The Overlap Between Intimacy and Manipulation

by SquirrellyThief

Summary

Love is like being dropped from a great height. Thrilling, usually caused by someone other than oneself, and the chances of survival are slim.

On a forced shore leave trip to Canto Bight while the Finalizer is in for inspection and repairs, Ren is determined to make Hux his once and for all. Even if it means whittling away at his willpower little by little.

Over those same two days, Hux learns that he didn’t have much willpower left in him to begin with.

Or: a melodramatic honeymoon fic that takes itself a little too seriously. (And technically two fics in one)

Notes

So allow me to explain myself:
I worked on this piece for 3 months, did the rewrite in 6 days, and now I'm stuck with a novel I'm not sure how I feel about anymore (the intensity with which I worked on it makes me only see its flaws. It's a perception thing). And my friends insisted I post it.

It was, originally, only supposed to be 2 chapters long. A Ren story and then a Hux story, but
the sheer size of it made that feel unwieldy, so I broke it up by scene instead.

Enjoy!
Visions I

In the seconds between breaths, Kylo Ren reached out. Threads of emotion and thought led to knots connecting them to other threads. He sped through them like pact pathways in the desert, no one around for miles, waiting for some blip on the horizon to catch his attention.

Then, something grabbed him. A chain looped around a speeder bringing it to a sudden, bone rattling halt. The world spun around him with disorienting intensity, pulling him downward and sideways with no point of reference to anchor him in three-dimensional space. Were he a younger man, it might have nauseated him enough to pull him out of his trance. As it was, the whole experience just left him dizzy and annoyed.

He focused and saw only a deep, inky blackness no amount of eyestrain could find details in. He was standing upright on a solid stone floor. The air was cool and wet, laced with the smells of rain and vaguely familiar grasses. Tension rippled across his back. Something was here with him, but what that something was he couldn’t tell. It was large, whatever it was, and it was trained on him. If he moved too quickly, it would pursue. A crouched hunter waiting for its prey to notice.

He tightened his fists at his sides. A jolt of electric agony shot up his left arm. Turning his hand up, Kylo blinked against the red glow seeping out of a gash in his palm, right along his heart line. It was crystal. When he touched it, it pulsed back in time with his heartbeat. Kyber then.

Holding his hand out, the glow was too dim to see by. It barely lit his whole hand. Curious, Kylo picked at it. Sparks and some sting, but it fractured wider easily under the slightest provocation. A little brighter each time. He sucked his teeth, laced the fingers of his right hand through his left, and pressed. There was a sickening crack, louder than when he usually popped his knuckles. Like stone splitting.

The fissure had widened considerably, small hunks of crystal sticking out at odd angles, darkening nearer the center like some bizarre, organic geode. He cracked his hand again, forceful and deliberate, watching the gap widen without breaking bone or skin despite the impossible limit he pushed it to. The crystals glittered and surrounded him in a corona of red light.

At least he could see now.

Kylo found himself in a wide, open room lined with many archways leading out to black corridors. Each one identical to its brothers. The floor was smooth, uneven stone. The walls precariously stacked brick with little mortar to see between them. He knew this place. Only when he was here last the walls were not quite so bare.

Luke’s school.

Why was he dragged back here?

He closed his eyes and listened to the sounds of distant rain and thunder. A howling wind cutting through the open corridors. He breathed deep; the faintest hits of smoke, ozone, and something putrid and carrion he couldn’t quite identify but forced himself to block out. He reached out for some hint; some pull of the Force guiding him to what it wanted him to see. A breeze, a change in the air, anything.

It came to him in a sound. A soft thing, rising and falling to the melody of a familiar song:

Mirrorbright shines the moon...
Leia? No. He’d closed that door years ago. He tried to home in on it, untangle it from all the other sensory input like picking a loose hair from a paintbrush. No. It wasn’t Leia. The voice was too low. Too mechanical. Something pretending to be her or a degraded recording.

Kylo opened his eyes and followed the sound, mouthing along with the words as he went. He shouldn’t remember, but muscle reacted without his telling it to; just like it had when Ben Solo was young and would hear it hummed in the next room. Leia so preoccupied with datawork she didn’t even realize she was planting that tenacious weed of a lullaby in his head for days afterward. “You used to love it so much when you were little,” was her only defense when confronted about it.

A long hallway lined with high, open windows showed him glimpses of the world outside. Much of the lands were still unbroken. Early in the school’s short lifetime then, maybe when Luke had first decided on the place. Ben at his elbow agreeing with his assessments even though he didn’t really care. Through the curtain of rain, Kylo made out the sloping dark hills and distant skeletons of trees and against the starless sky. Nothing and no one for miles.

When he held his hand out, the water sizzled and steamed when it hit the crystals.

A flash of lightning bathed the hallway in stark white and black, flattening down everything into stacked layers of two-dimensional shapes. At the end hall, matching his walking pace and roughly head height was a swirling mass of blackness. The eye of a cyclone, shattering and swallowing the panes white around it. He could feel it tugging at him too but dug in his heels and refused to budge even a step further.

Another flash and it was closer, approaching in a lazy, lopsided figure eight, as if through water instead of air. The edges of it scraped the walls, the ceiling, the floor. It leeched the heat from his skin even from meters away. Kylo fought the instinct to give it ground.

A third flash and it was gone. He was somewhere else entirely. A star destroyer. No. The Supremacy. Staring down a lighted hallway through the open door to Snoke’s throne room. He approached with the same caution he’d navigated Luke’s school. Wary the old bastard might make an appearance. But Snoke wasn’t here. The only figure standing out amid the wash of bloody red was a sliver of copper and white that could only be Hux.

He was held back in the doorway. Something pulling at him, turning the floor into a slow-moving treadmill. He stopped fighting it, and something warm and wet carded through his hair. A comb of teeth in a still-breathing mouth. The damp fingers of a benevolent master.

They caught on the tangles and yanked his head backward.

Tearing himself free landed him back in reality; the audience room of the Finalizer, seated on the floor. It was a smaller space than the one on Starkiller had been. Really little more than an emptied-out conference room with long-unused holoprojectors and cameras. Quiet, well-lit, out of the way. On instinct, adrenaline carrying over, Kylo looked around him. No traces of his vision remained.

Kylo hauled himself to his feet. His back and legs protested the sudden movement. Stiff soreness spread out along muscle and nerves but did nothing to chase away the lingering jitter in his heart. He was being ridiculous. It was just a Force vision. It couldn’t harm him in any way that mattered. And yet the wet heat of breath against his neck followed him all the way out the door.

He needed a task. A distraction. Something to do. Under Snoke his visions were always followed by orders; train with the knights, follow a lead on the map, check in on Starkiller. Now, he had to find the tasks for himself. Or, rather, bother Hux until he suggested something else to do besides bothering him. Usually having to do with messages he planned to pawn on Hux anyway, but it was
better than nothing.

Out in the corridors, Kylo kept his head down. Passed unseen around stormtroopers and officers, eavesdropping on gossip and casual conversation. A “did you hear” here and an inside joke there. Casual, lively things. Normalcy returning in full force. For weeks the ship had been quiet, no one willing to utter a word that wasn’t relevant to the business of the day. Everyone on high alert waiting for the next catastrophe to start. But it never came, and the Order breathed easy again. It wouldn’t last, Kylo knew, but he wasn’t about to rile everyone up again.

Eventually, he found his target just outside of a conference room, Phasma across from him, watching a clutch of officers march up the hall and back to their duties. They didn’t spot him, so Kylo backpedaled around a corner, his back to the wall.

“I don’t like this,” Phasma was saying.

Hux let out a long-suffering sigh. “I don’t either. But brass is still looking at me sideways and I don’t want to be on the wrong side of a coup.”

“They wouldn’t rally against you like that,” Phasma said, “Would they? After everything you’ve done.”

“My accomplishments and my failures are a bit too tangled for me to know for certain.” Annoyance edged its way into Hux’s voice. “I’ve stopped seeing messages calling for court martial though which is a good sign. I can’t overstep my boundaries though. The navy wants this to be a naval matter. I’m just,” it sounded like it physically pained him to say it, “not going to go.”

Phasma’s low growl sounded like static through her helmet. “And if they stall on us? What then, Red?”

Red? A nickname? Kylo couldn’t recall a time he’d ever heard anyone call Hux something that wasn’t his name or his title. Not to his face anyway. Much less anyone familiar enough to think of him in nicknames. Were they friends? Rumors around the ship that they were close predated Kylo’s arrival to the Order by a solid five years. But friends seemed a stretch for both of them. Hux the eternal isolationist. And Phasma with no discernible personality of her own. She was just a suit of armor, shiny and chrome, reflecting any light that drew too near. Hux’s especially it seemed, making it virtually inescapable in places the pair occupied together. Though, when it bounced off Phasma it was dimmer and colder like moonlight.

And yet, she had a nickname for him, which implied familiarity.

“Look,” Hux said and when Kylo peered around the corner his posture had changed; loosened in the shoulders and hips, favored one foot over the other. He didn’t sag and relax so much as tilt slightly into his dominant side. “I reported the damage and made it sound as urgent as I could. I don’t like this any more than you do, P.”

Another nickname? What the fuck? Hux had nicknames for people? When had this happened? Was this recent?

How had he not noticed before?

“You reported damage that’s going to be reviewed in a meeting you won’t be present for!” Phasma countered. “And if they shove us down the list of priorities? We stand the risk of ambush like this. The Resistance isn’t going to pull an army out of its ass and fight us honorably, Red. They’re-“

“I know.” Hux snipped, but it wasn’t the same sharp barb he shot at subordinates that tried to talk his
ear off. Just a terse interruption. “Look, Ren will be at the meeting. He has to be. We can play that card in our favor.”

“You really have him in your pocket now? That quickly?”

Kylo swallowed a scoff. Since when did Hux ever have him in his pocket? And how would she even reach that conclusion? Had Hux told her they slept together? Kylo hadn’t pegged him for the kiss-and-tell type. Judging by the disgust in her tone and the wave of exasperation that came with the words, she wasn’t too pleased about whatever she imagined for them. Kylo didn’t pick up any jealously though, not that he would care if he did. Phasma’s opinions had no place on his radar.

Hux didn’t answer her question. “Right now, we just need to keep the reports quiet. Let datawork move swiftly and be forgotten so word doesn’t slip outside the vessel. By the time it gets out, it’ll be to set traps. Nothing to worry about.”

“It better not be,” Phasma said.

“Are you threatening me, Captain?”

Another glance around the corner. Both their postures had straightened. Soldiers again.

“If we get ambushed, General,” Phasma started off on her way. “I will end your chapter of history before the Resistance has a chance to.”

“Deny them the satisfaction.” A little laugh bubbled out of Hux, but Kylo was the only one that heard it. Hux watched her go, his calm veneer falling away. He deflated with a quiet sigh, gloved hands running over his face. A dimness appeared in his aura that Kylo had seen before; exhaustion borne of repetition. Kylo almost felt bad for the man and all the damage control he’d been forced to do. Was continuing to do while his own career stalled out and rusted with disuse. He’d wondered, when Hux was in isolation, what his next move would be once he recovered.

But even now, Hux still hadn’t moved.

The sharp click of boots in his direction snapped Kylo out of his thoughts. So much for musing. Feeling mischievous, Kylo rocked back on one heel and took a long step forward, out from around the corner. He pretended not to see Hux coming and nearly collided with the man. He bit the side of his tongue when Hux jumped in surprise at the sudden appearance of his only superior in his personal space.

Hux let out a huff. “Did you need something, Supreme Leader?”

“No. Just minding my own business.” Kylo said. “You really should pay more attention to your surroundings, General.”

“Or we should put a bell on you,” Hux muttered under his breath and sidestepped around him.
Visions II

Gamma shift always had a certain uneasiness to it Kylo couldn’t shake. Being down to just a skeleton crew was nice, downright enjoyable even, but the emptiness of the corridors and open rooms felt ominous and unsafe. Like exploring uncharted territory where anything could be lurking in a far corner no matter how many lights were on.

He didn’t like to wander during gamma. Not if he didn’t have to. It was an ideal time for meditation and practicing saber work though. No one around to interrupt him, most of the crew and cadets quietly asleep. Their thoughts cycles of propaganda and old memories. It was better to sit in his quarters, or his newly annexed audience room, and just feel through his place in the galaxy.

