponge; thank you. Now, please—speak; spare me no detail.”

Kylo told him of his misfortunes until the water went cold and they needed a refill. Hux was a good listener, who had no unnecessary comments to offer. His lithe hands worked on cleaning and patching up the scars, bathing him, washing his hair—Kylo accepted the care; it was something Hux offered gladly. He told him about the palace of Theed, the magpie’s sly trick, how he outsmarted him; the regrettable loss of the watch—the gain of his life; the gytrash-ride, and his past: what he had only mentioned in passing, from leaving the States to their first meeting and first parting, the years spent yearning for his company.

Hux dried his hair with a towel, and kissed the place between his shoulder blades.

“What fair is fair; I have left you as well.”

“Don’t compare those events; you never hurt me—and I never realised how hurt you were.”

“Before you disappeared, you told me my orphan friend was never real; that the tutor who seduced
me was a duke in disguise; and here you are: lost and found. We can never go back to the way things were; there is no point in remembrance, but a new beginning is possible.”

“You were the one who seduced me,” Kylo muttered as Hux helped him out of the tub.

“Anyhow,” Hux replied, “I should have suspected you had blue blood: that arrogance, that temper, the eloquence—also, teachers don’t go around with a nose like yours.”

“It is certainly...big,” Kylo allowed.

Hux ran a finger over it, from base to tip, minding the wound, cross-eyed with concentration. “It’s so much more than big; it betrays that you’re of Naboo—the male line, of course. Your brows mock me for not seeing their secret sooner; the beauty if your face says: how could you think me anything but an Amidala of the House Naberrie? Kylo, you outrank me.”

“It changes nothing,” Kylo said; he knew it to be a false assessment. Here they were, standing by the tub, nude figures in the light, both of them biding the time before going to sleep. The bed stood waiting, a monstrous thing watching them—if they gave into the temptation of soft pillows and feather duvets, lay together cuddled, dawn would creep upon them; a new day would arrive unobserved, where they’d have to address all the things left unsaid, and plan for an uncertain future.

Kylo felt like they could trick time if they just stayed in place; he got Hux’s hand, interlaced their fingers. Decisions would have to be made, and plenty of them—but as long as they made them together, they were not in trouble.

“Maybe I should swear my allegiance to resolve the imbalance of our positions,” Hux offered, squeezing his hand; before Kylo could interrupt, he went on, “Get on my knees, that is; offer you my sword—and kiss yours.”

Kylo looked him over. “That’s no sword you have; it’s hardly a dagger.”

“How dare you,” Hux gasped.

“I can say whatever I please, and I will say this: I love that little pecker—I wish to feel it in me.”

“You want me to stab you, my lord?”

“Repeatedly,” Kylo said, leaning in. Hux kissed him; it was divine, it was holy—it spoke of devotion and loyalty, blessed sentiments of a true ally. Kylo cupped his face, tasted hallelujah on his tongue. He liked to imagine that their story would always end like this, in every century and every version of reality, united in a burning kiss.

“Ready?” Hux whispered against his lips. That short word startled him; he wanted to have Hux—that was certain; but whether he was ready for it perplexed him; being claimed by Hux had always been a reward—why would he deserve such a splendid prize now? He shook his head, his words trapped in his throat: I wish I could accept everything you give to me with no objection and no guilt.

“Later, then,” Hux assessed, and he nodded curtly. Hux gave him a parting kiss, smiling, and stepped aside.

Kylo watched with a heavy heart as he got a fresh nightgown from the linen chest. He didn’t want to go to bed, but standing around naked wasn’t any better. The stitches were itching and stinging, a conflicted arousal was twisting his guts, and his heart was fighting with his mind: say yes to the things you desire and you are yet to earn the consummation of your wishes.

“Here,” Hux said, offering a nightgown. Kylo recognised the buttons and the simple collar: it was his
own. It had been washed and ironed, but had been sitting in that chest too long, creased along the folds and having a too-strong scent of dried lavender. He could relate—he felt like an item of clothing himself, pulled out from a drawer after months of no wear, trying to find his shape again.

He dressed slowly while Hux nestled into the bed with a content sigh. What an idyllic picture he cut, surrounded by all that heavenly softness, waiting for someone to hold him through the night—how vain his hopes seemed, even with Kylo so near: this bed had been empty for months.

“Has there been someone else?” Kylo blurted; it was a question he had no right to ask, but one that burned him all the more for it. Which was worse: if Hux was unfaithful to a memory that didn’t oblige him in any way, or if he’d been just as lonely as Kylo and shared his pain?

“Mm?” he murmured as Kylo climbed into bed, humbled on his hands and knees. He straddled Hux’s hips, the duvet taut between them.

“What were you up to while I was away?”

Hux was unbearably beautiful, mouth pink and swollen from kissing, eyes lazy, thoughts languid, fragile hands thrown over his head; Kylo realised any answer would hurt him, and readied himself for a sore sting.

“The same old parade,” Hux told him dismissively. “You know now what it is like to manage an estate—keeps one busy; and besides, I had my inventions to keep me occupied, and a new season for socialising started.”

“I see,” Kylo said, cautiously relieved. Hux tilted his head, finally realising Kylo’s intent.

“I went to London,” he said.

“I see,” Kylo repeated, but Hux continued.

“It was March, I believe. I told myself I was done waiting; I gathered it was apparent you wanted to be forgotten: you had broken the engagement, forwarded no correspondence, and never even sent for your belongings; you , who blamed me for not writing a letter to a childhood friend! How ridiculous it was, I thought, to be holding out hope for you. Armitage, I told myself, admit at once that you have been deserted; there is no honour in denying it any longer. Preserve your heart, put your tears in a jar; go to a molly house.”

“I see,” Kylo said for a third time. Hux got up to his elbows; a singular passion was lighting his features—he was flushed, and his mind was in upheaval.

“Do you care to know what happened there?” he asked; Kylo nodded before he could think better of it. It’d hurt—oh, it would kill him—but it was all his doing: he deserved the punishment of the details.

“There I sat,” Hux said, “on my frequented settee—long abandoned, but now accommodating me once more; perfumed flowers in my hair, half-dressed in velvet; I reeked of money, and I looked so easy to persuade. They kept sending me drinks and I drowned the last drop; then came the cocaine; but I kept saying no to the sweetest offers—kept brushing off hands, turning away eager gentlemen, never once smiled or laughed. I felt like a god made of ice; my worshippers left me offerings—but I found none of them worthy. Daybreak came; the halls emptied; I went back to my hotel and pleasured myself in solitude, angry tears streaming down my face. I called your name when at long-last I climaxed, feeling hollow and defeated.”

“I wish I heard your call,” Kylo said. He nuzzled Hux’s neck—put his weight on him, pressed him
down to the pillows. He wanted to encompass him entirely; hide him from anybody who would desire him. Hux stroked his back, fingers stepping over his injuries like light spider-legs.

“The next day,” he whispered into Kylo’s hair, “I went to a bath. I knew which room to visit, and once I was there, how to take my pick. There was a student there—from which university, I cannot remember—a student and an athlete; broad like you, and god, was he handsome and eager. I took him for lunch; he had never dined in a London restaurant before; he had the same look in his eyes as you did in Millcote, wondering at the marvels of a fancied metropolis. I told myself I’d take this boy to Florence and Paris, see how he liked Athens and Vienna. I invited him to my hotel room. How he kissed and stroked me—but never tasted my lips, I didn’t allow it, and I was fully clothed; I told myself it had nothing to do with you—that these were my own boundaries. Half an hour; a whole; there was no gain to his efforts—I couldn’t get it up, and had no desire to deal with his own problem. I thanked him for his wasted time, and sent him on his way.”

“Poor boy,” Kylo said, darkly satisfied. He kissed Hux’s neck, felt him shiver—it was easy as that, but not anybody would know how to please him: to just graze their teeth over the jugular, bite down lightly—how to accompany it with a roll of their hips, a slide of palms over the arched chest. Kylo long thought himself the master of Hux’s pleasure. For all his inexperience, he’d been trained to do it proper. Nobody could replace him, not ever; they’d be substitutes, puppets. Jealousy was wasted on them.

“A rather unfortunate consequence was Millicent’s reaction,” Hux mused as he got a handful of Kylo’s hair. “She saw the student leave—of course, she knows nothing about birds and bees, and bless her soul, she thought the student was interviewed to be my new husband and her new teacher—as if these things always go together. She was in a riot, let me tell you.” He tugged at a thick, long uncut lock, and noted, “You keep growing your hair, my Samson; I’d loath to take you to a barber, but soon it’ll be past your shoulders.”

Kylo ignored that last comment and how his scalp tingled, thrill racing though him; he calmed his breath, resisted the desire to demand another yank, for there were more important matters at hand. He knew that if anything happened to Millicent, he could tell it from one look at Hux—but still, he half-dreaded to ask, “How fares she?”

“As one would expect,” Hux said, tucking silken strands behind Kylo’s ears. “Understandably, she is upset with your leave; but I wouldn’t say she’s overly devastated, with so much to distract her. I told her about your letter; she was certain of your return, and pressed me to send an answer.”

“You weren’t planning to?”

“I didn’t know what I wanted, and what to say to get it.” Hux flicked an ear, contemplative. Kylo delighted in all the probing, exploring touches while trying not to lose himself to them; he was being reclaimed, and took pride in being deemed worthy to return to. Hux had abandoned the possibility of new conquests for him; he wanted to be hospitable and accommodating. “Would you have come if I never wrote to you?”

“I wouldn’t have,” Kylo confessed.

Hux blinked in surprise, then a proud smile graced his lips. His eyes were shining in the half-dark—the look in them hadn’t changed: he regarded Kylo the same way as he did on the day he proposed. Kylo couldn’t comprehend how it was possible; how could Hux’s love be unaltered, but still different—somehow stronger and clearer, now that they shared a new understanding of each other.

“We should thank her, then, for demanding you back,” Hux said. Kylo nodded, distracted, then nodded again when at last he managed to comprehend simple English sentences.
“We shall,” he announced, sitting up but still straddling Hux’s hips.

There: that fond, warm smile was back. “I didn’t mean right away; it’s rather late, I’m afraid.”

“Oh; of course,” Kylo muttered, crestfallen.

“On second thought,” Hux said as he got up to his elbows, “I’d imagine it’d make a nice surprise—and she’d be much affronted if I waited with it till the morning. What do you say, should we go visit?”

“Please; I wish to see her—I can’t rest till I do.”

Hux didn’t understand his anxiety, but obliged him. He didn’t complain when Kylo all but tugged him to his feet, and was kind enough to present Kylo with a dressing gown. He dressed hastily, ready to reckon with the last of the magpie’s tauntings. Hux helped him tie the belt, got a candelabrum, and led him through the corridor, hand in hand.

*You always make me feel welcome*, Kylo thought as he gently squeezed Hux’s fingers, looking at his weary profile in the candlelight. *You make me feel like I belong — here, with you and your family.*

Hux opened Millicent’s door, and Kylo hesitated; after eluding Millicent for so long, it seemed rather presumptuous to surprise her—wake her from the very dreams where Kylo always managed to escape.

“Go on; it’s all right,” Hux said softly. “She’ll be glad to see you.”

Kylo braced himself and stepped over the threshold, pulling Hux after him. He so rarely ventured here: the nursery was Millicent’s private abode; it felt wrong to step inside without her invitation. The door that led to Unamo’s chamber was open; Kylo got to his tiptoes, lest he be overheard. The dolls and toys stood silent witness to his attempt to seek forgiveness. He nearly collided with the vanity table, then sidestepped books abandoned on the floor; finally, he located the bed: in the middle, curled up, was a small figure biting on her thumb. Kylo halted, overcome.

Millicent’s consciousness was immensely vast. What he knew of her previously was like mistaking a tree for the woods: a wilderness emerged as his senses reached out for her. He was lost in it, a stray wanderer in a whispering forest. How would it sound like after it was awakened, drenched in sunlight?

“It’s all right,” Hux repeated, and handed him the candelabrum. He walked to Millicent’s bed, his joy radiant—Kylo was reluctant to bask in it; Hux was so sure that this reunion would make his sister happy—but what if he miscalculated? Kylo stood awkwardly as Hux sat on the edge of Millicent’s bed, touching her braided hair. “Millie, Millie,” he called. Kylo could almost hear leaves stir and branches stretching as her dreams began to fade.

“Mm?” Millicent mumbled, reaching for Hux blindly. Kylo’s lips parted, then he closed them tightly as he beheld the entire span of Millicent’s consciousness. So this was what it felt like to be in the company of a fellow witch: to look at power—and have it look back. Millicent’s eyes opened; light shifted over them—a cat’s eyes in the darkness.

“My—” Millicent mumbled, reaching for Hux blindly. Kylo’s lips parted, then he closed them tightly as he beheld the entire span of Millicent’s consciousness. So this was what it felt like to be in the company of a fellow witch: to look at power—and have it look back. Millicent’s eyes opened; light shifted over them—a cat’s eyes in the darkness.

“Look there,” Hux said, pulling her up so she could recline over his lap. He handled her with such tenderness Kylo never felt before; a blood-bond; a brother’s love. He understood completely why Millicent was willing to kill for it, to do anything to preserve and protect it. Her sleepy gaze found Kylo; her pupils rounded. *Brother, brother,* her mind supplied; he was being recognised as family—Millicent didn’t deem it necessary to differentiate between in-law or relation, and reached for him just
as she reached for Hux.

“Mr. Ren!” she cried, lips turning upside down. Kylo rushed to gather her up in his arms, the candelabrum abandoned on a table; he held her, rocked her; she sobbed into his chest. Hux embraced the both of them, protective and tender.

“Hush now, hush,” he said, rubbing circles over her shoulders. “Don’t wake the poor Mademoiselle.”

“He’s back,” Millicent bawled, clutching Kylo’s dressing gown in her tiny fists. She took a couple shaky breaths, and met his gaze; Kylo wanted to say a thousand things, but all he could think was I'm here to stay, I'm never ever going away. “How I missed you!” Millicent said. “Oh god, oh god —”

“I hear you nearly got a new teacher,” Kylo said, giving a quick wink to Hux, who scoffed.

“Armitage attempted to tutor me himself,” Millicent complained, “it was nothing but Latin and arithmetics, and he sneaked some chemistry into the curriculum; it was dreadful, positively dreadful —”

“Give me some credit: now you know the basic concepts of hydrogenation,” Hux said. Millicent burrowed herself deeper into Kylo’s chest, as if she was trying to get away from the awful subject. Kylo chuckled, rather choked-off, and patted her back.

“You won’t ever have to catalyze platinum,” he promised.

“She might,” Hux said, a tad offended. “One never knows. Besides, I doubt I can employ you again.”

“You must!” Millicent cried, then repeated it in a whisper. “You must, please.”

“It would be below Mr. Ren’s position—”

“Good thing Mr. Ren is eccentric enough to enjoy teaching,” Kylo announced. As much as he appreciated Hux’s concern, he wanted everything to be the same again: and with Millicent clinging to his neck and Hux near, it seemed like a real possibility. “Consider it a peculiar trait of my personality.”

Hux raised his hands in relieved surrender, and Millicent cheered. One matter less to be resolved—a hundred left. Kylo had left Theed palace in an understandable hurry; his servants had been abandoned. He’d have to find a way to contact, pay, and release them—and after what had happened in the village, it’d be unwise to return there in the flesh. He wished he could: he told Millicent about the library and the garden, and the new spells to be learned.

Hux listened to their conversation half-reclined on the bed, pleased to see his little family reunited and making grand plans. Kylo wanted to take him to Naboo; offer him the cool shelter of marble halls once the worst of the summer heat reached Stormfield; take him to stolls in the garden—he thought Hux would appreciate its orderliness. He dared not to think of the various uses of bedrooms in Millicent’s presence, but he knew he’d live to see Hux spread on those chiffon covers, fully naked and waiting; they’d transform a cloister of past solitude into a temple of love, filled with chants of ecstasy, even the birds on the wallpaper singing of paradise and bliss.

The present occasion demanded celibacy and restraint: Hux dozed off atop the covers listening to Kylo’s tales, and he didn’t have the heart to wake him and drag him back to their pleasure den. Millicent got heavy in his arms, and he began yawning; they ended up all in a pile, nestled close and
warm. Sleep found Kylo easily, despite how he dreaded it; but the future looked brighter now—
kinder; tranquil.

Around dawn he was awakened by the violent screams of Brendol Hux. Well, well: there was one
member of the family he didn’t miss. He groaned as he opened his tired eyes, and met Millicent’s
gaze in the dark. He sensed that she was alert, and he didn’t miss how she was biting on her thumb
again.

“Are you afraid?” he whispered.

“He can’t hurt me,” she said, “and he’ll never lay a hand on Armitage.”

Kylo took a deep breath as the horrid yelling continued; he remembered how it used to freeze his
blood and make his skin crawl, but now it was almost satisfying to hear it; to know that Brendol got
what he deserved; he could sense that Millicent shared the sentiment. The sounds of Brendol’s agony
were a lullaby from hell.

“You must know I would never cause Armitage any harm again,” Kylo said softly.

“Of course you won’t; otherwise I’d put you in the attic with him.”

She closed her eyes. Kylo lay awake for the rest of the night.

* * *

Breakfast the next morning seemed a dream. There he sat, surrounded by familiar faces—including
the Roman emperors, who overlooked the dining table. How gaily Unamo had embraced him,
calling him all kinds of names for leaving, but oh so glad to have him back! How cordially poor
Mitaka had greeted him, although he was daunted by his presence! And Mrs. Mitaka—clasping his
hand, shedding big tears, full of complaints of how her cooking had gone to waste without his
flattering voracity! The family had been served devilled kidneys, bacon rashers and eggs, cold meat,
game, and fish to celebrate Kylo’s return—anything that the pantry and a quick trip to the village
would yield.

Kylo looked at the laden table covered with damask, the fine crystal glasses, the porcelain and the
silverware; a sorry collection compared to Theed’s riches—but he wouldn’t exchange the company
for anything. Millicent chatted and chirruped easily, helping herself to generous servings, while Hux
nibbled on delicate portions, his attention wandering to Kylo. He smiled around small mouthful of
meats, mischievous eyes creasing. He looked delectable; Kylo wanted to climb under the table and
open his trousers, mouth at the linen until he was allowed to get a better taste. He’d lap at Hux’s
straining cock, be obedient and docile as he drooled over it; he’d even keep his hands to himself,
clased behind his back, and lower his lashes, undeserving to see Hux come undone for him. He’d
drink up the creamy, hot seed, and say thank you, Armitage. Surely, Hux would pet him; tell him
he’d done well. A most tempting fantasy; one that, regretfully, could never become reality with so
many people around.

As if he sensed that Kylo wished for less servants present, Thanisson rushed in, breathless, cheeks
bright red and hay in his hair. He looked miserable as he hastily bowed; straightening up, he caught
sight of Kylo and his face fell.

“State your business, please,” Hux said, knocking a silver spoon to a hard-boiled egg. “If it can wait,
then do wait until we’re finished with breakfast.”

Thanisson watched the shell break and flinched. “It cannot wait, sir,” he said. “There’s a beast in the
stable."

“A beast?” Hux asked, amused but nonplussed.

“That’s my horse,” Kylo said.

Thanisson pointed at the door whence he came, as if they could see through it and spot Supreme in the stable. “That’s not a horse!”

“Please, don’t be rude to Mr. Ren’s horse.” Hux put his hand over Kylo’s and stroked his knuckles. “I’m sure it’s a fine breed, dear.”

There was a momentary pause, filled with Thanisson’s panting, the clinking of cutlery, and Millicent sipping on her tea, peering at the garden but avoiding everybody’s gaze.

“It’s courting Finalizadora,” Thanisson announced on a solemn tone.

Hux frowned. “Well; is she wooed?”

“I’m afraid very much so.”

Millicent’s head shot up at that, a brilliant grin on her lips. “Will we have baby horses?” He turned to Hux, and pleaded, “Please, please, I want a filly! I’d take such good care of it—”

“I’m not going near the spawn of that thing,” Thanisson mumbled.

During the ensuing, rather explosive conversation where Millicent begged for a stead, Thanisson threatened to resign and Hux tried to placate both of them, Kylo gazed at the line of trees hiding the stable from sight, and couldn’t help but feel a jealous pang. How long till Hux and him could unite again with animal abandon? He was ashamed to think so much of Hux’s cock—modest but thick, probably lying on his left thigh now, smooth, flaccid. He wished to service it; his restraint only brought more frustration.