But this particular gamma, Kylo had something to do. As much as he hated to admit it, Hux’s apparent friendliness with Phasma had bothered him. He’d tried to block it out. Write it off as pettiness that was beneath him. But the idea that he’d missed something so obvious as the man having a close friendship right under his nose was too much insult to be ignored. That relaxed posture, that lowered guard, how Phasma had earned such things was a mystery. She didn’t seem to do anything, except her job and be in Hux’s general proximity sometimes.

And Hux didn’t play favorites with her, as far as Kylo knew. Everything he’d ever given her could be easily justified by her career record, which had been spotless for the decade or so Phasma had been in service. But they’d always worked together, Kylo noticed when he’d poked around their respective files earlier. On the Finalizer together, on Starkiller together, wherever one went the other was not far behind.

The door to Hux’s quarters was unlocked when Kylo got to it. The general seated at his desk. At some point post-recovery, he’d acquired a large transparent work panel, lit it from beneath with spare droid parts, and laid it over the center of his desk in a cheap, hasty recreation of his old custom, built-in model. He was scratching away at something on the screen with a stylus held loosely in one hand, his chin resting the palm of the other. He sat cross-legged in his desk chair, boots tucked discretely out of sight, jacket with the belt still laced in the back loop slung over the back of his chair. He glanced up at the motion of the door but didn’t react to seeing Kylo there.

“You’re still awake.” Kylo called a coaster from the other side of Hux’s work surface as he approached, narrowly missing the general’s head. Hux, to his credit, didn’t flinch this time.

“I’m on call,” Hux said blandly, going back to his task. “I couldn’t make Opan take gamma alone forever.”

Kylo wanted to argue with the statement but checked himself. He set the mug in his hand on the coaster and scooted both Hux’s way. Another glance. Another silent acknowledgement, but no action.

Well, if he was going to be boring tonight.

Kylo braced a hand on the back of Hux’s chair and leaned over his shoulder. Hux tensed a little but didn’t pull away, didn’t snap, didn’t stop what he was doing. “Hey, I know her,” Kylo laughed. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Hux’s mouth tick up in a smirk.

On the screen was a blueprint, half finished, but still very recognizable as a TIE Silencer. It was a slightly different design; rounder, tighter, sleeker. Hux was currently adjusting the proportion of side panels, trying to get them in line with the look and feel of the old, hexagonal version. A bunch of
what Kylo could only assume were parts numbers in Hux’s atrocious handwriting littered the right-hand side of the sketch; some marked with question marks, others crossed out and corrected, a few circled.

Kylo had been partial to the blockier version by sheer virtue that it was different than the standard Fighters. Sharp and unique in a way Kylo wasn’t quick to part with, but Hux’s sketch, even half finished, held a lot of promise. It looked faster and, knowing Hux’s penchant for perfectionism, it would handle smoother and punch harder. Just like every iteration before it. It wasn’t even close to existing and Kylo already had the itch in his palms to fly it.

“I’ve been thinking of giving it the body of a Special Forces fighter.” Hux explained. He touched the tablet with two fingers and rotated the sketch so that it was head-on with the cockpit. “Take out the extra chair and you’ll have the same amount of space. Might correct some of the persisting issues we’ve seen in atmo. Plus, the Fighters are already in production, so rolling these out won’t take too much adjusting.” He clicked his tongue, “Hopefully.”

Everything had to be perfect but consume next to no resources or manage to be repurposed somehow. The original Silencer had been a prime example of this, made piecemeal from parts already in production. Even now his old models were relegated to top-class pilots when Kylo was given an upgrade and their data was collected continuously. Though it only caught Hux’s interest when someone crashed or exploded in atmosphere.

Kylo backed off, circling around the desk and pulling up a chair. He propped up his feet, crossed at the ankle, on the corner of the desk and earned himself a listless glare for it.

It was a good idea, based on what he knew of the Special Forces Fighters; two-man recon ships built to survive what normal Fighters couldn’t. Life support built-in, which had been pretty scandalous at the time of their inception. “Wait. If you’re using an SF base,” Kylo started, and judging by the look Hux was leveling him, the general knew exactly where this question was going, “does that mean I get butt cannons?”

“I know for a fact you did not just use the phrase ‘butt cannons’ in my office,” Hux snipped at him. “Get that hanger slang out of here, you heathen.”

It was simply astonishing how sharply Hux was still willing to speak with him, even now. Hux had never had a problem looking down his nose at authority. Kylo had seen it in the way he looked at Snoke. Under that mask of anxious propriety had been the smallest, persistent spark of seething hatred. The kind that led to coups. Kylo often wondered if Hux would have tried to kill Snoke and usurp the throne himself if he hadn’t beaten him to the punch. To have that ire leveled at him almost felt like the early days. The newly defected apprentice and freshly appointed general. There was an air of familiarity to it. A normalcy Kylo could hide from his responsibilities in for a time.

“Hux.”

Hux went back to his sketching, but Kylo could see the slightest hint of teeth holding his lip.

“Hux, I want butt cannons.”

“Rear auxiliary blasters,” Hux corrected, glancing up, “And no. Clearly you’re not responsible enough for them if you’re going to be this childish about it.”

Kylo didn’t concede but refused to confirm Hux’s accusation by pressing further. Instead he just watched him and waited.
"We couldn’t even mass produce them if I let you keep them, Ren.” Hux sighed, looking up again. “Honestly. They wouldn’t be useful to pilots without a myriad of additions to the weapons systems.”

“I wouldn’t need those,” Kylo argued, though really it was less of an argument and more of a game at this point. Hux was right, of course. The only person who could accurately hit a target behind him without any sort of visual assistance was him and only him. The Silencers were, in the end, just prototypes he was testing, not custom ships for his use. But that didn’t stop him from wanting them to be. “Have you considered the damage I could do with butt cannons? I’m already the most precise pilot you have. Now I can be precise in two directions at the same time.”

Hux was shaking his head the whole time, but there no anger coming from him. Just mild, muted amusement. “For the last time, Ren, no butt canno- oh goddamn it. Now you’ve got me saying it.” He threw his stylus at Kylo in a huff. The tiny thing was easy to catch mid-flight on reflexes alone and toss back on the desk. Undeterred by the futility of the attack, Hux continued, “I’ll hear no more arguments on the subject. My design, my rules, starjockey.”

“Now who’s using slang.”

Hux reached for the mug at his elbow without even looking at it. Like he’d put it there himself. “Don’t make me throw something else at you- “ He stopped, stalk still, when the steaming mug was just under his nose. "Wait a minute,” he mumbled, changing his grip and inhaling a lungful of steam. “Is…” his brow furrowed in confusion. He trained his eyes on Kylo. “Is this-?”

“Arkanian black,” Kylo supplied. “The mess still had some from your last order. Tucked away. They managed to find it when I asked about it enough.” ‘Enough’ in this instance meaning ‘once with great prejudice’ but the less Hux knew about that, the better. “I didn’t know how you took it though. So, it isn’t sweetened or diluted or- “ He stopped short when Hux took a small, experimental sip and then a larger, more confident one. Apparently, the man was immune to burning his tongue on hot liquids. Maybe that was a First Order thing. Or just a Hux thing. Kylo couldn’t be certain.

“I don’t sweeten it,” Hux said after a pause of appraisal, “It’s a little weak, but it’ll do.” Because of course Hux had to take some issue with the gesture. Another pause, another sip, then a quiet, “Thank you,” as he set the mug back on the coaster.

Kylo called it a win. He sank into his chair until the back of his head touched the neck rest. Not exactly the most comfortable position, but it awarded him an interesting angle on Hux.

He’d gone back to his sketching and notes. The blue light of the tablet nearly blinding against the deep, rich shadows of the room. It caught on his cheekbones and his brow. Through his slightly parted lips to glint off the wet edge of his teeth. It washed out his irises, his eyelashes, his brows to near white and muted the color of his hair. He was gorgeous like this. Ethereal. A ghost framed in a massive black shadow. His mind a steady stream of numbers and reminders and corrections, the steady tick… tick…tick of an ancient, reliable timepiece.

Kylo felt himself dozing, sinking into the shadows around him like a plush featherbed. He blinked up at the ceiling, trying to fight it, but something took him by the scruff of the neck and yanked him under.

He was back on the Supremacy. Ahead of him was the hall to the throne room. His hand throbbed to remind him the crystal fissure was still there, glowing impotently. It had closed up from the ragged geode of his last vision. Just a gash across his palm again. Behind him, there was nothing. Just hallway and darkness. No beasts, no school, nothing.
In the distance, he heard a distant rumble like thunder, and snow static like rain.

He crossed the threshold into the throne room without pursuers this time. It was the same pristine space Kylo remembered, haunting in its spaciousness. The red panels were drawn in all but a small viewport overlooking a single planet from impossibly close. A familiar planet, Kylo realized after a second of scrutiny. Jakku.

In front of the viewport was Hux, dapper and refined in a sleek white jacket to his dress uniform. At his right shoulder a black and grey cord draped along his arm held in place by two silver pins on either side. The high collar’s trim and the outside seam of his trousers was the same sparkling silver of his rank stripes. The only real color he had was hidden in the pinks and yellows of his skin and the bright orange of his hair. And that hair was longer than normal, swept out of his face instead of plastered down. The darkness under his eyes had lightened, his skin tone evened. Lively and youthful. Kylo felt drawn to him the same way he had been in the hanger years ago. A sun dragging him into orbit.

“Ren,” Hux turned his head to him, the heels of his polished boots snapping together. “I was wondering when you’d show up.”

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing that isn’t under control.”

Outside, the field was still. Nothing between them and the planet’s surface. Kylo couldn’t see the Finalizer or anything in Jakku’s atmosphere. The magnifiers didn’t even help. There was just dead space. What was this? What were they doing?

Another rumble from the hallway.

He turned to Hux. His profile was absolutely regal. Kylo could imagine him with golden laurels in his hair, a right and proper emperor for the galaxy. Pulled up from nothing and placed at the pinnacle with meteoric speed. And Kylo would give it to him. Maybe not wholly. Definitely with caveats. But he’d sit on the throne, even if it was just on the arm at Kylo’s side.

He took him by the arm like a man possessed and tugged him closer. Hux stumbled, eyes widening in surprise a moment, but didn’t try to take his arm back. If anything, he seemed amused when their lips connected and after a second, Hux kissed him back. Gentle, generous, like this was old hat for them. A gloved hand settled against his cheek, holding him in place.

A breath ghosted up Kylo’s spine.

He tightened his grip on Hux’s arm, trying to stay grounded in the moment. Not wanting this vision to evaporate in favor of some metaphor that would only make sense after the event it predicted came and went. He craved a dream, not a prophecy.

But Hux pulled away with a sharp noise of distress. On instinct, Kylo held him tighter. Hux was glaring at him, the dark circles and sickly pallor were back. His hair disheveled. Pink stars reflected in his eyes.

Kylo pulled his hand away and blood stuck to him, dripping off a jagged crystal sticking out from his palm. A bright red splotch stained Hux’s jacket. It wicked through the material so quickly it had spread to his elbow by the time Hux brought his hand up to put pressure on it. Kylo tried to say something, to explain himself, but the words just wouldn’t come. Fat, syrupy drops ran down his
hand and under his sleeve.

“Ren…” but there was something wrong with his voice. A quarter second delay. Distortion. A cheap imitation of the real thing.

Outside, a black line split the planet in two.

Hux took a cautious step back. His footing wobbled, the knee supporting his weight buckled. Kylo rushed to catch him.

His boots hit the floor in Hux’s quarters. The sudden change in lighting and perspective was disorienting. “Wha- What’s happening?”

Hux was standing beside him (very much the real thing), fastening his belt over his uniform jacket (black). His boots were on, his hair slicked down. “Welcome back,” he droned sarcastically. “I have to go to the bridge. The crew wants my eye on some of the readouts.” He adjusted his sleeves. “Gamma team, it seems, is too smart for their own good. I’ve taught them too well. They know where their paygrade ends.”

Kylo huffed an awkward laugh through his nose. When he moved to get up, Hux stopped him with an outstretched hand.

“Don’t trouble yourself. It’s just residual RKM damage, I’m sure.”

Kylo settled back into his chair, uncertain how he felt about being dismissed even though he knew his presence would be pointless.

It seemed, according to the reports Hux had sent to him, that the destruction of the Supremacy was the gift that kept on giving. The few ships that had survived the blast, the Finalizer included, had started seeing malfunctions in their scanning equipment in the cycles following Crait. In the Finalizer’s case, it was mostly false-positive readings. Blaring sirens for ghosts. Navigators had to double and triple check routes through hyperspace before going ahead with them, and travel became safer in short bursts. On-board techs and mechanics had given it their all trying to fix them, but eventually all of them unanimously agreed that the whole system needed to be shut down, gutted, and replaced.