His situation didn’t improve as the day progressed. Hux decided to refuse callers and visitors, and oversaw Millicent’s lesson in the parlour. He was lounging on a loveseat, with letters at hand he neglected to read, ogling Kylo instead with a satisfaction so immense Kylo found it nearly impossible to focus on literature. If it was just the two of them, with no-one to interrupt their leisure, Kylo would ask him to touch himself. He was still convinced that some kind of danger lurked in the act; how riveting it would be to see Hux play with his cock absent-mindedly, making pretense to be occupied with the letters as he stroked and groped. Kylo would join the game: he’d remain sitting on the ground, as he was now, legs crossed, but his hands busily readying his arse, fingering himself open until he was moaning with the need to have a wet cock in him. Hux would call for him and bend him over the armrest; we’ll never be alone again, he’d say, not as long as we live.

“Sorry to bother you, sir,” Mitaka said, peering inside the parlour and jolting Kylo from his reveries. “There’s a constable to see you.”

“No visitors,” Hux said with an imperious air. He made a show of turning a letter, as if inspecting its back was of the utmost importance.

Mitaka hesitated, much agitated. “I’m afraid he says it’s urgent.”

“I can’t remember committing any crimes in recent memory,” Hux retorted. “How urgent can it be? Send him away.”
“He has a warrant.”

Hux tsked. “Outrageous!”

“What’s wrong?” Millicent chimed in, wide-eyed and afraid. Hux got up from the loveseat, sparing an apologetic look at Kylo, then turning to his sister.

“It’s all right, dove; back to Herodotus—I’ll return shortly.”

Kylo and Millicent watched him leave; a glance at each other, a nod, then they rushed to the door and got to the gallery to eavesdrop. Kylo was tense, but panic didn’t manage to take hold of him: he could feel Hux’s assurance that a misunderstanding was at play, and he could detect the police officer’s feelings: he was deathly afraid but disdainful of his own emotions. As he and Millicent crept closer to the barrier to peer down the hall, he could hear his thoughts clearly.

_We hung the witches and buried superstition with them, a hundred years, a hundred again, they never came back, the witches are dead, the witches are all hanged and dead._

With a sinking feeling, he realised it wasn’t Hux the constable was here for.

“Mr. Ren had left my employ months ago,” Hux was saying; he stood with a hand on his hips, commanding. The constable was a robust man with a hulking frame and wide shoulders, but he was shorter than Hux, and had to crane his neck to look him in the eyes.

“That is all the more worrying, my lord,” he said in a hushed tone. “He might turn up uninvited.”

“Can you tell me who identified him?”

“The Venerable Chattoway.”

“Traitor,” Kylo mouthed. Millicent peered at him anxiously; she was holding onto the barrier’s columns with such force her knuckles turned white.

“Are you meaning to imply that a bishop of Christian faith vouches he saw a witch in the shape of my former dependant?”

The constable brushed his moustache self-consciously. “He’s not the only one, my lord; but he’s our crown witness. I have this document signed by over a hundred attestants. The town is in upheaval. Workers refuse to return to the factories, even the pubs are empty—everybody is on the streets. We fear a riot, your lordship.”

Hux pulled a face at that. “I fail to see how it is my business. You cannot search my grounds based on superstition; that would a most detestable, unlawful violation of my privacy. My lawyer will hear of this.”

Something akin to pity flashed in the constable’s consciousness, swiftly silenced. “Your lawyer is among the witnesses.”

“I refuse to believe it; he’s a sensible man!” Hux exclaimed.

“So am I, my lord,” the constable said candidly. Kylo tasted his fear again, tart, bitter. “Yesterday night I was awakened by my wife’s desperate cries. As I got to the window, I saw a man jumping from roof to roof, riding a feral horse, and heard his crazed laughter. A lunatic, I told myself; but such feat couldn’t be executed by any ordinary man—my wife swore on her life she saw the horse breathe fire. I’ll have to search the stable.”
“The hell you do,” Kylo whispered. He got hold of Millicent’s shoulder, and guided her away; she kept glancing back, afraid that Hux wouldn’t stand his ground on his own. Kylo understood his game better: the pretence of an insulted lord—it’d be near impossible for the constable to search the premises while he acted so offended, or he’d risk dismaying a servant of the crown. It gave Kylo enough time to steal to the laboratory, find his way to the adjoining sitting room, with Millicent tagging along. He opened the window: a brisk breeze got in, and the bright leaves of the sycamore reached for him like tiny hands.

“We’ll need to get to the stable before the constable does,” Kylo explained.

Millicent looked at the tree then shook her head, the curls of hair auburn hair flying everywhere. “I’m not climbing.”

“But you didn’t try to climb last time, did you now? You have attempted to fly—and you’re so much stronger now. I trust you to do it; can you trust me?” He stepped on the windowsill with urgency, and reached for her. His eyes were begging: come with me. He believed they could descend without accident; but should he be mistaken, the tree was there to catch them.

Millicent wavered a moment longer; she looked over her shoulders once again, a pout fixed on her lips. She wanted to be near Hux, should he need her uncanny abilities—but already, she placed her hand in Kylo’s palm, putting her confidence in him blindly. Kylo pulled her up and offered his back for a piggy ride. Millicent held on tight, squeezing her eyes shut.

Kylo looked down into the garden. It wasn’t too big of a fall, but it was enough to shatter their bones and give them concussions. He had a horrible doubt in his heart: maybe with the magpie caged, his abilities were locked away as well—except for what he stole back.

Nonsense, he told himself. You have summoned the gytrash, and now you will hide it. You are your own master; Snoke can govern you no longer. Jump: you will float. Go: Hux needs you.

If only it was easy as that—he couldn’t chance being discovered: one glimpse at him would betray Hux’s lies. He would have to attempt transformation for the first time in his life; he and Snoke had discussed it at length. The question was: could he trust his teachings?

He calmed his troubled mind as Millicent urged him to jump. He spread his arms gracefully, as a bird opens its wings. He felt the sunlight on his skin, listened to the rustle of leaves and took in the rich smell of spring; all was connected—all was within; nature and him, submerged, connected in one consciousness. Hear me now, magpie; you have stolen the shape of my grandfather, the crow—I’m stronger than you two: I am a raven.

He felt his fingers curl into talons, his bones growing lighter; he couldn’t wait until the transformation was complete. With a shriek, he threw himself into the air.

A beat of wings and a too-fast heart.

Half-human and half-animal, he landed safely on the ground.

“That wasn’t too bad,” he announced, relieved.

“Your voice—!” Millicent gasped.

“Never mind that,” Kylo croaked.

“You have feathers in your hair! Your eyes—they’re round, and all black!”
“Don’t be afraid of my eyes; these are mine. Come now, come; to the stable.”

He got Millicent’s hand, sharp fingers curling around her wrist, and pulled her behind him, hurried, before he’d turn completely.

Apparently, Thanisson had taken pity on the goat and let him roam free before Supreme could hurt him: they found him grazing peacefully behind the stable.

“Stay with him,” Kylo told Millicent. He approached the gate; walking gave him some difficulty—his knees were bending backwards, and his back was hunched. He stepped inside, anxiously flapping his wings. The smell of soiled hay was overwhelming; Kylo cursed Thanisson for cowardly abandoning his duties. Finalizadora was in her stall, peering out of the window and leisurely wagging her tail, not disturbed by the monstrous figure creeping through the shadows, still recognising the human in it. Kylo was relieved to find her in a decent state and looked around for her seducer. Supreme called for him with a cheery neigh: it had located a wheelbarrow full of hay.

“There you are,” Kylo said, but not on a human tongue. Supreme raised its head; it was easier to listen to a raven. Its eyes were burning in the halflight, crimson and bright. With his wings raised, Kylo advanced. “I have no time for spells and chalk circles, chanting and blood magic—will you obey me anyway? You came when I called—but you came on your free will; you rode fast when I asked—now I ask you this: appear ordinary. Hide under your own skin; may the ember of your eyes look like coal, may the fire of your breath be no more than mist. I cannot ask you to shrink—but you shall look less frightening.”

Supreme looked at him, too thoughtful to be mistaken for a horse—but with the next blink, its eyes shone black and clean. Kylo sensed Hux and the constable approaching; he submitted to the alteration of his form, chanting secret words and turning on his heels—as he spinned, he transformed into a raven proper.

A few beat if his wings—he got up in the air, and out of the narrow window just as the humans entered. He soared triumphant, half-lost to the joy of it; he felt his consciousness slipping, and thought of Millicent, staying connected to his humanity through their connection. He came to a rest on her shoulder and cawed, proud of his successful transfiguration. Millicent regarded him with a scowl.

“I’m awfully sorry to bring this up,” she said, “but you have left your clothes behind. It can get rather awkward.”

“What is that?” they heard the constable exclaim.


“A quite well-dressed stable boy, is he?”

“And as you can see, he tends to ordinary horses—no kelpies or unicorns here, I’m afraid. Was this the one you saw?”

“It’s about the size of it, and has the same colouring.”

“Well: it’s a shire horse, cold-blooded; I doubt you could see it jumping and bouncing even if you threatened it with a branding iron.”

Kylo couldn’t make out the constable’s muttered answer, but he sensed he wasn’t convinced. Hux had refused to let him search the house, despite the warrant, which he had declared an unlawful scribble. The constable thought of other things: whispers about a body in the wych elm tree; a
rumour how Brendol’s coffin was much too easy to lift; how Cardinal vanished without farewell to his friends in Millcote, never responding to their letters; later: the governess who left, but was never seen leaving, and now: this fabled teacher. He hadn’t formed an opinion about witches—the thought was too terrible—but one thing he had realised: he was lucky if he made it out of Stormfield alive.

He said a few parting words and hastened to leave. As he rounded the building, taking comfort in the weight of his revolver hidden inside his frock coat, he saw a little girl and a black goat. The girl’s eyes were dark and wise, and a ruffled raven was perched on her shoulder.

He looked at her and made up his mind about witches.

* * *

Kylo was overwrought when he got back to his old room. He had come here in the morning to fetch his clothing; now he paced along the packed boxes and stacks of books, leaving feathers all around, shedding his animal form but not quite able to regain human shape. He had four limbs, but heavy wings clung to his arms; his fingers were sharp, his legs bent as if broken, and his naked body was covered in hideous goosebumps.

“You’re stuck,” Maratelle observed. Kylo shivered and glanced at her; she was sitting on the bed, ghostly-pale and wounded, but as ordinary as he had ever seen her.

“How do I get unstuck?” he gritted.

Maratelle inclined her head; it rolled slowly over her sagged shoulder. She was a memory of a corpse, nothing more. “How would I know?”