But, for now, as they sluggishly made their way to rendezvous point in the unknown regions, the crew just had to deal with anomalies and pawn judgment calls off on their superiors.

“Lock up if you leave,” Hux said, and was out the door before Kylo could respond.

For a moment, Kylo was surprised Hux was willing to leave him completely unsupervised in his quarters. Then again, he’d already gone through all of Hux’s things once and destroyed the few items Hux still cared about in the process. And it wasn’t like the general had had the time to add to his meager collection of belongings, aside from what Kylo had demanded of him. Whatever there was to see or steal or break, Kylo had put eyes on already.

He stood and stretched the tension out of his back, arms stretched over his head. His body protested the mistreatment, reminding him with a dull insistence that he wasn’t a flexible teenager anymore. He wasn’t going to get away with finding weird ways to center and mediate.

Circling around the desk, he settled into the general’s chair and tapped the tablet screen to reactivate it. The flash white and blue nearly blinded him for a second. Through the spots, he saw Hux had left his blueprint open. It was nearly finished. The parts list was starting to creep into the sketch. He went through the list; some of the numbers he knew and could name the parts for, the ones he usually had
to have repaired or replaced after a jaunt. The sketch itself was gorgeous. A quick swipe of his finger
spun the whole thing around.

Auxiliary blasters intact. “Indulgent of you,” Kylo laughed to himself. Hux would regret the decision
to give him that much firepower, but Kylo wasn’t about to say no. If anything, he was inclined to say
*thank you* in the most ornate way possible.

Hux had left his stylus by his mug. Cold now, but a few sips left. Kylo eyed it, he’d been curious
about the weird, woody tea from Hux’s homeworld the whole walk over. It had smelled potent and
heady, but Kylo refused to let himself test it. He had to hold on to plausible deniability if it turned out
awful. But now…

Kylo took a tentative sip, just like Hux had. It had a strange viscosity to it. Just a hair thicker than
normal water. Bitter, but not oppressively so. The smoke of it lingered on the roof of the mouth. But
the aftertaste was enough to make Kylo set the mug back down; wet paper and loose soil. Kylo
wanted to be surprised that Hux could stand a whole mug of the stuff, but he already knew the man
had no taste.
Visions III

The First Order was a sharp, angular thing. Like broken glass. Certain rules of decorum were kept in place with a quiet viciousness that would have given a bipartisan Republic dinner a run for its money. All suffused with bloodthirsty, violent chaos Kylo adored. Stormtroopers were auctioned off like cheap droids after supposedly randomized assignments were announced. Veterans of the Empire snapped up the best and brightest to mentor, to stake their names in, at younger and younger ages; gambling against the house’s track record of burnout and mental breakdown. Children without names were encouraged to outperform their peers by ruthless patrons like racing steeds and those that lost were cut loose like so much blighted excess.

It was the galaxy’s biggest sabaac game played in blood by savages in crisp, tailored uniforms pretending to be genteel society. And it was delightful. No softness. No holding back to avoid imagined offense. No forcing compromise at the detriment of all parties. No pretending all hands could win.

Kylo knew against all doubt that his unique skillset as a Force user had saved him when he switched sides. That it was the only thing that kept him at the top of the rusted, barbed chain of command. But that chain still had him, was shackled to him in the title of Supreme Leader and it was heavier now than it had ever been when he was simply a knight and apprentice. He wasn’t built for governance, anyone that had known Ben Solo at all would have been able to tell. Less so for the pomp and platitudes and entirely too many rules the First Order demanded be acknowledged. It bored him terribly on the best days and annoyed him to fits on the average ones. Just answering messages and organizing who deserved what and when and how bad the fallout would be of a decision was enough to drive him mad. He passed off meetings whenever he could to Hux, knowing that talking to people and preaching the doctrine would always be his wheelhouse, and, well, it behooved Kylo to put his best assets to use.

However, the naval fleet had made it very clear that Hux, who came up through command of the stormtrooper program and not the fleet, was not welcome to discussions about repairs to said fleet. Including what remained of the Supremacy herself and the Finalizer; a fact that struck Kylo as kind of silly since the Finalizer was, technically, Hux’s ship, army/navy distinction notwithstanding. But at the end of the day, he had no voice in this choir and Kylo was left on his own.

He briefly considered promoting him, giving him a new title that allowed Hux to attend all meetings on his behalf just so he wouldn’t have to. Like a steward or a personal assistant. Snoke had gotten around meetings through a network of agents, Kylo could establish a similar one. Probably should in all honesty before he lost his head at a meeting and killed someone out of sheer annoyance. The idea was scrapped before it ever reached Hux’s ears. It was bad enough to look like he was playing favorites with the man (which he was) but giving him power just painted a target on his back. And Kylo didn’t want to play the odds if he had to fold this hand.

So, he was stuck going to the meeting alone. Not before being briefed by a very agitated Hux about the most common, inane, and boring questions Kylo would have leveled at him and how to answer them diplomatically. The sheer number of answers that surprised him was a testament to how many meetings he’d attended but completely checked out on. It was much more appealing to just meditate quietly behind his mask than actually pay attention. It was the kind of thing Leia would have scolded him for, but Hux just sighed and moved on to the next topic, unfazed.

Hux ultimately advised, “Try to get the Finalizer high on the schedule but if everyone agrees, roll with what they decide. Don’t pretend to know better than people who have been doing the job
longer than you’ve been alive.” Kylo wondered how many times a young Hux had spoken out of turn to learn that lesson.

The meeting itself went about as well as Kylo could have expected. A bunch of stuffed shirts with dingy auras giving him wary looks. It had been a unanimous decision that Kylo continue to conceal his face around the First Order’s general population. A deep hood and low cowl called on memories of Palpatine in a way that made the oldest in attendance nervous. Though it did nothing to obscure his voice, not that it really mattered. The last time he could recall Ben Solo speaking in public was before puberty had claimed his voice for adulthood.

Still, the subject of his face was an uneasy thing tugging at Kylo’s attention the whole time. His ascension had rippled through the military in word only. Bureaucracy and aggressive censorship acting like a fine sieve to capture the more unsavory particulars so they might be molded into something more flattering or thrown out entirely. It was the second time Kylo was ever truly grateful about how slowly news spread.

And the slower his face made the rounds, the better, in the opinions of everyone that knew the truth. If someone recognized him with any sort of volume it could spell game-changing scandal. Hux and Phasma’s joint damage control had been skillful enough to silence whispers that Snoke had been killed unjustly. Their propaganda machine wove a web of lies about Snoke’s fitness to lead and a planned coup for the betterment of the Order forced to jump ahead when the Supremacy disaster threatened all their lives. How paranoia and distrust and not incompetence had led to the biggest catastrophes the First Order could stand to face. It was so convincing that by the end that Kylo started to believe it.

But Leia Organa’s only son taking over the highest seat of power of her greatest enemy in the wake of two major victories for the Resistance? That, and whatever cover-ups allowed it to happen, would be a death knell for all parties involved and even those caught in its orbit regardless of their participation. Public executions of traitors were popular right now.

Luckily, the meeting didn’t run over schedule. Decisions were mostly unanimous and Kylo really only had to be present for the process, not an active participant in discussions. An order of importance was assigned, and though the Finalizer didn’t take top billing, she was close enough to the head of the list that the news blew over well with Hux and the maintenance team.

The ship would have to be, for all intents and purposes, docked and cleared out of all but the necessary crew for a few cycles. Some jumped at the opportunity. Navigation in particular was quick to cash in what leave time they had. Opan’s put in a request for a four-day stint planetside. Visiting family, he claimed. Stormtroopers were given special assignments to get them off-vessel. The phrase ‘reconditioning supervisor’ appeared on many of them. The only people besides maintenance that didn’t try to get off ship where: Phasma, who had at some point burned through all of her accrued leave time so she didn’t even attempt to request it, Hux who had spent two days of his time off six years ago and never did it again, and Kylo himself.

That wasn’t going to fly.

Being Supreme Leader had its perks. Top level security clearance. Overrides for everything. No doors could be locked to him. No secrets kept. He was the final word on everything: missions, requests, disciplinary hearings. If he wanted to intervene and change something, he could, and no one would stop him. But the most surprising perk he’d discovered came in the form of a shady bit of corruption on Snoke’s part: his finances.

For years, Kylo had been led to believe, much like everyone else, that Snoke’s personal accounts fed into the Order. Maybe at one point they had, but not anymore. Snoke instead had set aside a sizable
sum to steadily grow into the billions by skimming off the top of the First Order’s more profitable enterprises. Not quite embezzlement, easily explained away as a commission or finder’s fee, but close enough that it left a bitter taste in his mouth when he’d found it. It was far too large to just be an insurance cushion too, Snoke had been planning something. Though, Kylo had no idea what that something was. He speculated that it was what Snoke had used to buy his relics.

But now that money was his to spend. And the prospect of forcing shore leave on people gave him an opportunity to put his master’s ill-gotten gains to interesting use. Whatever was left, he’d throw at the treasury, or anonymously donate to developing projects or infrastructure initiatives. Something wholesome.

Another perk of his new status as supreme authority was that he could pick the entourage that came with him as a sort of honor guard for away missions. Not that he needed it, he was perfectly capable of protecting himself, but Snoke had taught him that a tight group of intimidating soldiers did wonders for the image of power.

He picked Hux to head his entourage. “You’re the highest-ranking officer left, General.” Had been his excuse at the time. And encouraged Hux to select a squadron from the remaining stormtroopers he thought best equipped to keep their mouths shut and look intimidating during a relatively peaceful diplomatic mission. Hux had cocked an eyebrow at the word ‘peaceful’ but did as he was told. Only after the crew was picked did he ask what it was for.

“Taking an opportunity to put an ear to the ground. Get out of the repair crew’s way and recenter.” Kylo had answered.

Hux’s jaw worked like he was preparing to argue but found no footing in the words Kylo had so carefully chosen. “Where?”

“What Bight?” Neutral territory. Epicenter of luxury. Home of scoundrels and war profiteers aligned with no country. The perfect place to lay low for a few days without being completely isolated like they would be in a hollowed-out star destroyer. Even Hux, for all his nose-turning when he was told to pack for the trip, couldn’t argue with the choice. It was the chance to rub elbows with the wealthy, rake in resources and potential fair-weather allies for the First Order. Because of course Hux would think of working on a trip like this.

They arrived planetside a little before dawn. The Upsilon touched down at one of the wealthier locales; a lavish casino with an adjacent hotel. The landing dock was near a racetrack, ominous in its empty silence. Word had gotten to the Order that the Coruscant Hotel had been the victim of a particularly nasty run-in with some vandals. Eyewitness descriptions painted a picture of two familiar faces wreaking havoc through the place on the backs of faltheirs; FN-2187 and the girl he’d stowed away with on the Supremacy. Reports said they’d cut through the casino and much of Old Town on the beasts. Journalists speculated that it was part of some protest, locals called them anarchists. Either way, the Resistance would have little love in the place. Which was exactly what Kylo was banking on when he booked a room at the Coruscant without looking at the price.

It was a bit ostentatious for Kylo’s blood. He preferred to be closer to the heart and soul of a place; a poor district inhabited by people that couldn’t leave in two months, saturated with emotion and history. But that wasn’t the point of this little outing.

When his entourage entered, much of the ground floor was vacant. A few attendants manned the front desks but pretended not to see them as they got ready for the day. Droids milled about performing little tasks. Doors stood locked and smoked out with hours of operation blinking bright blue in the glass.
Though they’d tried, the hotel hadn’t managed to completely hide the evidence of vandalism. Hooks sat empty of their chandeliers in the high ceilings. Scratches peeked out from under misplaced rugs. The back of the bar had huge swaths of empty space between bottles and glasses. A window was covered in paper. Patches of stone and plaster were just a hair lighter than the rest of the walls.

A man came bustling up to them or, at least, he looked the part of a man at range. Bifurcated pupils and too long incisors told a different story. Something moved at his waist under his jacket. “Supreme Leader Ren,” he greeted them, his voice low enough to not draw attention, but not whispering either. His accent distinctly Imperial, but not quite the same clipped, sharp thing Kylo had grown used to. He swallowed hard as he looked at the stormtroopers. “We are quite excited to have you staying with us.” And putting in a good word for us.

“We’ll see just how long I stay.”

The change was dramatic when his face fell.

“The place is… popular,” Kylo said, needling him, “And my needs are very particular. I am an extremely private person.” His face might have been concealed, and his knights might have been absent, but the saber on his hip was real enough. The concierge turned green when he glanced at it as Kylo adjusted his grip on the knapsack slung over his shoulder.

“Oh. Well,” he tittered nervously, eyes not quite prying themselves from the weapon. “Privacy is our specialty.” He steepled his fingers. “The Imperial Suite in particular. Far enough away from the casino that you won’t get any of the,” a delicate cough, “rabble. And even if you do, the walls are soundproof, and the doors reinforced. Security matters to us here.”

At his shoulder, Hux scoffed through his nose. Kylo glanced at him just to catch the unimpressed scowl on his face. He was sharp and authoritative as ever in a parade uniform, his coat left behind with the rest of his things on the Upsilon. Kylo may have let him remain under the impression that he’d be working alongside his stormtroopers recruiting. Time to shatter that illusion.

“Excellent,” Kylo said, then waved a hand at Hux. “General, get your things. You’re staying too.”

“I most certainly am not,” Hux shot back. A reflex. The way a leg kicks when the knee is struck. The concierge paled and tried to look anywhere but at the two of them. Behind them the stormtroopers stiffened.

Kylo rounded on his colleague slowly. But there was no uptick in fear. Short of physical bodily harm, Kylo had never been able to faze the man. Threats and intimidation tactics rolled off him like water. It set one hell of an example for courage, even if it did annoy the shit out of anyone that tried to get Hux to bend to them. Hux arched an eyebrow when he leaned in close, “You said it yourself, general,” Kylo whispered, “This is a good place to make connections. Secure funding.”

“Yes,” Hux hissed back, “for you.”

Kylo tilted his head, waiting for that penny teetering on the edge to drop off.

“If you had any people skills to speak of,” Hux conceded with a sigh. Exasperated already. That worked in Kylo’s favor. “You want someone to be your face.”

“And who better than you?”

Hux’s brow dipped, not keen on the compliment being used against him but still flattered under the bluster. After a long silence, his resistance turned to slack. A derisive little scoff, a shake of his head,
“Yes, sir.” He turned sharply and headed back the way they’d come. The gaggle of troopers looked between their general and their Supreme Leader, unsure of who to side with. Kylo waved them off and they scrambled to fall into step with Hux.

“This way, sir,” the concierge said, making his way toward the stairs. Kylo fell into step with him. “How long will you be staying with us?”

“Two days by your calendars.”

“Excellent!” he picked at his fingers, “Though… hmm. I must warn you, Supreme Leader that, um- The Imperial Suite only has the one bed.”

Kylo almost laughed but held his composure.

“We can get something from- “

“It’s fine.” Kylo interrupted. Multiple beds would complicate things. Give Hux an easy out, and that wouldn’t do. “He can sleep on the floor.”

The concierge’s eyes widened, but he didn’t press the issue.

The Imperial Suite was nice, but not Kylo’s definition of a suite, as it only had two rooms. It was brighter than he was expecting. He wouldn’t have been surprised by the same all black and red motif Snoke had preferred. Or, at the very least, the blacks and greys of the Empire.

But this was a spacious, airy room with cream colored marble floors and high ceilings trimmed in gold molding. Against the wall to his right was a bed large enough for at least four people, framed in light opalescent wood, piled high with black blankets and ornately embroidered throw pillows. At the footboard, a low divan with matching black cushions. Harsh Old Empire art pieces dotted the other walls in matching frames, or on pedestals the same marble as the floors. A dresser, a large mirror, and a crystal-and-gold minibar complete with glasses on the wall opposite the bed near the door to a darkened refresher. On his left, a desk terminal, nearly twice the size of Hux’s custom with a polished wood finish and low-backed leather armchair.

Directly across from the entrance, a paneled window took up the whole wall. The balcony beyond obscured by gauzy off-white curtains.

Kylo set his things on the bed, watching how deep they sank into the blankets. He could only vaguely remember the last time he’d encountered a bed this plush. He’d been so little then.

With a wave of his hand, the curtains clattered along hidden tracks to collect in the corners of the room. The lock clicking free was the only signal for which glass panel was the door. It pushed open without a sound.

Dawn was just starting to break. The air cool and dry, laced with salt and dust. A holoshield glittered in the light and crackled when Kylo reached over the railing to touch it. Privacy indeed. Kylo pulled back his hood and took a deep breath. One of the few good things about being in atmosphere: unrecycled air. It just felt better for the body even if it was, at its parts, no different. He didn’t care what Snoke or Hux said.

The weathered stone of the balcony railing caught on his gloves and sleeves when he leaned against it. He closed his eyes and listened. First, sounds: the wind, the movement of vehicles, distant voices. Then, the hum of the city waking, electricity moving through buildings, life growing organic and wild like a buzzing of insects on the edges of his consciousness. A welcome departure from clockworks and repetition. He focused on a few: the concierge preening on his way up the hallway,
an arms dealer sweating bullets as a business deal started to sour in the neighboring room, a couple taking advantage of the shields and having sex on the balcony below.

Kylo laughed to himself. “Classy place.” And went back inside.

While he waited, Kylo traded his robes for something a bit more casual. It was easier to hide if he blended in. Standard issue undershirt and loose knit sweater, a near black shade of brown shot through with metallic thread from the start of his Dark Side days. He’d been surprised he still had it tucked away with the rest of his old things. Still soft, still smelling faintly of dust and woodsmoke, hems mostly intact. He tied his hair up, letting any locks that didn’t make the first pass of his hands stay loose. It was getting unruly. Snoke wouldn’t have tolerated it, nor would the masters that came before him, but Kylo thought the extra length suited him better. And it wasn’t like anyone was going to tell him to cut it.

His most distinctive items: lightsaber, FO tags, cloak and cowl, found homes on the dresser next to the bar. Kylo’s reflection watched him impassively as he moved, waiting to be acknowledged. Pale and tired eyed, looking five years older than he was. Kylo poked at the bags under his eyes. How in the fresh hell did Hux manage to stay so pretty on half the sleep Kylo got? Some sort of forgotten Imperial witchcraft, surely. Possibly blood sacrifice.

Hux came in with his bag slung over his shoulder. A shard of white in the doorway betrayed a trooper stationed outside the room. Hux’s look of exasperation turned into one of unbridled rage before the latch clicked into place. “Ren, what the hell? There’s- there is only one bed in this room.”

Kylo, feigning innocence terribly, cocked his head, “And? We’ve shared a bed before. A much smaller one if I recall.”

“That was different.” Hux’s eyes narrowed and his ears pinched a little. “I’m leaving.”

“No, you’re not,” Kylo called as Hux turned around, fully prepared to stop him by force if he needed to. “You’re the head of my entourage. You stay-”

“Oh the Upsilon with my stormtroopers,” Hux interrupted. Echoing the original plan seemed to give him some comfort. “Working.”

“You’re not working while you’re on shore leave,” Kylo argued.

“I’m not on-“ Green eyes widened as the realization hit him. A flash of deep, dark rage like a lightning strike of pure color crackled through the room. It didn’t overtake Hux though. He gave it no voice. But he wasn’t backing down. Perhaps Kylo had misread the man. “Fine, I’ll go down to the front desk and get my own room.”

No, no, no. Hux getting his own room defeated the purpose of dragging him to Canto Bight in the first place. He’d just hole himself up in there, like his quarters on the Finalizer and Kylo wouldn’t stand a chance trying to get him out and about. He wanted to pull the man apart, see what made him tick without the durable box of First Order propriety in the way. Strip him of rank and posture and see what remained of Hux the civilian, if anything, and build from there. But he couldn’t build anything with the scaffolding out his range.

He could force him. Tug his thoughts in the direction of staying with a few well-placed words and ideas. Make him keen on the idea of enjoying himself for once in his bland, miserable life. But no, that would color everything. He would have to keep those strings taut or the whole system collapsed. And if he was found out every potential outcome went up in flames and Hux went back to hating him again. No, it had to be Hux’s idea to stay. Or, at least, his consent had to be given on his own
“Hux,” Kylo said, “this is the nicest room in the hotel. When are you ever going to get an opportunity to stay in a place like this again?”

“You assume I wanted an opportunity like this in first place.”

Kylo swallowed an angrier response, but frustration clung to his throat like a bad cold. “Would it kill you to enjoy a day off? Experience some luxury for once?”

“What is it with you and forcing me to stop working?”

“If you stopped on your own, I wouldn’t have to!” Kylo almost laughed. He remembered Han and Leia having this exact argument a lot when he was little; and his was the losing side. There was a memory he hadn’t asked for. Kylo blocked it out, plowing on, “Have you not earned a breath or two? A recovery so you might return to your work at your best instead of milling about at average all the damn time?”

Hux’s grip on his argument faltered. The insult landed exactly where Kylo had wanted it to. With a resigned sigh, Hux moved deeper into the room and set down his things, taking out his frustration by kicking the bag under the divan. “Fine. What now?” Kylo didn’t realize he was supposed to respond until Hux took one last dig at him. “As the New Republican in the room you have the better understanding of hedonism.”

Oh, Kylo wanted to slap him for that one. His hand twitched. But there was a longer game to play. Still, he couldn’t let that go unanswered entirely. “Well, you should change first. You can’t go out dressed like that.”

Hux looked himself over, “What’s wrong with the way I’m dressed?”

“You’re in uniform.”

A long pause, like Hux was expecting further explanation. “And?”

“Someone will recognize you. You’re not here on a mission, you shouldn’t look like it.”

“My face is recognizable,” Hux bit, “Everyone in the galaxy has seen it at this point,” but he knew he was losing ground. It didn’t stop him from fighting anyway though. Stubborn to the last.

“I don’t care.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, Ren, all I have are uniforms.”

Kylo shook his head. Hux had to have something. He’d been tasked weeks ago with restocking his old things, which had explicitly included recommissioning a new dress uniform and other clothing. Had this been any other man, Kylo would have accused him of procrastination. But an order was an order and Hux would obey, even if he didn’t like it. He had something; he just didn’t want to admit it. “No uniforms. You’re on leave. Dress like a civilian.”

Hux looked him up and down, arching a skeptical brow when he got back to Kylo’s face. Kylo caught a thread of anxiety from him. A deepening of shadows, a trepidatious, unsafe feeling. Familiar. Kylo found those threads in himself when he approached a new group barefaced. Would this be the encounter that ousted him? Destroyed him? Like walking into a fight without armor, his weak points on display. Kylo almost felt a pang of sympathy for the man. A near miss.
“We don’t have all day.”

“I can stay here if you don’t want me out in uniform,” defensiveness added an ugly note to Hux’s voice, but he was collecting his things again. “I’ve already been seen anyway. Civilian clothes aren’t going to change that.”

Kylo crossed his arms and leaned on his trailing foot.

Hux’s patience was visibly fraying. “How would you have me dress, then?”

“Something casual, but presentable.” Kylo suggested, “Dress like you’re going on a date.”

“I don’t like the way you phrased that.”

But Kylo was shooing him into the refresher, “Just change.”

Hux came out nearly half an hour later. Not changed, but his clothing doctored into something a little less obvious. Jacket traded for the thin grey button down of his dress blacks, loosely tucked in. The outer seam of his pants had been pulled in and pinned in place by shiny black dress pins to imitate a closer cut. It called attention to just how tall and thin he really was. The uniform didn’t just give him authority, Kylo realized, it added the illusion of weight. Without it, he looked frail and malnourished. Hux kicked his bag under the divan again with the same aggression as the first time. “There. Happy?”

Kylo couldn’t help but roll his eyes. And people said he was the petulant teenager. “It’ll do. Just…” he took a few quick steps toward Hux, using the element of surprise to his advantage and ruffled the man’s hair. Hux yelped and flinched back like Kylo had struck him, arm coming up defensively. Kylo caught it by the wrist, unbuttoned the cuff, and started rolling up the sleeve.

“Ren.”

Kylo knew that tone well, had used it many times himself when Leia caught a glimpse of her son in a hallway and hissed, “What are you wearing? You can’t go to dinner dressed like that.” And would pick at the seams of his jackets or the frayed cuffs of his sleeves. “It’s bad enough we have one hooligan in the family.” And Ben would pull in his shoulders, slouch, and take direction. He’d been a willowy, spindly thing then, not unlike Hux now. No long days of saber training and vigorous exercise to fill him out. Bookish, quiet. Truth be told, he’d never really minded getting dressed up for dinners, hell he even welcomed them as a break from the mundane. He just never felt welcome once he got there. The scoundrel’s boy, the prodigal son. Delinquent others would whisper, no matter how hard he tried to recall the social graces his mother had tried to teach him.