“Don’t play coy; you must’ve helped your daughter a hundred times over.”

“I have never mastered metamorphoses myself. This is what I can say: it doesn’t look like it comes naturally to you—it’s a mastered ability; so master it.”

“You’re not being very helpful,” Kylo retorted, but an idea was already forming in his head. He set out to search for his drawing kit.

“Why should I help you?” Maratelle asked lazily.

“Don’t you ever want to rest in peace?” He located the box of charcoals. He got a piece, crouched down on the ground, and began drawing on the parquetry.

“You don’t have the power to grant me peace.”

“What does, pray?”

“Mercy.”

Kylo’s hand faltered as he finished the circle. He peered up at Maratelle, forever suffering and desolate.

“Maybe you’ll have it one day in the distant future.”

“And maybe one day in the distant future, you’ll prove to be a proper witch,” she said.

Kylo scoffed and grinned at her, surprised by the friendly jab. Maratelle smiled back.

The door opened and Hux entered the room; he appeared to be fuming, but as he perceived the
monstrous figure of Kylo kneeling in the circle, he forgot about the bothersome constable altogether.

He looked him over and asked, “What have you gotten yourself into this time?”

“What does it look like?” Kylo mumbled, stealing a glance at Maratelle. Her mirth had fled; being in Hux’s presence was a cruel reminder of her past crimes, and as remorse fought with the denial of her wrongs, her figure twisted and distorted.

“It looks like trouble,” Hux said as he approached him, the shadow of a wych elm framing his figure. He crouched down outside the circle; Maratelle’s laboured breathing echoed in the air.

“I’ve been careless,” Kylo said. Hux reached out to touch him; he recoiled out of instinct. He felt revolting and grotesque, wearing the stigmas of so many miscalculations: marred by the magpie, disfigured by the hubris of haste magic. Hux tried again; cupped his face, looked into his raven-eyes, and ran his thumb over the deep wound.

“It’s going to be all right,” he said.

“I spied on the constable’s mind: he has terrible suspicions. What if he comes back to ruin us? Wouldn’t that be my fault?”

“Darling Kylo; come what may, I won’t blame you.” With that, Hux kissed him; there was gratefulness in it—he was glad that Kylo had come back to him in such a hurry that it caused a scene; that he employed dangerous occultism to help him; that he was here. He grasped his arm, not minding the feathers; he tasted his lips, and had no care if this love was going to doom him.

Kylo returned the kiss, encouraged; he whispered secret, orphic words into it, but the plainest of them all—my beloved—had more power than the half-muttered spells. He and Hux were forever bonded; he could always pull at that bond and find a way back to himself.

He was fully human when the kiss was broken; Hux stroked his face, and noted, “Oh, what a pity—you made quite a handsome beast.”

Kylo spent the rest of the afternoon in the solacing shelter of the library with Millicent, while Hux retreated to his study to pen strongly worded letters to his lawyer. There was no mention of the constable; to occupy his mind as well as to entertain his upset student, Kylo opted for a drawing lesson. Mademoiselle Unamo was nominated as a model: she was to sit in the window recess and look regal, hair let down and an embroidered shawl arranged over her narrow shoulders. Millicent complimented her by comparing her to Athena; it got a smile on Unamo’s lips Kylo was eager to capture.

“A triangle drawn from the centre of the head through either side of the nose will establish a good proportion for the breadth of the mouth,” he advised, showing Millicent how to measure it. She had the sketchbook in her lap, comfortable in a velvet armchair; Kylo stood behind her like a whispering muse. “Define the contours; we will build up the tones gradually, but you can add the basic lines of texture now. Layer them cautiously—like so; very good.”

“Don’t forget to make me pretty,” Unamo said.

“Please don’t speak,” Kylo replied, eyeing the portrait critically. “We’re attempting to capture your lips.”

“Many do,” Unamo winked.
“The Mademoiselle’s fairness is wasted on me,” Millicent complained as her charcoal pencil flew over the paper. “You would draw her so much better!”

“We’re not here to hone my talents, but yours,” Kylo said, “although I must confess I’m in need of some practice as well.”

“You should apply to the Royal Academy of Arts,” Millicent advised, peering up at him, neck craned. Kylo chuckled, and petted her hair.

“If they will have me—maybe; but I’d need to move to London.”

Millicent looked back at her drawing, and went on saying, “Armitage would go with you, I’m sure; when I’m sent to school, you should ask him to go. He has many acquaintances who would gladly offer lodgings; you’d be quite comfortable, and he’d enjoy his stay in the city as well. He keeps moaning that the country bores him.” She wrinkled her nose. “If you ask him to spend some time in London with you, he’ll be tickled pink—he’s so easy to please.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Kylo offered. Oh, how he longed for London—what a bright future it would be: he pictured himself strolling through Piccadilly with a folder clasped under his arm, excitedly heading for his classes. Everybody who looked at him would be able to tell that he was an artist in training—it’d give him more pride than his rank.

Maybe Hux would accompany him; walk him to the Academy every morning, part with a stealthy kiss. He’d learn to paint with oils; he’d make luxurious portraits of Hux and secret art just for their own pleasure. He’d make him immortal; exhibit a picture of him in the National Gallery, have London’s crema de la crema come and admire his galant figure on horseback, depicted as a noble youth on an evening stroll. Everybody would be astonished by his sweet beauty, and no-one would know that all that grace and exquisite elegance belonged to Kylo. Surely, they’d be wedded by then; Kylo would keep the ring in his breast pocket and touch it in secret as he received congratulations from eager patrons. He wouldn’t rest until he excelled in art; he would work rigorously to better himself and impress Hux.

They’d return to Stormfield eventually; reunite with Millicent, back from school for the summer. Kylo would share his knowledge with her; bring her to the moors to paint, their easels set up side by side. He imagined Hux would come along; get a blanket and watch them while lounging in the grass, like he and Kylo used to laze around when they were boys; then they’d have a picnic with scones and tea, enjoy the warm night and good company, play hare and hounds and parlour games.

He wanted to tell about his plans to Millicent—but they were crudely interrupted. Mitaka entered, face and consciousness likewise alarmed. He looked around, petrified, and made a solemn announcement as he fretted with his fingers.

“Get Miss Millicent to safety; they’re here.”

“Who?” Kylo asked as he helped her up. She clutched the sketchbook, looking at a confused Unamo and then Kylo, pleaded to stay, to just have enough time to finish the portrait; it was not a possibility: Hux arrived, just as shaken as his housekeeper.

“There you are,” he said, relieved, rushing to Millicent.

“The people of Millcote have come,” Mitaka explained. “They’re demanding to see the Master and you, mister—my lord, and Miss Millicent too.”

“They have no right for such demands,” Kylo scoffed. “What a ridiculous affair! How many of them
“Half the town, by the looks of it,” Hux said. He hauled up Millicent, who hugged his neck, hiding her face in the crook of his shoulder, small and scared. “Pitchforks, torches, shouting, the whole ordeal—Mandetat reported they’re rounding the road, and are headed here. I told you: a peasant revolt.”

“What will we do?” Kylo asked, but was interrupted by Unamo’s gasp. She pointed at the window: they could just about make out the approaching crowd in the distance; the constable hadn’t exaggerated when he said Millcote was in upheaval—their wrath almost boiled Kylo’s skin. They were frightened, and out for blood rather than answers.

“We should stay clear of the windows,” Hux advised in French.

“Do you think they’ll try shoot us, Monsieur Hux?” Unamo couldn’t tear her gaze away; the crowd got to the gates—men and women, even children clinging to their parents.

“I should think that the French revolution had shown us what an angry mob can do,” Hux replied evenly.

“You don’t have to remind me, monsieur; I never lived through it—but I come from a family of royalists.”

“Were your parents beheaded?” Millicent asked, holding on to Hux tighter. Unamo looked at her, pale and grave.

“My grandparents; they were torn limb from limb.” She wound the scarf tighter around her, and finally stepped away from the window.

“I should hope Englishmen wouldn’t go to such extremes,” Hux announced, and turned to Mitaka. “Fetch me my musket, Dopheld; arm yourself and Mr. Ren with a revolver.”

“Right away, sir,” Mitaka nodded. He made haste for the door, and the company followed; the servants steps were quick and nervous, but Hux marched with a dignified air.

Kylo tailed him, and whispered once Mitaka was out of earshot, “I need not to be armed. I could command a storm to keep them back; summon dreadful apparitions; lull them into an illusion—”

“That won’t be necessary, thank you.” They got to the narrow gallery, and Hux turned to face him, rocking Millicent. “I wouldn’t want to provoke them. Precaution is advised, but my strategy is to weather through this. They’ll get bored, eventually; head home grumbling; let’s not give them another spectacle to make you suspect.”

Kylo bowed his head, although he was displeased by the answer. He wanted to face them: scare them away, make them scream and tear at their hair, frightened by the awful wonders he’d show them. He could feel their consciousness as a whole, as if it was a buzz of a hive. Despite what Hux supposed, these wasps wouldn’t fly away until they managed to sting.

Hux regrouped with the household in a barely used drawing room on the first floor. They drew in the heavy curtains, and lit a small candle, for the evening was fast advancing. The air was tense; waiting out this absurd siege would be nothing short of nerve wracking. Hux pulled Millicent into his lap, and motioned Kylo closer; he stood by his armchair, and got his hand. It was cold and clammy, and Hux held on tightly, but his voice was calm.

“My most sincere apologies for this silly situation.”
The servants were full of questions: what did the townsfolk want? Why did they come now? Have the circumstances of certain deaths been revealed? Hux tried to offer rather evasive answers, speaking of jealousy and riches, misguided liberalism and the twilight of rational thought; but the crowd made its goals known.

“Hang the witch!” they were chanting. “Hang the witch! Hang the witch!”

Rodion whistled, and looked around the small room with mock-concern. “Confess up: which one of us hides a broomstick in his closet?”

“Mr. Ren has quite the number of moles,” Mandetat jested; Kylo just looked at him sternly, and his teasing smile faded off of his face.

“The good folk of Millcote attribute something to the good Mr. Ren no man is guilty of,” Hux said. “I’d reckon it is on account of the rather tense relations of our nations; they must think us complicit for hiding an American, and came up with the most fantastical claims to put blame on him.”

“You’re American?” Thanisson asked, taken aback. “I have an American relation; perhaps you know him—”

“I left the country when I was five,” Kylo fired back, “and besides, the New World is rather large—”

“Let us not argue, please,” Hux said softly, squeezing his hand. *Hang the witch*, the crowd kept roaring, and a new shout sounded: *sodomites!* Hux pulled a face at that, then addressed his dependants. “I’d suggest you leave through the kitchen’s backdoor, if you are not in favour of waiting this out. Whatever you chose to do: you’re under my protection—I’m obliged to keep you safe. Now I’m in no position to guarantee your well-being.”

“I’m not going,” Mrs. Mitaka said, “not for these bastards.”

As if the crowd could hear her, someone cried *bastard*; somebody else: *murderer*; years’ worths of grievances were brought boiling to the surface, with the never-ceasing chant, *hang the witch, hang the witch, get him to the wych elm tree!*

“You have families,” Hux said, looking at his gardeners.

They stood silent for a moment, then Rodion said softly: “You do too; my father’s father swore loyalty to the Huxes.”

“You’re free from your promise,” Hux said; but none of them attempted to leave.

“We’ll just have to wait this out,” Mitaka repeated Hux’s idea, and promptly got himself a chair. Most followed his example; Slips and Nines were uncertain—but they had no place else to go, so eventually, they settled down as well.

*Hang the witch! Burn him! Burn him!*

“Now we’re at Scottish habits,” Mrs. Mitaka observed.

An awkward silence followed; they were sitting around in a circle, as if they were complicit in a seance. Kylo could hear the hum of their disquiet, but words of logic and reason were louder—surely, this fuss would soon be over and they could all return to normal. They remembered the frenzied days after Maratelle’s death, and recalled the calm that followed. It wasn’t too bad, they supposed, to just sit here together in idleness—but the silence was growing oppressive; that, they couldn’t help but notice.
“Has anyone read anything interesting recently?” Hux attempted to break the tension. “Perhaps you could share.”

A loud crash followed his words. Millicent shrieked and Unamo screamed; Rodion jumped to his feet, and announced: “I’ll go see what it was.”

“A window must’ve been broken,” Hux said with desperate calm. His musket was within arm’s reach; Kylo was happy for it, but swore that Hux wouldn’t need it. Despite all precaution, he was ready to unleash his magic.

They could hear hollering, a crash again; then, footsteps.

Rodion swore, and got to the door; Mitaka leapt up, ran to him, and handed over his revolver. Rodion checked the bullets, and nodded to himself. They were all silent; the town’s cries sounded like the crashing waves of sea, lapping at the walls, droning out all noise and threatening to swallow them.

Ever so careful, Rodion opened the door. Kylo contemplated following him, but his place was by Hux’s side; he’d see that no harm came to him. He squeezed his hand in reassurance; Hux squeezed back.

Then there was a deafening bang.

***

Ashes, ashes.

***

Kylo came to himself, bewildered as his consciousness emerged from thick darkness: a moment ago he was in the drawing room and Hux’s hand was in his—now he was clasping nothing, and ashes were falling over him. He was lying on his back surrounded by debris, staring at the ceiling that was cracked wide open. He saw fire; he saw the ruins of the drawing room.

There’s been an explosion, he realised. He tried to get up, ears ringing and a throbbing headache tormenting him as he attempted to think; the laboratory, his mind supplied. Hux had been experimenting with bombs—

“Armitage?” he croaked.

How did they get in? First storey—the sycamore tree—they had torches—they shouldn’t have entered the laboratory—

“Armitage?” he cried again. He could feel his faint presence, and feel Millicent, but couldn’t locate them; he looked around—his vision was blurred—and all he saw were flames, eating up the staircase, spreading through the hall with suffocating heat. His instincts screamed to run, but his groggy brain couldn’t give the proper order to his benumbed limbs; he was too dazed to get to his elbows, let alone to stand; he attempted to roll over, but a strong wave of nausea overcame him and he curled up, heaving, pain shooting through his spine.

Concussion, he thought. Not now, not now; you are needed—arise! Can’t you hear the hullabaloo of
the crowd—they’re still around—Hux and Millicent need to be found, and all the dependants—the fire must be stopped—get up, get up!

He attempted to get to his hands and knees, searching for memories of the explosion in vain—how severely were they hit? One moment—Hux had squeezed his hand—there had been a terrible noise—darkness—the fire—he had tumbled down.

Stop the fire.

Stop the—

(I cannot forgive what happens in the fire. And what comes after.)

“Got you!” someone yelled; it sounded from a distance, but the man had to be there with him, for he felt a rope tightening around his throat; he’d been lassoed like common cattle—he tried to cry out, but couldn’t. He craned his neck to peer at his attacker; his vision was still swimming, but he recognised him from somewhere: a young man, a drunkard; he met him the first time he’d come here. “I got him, I got him!” the man was shouting. He was the one who told him about Maratelle and the wych elm tree; a local maniac haunted by gossip—what was his name, what was—if he could only gather enough strength to hex him—

Kylo was twisting around, trying to wriggle free; the man was pulling him towards the hall’s open gates, the muscles of his arm straining and a vein on his forehead throbbing and swollen.

The crowd was waiting outside with torches and still they chanted: “Hang the witch! Hang the witch!”

Kylo recognised more faces: there was Nell and the charwoman; the prostitute who had taught him how to kiss; the tailor who had made his splendid clothes; the driver who had brought him to Lowood; even the poet and the writer from the gentleman’s club. The noise of their mind was too much to bare, even though he could sense doubt and regret—they never meant to set the house on fire, it was an accident; some didn’t want to see him hanged, but brought to a judge, and answer for the scandal he caused; but the faint hush of their hesitation was trampled by the trumpets of terror and rage.

Indeed, most had abandoned all common sense on the way here, emboldened by screaming preachers and enraged that Hux would dismiss the constable—as if one failed attempt at lawfulness justified an upheaval. Their thoughts were terrifying, rid of any sort of empathy or good feelings. They watched a humiliated Kylo being dragged to the threshold and ignored any reflection of sympathy; they thought him inhuman, improper, a villain, a devil; someone who deserved nothing but death. Kylo felt a gust of cold air, the caress of darkness. His lips parted to try and mutter a spell.

There was a bang again; not the disastrous rumble of the explosion, but a sharp pang ringing through the air—a shot fired—and the man holding the rope’s end collapsed. His head was open like a flower.

Amidst the terrified cries of the townsfolk, Hux descended the burning, creaking stairs of the hall, preparing his musket for a second shot; the bayonet glinted in the inferno; it wasn’t nearly half as sharp, bright, or dangerous as his heated gaze. He was bruised, staggering, his frock coat torn at a shoulder—but alive; safe. Millicent followed closely, carrying his satchel of bullets, putting one foot in front of another, steps light like a cat’s and eyes reflecting the glow of the flames. They looked like a pair of avenging angels; Kylo laughed, that deep, unsettling laugh that doomed him for the people of Millcote. He got to his feet, back pressed to the door’s frame to support his weight. He kept out of the way, allowing Hux to aim at anyone he fancied to die.
“Don’t shoot!” the poet cried out, spreading his arms as if to protect his fellows; a heroic attempt—but one that was not appreciated. His mouth opened to deliver a speech, declaim the righteous reasons behind their savage siege—but he choked on the flowery words.

“How dare you speak up, after the waste you laid on my home?” Millicent asked; her arm was outstretched. She stopped as she reached ground level; all eyes were on her: a petite figure dressed in lacey pink, a child with a dreadful face. She twisted her hand; the poet whimpered. “You absurd creatures! Are you afraid of witches? You were fools to seek us out then!”

The poet’s tormented body was lifted up in the air; his back arched in an unnatural angle—until it snapped; the terrible noise of bones breaking and flesh tearing was heard. He dropped down with an insignificant thud—but there was another sound, quick and too-loud.

Kylo saw Millicent double over. A look at the crowd: a raised revolver.

“No,” he mouthed; with terror, he turned back to Millicent. She put her hand over her chest; she pulled it back—blood stained the lace mittens, and blood was blooming through her dress.

“Armie?” she said, voice thin. Kylo couldn’t comprehend what was happening; he stood motionless, the world around him muted. He didn’t know who had fired the shot; it didn’t matter; what mattered was Hux dropping the musket and catching Millicent, who was falling over.

“It’s all right, it’s all right, I’m here,” he said, eyes wide and fingers trembling as he pressed them to the wound to stop the bleeding; thick blood spurted through his fingers—the arteries had been hit. “I’m here, my sweet, I’m here, I’m here,” he kept repeating as he got to his knees, pulling Millicent down with him and rocking her like a baby. She was deathly-pale and shivering; her hazy gaze found Kylo. She tried to speak, but couldn’t. Kylo sent her a thought: hold on— but felt her world dissolve, thoughts dimming and slipping away, the very centre collapsing.

But there—something small and fragile—the twinkle of a star, a faint light: life. Her eyes were looking at nothing; her hand dropped from her lap; her skin was ashen; her breath halted—but that light didn’t go out: it refused to.

Hux kissed her cheeks, tearful eyes squeezed shut. Bent together like this, one could see their similarities, and how the living looked closer to death than the one who had been shot.

“Do you feel it?” Kylo asked softly; begging, maybe. Hux peered up at him, holding Millicent’s body and still rocking it, curled around her as if he could protect her from the bullet that had already been fired.

“Kill them all,” he said tonelessly and turned back to Millicent, disinterested in the ordered massacre; he cupped her face, and pressed their foreheads together.

Kylo looked at the hushed crowd; they stood as if spellbound, looking on in horror. Kylo stepped over the threshold, blocking their view of Hux in grief—they had no right to see it; they had no right to ever have come here.

“Witches are not as easy to kill as you may think,” he said, sing-song, low. He peered around again, and added in a gentle whisper, “but you are.”

For a few seconds, the townsfolk didn’t notice how the air stilled, nor the ice in their lungs—but soon enough, they coughed and gasped, suffocating on Kylo’s revenge. Thunder rumbled; Kylo watched the rain falling on their twisting, shaking bodies—they’d die in mud; they would die knowing that he had summoned a storm to wash away their destruction.
Kylo stood there, corpses lying at his feet: men, women—children; but Millicent was a child, too. He felt no remorse as he turned on his heels and stepped over his attacker’s dead body.

The hall was flooded, the fire clenched. Moonlight shone through the latticed windows, the rain drip-drip-dripping.

*I had been warned,* Kylo thought as he approached Hux, still cradling Millicent’s dead body. *I should have known.* But all the prophecies stopped here: whatever would come next was subject to change. He crouched down, and gently clasped Millicent’s hand in his. It was still warm, but cooling rapidly.