He sighed through his nose and shoved the memory back under the closed door where it belonged. “Hush. We have irons. A few wrinkles won’t kill you.” He did his best to keep the folds neat and even while Hux fidgeted and fixed his hair. He stopped just below the elbow then held out his hand for Hux’s other arm.

“I can roll up my sleeves myself,” Hux snipped, but handed over his wrist anyway. Kylo popped a few buttons at his collar for good measure, enough to see the hard, black line of his undershirt and the silver glint of his ID tags at his neck.

Kylo looked him over again. Yeah, it would do. This time. “Would it kill you to own something in color?”

“Red doesn’t exactly look good on me.”
“There are other colors, Hux.”

“I don’t have anything that isn’t a uniform,” he said again.

“Why?”

“Because all I’ve ever needed are uniforms,” exasperation lifted his voice to a less-than-polite volume. Hux checked himself with a deep breath and a click of his tongue. “A dress one for events, a parade one to make an impression, PT sweats, everyday wear. I don’t have use for anything else.”

“Bullshit.” But Kylo could sense it. The clear, unfiltered breath of air that came on the heels of honesty.

“I really don’t,” Hux held his hands out, “Even at civilian events, I’m a soldier.”

Kylo furrowed his brow, confused. He’d never bothered to attend a First Order event, even though he’d been invited to several. It never seemed necessary. People knew who he was, what he looked like, he didn’t need to go out of his way to confirm what they already knew. “Why?”

“It’s the way of things.” Hux shrugged.

Foulness, dishonesty. “Don’t test me, Hux.”

Hux looked up at the ceiling, clearly tired of the argument. “I- Everyone’s equal in the uniform.” His shoulders sagged. “All that really matters is this-” He held up his arm and gestured to his bare wrist. “Oh, don’t laugh, you know what I meant.” That blackness was starting up in Hux’s aura again.

Kylo didn’t want to feed it. “You aren’t just your rank. You’re a person.”

“Am I?”

Kylo felt his face betraying him. His voice more so, “Yes.”

Hux bristled at the tone. “If you say so.”

“I do.” Kylo took a deep breath and changed gears, “Come on, we’re burning daylight, and we have a lot of city to cover.”

“I’m going to hate this aren’t I?” There was a lift to the mood of the room.

“Of course you are, but you’re doing it anyway.”

Hux fell into step beside him.

There were people on the casino floor when they cut through it a second time. A sparse crowd of recovering partiers stumbling their way back to their rooms, hotel guests taking advantage of breakfast comped with price of their room keys, gamblers collected around the slot machines. At the bar, a woman in a wrinkled shirt poured clear spirits into technicolor fruit juices in tall, thin flutes for older, overdressed women to pick up as they passed.

“Hey!”

Kylo’s thoughts snapped back into focus. Hux was no longer at his side. He was stopped a few steps back, one hand raised defensively between him and a rough-looking man in his fifties aiming a bleary-eyed glare at him. “I’m sorry, sir,” Hux was saying, doing his best to look as small as possible, “I wasn’t watching where I was going.”
“Who do you think you are?” The man gave Hux a rough, two-finger shove aimed for the center of his chest. “You know who I am? I could bury you, boy.” Hux apologized again and took a step back, the man was already on his way up the stairs mumbling about prissy hotshots under his breath.

“Bastard,” Hux growled when Kylo joined him.

“What was that about?” Kylo watched the departing man clumsily take to the stairs. He considered tugging the rug, just enough to jostle the guy. The stairs were shallow enough he wouldn’t get hurt too badly if he fell.

“Nothing. Just one more reason to hate this place.”
Old town was bustling despite the early hour. The sun still low and fat in the sky casting long, deep shadows that spanned entire side streets. Cafes had lines out the door, every table occupied. Businesses had their lights on but closed signs still hanging in the windows.

Breakfast had been an exercise in weaving through people and checking menu boards at range; tasks for which Hux was infinitely better equipped. Ritzier places sold coffee; real coffee, the bold, full-bodied stuff of roasted beans curated by craftsman and not the chalky, bitter spray-dried stuff everyone and their brother could get their hands on. Though Hux stuck to his old standard, a smoked, earthy tea with nothing added to it, he’d taken a sip of Kylo’s coffee when it was offered to him.

And, oh, the way his whole mood reacted to it. All traces of blackness fading from his aura in favor of rich, deep oranges and golds.

Ben Solo had always hated being able to see people like that. This wispy corona of color that solidified when he watched a person too long, resetting to nothing the second he looked away. It had been an assault to the poor boy’s senses that only worsened when he learned what the colors meant. Then, he could find annoyance and exasperation in every pair of eyes that looked back at him. Fear in the ones that looked longest.

Kylo Ren, however, learned to enjoy it. Perhaps it was because of the First Order’s limited color palette of anxiety, exhaustion, determination and duty. Soft, muted pastel colors with occasional flash of neon brilliance and fanaticism instead of flashing signs masquerading as people and demanding his attention all at once. In time, with the aid of his mask to cut down suspicion, he learned to focus. To pick out swirls of color within the whole like cheap black ink diffused in alcohol into its component pigments. He made something of a game of it during meetings and inspections he wound up roped into; picking out the weakest links by saturation of their colors.

The streets of Canto Bight were closer to the overwhelming clash of color Ben had endured. Fresh eyes allowed him to finally tolerate those royal, prideful things. The swaths of envy, jealousy, craving, and need. The occasional swirl of rippling blackness, pulling whatever came near into its vortex. Temptation a harmonizing undertone that brought the city together.

Much of their morning was spent window shopping. Wandering about but never really going in to anywhere. Hux at his side pointedly pretended his edges hadn’t been covered in bubble wrap and made harmless. That his posture hadn’t changed even though it screamed boredom. His eyes wandered, flitting from group to group like an animal looking for sickly, easy prey. He kept his hands clasped behind his back as they walked, but without the uniform it just made him look stiff.

Wherever Kylo went, Hux followed like a trained hound. A bookshop, a liquor store. He browsed but never touched anything. Made no purchases or eyed any object for too long. Kylo, in turn, bought nothing either. Anything that might have caught his attention could have just as easily been imported on commission for half the price of these tourist traps.

One thing that wasn’t easy to get on commission, however, was clothing. Specifically, civilian clothing; things of local materials and artistry. One of kind or limited production. This, along with Hux’s conspicuous need for the stuff, led to Kylo dragging his cohort into a variety of shops, ranging
from designer boutiques to thrifty secondhand stores and forcing him to weave with him through the racks at least once. As the day drew on, Hux’s resolve faded, and he started to look at things despite himself.

Well off the main drag, they’d found a little thrift shop on a corner with reasonable prices selling all sorts of goods, many so close to new Kylo could have sworn they’d never touched a body except to be purchased. And they sold more than clothing; jewelry, art, a particularly nice set of calligraphy brushes Kylo caught himself glancing at enough times to warrant just buying the damn things. He’d never replaced his old ones anyhow. Snoke never gave him the time to. Digital was enough to keep his wrist limber, but nothing was quite like putting a brush to paper and watching the ink seep in.

A black coat of Nabooian origin caught his attention near the back of the store. Though he was certain it wouldn’t fit him as-is. Some alterations and he could probably make a surcoat out of it. Or pass it off to one of the smaller knights. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Hux poking through an adjacent rack, pretending to browse even though his attention was on one item midway down. When he got to it, he paused; a white leather jacket. It looked to be about his size, maybe a little large. The sleeves straight and unadorned, but silver rivets glittered at the shoulder when Hux pulled up the sleeve and the little green tag with the price.

And promptly took a sharp breath through his nose and went right back to looking at nothing in particular.

“This is all patently ridiculous,” Hux grumbled under his breath when Kylo rejoined him.

“What is?”

“All of this? This whole day of doing, well…” He trailed off.


“I wasn’t the one that chose to go on leave, remember?” Stars, he was as bad as Leia.

“No, but you needed it.” He jabbed Hux’s arm with his elbow as he passed, “You can’t keep up a breakneck pace anymore. You’re not twenty.” He chose his blows carefully; the aim was to subdue, to force surrender, not incapacitate. “You’ll burn out again. And maybe next time it won’t almost kill you.”

Hux sucked in a breath through his teeth and started away.

“Buy something,” Kylo hissed after him and got waved off.

Hux contented himself with the view out the front window for the rest of the stop. Kylo let him have the space. He did end up buying something in the end; a sliver money clip of all things. Though Kylo was certain Hux wasn’t the type to carry physical money. He wasn’t even sure Hux owned a wallet. An assessment Hux immediately proved wrong by not only paying for the clip with physical money, wallet and all, but asked the girl at the counter to break the other bills he had. Roughly a hundred credits worth in local currency.

When had Hux gotten local money? On his way up to the room? Kylo’s plan had been transparent, but he’d thought Hux’s denial had run deeper.

“How do you want me to break it?” The girl at the counter asked.
“Smallest denominations you have. Singles if you can manage it.” Hux said.

When she turned away to count bills, Kylo couldn’t contain himself. “What are you doing?”

Hux didn’t look at him when he whispered back, “What? You’re the one that told me to enjoy myself.”

Avoidant. A non-answer so Kylo couldn’t call him out for lying. The bastard was getting wise to him. “What do you plan to do? Tip strippers? It’s not that kind of trip.”

“Maybe I just have a burning fondness for vending machines I never got a chance to indulge on the Finalizer.”

The girl returned before Kylo could reply and counted out a wad of small bills into Hux’s hand. “Have a nice day, sir.”

Hux nodded to her and started away, folding the bills and securing them with the clip. The whole affair was looped onto his ID tag chain and tucked under his shit. He didn’t put his wallet away until he was halfway out the door, where he realized Kylo wasn’t following him. “Are you coming?”

“Actually,” Kylo turned to the girl and she jumped with a startled little yelp when she noticed him standing there. “I’m going to get a few things. You can have them sent to my room at the Coruscant?”

She nodded nervously, “Y-yes, sir.” She looked between him and Hux as if the general were somehow responsible.

Hux scowled at him. “I’ll meet you outside, then.”

Kylo took his sweet time, content to make Hux wait if he was going to be sour about it. “Wrap them up tight, will you? I don’t want to risk anything getting lost.”

Outside, Hux wasn’t waiting by the door. Instead, Kylo spotted him a short way up the road. He had a flailing child by the back of her dress collar. The fabric bunched tight in his fist and his body turned so even if she did land a blow, it wouldn’t hit anything vital. The girl had one arm tucked tight against her body, her waist bent, something clenched in her hand.

“Get off me!” She shrieked; ear shatteringly shrill even at range. “Let me go!”

“You know what they do to thieves here,” Hux warned, the picture of predatory calm, “Give it back and no one has to get in trouble.”

“I’ll scream!” She wasn’t already?

Kylo jogged closer, fully intending to intervene, ask Hux what the fuck he thought he was doing, but stopped short when Hux tugged the girl and said, “That’s wallet’s hot and it doesn’t even have money in it.” After that, he sank into the shadows to watch. Hux didn’t seem the least bit fussed by the situation, and Kylo could always intervene if things got hairy.

His words gave the girl pause and stopped her flailing. She was a mousey thing, fair skinned, her hair a slightly deeper red than Hux’s, twisted up into scraggly buns to keep it out of her face. Her dress was covered partially by an apron and her boots were a size two big. “You’re lying,” she grumbled.

Hux didn’t say anything.
She unfolded her arm. In her hand was Hux’s wallet. She flipped it open and rifled through it only to throw her head back and groan a second later.

“You turn it in like that,” Hux said, “You’ll just be accused of stealing it in the first place. You’ll be in even worse trouble than you are now.”

“You’re mean,” she pouted.

“I know.” He held out his free hand where she could see it.

With a huff and a sniffle, she handed the wallet back. Hux tucked it into his pocket but didn’t let her go. She watched him over her shoulder, brow drawn up and wrinkling her forehead.

“How much does a hot meal go for around here?” he asked, scanning the street and alleys nearby. “For someone like you.”

“Six…” she frowned up at him. “Six dhesher. Why?”

With his free hand, Hux pulled his tag chain out from under his shirt. “Six a head, right?” The girl’s confusion didn’t let up, but she nodded and Hux let her go. She didn’t run, didn’t even back away, just watched him unhook the clip and point to something outside Kylo’s field of view. “So that’s six, twelve…” he pointed to the girl, “eighteen total?”

She chewed her lip, eyes widening as Hux started counting eighteen from his stack. He crouched down to her level and offered it to her, only to snap it out of her reach with a flick of his wrist before she could touch it. “You know you don’t have to live like this.” And he had her full, undivided attention, his voice light and gentle in a way Kylo had never thought the man capable of. “None of you do.”