“Explain what is happening,” Hux said, his voice even. Grief threatened to overwhelm him like an avalanche triggered by the slightest sound; just one wrong word would set it off. “I’m expecting her to open her eyes any minute. Smile at me; tell me she’s not in pain—not even in pain—and certainly not dead; she cannot be. I would feel it. I have none of your abilities, but I would know if she was truly gone. Is it my crazed mind telling me she’s not gone? Have I gone mad? I believe my heart stopped the moment that shot was fired. It won’t beat again until she’s awakened. No; I cannot go on without her.”

“She won’t wake,” Kylo said carefully, “but she could come back in another form.”

Hux looked at him, hot tears streaming down his face; he wasn’t conscious of them. He looked like a dismal pietà, his whole world of happiness held in his lap—dead.

“Don’t leave me with such scant consolation,” he said. “Will she be one of your ghosts? Lingering, never to be seen by me? Spending an eternity in unrest—no, I cannot have that. Call her back to life; I implore you to do that—don’t make her like our father, a corpse rotting away in hunger: make her like she’s always been—spirited, happy; she still looks alive, doesn’t she? Hurry before she fades—I cannot let her fade from me.”

“I cannot do anything,” Kylo said; a sob escaped Hux at that, so desolate and crushed that it made him bend over. Kylo had to get hold of his shoulders, and hastened to add, “leave that to her.”

“Come back to me!” Hux screamed; he couldn’t stop his mourning any longer—he collapsed, holding onto Kylo’s neck, face pressed to his chest as Millicent lay motionless. Kylo embraced him fast, wishing he could say something—talking was still a hardship, and he didn’t have the words for what he knew was going to happen; all he had was a sense of anticipation, so powerful he couldn’t grieve; something had been lost—irreparably; but there was that twinkle of light, that distant star.

He rubbed Hux’s back, hushing him tenderly—but the tears wouldn’t stop falling; Hux was gagging on his sobs, making strangled noises. His consciousness unravelled, leaving no coherent thoughts but the vanishing silence of death.

“Come back, come back,” he whimpered. “Forget what I said; you could be terrible—a walking corpse, for all I care, and I’d still embrace you. You could be a shadow and I’d still see my sister in you. You could visit me in a dream, and my skeptic heart would shiver with joy, and I’d cry: it’s you! Millicent, Millicent, my darling Millicent—welcome back!”

Kylo felt something then—a recognition, and not his own; what was left of Millicent heard her name—knew that she was being summoned. Kylo pulled back gently, and peered down at her face. It was horrible to see her like this; she’d never have this body back—but there: something moved. Kylo held his breath as a white butterfly crawled out of her open mouth.
Hux exclaimed—part surprise, part fear—but offered his hand immediately; the butterfly climbed onto his palm, trembling, afraid, and tried to open its wings.

“Help her fly,” Kylo said.

“It’s her?”

Kylo wished he knew the answers and say for certain: *this is what is going to happen*. He only had theories, inklings; he could sense a trace of Millicent’s consciousness in the butterfly, but no self-awareness; she was gone from this world—but that didn’t mean she couldn’t return.

Hux blew warm air on the wet wings and touched them carefully. The butterfly didn’t recognise him; it had no name for him, or for itself. It was going to fly; it was called by the moonlight, driven by something she couldn’t comprehend: survival on a fathomless level.

Watching the first flutter of its wings, Kylo thought of capturing it—keeping it safe—bringing it along wherever they would go—but it felt wrong. The butterfly had a mind of its own; it knew what it had to do and didn’t need the guidance of a brother, or a teacher. Millicent had gone to a region no living could follow: she’d find her way back alone—all Kylo and Hux could do was keep calling, and hope she’d follow their voice.

The butterfly flew up, soaring above their heads, faint and iridescent until it vanished in the darkness.

*A ***

A funeral is always a solemn business; even more so when the body is so small, and so plainly devoid of life. Kylo often heard that the dead looked as if they were just sleeping; but the bundle Hux carried was more like a misused doll of broken porcelain, the blue veins of the hand visible and the lips colourless, a purple shadow under her lashes. She had but two mourners: after the explosion, Hux had commanded his dependants to flee—the ones he could find, that is—and as their last act of loyalty, they obeyed.

It left two lords stumbling through the garden, following long shadows and odd paths. Behind them, a cruel reminder of former happiness: a dark ruin of something they would never call home again. Kylo tried to think of places they could go—mostly so he wouldn’t have to think of where they were now headed, and why was he carrying stones in his pockets. Theed Palace was not safe: they might just be faced with a new revolt. Lowood was likewise out of the question: if someone maimed Luke’s hand for trying to help, what would happen to him, who experimented with dark magic? London, maybe: but how could England ever be a haven again? Half of a town disappeared—they’d be found soon; there was no point to bury or burn them: their absence was what mattered. *Better leave them to rot*, Kylo thought; *better leave everything*.

They had reached the lake. The water was smooth and black like obsidian; the moon’s reflection built a silver bridge over it—Hux ventured to step on it. He walked until the water came up to his knees, holding Millicent carefully, his hand cupping the back of her head. Kylo followed them, heart heavier than the stones he put into Millicent’s shoes and the little pouch that was tied around her waist. *This is not a farewell*, he reminded himself—but a goodbye was hard enough, and made him heartsick. Like Hux, Kylo was half-expecting her to open her eyes at any moment, rub at them sleepily, and ask what she missed; or that he himself would be awakened by a bitter dream, and find himself back in the nursery, with Millicent breathing softly in Hux’s embrace.

Hux said he wouldn’t leave her alone in a cold crypt with cruel parents, walled up and abandoned. He would offer her to the water; let her be dew, rain, snow; let her live a thousand ways, endlessly transforming until her soul found her way back home. Kylo watched him walk deeper and deeper
into the pitless darkness of the lake, and caught a glimpse of a curious reflection on the surface: two white figures. He looked up; there: two spirits were floating above the water. Maratelle was somber, and appeared more livid than grief-stricken: a good omen—and Moll MacGowan, watching her son with pained sympathy. She began singing, a low keen for Millicent; Maratelle found Kylo’s gaze, and begged for something wordlessly.

*Let him see.*

The place that used to bound them was ruined; they roamed in the air like dissolving spectres. Brendol must have perished in the fire—Kylo was glad not to see his soul among them. He muttered a short spell. The water was now at Hux’s waist. He must’ve heard the singing; he looked up, and cried out as he saw the figure of Maratelle descend. Her face was gentle, her eyes broken; she submerged into the water, and held out her arms for her daughter.

“Mama?” Hux said; he sounded like a scared boy.

“Silly child,” Maratelle replied. “Look up.”

Hux blinked away tears, and obeyed. He saw his mother for the first time in his life; it was at a funeral.

**Epilogue**

Dear reader, this is the story left to tell: a voyage, a threat, and the rest.

Kylo and Hux fled to Fleetwood port with the aid of Finalizadora and Supreme. Mr. Dameron’s ship was waiting for them; they boarded it with the horses. They didn’t have much to carry: the fire had destroyed nearly everything, including Kylo’s drawings, his favourite books and most of his clothes. Along with some surviving necessities, Hux had managed to pack Millicent’s doll, the last book she was reading—a volume of poetry—and the velvet slippers she embroidered for him with his monogram.

They had kept their name and rank a secret, using a modest cabin in the ship’s iron belly. Within the first hours of their journey, Hux became seasick; a day, and he couldn’t even leave the bunk bed. Kylo suspected consumption, and was chilled to be proven right when Hux started coughing up blood. He never left his side, and held him through the long nights. When the sailors were patrolling the corridors, he’d put his hand over Hux’s mouth, muffling the wretched coughs. He couldn’t risk getting Hux quarantined; he couldn’t risk losing him—in his weakened state, it’d be a death sentence.

Going above deck was dangerous; staying in the tiny cabin was intolerable. Kylo would open the small, round window and let Hux sit on his shoulders so he could get some fresh, salty air. It helped—but it wasn’t enough. Kylo was helpless without his herbs: all he could offer was the comfort of his touches and whispered words of encouragement. Hux had delirious thoughts of death: he wanted to meet Millicent again; wondered if he could offer his fragile life instead of hers. He was anxious about leaving England: he was worried Millicent wouldn't be able to follow them so far over the seas. All reassurance he could get were Kylo’s promises that she’d be back. He had to trust him more than his own beliefs and convictions—and oh, he did.

Kylo never felt so loved, and so dismal. Hux had put his faith in him: what if he was wrong, and they’d wait for Millicent in vain? Hux would cling to him, hold him stronger than ever: but he was
dying—the more he gave Kylo, the more he was about to lose. It would’ve been easier to close him off, put but a short distance between them in preparation of something that was maybe inevitable—but Kylo couldn’t do it. He kissed Hux’s feverish cheeks, tasted his bitter lips, made love to him on sheets that were soaked through with cold sweat. He abandoned rest to watch over him in the thin hours Hux could sleep, and told him stories until his throat felt raw and his mouth was dry.

After a fortnight, they arrived; Kylo was afraid he was guiding Hux to his grave. The journey had been too harsh on him: in the last days, he could no longer eat, and even spat the water back. He lost weight, his ribs visible through the too-pale, dry skin; his once-bright eyes sunk into his skull, his nails flaked, and his hair was thinner. Kylo carried him off the ship like he’d carry a bride, not a sick man who was no longer himself, thoughts consumed by grief and illness.

Hux wasn’t strong enough to ride, so Kylo paid for the horses to be kept at a stable, and got a carriage just for the two of them. He let Hux lean on his shoulder, caressed his face, whispered against his lips: *you will live; stay with me.*

He was surprised by the ease he recognised the roads they passed; but those last miles to his former home through the streets of Salem were not that easy to tread. The mansion was smaller than he remembered, but not any less imposing. If he didn't have Hux with him, he would’ve turned on his heels, but he couldn't expect help from anywhere else—so he rang the bell.

Threepio opened the door; his eyes rounded behind his golden spectacles, and he exclaimed, “Master Ben!”—with that, he fainted. Little Artie was quick to rush over when he heard the noises.

“Help us,” Kylo begged. Hux was unconscious in his arms.

What hustle followed; what dashing and scrambling! The mistress wasn’t home, nor was her husband; the maids carried Hux to the red room despite Kylo's objections—it was the only place suitable for an unannounced visitor. Kylo dreaded to enter; he hated to see Hux be put in his grandmother's deathbed that faced the window through which the magpie had entered. Kylo wouldn’t let Hux out of his sight; in this cursed room, any second could be the last.