There was a heavy silence. Kylo watched the streamlined sunny colors of Hux diffuse into the air like steam seeking surfaces to condense against. And it found it in these children. Ben Solo might have suspected the Force in the way he held their attention.

“The First Order would be more than happy to take you in,” Hux offered. “Feed you. Teach you. You’d want for nothing.” And even though Kylo knew the truth from experience, he sensed no dishonesty in Hux’s promises.

“I heard the First Order wants to enslave everyone,” A tiny voice said from the shadows outside of Kylo’s sightline. Two more kids, much younger than the first one, inched out into the street.

“We purchase children off the slave market,” Hux corrected. “That is true, but they are treated just the same as the native born there. They get all the same things.”

Doubt. Doubt so thick Kylo could taste it like an acrid smoke on the back of his tongue. He was almost certain Hux could taste it too.

“They’d take us?” the girl asked. “All of us?”

Hux nodded, a small, proud smile lifting the corners of his mouth. “The First Order would never turn a child in need away.” His certainty was grounding. Unarguably true. The Order would snap up every single child this planet threw at it, needy or otherwise.

The children looked amongst themselves.

“You don’t have to decide now.” Hux reassured them. “I leave before dawn the day after tomorrow.
If you find me before then, I’ll tell my crew to take you with us. All of you. Okay?”

And ship them off to the trooper corps on the new *Absolution*. Strip them of their names and identities. Soothe them to sleep awash in propaganda and new rules to learn lest they be punished. Conditioning and reconditioning and reconditioning until they were all one shape. The brightest stars sacrificed to the officer schools to prove themselves worthy. But none of these little stars seemed all that bright to Kylo. All stormtroopers then.

A new voice joined the fray: “Don’t listen to him!” A boy of a similar age to the girl joined them on the street. Trailing in his wake were two other children, considerably younger. “He’s a liar. Do you know who he is?” The boy had a righteous fury too big for his tiny frame. Kylo felt a shift in the air. A lightness. An updraft and brightening from his direction.

No, that couldn’t be right.

Hux just laughed like the boy’s anger was the most preposterous thing he’d heard in his life.

“Temiri,” the girl hissed through clenched teeth, cutting the boy off to stop him.

It did her no good. The boy just pointed an accusatory finger at Hux. “He’s General Starkiller. He’s evil!”

That got Hux a round of concerned looks. They were slipping from him, but not enough to turn. It rolled off him like water. “Is that what they’re calling me now?”

“You blew up those planets.” The boy kept up his pointing.

“The *First Order* did, yes.” Hux said, “But to place blame for something so large on one person is silly. I didn’t act alone. Millions of people wanted the Republic stopped, and we stopped it. We did the galaxy a service.”

Temiri didn’t back down. “Stop them from what?” The two nearest him squared up too, chiming in, “Keeping the planets free?” “Stopping you from hurting people.”

“We want the galaxy to be fair,” Hux’s patience had a depth like the center of a vast ocean. If Kylo had possessed even a portion of it, he might have never defected in the first place. “And sometimes you can only make things fair by resetting the board.”

“You blew up planets.”

“No one wept when the Rebellion blew up the Death Stars. Or the base I was stationed on. And those places housed more than just soldiers. Spouses, children in some areas that never saw them coming. Civilians just like you. People that had done nothing but be in the wrong place at the wrong time,” Hux countered. “But it’s okay because the Republic did it, right? Because they made promises they never kept? Strange how some actions look just from the eyes of the winner.”

The kids fell into a guilty silence.

One of the children behind Temiri, a stern-faced, dark skinned boy, was the first to speak up. “The Resistance will stop the First Order. We just have to wait.”

“Even if they did,” Hux conceded, “the Resistance won’t come back for you.”

“You don’t know that,” the girl said.
“Yes, I do.” A somber tone. “The Resistance will forget you the same way the New Republic forgot about me. I was like you once; tired, hungry,” he looked to each child in turn, “poor, sick all the time. Mother always thought the Rebellion was for us. That the Republic would come and help us. But they never did. We were on an Imperial planet, and to them that made us not worth saving.”

“You were the Empire,” Temiri said.

“I was a child,” Hux corrected. “Younger than you are now. Mother was a maid.” His attention landed on the girl, “She swept floors, did dishes and laundry. She’d never held a blaster a day in her life. She’d done nothing wrong.” A wider focus, “And the Republic did nothing when war broke out on my planet. Even though they promised to help everyone when the Empire fell.

“In the end, they only cared about their children. Their families. Their planets. They didn’t care about the rest of us. They lied to us. And their Resistance lied to you.”

Temiri puffed up, wanting to refute the claim. Fight on behalf of the side he’d thrown in with. But he had nothing to fight with in the face of Hux’s little speech.

“What…” the girl spoke up first, “What happened to your mom?”

Kylo could hear Hux’s voice that shift on the Finalizer clear as day. Though whether it was Hux’s thoughts or his own wasn’t as clear. He pulled out his sidearm and shot her.

“She was killed,” Hux said out loud to the children, “in the war. I was lucky the First Order found me when they did. The same could have happened to me, or worse, if I’d waited much longer. And I wasn’t the only one. So many children were lost, their families arrested or killed, their planets unable to support life. All of them needed somewhere to go, and the New Republic suddenly couldn’t see them.

“Where the galaxy is blind, the Order provides.”

Kylo had heard that line echoed in the mind of every stormtrooper, every officer Hux’s age or younger. Remnants of their initial conditioning and the lingering threats of the alternatives.

“We didn’t do this to you,” Hux continued after a pregnant pause. “For longer than you’ve been alive the New Republic has been in charge. Their blindness is what let this happen. And we’re doing everything we can to try and fix it as fast as we can. So you don’t have to live this way anymore. We haven’t reached this far yet, but we will. Soon. But why sit around and wait when you can just go now? Have dry beds to sleep in every night. Warm meals. Medicine when you’re sick so you get better all the way. You could have this the day after tomorrow if you leave with us.”

The children looked to Temiri. The boy held Hux’s gaze, looking for the lie.

But there wasn’t one. Not in anything he’d said. It filled Kylo with a strange, giddy energy. Like watching an artist in his element. A beautiful piece coming together in the last few strokes. Hux spun words, knotting fragments of stories into intricate nets. Bolstered them with pieces of truth and unshakeable conviction, trimmed the weakest fibers by omission. But never once wove in an outright lie. Truly a sight to behold.

Kylo felt a shift in the air again and tried to follow it. Ethereal and Light. The boy. But it evaporated before he could get close. There was no mistaking it now, the boy was sensitive. How much was difficult to tell. If Hux didn’t recruit him now, they’d have to come back and take him before the Resistance could corrupt another Force user for the Light.

None of the children moved or spoke.
Satisfied with his victory, Hux turned his attention back to the girl. “Eighteen was it?”

The girl nodded.

He recounted the little stack in his hand. Eighteen. Then, paused, watched her face, and took the stack of money back out and went to twenty-five. He folded the small pile of bills between his fingers and held them out to her.

“Arashell, no,” Temiri hissed as the girl reached for them.

“What do you want for it?” She asked.

Hux pretended to consider. “Fortune favors the bold,” he said and inched his hand a little closer.

“What’s going on over here?” A disheveled cloddogran in a mechanic’s vest, wielding an electric prodding pole walked right past Kylo and up to Hux and the children. “What are you little vermin up to?”

The girl snatched Hux’s money and shoved it into the pocket of her apron. The rest of the children tried to scatter. The cloddogran grabbed the girl by the scruff when she got too close, just like Hux had.

“Hold it right there!”

Hux was already on his feet, unfolding into his usual ramrod straight posture and exuding as much calm and authority as he could muster without his rank to hide behind.

“These kids bothering you,” there was a pause as he looked Hux over, “Sir?”

As one the children held their breath. All eyes on Hux. He would show some set of colors here. Prove someone right be it the stalwart boy with the uncanny knowledge that thought he was evil, or the newly minted dissenters that wanted to trust him.

“What? No. Of course not,” Hux said and all of his hooks found purchase. He had them. “I hate to admit it,” he laughed and shoved his hands in his pockets. Look meek, look small, look embarrassed.

“But I got a little lost. It’s my first time on planet, and I needed directions back to the hotel.”

“This true?” The cloddogran glared at the kids who nodded in emphatic unison. “Huh. Well.” He looked back at Hux, let go of the girl and wiped his hand off on his vest before extending it in greeting. “Bargwill Tomder. Run the racetrack at the Coruscant.”

Hux didn’t take the hand. “Do you?”

Tomder looked Hux up and down again. “You lookin’ to buy? Fat cats want the stables automated after the whole… incident. Got stock to sell cheap. They’re good for grunt work. Quiet. Usually out of the way.”

Kylo could feel the change in Hux’s energy from fifteen feet away. Hostile, angry, dangerous. Venom dripped from his voice and corroded everything it touched. “No. I’m not looking to buy.”

Tomder either missed the hint or was really just that determined to move his stock of children. “You won’t find kids this cheap anywhere in the galaxy. Trust me.”

Hux’s hands twitched at his sides and he tucked them behind his back to hide it. “I told you, I’m not interested.” But Tomder wasn’t backing off.
“Armitage.” Hux cringed at the name, but Kylo wasn’t about break their low profile. If he had to behave himself, so did Hux. It was only fair, really. Kylo jogged past Tomder to join them. He was a little shorter than Tomder was, and not nearly as broad, but his presence more than made up for it.
“What are you doing?”

“There you are,” Hux said, taking the out, but the venom was still in his voice. “Are we going back now?”

Tomder cleared his throat.

Kylo made a show of cracking his knuckles just to watch his eyes go wide. “Yeah,” he said to Hux, “Let’s go.” And together the pair swept past Tomder and up the street back toward the hotel.

“Hey! Don’t I know you from somewhere?”

Maybe he was talking to Hux. He did have a point when he said his face had been seen by the whole galaxy. But, when Hux turned, Tomder just shouted “Hey!” again.

Fuck.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“You sure?” Determined motherfucker. “I could’ve sworn I’ve seen you in a holo somewhere.” His thoughts started wracking away. Dipping into the New Republic senate, the First Order hierarchy. Dangerously close to a connection Kylo did not want to see made.

Hux stopped walking two steps after Kylo did. He didn’t backtrack with the knight though.

Kylo focused on Tomder. Listened closely to the train of his thoughts, found where it was threadbare and loose. A doubt. One too similar lookalike to focus on. “I’m positive. I’m not your guy.” He waved his hand, Tomder’s eyes followed it, and the whole pattern unraveled. “I’m nobody.” He sniffed and thumbed his nose to hide the gesture, painfully aware of the children watching him do this. “Don’t worry. Happens all the time. I’ve got one of those faces, y’know?”

“Yeah,” Tomder nodded, “One of those faces.” He blinked the glassiness from his eyes. “Yeah, no you’re right. Sorry to bother you.”

Kylo didn’t linger.

“Subtle,” Hux commented out of the corner of his mouth when they were well out of earshot, taking a side street that overlooked the coastline back into Old Town proper.

Kylo matched his volume, “Last thing I need is someone calling out my name. Either of them. I’m trying to lay low so I can enjoy myself in peace, remember?”

“If you’re lying low,” Hux huffed through his nose, looking out at the beach. “what does that make me?”

“The officer that has lowered his standards enough to take up with a nobody scoundrel while on leave,” Kylo supplied. He didn’t even try to hide the smirk on his face and the wave of exasperated disgust from Hux made it clear he’d seen it.

“Anonymity really appeals to you, doesn’t it?”

There were hooks in the question, but they grazed harmlessly over him. “There’s a certain freedom
in no one knowing who you are.”

“A danger too.” The darkness in Hux’s aura spoke through him, altering the timbre of his voice ever so slightly. Kylo chanced a look at his surface thoughts. Impressions of isolation and helplessness, shouting and not being heard.

“I suppose,” Kylo relented, dropping the line of discussion for now. He could always pick it back up when it suited him. When he’d figured out how to wield those threads properly; to squeeze out information instead of unraveling the man or strangling him to death. “But I’ve always lived for danger.”

Hux laughed and stopped in front of a bare section of beach. “Oh, Ren, before I forget.”

“Yes?”

Hux pulled the wallet out of his pocket. The glare he shot at Kylo was so icy and sharp the temperature dropped, “Don’t ever call me ‘Armitage’ again.” He threw the wallet out toward the waves like a skipping stone. It got some real distance.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, I'm aware the Canto Bight kids don't ever Basic at any point in the movie.

This isn't the first liberty I take with the canon, I promise.

Also, if you wanna hmu, you can find me on Tumblr!
Dinner was at a little hole in the wall just after sunset. The kind of place that had patrons seat
themselves and the waitstaff got to them eventually. Luck gifted them with a quiet window seat with
a view of the street and the flashy low-riding speeders that whipped past at odd intervals. Around
them, couples and groups sat hunched over tiny tables laughing and clinking glasses. It was noisy,
but not unpleasantly so.

Kylo snapped up both menus when the waiter finally made it to their table. Hux glared at him in
offense. The waiter, who couldn’t have been more than a teenager, was smart enough to know not to
get involved. Hux ended up unwilling to make a scene in so public a place, and Kylo got his way.
He ordered the most interesting unwilling to make a scene in so public a place, and Kylo got his way.
With a swipe of his room key in the waiter’s datapad, everything got billed to the room. No checks
for Hux to tut about necessary.

“You need to branch out a little,” Kylo chided when they were alone with their glasses of water and
their window. “You’ve been living on army food for too long.”

“This is not what I would call ‘branching out a little’”

“Well, it’s a good thing I didn’t ask you then.”

Hux huffed through his nose, turning his attention to the window. Oh, his pout was cute, and Kylo
indulged it for a while. At least until the plates came. Then, before Hux could make any pithy
comments about the food, he asked, “We’ve worked together, what? Five years total?”

“Give or take,” Hux answered, dubiously poking some grey thing on the plate nearest him with a
fork. It wobbled but didn’t fall or break apart.

“Have we ever had a sit-down conversation? One that wasn’t a meeting?”

“Not before Snoke died,” Hux answered with confidence. He didn’t even have to think about it.

And not really much after the fact either, if Kylo thought about it. In fact, they didn’t start talking
casually at length until he’d woken up in Hux’s bed instead of his own. After that, some seal had
been broken and fresh air moved freely between them. The competition finally over. They were on a
shared side now.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you something,” Kylo said. He paused long enough for Hux to look at
him, head tilted in curiosity. “What is your beef with clones?”

Hux took a deep breath and went off like his whole career depended on it. Kylo didn’t even try to
stop him. Couldn’t even if he wanted to. The man was simply too prepared to lay the trenchwork to
defend a thesis that amounted to ‘clones caused the Empire to fall’ complete with quotes and cited
sources. Kylo could only get words in when Hux absentmindedly took bites of the food in front of
him. And even then, they weren’t arguments so much as jumping off points. His only real counters
were the things he knew of the Dark Side machinations of the Empire and their reasoning for them.

At times he could have sworn Hux looked impressed.
It was engrossing, their back and forth. Plates were emptied and cleared. Glasses were refilled. The staff knew better than to interrupt whatever was happening with inane little check-ins. The pair only realized dinner had come and gone when Kylo reached down, thinking there was still a plate in front of him, and turned up with a single neatly wrapped mint.

Hux blinked at the table. “Oh.” He cleared his throat, embarrassed, “I should never have let you get me started.”

“Nonsense.” Kylo laughed, “You get so passionate when you tear down the cornerstones of the Empire. It’s charming.”

Hux chewed his lip. “I don’t tear them down.” He picked up his own mint and they both got up. “Their methods are just dated and flawed.”

“I would hope so. The peak of their power was decades ago.”

Hux scoffed and cracked the mint between his teeth like a heathen.

They took a roundabout route back to the hotel, weaving through the tight, covered streets of Old Town proper, avoiding the ones they’d already walked down. Eventually they wound up far enough removed from the main track again that night nearly seemed peaceful.

In their wanderings they passed a few niche shops. Holes for discerning buyers that knew what the wanted and where to look for it. Glass ornaments, custom weavings, specialty furniture, weapons, difficult-to-procure collectibles, antiques, a pawn shop, and a store with black fabric over the windows that doubt sold pornography, sex toys, or both. One that caught his and Hux’s attention alike had diecast models of spacefaring ships in the window. The darkened store beyond looked like a labyrinth the way boxes were stacked on top of each other. The business hours sign said they’d closed hours ago.

On his own, Kylo probably would have shrugged it off. A venture for tomorrow maybe, if he could be bothered to remember. But the way Hux stopped and stared, squinting into the shadowy store and whispering, “Is that…” under his breath was enough to stop him. Kylo sidled up next to Hux trying to catch a glimpse of what he saw, but only spotted pieces of a work-in-progress hidden behind walls of boxes and blister packs.

The window display, however, was still lit by the strings of light that served as streetlamps. Shiny metal models from nearly every era. Every side of every war. A, B, and X wings. A GR-75. A star destroyer. One corner had a wide selection of TIE models in the light grey of the Empire and few of the sleek, black First Order designs.

“My father used to have one of those,” Hux said, tapping the window. A 1:24 scale model of a chrome-plated Imperial pleasure yacht was held aloft by plastic arms inside an acrylic case at the corner of two walls. It was a pretty little thing, shiny and glittering in the dim light.

“Used to?” Ren asked as they straightened.

Hux made a face, his mouth pulling into a thin line. They turned and started away from the store. “It was destroyed.”

“How?”

“He crashed it,” Hux said, and Kylo felt the discordant note of dishonesty immediately. “And then it was scrapped for parts.”
“You’re lying.” Kylo accused. It seemed such a silly thing to lie about too, especially for Hux. What did it matter to him?

“No, there’s an incident report and everything. He crashed it on-“

“Stop lying.”

Hux sighed. “Alright. So,” he hummed in annoyance, “There might be stories that conflict with the incident report. And if you were to ask the right people you might hear a rumor or two.” When Kylo just stared at him, thoroughly confused by that non-answer, Hux added, “Specifically a rumor about how a twenty-something recent graduate of the Academy got drunk at a dinner party and picked a fight with Brendol. And to get back at him for kicking him out and saying some unsavory things about his mother… stole the yacht in the middle of the night with a couple stormtroopers.” At no point did Hux look him in the eye.

His jaw almost hit the sidewalk. “You- You went on a joyride? You? You crashed your father’s yacht on a joyride?”

“I didn’t say that,” Hux snipped defensively, but knew he was caught. “But I would like to add that the twenty-something in question did fully intend to bring it back unharmed. And he genuinely thought that planet was entirely uninhabited and had no idea there were anti-craft weapons on the surface while he plotted his course home.”

“You couldn’t just crash the yacht you had to have it shot out of the sky?”

Hux ran a hand over his face. “You say that like you didn’t have a rebellious period in your twenties that soured quickly.”

And Kylo couldn’t stop laughing.

It spread to Hux in seconds. “Oh, I totaled it too,” he forced out and they both laughed even harder. “And of all the places I could have crashed it, I landed in the most difficult place to traverse.” He covered his eyes with one hand. “Brendol was furious. Just left me on that shithole planet for- stars, I don’t even remember. Must have been a fortnight planetside. Maybe a little less. It all sort of blurred together after a while.”

“He left you there?”

“Just outside of atmo the entire time, the prick. He knew the moment I left and tailed me all the way to Parnassos.” Hux uncovered his face and shook his head at the ceiling. “Watched the whole merry adventure through the trooper’s helmet feeds. Probably expected me to die down there. I had radiation sickness for weeks.”

They laughed at the young Hux’s expense.

“Wait-“ Kylo sobered first. “Wait, wait, wait. None of this is in your file. It says you have no ground experience. No med stay either.” The worst thing in Hux’s file was blaster misfire that killed a student twenty years ago. An accident. A blip. Not grand theft starship and two-week excursion to play footsie with death.

“I know,” Hux said, ice in his voice. “Brendol took the fall for it so it wouldn’t end my career before it began.” And lorded it over me for the rest of his life.

They stopped at the top of a staircase. The street around them empty and far enough from the bustle that individual sounds couldn’t reach them. Hux rolled his shoulders. Muffled a yawn with the back
of his hand. A long day of walking wouldn’t have even registered for him on a ship or Starkiller, but a day spent in atmo, in sunshine, and wrung him dry of energy. The planes of his face had taken on a deep pink that would worsen without immediate attention. “We should head back.” Hux said, his voice taking on the slow, syrupy quality of fatigue. His accent thickened, a strange edge to it. “Before the buckets get antsy and look for us.”

Kylo had little choice but to agree. As much he might have wanted to linger, as little as he might have needed sleep, this was, ultimately, for Hux and running him ragged was counterproductive.

“Ren?” A glance out of the corner of his eye. His posture had changed, sloping in the shoulders and hips, favoring his dominant side. The tightness in his jaw was gone. The chill, the sharpness dulled down.

It was nothing to reach across that short space between them and take Hux by the arm. When Kylo tugged, he went willingly. Even the air wouldn’t supply resistance. And then they were chest to chest, mouth to mouth.

Hux, Kylo had learned over several weeks of forcing enraging kisses on the man, pretended to be a bad kisser. Of all the things he pretended to be, that had to be the strangest. Or the most asinine, considering how he melted into them if they lasted long enough. He feigned hesitance and inexperience. Over-caution. He wasn’t fooling Kylo, though, not now. When he’d finally given in and joined in as an active participant, when his resolve broke and he pushed Kylo against the wall by surprise on the Finalizer, his skill was obvious. His teeth sharp, bite strategic, and tongue as clever as Kylo had imagined it all those years ago. It begged questions. How had he learned this? Where had he practiced? Who had taught him to mute, muffle, and wait until the coast was clear and he couldn’t stand it anymore?

What had been the punishments for not doing so?

So many hammers had come before Kylo to beat Hux into this shape. It would take ages to get him back to start and reshape him into a better image. An image truer to the feral, passionate thing Kylo saw hiding behind regiments and protocols. Kylo saw no answers on the horizon, but knew he’d get to them eventually. For now, he just had to keep on this road. And being patient was much easier when he could coax Hux’s mouth open with his tongue.

Something pulled at the back of his thoughts. A hook sinking in but the housing unravelling the second it applied tension. Someone calling a name. A siren song on the other side of a closed door. Insistent, but faint. Kylo tried to ignore it. To drown himself in the present, in warm insulated air, the smells of salt and stone. The taste of mint on his tongue. The breath against his cheek. Teeth against his lip. Hux’s arm in his hand turned into an anchor, keeping him from drifting off into his own head.

Ben!

Rey’s voice. Sharp and shrill and distant. A lightning strike to the back of his mind. Something hooked into him in those valuable seconds before the thunderclap. Solid, like Snoke’s hand in the hair at the nape of his neck, undecided on whether Kylo deserved to have his head wrenched back. Dread. Anxiety. Smoke in his blood. He tensed against the feeling, bracing himself; jaw locked, fists clenched, rooted in place.

But when the thunder came, it wasn’t Snoke. It wasn’t even Rey. It was Hux, growling and snapping and taking a swing at him. Off-guard, Kylo backed up to avoid the blow, only to realize he had a death grip on the general’s arm, dragging him along.

“Let go,” Hux snarled, bracing a hand on the crook of Kylo’s elbow and finally wrenching his arm
free. He staggered backward, panting and pale, and then just kept going until he was well out of
arm’s reach. Anger and fear poked out of him like barbs on a coiling strand of razor wire. “What the
cunt-“

“Hux…” Kylo tried to reach out but immediately cut himself on the spikes.

“Get away from me.”

“Hux, wait.”

He didn’t.

“Damn it.” In any other circumstance, Kylo might have found the wave of defiant anger as Hux
turned and started down the stairs charming. Now it only served to infuriate him. He charged after
the man. A few long strides once they were down the stairs put him in front of Hux. “Listen to me.”

“No.” Frigid and venomous, ten times worse than the tone he’d leveled at Tomder.

But Kylo talked anyway, ignoring the warning bells ringing off Hux. “It was an accident,” he tried to
explain, “I swear. I didn’t mean to-“ Hux wasn’t listening, just trudging onward, trying to get away
from him. Hux wasn’t supposed to be afraid of him. Wasn’t supposed to run from him. After
everything Kylo had done. “For fuck’s sake, I’ve hurt you enough times on purpose, you should be
able to tell the difference by now.”

Only once the words echoed off the walls back at him did Kylo realize how awful they sounded. He
stopped his pursuit then, knowing he was only digging himself deeper. Hux marched away, taking
the first feasible corner he could just to break line of sight.

Kylo turned on his heel and walked back up the stairs, in as opposite a direction as he could. He
ground his teeth until his temples throbbed, missing the weight and hum of his saber hilt in his hands.
The smoke in his blood turned to burning, scratching salt that made his muscles sing and his chest
hurt. Why was it that sabotage only ever sank in when there was nothing he could do about it? When
the hole was too deep to climb out of?