When Han and Leia got back to the premises, they were informed that their son had returned. What they found was just a shadow of a man, keeping vigil over a barely breathing stranger. Leia didn’t hesitate; she made haste to get herbs, and Han helped with feeding Hux, fetching the water when Kylo wanted to towel him down. He made ointments with his mother, which he rubbed over Hux’s chest; his breathing eased after they muttered the proper spells Leia only half remembered. Hux sunk into a shallow sleep—but finally, he was resting properly.

“There’s my fiancé,” Kylo said. Leia had no answer to that; she wordlessly changed the wet towel on Hux’s forehead.

There was a specific hush to a house when someone was fighting with death—and losing the battle. Hux’s condition stabilised, but he didn’t get any better. Kylo hated every moment they had to spend there; hated how fastidious the dependants were, how everybody was walking on eggshells and speaking in whispers. When he couldn't take it any longer, he escaped; he only got as far as the balcony—he wouldn't leave Hux for anything.

Han found him there, crying with his back pressed to the railing, knees pulled up to his heaving chest. He told Han he lost a child; that he couldn't bare losing Hux. He said nothing of other things—the ones he killed—how he expected remorse to catch up with him; how it never did. He couldn't accept the kindness of his family: if they knew what the two of them had done, they wouldn't
welcome him. He shared what he could: that he didn't even know if his former friends and fellow servants lived or died.

“Death is like this,” Han told him, taking his place on the ground besides him. “It takes, and it takes, and it takes.”

“It cannot take him,” Kylo said darkly.

“Here’s what you can do to save him, kid,” Han said while Kylo struggled not to give into the comfort of his presence, his warmth, his scent; dad, dad, dad. Pick me up, pet my hair, check under the bed for monsters.

He was too big for that. “Take him far away from here,” Han advised. “Get him to the Sawatch Range of the Rocky Mountains. The air is fresh there, the sunshine abundant. Your Great-uncle Owen used to have a farm in the settlement of Tatooine; patch it up a bit. A few days there, and your Armitage will be a changed man.”

Kylo wiped his face, and frowned. “ Aren't you banned from the South Palette?”

“Give some credit to your old man,” Han snorted. “I’m not only banned, I have a price on my damn head; but you’ll come visit as often as you can, won’t you? Come on, Benny, shake on it.”

Kylo offered his hand, and something far more important: his name. “Call me Kylo, please; I haven't been Ben in ages.”

“Kylo it is, then,” Han said, squeezing his hand. “I don’t care; just don’t be a stranger.” With that, he pulled him into a tight hug. Kylo sensed he didn’t want to ever let go—but he had learnt how to do so.

When Kylo got back to the red room, he found Leia diffusing astragalus oil on Hux’s nightstand to ease his breathing; he was coughing terribly even while asleep. The air was sweet with vapours, but the odour of malady lingered, unrelenting, impossible to chase away.

“Dad says we should go to the Rockies,” Kylo said, leaning on the doorframe.

Leia made a non-committal sound and looked up at him. She was visibly jaded, but held herself with admirable composure, back straight, hair neat, and not a wrinkle on her silk gown.

“Would you like to go?”

“I just got back—wouldn’t you hate me for leaving?”

“How could I ever hate you?”

If you knew, if you knew.

Leia signalled to him to draw closer; he elected to sit on Hux’s bed, and took a hold of his hand. Hux smiled in his sleep, but a painful scowl chased it away.

“You don’t much fancy him,” Kylo noted.

Leia sighed, and looked him over. There was no enmity there; but no affinity either.

“He’s a son of the Empire I’d very much like to see collapse,” she said. “My whole life, I fought for democracy; he and his family had always been an obstacle on the way to freedom, not to mention his mentor. I’m not ashamed to tell you this: on the day he was finally sent home from India, I opened a bottle of champagne and drank it in one sitting. Then it seemed he was more invested in taking care
of his sister than to continue working on his diabolic machines, but as long as he was fraternizing with the likes of Krennic and Tarkin, not to mention the Lady Scyre, I could not rest. He has the terrible potential to devastate our world in the name of civilisation.”

Kylo thought of corpses beaten with rain; the dark magic surging through him; he said nothing.

“I know him quite well,” Leia went on, voice tired and hoarse. “I must admit he looks far more young, frail and sickly than I ever imagined. More importantly, there’s something I never entertained: that he’d be in love with my only son. I see how he looks at you; I pray that he’ll never look away: that way, the world may be safe.”

Kylo ran his thumb over Hux’s knuckles.

“Help me keep him,” he begged. “This weather will kill him.”

“Why do you seek my permission to leave?”

“Because I ran away.”

“No, honey; you didn’t do that.” Leia’s eyes were deep with sorrow; Kylo couldn’t look on. As he averted his gaze, Leia touched his face, following the long line of the scar. “Snoke wanted to steal you away; he succeeded. I asked myself how I could be a good mother to you when I first held you in my arms, and felt the weight of his curse. I kept asking this when I wrote you letters sealed with tears, and I kept asking when the letters stopped. This is the answer I found deep inside my stirred heart: a mother’s duty is to see to it that her child is happy. You have returned burdened with grief; you won’t find remedy here. So go; go wherever life takes you; choose your companion; experience pain and pleasure—I won’t ask you to come back. When you’re away, it feels like a part of me is missing. I have grown used to the ache; don’t mind me.” She kissed his forehead and whispered: “Know this: whatever you do—whatever you did—I’ll always be proud to call you my son.”

Kylo met her eyes; she knew.

(So this is what you can't forgive me, little Rey: that I got away with it.)

Leia embraced him, and whispered into his hair, “Adieu, dear child; adieu.”

The goodbye echoed in Kylo’s mind from New York to Illinois, and past the Missouri River. The journey took one and a half months; Hux had been sufficiently nursed back to health, but he was still unwell, yearning for the mountain air. They were escorted by Kylo’s Uncle Lando, the governor of Cloud City, and his team of former bandits. They slept under the stars, Kylo and Hux sharing a bedroll while the gunslingers stood guard.

Kylo watched Hux’s ashen face by the campfire, framed by a newly grown beard and too-long hair, his once splendid attire besmirched and frayed; he would wonder whether he made the right call dragging him so far away from the safe haven of Britain—but then Hux would wake, and smile at him weakly, eyes still bleary but gleaming with hope: off we go; take me home.

Asleep, Kylo had different worries: he’d always call for Millicent, and the answer was often silence—but sometimes, there was a reply: no words, just raw emotion, a confused flutter, a rage and a resolve. Kylo told Hux: we’ll meet her, lover, over the rivers, over the mountains.

Lando led them to the border of Missouri: an unorganised territory started from there, teeming with danger. Uncle Chewbacca took over; he and his tribe showed secret roads to Kylo and gave healing salts to Hux. The no-man’s land was far from abandoned: they passed a number of camps, settlements, and slow-moving wagon convoys. Kylo was tempted to stop at any pretty dam, declare a
small patch of forest his brave new abode, but Chewbacca just rolled his eyes and urged him to ride on.

Kylo finally understood why when they reached the Sawatch Range. The wind carried the lush scent of the sleepy waters and pine trees. The scale of the majestic mountains took his breath away—after everything he’d seen, there was still something exceedingly stunning and sublime in it. The peaks were silver with ice, but the feet of the mountains were dipped into liquid gold of sunshine. They climbed Mt. Elbert through sharp rocks and dried moss; the world soon looked barren, but peeking back over his shoulders Kylo could still see patches of green and the royal blue of the lakes, stretching over the ever-expanding horizon.

Tatooine turned out to be a small but bustling market town; the wooden houses were terraced, but on the verge of collapse—temporary shelters that stayed despite all odds, purposes and intentions. They passed the white-washed town hall and the jail on the dusty main street, a rotting church, children playing in the dirt, and a brothel that looked fairly busy even in the middle of the day. Kylo kept glancing at Hux, trying to discern his opinion; his face didn’t betray any emotion, and his thoughts were mostly on exhaustion.

Chewbacca presented uncle Owen’s farm with a proud grunt, since they had no common tongue. The Skywalkers used to build wells in the early years of Tatooine, but it was apparent that their home had been long abandoned. The bay window was shattered, the lace curtains torn, the whole building rotting and the white fence around it filled with gaps and decaying.

“When you gave me a home,” Kylo addressed Hux, “you shared the luxuries of a country hall with me; I’m embarrassed to think that this is all I can give.”

“Don’t be,” Hux said. “When I lived in Stormfield, I fancied myself an English lord—but I’m an Irish bastard, after all; this house will suit me nicely, I shall think.”

Hux took an odd, relieved sort of comfort in his new-found identity; he always had the secret worry that he’d prove to be a failure and a fraud, that his parents were right to despise him all along—now that threat was gone. He started fixing up the stalls eagerly while Kylo mimed his thanks to Chewbacca; when Kylo shooed him off, saying he should rest, he busied himself with neatening the embroidered pillows on the lumpy couch and sweeping the sitting room. When Kylo was finished with the horses, he found him with two heavy buckets of water he had carried from the well, babbling about how the duvets needed to be washed.

Kylo looked him over: sleeves rolled up, ascot absent, sunshine in his hair and cheeks red. His heart filled with love and desire.

“You think you know how to wash?” he said, the jest softened by a tenderness he couldn’t help.

Hux huffed and put the buckets down; the water spilled over the rim. “How hard it can be? Even the servants can do it.”

“Give it here,” Kylo said, stepping closer. “Let me show you, lordling.” He knelt down, and reached for the bucket’s handle; Hux reached out the same time as him—their fingers brushed. Hux looked at him intently.

They made love in a streak of the afternoon light on the floor, trading joyous kisses, limbs aching from the journey, Kylo’s thighs trembling around Hux’s snapping hips.

Rather curiously, Hux was quicker to adjust to their new home than Kylo: in a matter of weeks, he was up and about in a bowler hat and with a handsomely trimmed beard, advocating a project to
install a water supply system in the town. Kylo was anxious he’d be mocked or even shunned for being a British busybody; but Tatooine had all kinds of people, many of whom could tolerate some eccentricity in exchange for good work. Kylo obsessively surveyed the thoughts of their fellow townsfolk, looking for the smallest stir of unrest; the worst he could find was disinterested annoyance. They took measures to avoid suspicion: Hux advertised that he was a widower, Kylo, that he’d marry soon, when he made enough profit to sail his fiancée over the seas. The lie granted them an opportunity to wear wedding rings; nobody cared to notice that they arrived without them.

The bruises of bad fortune were invisible. Only Kylo knew that the prosperous Mr. Hux had a small nursery, freshly painted by his own hands, with a humble bed and feather pillows he fluffed up every night, and duvets and sheets he changed bi-weekly, although the only inhabitant of the room was a lifeless doll. He knew that they were running out of money, and that writing to their respective banks would put them in jeopardy. For Hux, the aqueducts and lavatories were only the beginning: he had dreams of a railroad and a fire station, but was granted no funds for the proposed projects. He was maniacally diligent: when he came home from work, he’d just lay his plans over the kitchen table, and work on them until the last candle burned down and Kylo dragged him to bed.

On the February of the next year, when Kylo returned from the small school of the nearby town where he had taken up teaching, he found Hux in the stalls, his coat soaked through with blood, and in his lap, a shivering foal twisting around.

“We shall keep her, don’t you think?” Hux said. “She shall be Millicent’s horse—remember how she begged for a pet?”

Finalizadora was lying on her side, breathing heavily; the scattered hay was scarlet, and the blood kept dripping from Hux’s hands. Apparently, he had helped her give birth; Kylo didn’t have the heart to tell him that his attempts might have been in vain. Millicent’s feeble consciousness was unchanging and distracted; Kylo had no hold on her. Still, he kept hoping—hopelessly; he had to have faith for Hux’s sake.

Years passed; Millicent would have been seventeen; Kylo was twenty-nine. He followed a herd of buffalo home; the burn of the setting sun made the water in their wet fur evaporate, giving them a ghostly aura of mist. Kylo had a boline with him, and a basketful of herbs; the wide rim of his hat cast his face in shadow, his dark duster coat flipped around. When he passed the young herdsman, he was greeted with a polite “Good evening, Dr. Ren!”

That wasn’t the name most addressed him by—when he decided he was done with teaching and would never be an artist, he set up a small shop for natural elixirs; the people of Tatooine might have suspected that they were more of the supernatural sort, for they called him the witch doctor; mostly a joke referring to his strange, scarred face, dark clothing and uncannily potent remedies. At first, Hux was worried; but soon enough, he recognised it for the jest it was, and spread ridiculous rumours of the various uses of witchcraft—which were mostly true stories, but no-one had to know it.

Kylo climbed the treacherous slopes of the mountain with hurried steps, and broke out in a sprint once he entered Tatooine. Eight years living here—and still: he couldn’t wait to step over the threshold of their home and close the door behind him, breathe in the scent of whatever atrocity Hux was making, tell him about his day and listen to him in turn; or just sit in silence, content, serene, huddled together under a blanket.

He rounded a corner; rushed through the street that looked much less shabby since Hux had been made speaker of the town council. There he sat on the front porch in his trusted wicker chair, smoking a pipe and leafing through some reports with apparent abhorrence. When he spotted Kylo, his face softened, but he bit down his smile and feigned a casual air as he said, “Welcome back.”
“Good evening, Mr. Hux,” Kylo said, making a show of wiping his boots clean on the mud scraper without even sparing him a glance. He entered the house, knowing that Hux would wait a few minutes before he followed him. He took his hat off, idly fanning his face with it as he looked around their home. The floor had been swept and mopped; great-aunt Beru’s best ceramics were put on the table. An attempt at porridge was present. Hux had even gotten some flowers to make the place look friendlier; the gesture was somewhat counterbalanced by the loaded rifle affixed on the wall, but not overtly ruined. Kylo had always thought they’d made this house a most merry and cozy place: every rug, pillow, mug, and especially the books were reward and evidence of hard work. He was proud to survey the place every time he counted his blessings.

Still: it would be worth nothing if all of this was only his—but the door opened, and Hux came in, making Kylo’s heart leap. He’d grown fond of American wear, realising early that his flamboyant British clothes were not doing him any favours in this climate, in a town of outlaws; there was a special joy in watching him shed a simply tailored coat, revealing a wool waistcoat and cotton shirt. Kylo hoped he’d slip into something more comfortable for the rest of the evening: he especially liked denim trousers on him, for they really complimented his frame. Hux kept on undressing, which was promising, but he stopped once he was in shirtsleeves and braces.

“Won’t you put that basket down?” Hux asked.

“Sorry,” Kylo said and set the herbs on the kitchen counter, only to pick it right back up; space was scarce, and it’d be in the way. He looked around rather helplessly, making Hux chuckle.

“Something’s on your mind?”

“Uh-huh.” He managed to find a place for the basket near the hulking cast iron stove. He kicked it for good measure, making it slide into a corner. Rubbing his hand together, he announced, “I’m starving.”

“Then you better eat this mess I made with love,” Hux said. As he passed him, he stole his hat; he put it on with some flair, and tipped the brim. “How do I look? Dark, brooding, mysterious?”

“You look like a man with no manners and thieving little hands.”

Hux made a face, but his eyes were shining with mirth. He dropped the hat unceremoniously on the extra chair (tall, narrow; a child’s size) and began serving the meal. “How was your day?” he asked as Kylo took his place carefully, contemplating whether he should go to bed with an empty stomach as he caught the first whiff of the porridge, but judging by Hux’s playful mood, they’d be up all night—it’d be best to please him and just swallow down whatever he was given.

Around cold spoonfuls of mushy food, Kylo told him about the early hours spent in the shop’s kitchen stirring the cauldron and chanting spells, then his first buyers, who came from over the Tuhare Lakes.

“It seems you’re getting famous,” Hux noted, proud, pleased.

Kylo scowled to hear that. “We shall hope that I won’t be too famous.”

“Nonsense; I think we would all benefit keeping contact with the surrounding settlements, and Mr. Thanisson agrees.”

Kylo’s scowl deepened at the mention of that name. He was some distant relation of Thanisson; damn that this cursed world would be so small!

“I’ve been working on a map in my idle hours,” Hux went on, “attempting to chart potential allies
and trade partners.”

“You don’t have idle hours,” Kylo said fondly, then, “may I see it?”

“I’d be happy if you could look over it and advise, with all your wanderings; but do keep in mind that I am no cartographer.”

“I won’t judge it too harshly, but I might laugh a bit.”

“You wound me,” Hux said solemnly. He was thrilled enough to leave the washing to Kylo, and rushed upstairs while Kylo cleaned the plates under running water. He could see the stalls from the window; the horses appeared to be restless, but more excited than scared. Kylo watched them, wondering about the source of their unease, and decided at once to check on them. He put the wet tea towel over a shoulder and stepped into the garden through the creaking back door.

The shadows were long, the sky a haunting purple, the horizon blurred with an approaching sandstorm. Stubborn weeds parted for Kylo’s heavy steps as he walked around and checked the shed for coyotes and the lonesome tree for birds of prey; he found no source of disturbance, and was ready to blame it all on the strange weather, when—there—a shadow running past the well.

The wind picked up. Kylo followed the direction where the creature fled; it was small and nimble, but strange in shape—it appeared as if it was carrying something. He had lost sight of it; he made a round again, getting concerned. He tried to look into its mind, but he felt as if something looked back; the sense that he was being watched mounted as he got back to the kitchen door. He peered around, lost, while the horses neighed and the sandstorm rolled in, closing in on Tatooine.

There was a piercing cry.

“Armitage!” Kylo shouted, and rushed back into the kitchen; the wind slammed the door behind him shut.

He found Hux on his knees, face buried in his hands, his wretched sobs muffled. An orange tabby was looking at him curiously, head tilted, deep blue eyes unblinking. A magpie’s carcass was in her mouth.

Chapter End Notes

Content warnings: spoiler - supporting character dies...or do they* / killing an infant mentioned as a metaphor / consent negotiation / stitching wounds (not detailed) / joke about petplay / Hux mentions almost having a hookup with someone else / body horror: human-animal transformation detailed / threat of public execution / gun use / cold-blooded murder / Hux and Kylo prove to be villains with shady morals / graphic description of wounds and corpses / illness (tuberculosis, seasickness) described, vomiting referred to / a horse gives birth

* SPOILER: ɯɹ oɟ uɐɯnɥ-uou ɐuᴉsuɳʇǝɹʇoɥs sʇǝƃʇuǝɔᴉllᴉW

A million thanks to my wonderful beta, bioticnerfherder, to everybody who helped me with the previous chapters (Gefionne, Anna, ktula, deadsy: thank you!) and to you, dear reader; thank you so, so much! I wish I was better at farwells and final words; let me just say that it's been a pleasure, and I'll be forever grateful for all the support Some Strange and Unnerving Events got! This story is very important to me, and it means the world...
that I could share it with you, guys. Grouphug?

Art, art, art!
* [creepy moodboard](#) by silivrenelya
* [Lord Arkanis in all his glory](#) by Katie's Ghost
* [Lord Arkanis: the trendsetter](#) by Jeusus
* NEW: [cover by The Fatal Impact](#)
* NEW: [cover by gaw giaonyermind](#)
* * NEW: [a debauched Lord Arkanis](#) by Katie's Ghost (with male presenting nipples)

My [tumblr tag](#) for the fic // there's a [moodboard](#) for the chapter

List of references and inspirations
C. Brontë: Jane Eyre (to the surprise of no one) & “Who put Bella in the wych elm?” (unsolved mystery) & One for Sorrow (nursery rhyme) & Kylo having healing powers is Holly’s headcanon from CWU
With subtle nods to: S. Jackson: We Have Always Lived in the Castle; J. Austen: Pride and Prejudice; D. Defoe: Moll Flanders (appearing as Essie MacGowan in N. Gaiman’s American Gods series); E. Brontë: Wuthering Heights; C.P. Gilman: The Yellow Wallpaper; L. Carroll: Alice in Wonderland; A. C. Doyle: A Study in Scarlet; Hamilton (the musical): Wait for It; C. Churchill: The Skriker / Fens; movies: Crimson Peak (without the incest), Black Swan; folk tales: Bluebeard, Rumpelstiltskin; English mythology; Hungarian mythology (yay for fire-breathing horses)
And very obscure references to the following poems: S. T. Coleridge: Kubla Khan; C. Rossetti: In the Artist’s Studio; L. A. Douglas: Two Loves; T. Campbell: The Turkish Lady; Sappho: I Have Not Had One Word From Her; T. S. Eliot: The Waste Land (at which point I’ve stopped giving that little amount of fucks I had left for historical accuracy)

Works inspired by this one
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