Fuck he wanted to break something.

Snoke’s voice chimed in with an answer, a memory brought forward, unbidden. What good is your
foresight if you never use it, Kylo Ren? You waste your gifts like spoiled child. Have you learned
anything, or do you need another lesson? The ghost of crackling electricity under his skin, clamping
around his heart like a vice. Invisible hands sinking through his flesh to twist his bones out of
alignment. Pain was a most effective teacher if applied judiciously, Snoke had said once, and Kylo
would learn one way or another.

The first things that broke under the weight of his frustration were the security cameras. Storefront
windows went next.

No. Kylo tried to shake the thought off and when that failed, slammed the side of his fist into a wall.
Focus. Another strike sent a pulse of pain through his hand. Burglar alarms sounded like whining
dog whistles. Focus.

What the hell had that been? Rey’s voice? But surely, she’d be systems away by now, hiding out
with Leia and remnants of the Resistance. Unless she somehow knew to be on Canto Bight to
contact him. But that seemed implausible. Coincidence was one thing, foresight another, but the
window of opportunity was just too small.
The only other explanation Kylo could think of was that Snoke’s connection had lingered somehow. An idea that was hot to the touch. The only way it could linger was through maintenance. And he hadn’t touched it since Crait. He was almost certain Luke wouldn’t have taught Rey how to. And Snoke was dead. Or, at least, Kylo thought he was dead.

There was really only one way to find out. And no time like the present.

Chapter End Notes

And another liberty I take with the canon because I'm still not super keen on the way the Phasma novel ended.

Good thing canon's just a sandbox
Visions VI

A clifftop overlooking the city was a quiet enough spot to meditate. No one around, no sounds but for the breaking of waves and the ocean wind through the grass. Peaceful, removed, the kind of place Luke used to drag his apprentice to contemplate his place in the galaxy. Beyond the black horizon, where the oasis ended, there was only desert for miles. The sea breeze brought a chill wetness to the air, and when he breathed deep and closed his eyes, he was back on Starkiller, in the construction with engineers prattling on about terraforming and timetables.

But when he opened his eyes there was no white snow or conifers.

Kylo let his knees buckle and his weight pull him to the ground with a heavy thud. He landed on his back, dew soaking into is shirt immediately. Canto Bight’s cloud of dingy grey-yellow light blocked out the stars. Though he considered it, Kylo didn’t have the time to walk out far enough to see them. Not if he wanted to get back at an hour that didn’t warrant a search party anyway.

He let his eyes drift closed, hands folded over his chest. Inward first. Find out where the hook sank in and follow it out. It was a small thing. A splinter, difficult to spot but radiating irritation. A deep breath, and sound melted away. All distraction boiled away into steam: the wet grass, the waves breaking, the breeze against his skin, the lingering taste of Hux on his tongue.

Ben, she’d called him. That little needle, tiny fishhook, stubborn splinter, shrapnel from his past life chucked at him from across the void of space. Han had called him that name on Starkiller. Snoke to taunt him. Luke had probably called him that behind his back. They’d taught it to her like a language in a bad accent. Annoying and in need of correction.

He pulled it free and followed it back to its source. Through the city, the atmosphere. Past moons, ships in orbit, neighboring planets. Further and further, and his grip on it slipped as he unraveled to threads and knots laid out in a single straight line. She was far. Painfully so. He lifted his arm, brow knitting together, just that little bit of extra slack.

“Rey!” He barked. The sound muffled to his own ears. Underwater, through snow, behind a window. Was she listening for him? Waiting for his response? It plucked something; vibrations from voice box to eardrum. He followed them until he could go no further without risk of snapping the cord connecting him to his body entirely. Rey?

Ben? The hook stuck into him again finding purchase in a knot and braiding the lines together in a tangled mess.

He opened his eyes and she was sitting across from him, her own arm extended to its limit and close enough that their fingers nearly touched. She looked surprised. Alarmed even. A risky experiment with an unexpected result. Kylo could feel her uncertainty, her reluctance, her disgust at seeing him again.

His earlier rage came back all at once and crashed over him hard enough to spur him into motion. He stood and she scrambled backwards. The world took a dizzying shift in perspective, parallel to perpendicular with points that didn’t change. and a lesser man might have lost his footing in it. “Who do you think you are?”

She tried to put distance between them, like he could do anything to her through the projection. When everything stopped moving, they were both standing; Kylo on solid stone, Rey floating over the edge of the cliff. “Ben, I-“ she held up her hand defensively this time and glanced at something
on her right. Stars, why had he tolerated her calling him that before? “Wait, please.”

“You don’t just get to barge into my head whenever you want like you own the place.” At least confront a guy first. Kylo wasn’t above prying thoughts out of a person’s head, but he looked them in the eye when he did it.

Rey bowed up, eyes widening and shoulders tense. She looked the same as the first time he saw her; hair up, anxious, draped in linens and repurposed leather. Again, something on her right caught her attention. She hissed at it this time. “Shut up!” Not alone then. But Kylo couldn’t sense her audience. “I have questions,” she said to him.

He probably would have reacted better if she’d just crashed his date to slap him. “Questions? You kick down the door into my head and ruin my evening for questions?” No saber, no tangible targets, his rage had nowhere to go. “I offered to be your teacher once, answer all of your questions. You told me no.”

“That was-” She stopped short. It wasn’t really different, and she knew it. “I wouldn’t have turned to you if I had any other options. But my teacher is dead because of you. Any other Force users I could have talked to are gone because of you.” She forced herself to relax her jaw. “You’re the only other person I know powerful enough to have the answers I need.”

Kylo laughed at her. If she wanted to appeal to his ego, she’d have to do a better job of it.

“How did you manage this?” He asked, gesturing to the space between them. “How did you find me?”

She took his silence as a cue to continue. “I’ve seen something,” she explained, “Something… evil out there. Something that isn’t you. It’s-”

Ancient, something in Kylo supplied, ineffable.

“It’s getting closer,” concern turned to fear, “I’ve seen it. I can feel it. I- I need to know if you can feel it too.”

“I don’t see what you want my opinion for,” he said, noncommittal. If she had the same visions he had, this was bigger than he’d feared. This wasn’t inside him. But that only flooded him with questions. “I don’t train in your philosophies. If Luke was worth anything as a teacher, you should be able to interpret your own damn visions.”

Rey set her jaw and scowled at him.

So, Luke really hadn’t taught her anything. Figured. One would think a man would learn a lesson after his greatest failure. But Luke was more coward than man in the end, Kylo supposed.

“How did you manage this?” He asked, gesturing to the space between them. “How did you find me?”

Her mouth moved in the start of an answer, but she rethought it. A sigh. “I don’t know. I wasn’t looking for you. I was looking for anyone else, actually. But the Force led me to you.”
That left a bitter taste in Kylo’s mouth. A niggling, irrational thought piped up in the back of his mind again. Snoke might not be quite so dead. It was silly, he knew. Patently ridiculous. But the idea dug in its claws anyway.

To ease his mind, Kylo felt through the connection, looking for outside interference. He found none, just a tangled tether that bound him to her so messed up and jumbled it was hard to tell one ended and the other began. It anchored him in place like he was full of stones. Tied up on a leash. Less than. The way Snoke’s call used to feel when Kylo heard it. He hated it. If he wanted to, he thought, all it would take was the right tug and the whole thing would come undone.

“Don’t contact me again.”

“Ben, wait.”

Oh, he was getting tired of this. “That’s not my name.”

She ignored him. “Just- Just tell me if you’ve seen it too,” she pleaded. “If you’ve seen Jakku explode. Or this- this Thing. I need to know if these visions are just me or if- if they’re something else. That’s all I want from you.”

“You aren’t in a position to want anything from me.”

She bared her teeth, “You act like I was the one that betrayed you.”

“I wanted to teach you,” Kylo countered, “I helped you kill my master in good faith without asking for yours in exchange. I offered you the entire goddamn galaxy, and you blew me up. One would call that betrayal, yes.”

Rey rocked back on her heels, eyes widening.

“I would have taught you everything I could,” Kylo pressed, “All of my experience on both sides of the fight would have been at your disposal. You could have traveled the ends of the galaxy. Felt the embrace of Darkness, that power, hear its secrets. You could have been something great. Now look at you. Thinking you have the moral high ground by knocking me down but crawling back because you know nothing and have no one.”

“Shut up.” He’d struck a nerve. Just like when he’d told her she was nobody. “Stop.”

“Why are you really here? Why are you interrupting my life to ask for help you know I won’t give you?”

Rey took a sharp breath through her nose, “Because I know there’s still Light in you, Ben.”

Kylo ground his teeth and couldn’t force himself to speak.

Rey just plowed right on. “And if that Light burns for anything. Anything at all. Let it be the fate of the galaxy. Its people. Stop avoiding me and just tell me what you know. What you’ve seen. Work with me. If not for the sake of all people, then for your own. Do it for the First Order if you must. This is bigger than war. Bigger than the two of us. I can feel it. Surely, you must feel it too. Tell me something.”

For a fleeting second, he was almost compelled to answer her. As much as he hated to admit it, she had a point. Whatever this Thing was, it was important enough for the Force to show both of them. Powerful enough to do whatever Jakku snapping in half meant. And it was gaining traction. He wondered if the First Order had the means to confront such an enemy. Its resources were depleted, its
alliances strained. But if they couldn’t handle it, the Resistance sure as hell couldn’t either.

But maybe, without the war to distract them, what remained could be focused on finding answers.

“Surrender.” He held out his hand to her.

“What?” Rey blinked at him.

“You want to know what I know? Surrender.” He said again. “I’ll tell you whatever you want, and my troops can start searching for answers instead of searching for you.”

“No!”

Kylo rolled his eyes, “What do you mean ‘no’? You said it yourself, the fate of the galaxy could be at stake. A threat that large needs a united force to fight it.” He laughed. “Even if your –what?—ten guys? Stood any chance against our army, Republicans are in charge. They’d just break everything up again. Planets being sovereign and independent sounds great until they have to defend themselves. And then you’ll be too divided to aid them! The unifying banner of the First Order is your best option right now.”

She shook her head, “You would just conquer us. Enslave us. You wouldn’t protect anyone!”

“Is it not a ruler’s duty to protect his people?”

“Would it be yours?”

“I can’t rule over dust, now can I?” He huffed out a sigh, “The continued existence of the galaxy benefits all parties. Surrender, and we might work together.”

But she wouldn’t budge, “The Resistance will never kneel to you.”

“Then you will perish.” Kylo said. “And we have nothing more to discuss.”

“You would put the whole galaxy in danger over this?” Rey snapped at him. “Turn a blind eye to it in favor of this war?”

The hypocrisy was hilarious. “What do you expect to happen here, Rey? I just give you what you ask for, for what? Nothing? Helping you out worked so well for me last time, right? Or would you rather the Order just give up its holdings, wash its hands of the galaxy. Good luck, you’re on your own again. For the next empire to come conquer you because you can’t get your shit together. May the Force be fucking with you.”

Rey drew her mouth into a thin line. “It doesn’t have to be like this. We don’t have to pick sides. We could just be…” she hesitated, searching Kylo’s face for the words she needed, “Force users protecting everyone.”

In the end, they only cared about their children. Their families. Their planets. They didn’t care about the rest of us.

“Trying to protect yourselves.” Kylo corrected her. “You want to able to keep fighting us but want us to do the heavy lifting for you. You want our resources, our training,” it was our now, which would have struck the Kylo of a year ago as strange that he would tie himself so wholly to the Order. But here he was. “You want our ships and our weapons, to reap the fruits of our supposed evil without having to ever touch the seeds yourself.”
“That isn’t true.”

“That isn’t true.”

“Then what is, Rey? What does Leia’s little Resistance gain from the hand of its greatest enemy. The thing it exists solely to fight. What do I gain from an alliance with you?”

And she cracked a little more. Her faith shaken. She knew the truth and now she had to admit it. “I want people to be safe. I want the galaxy to be safe. I want this war to be over. I—

*I don’t want to be alone.*

Stars, he knew that feeling. Felt it when the ghost of Ben Solo moved too close for comfort. The isolation of being too powerful for one’s own skin. Of not knowing what to do with it. Of hearing its call to action but not knowing where it wanted him to go. To crave change when everyone else wanted to stand still. He wondered if it kept her awake at night too.

He tamped down the sympathy. She wasn’t his to mentor anymore and she would find no answers in the subdued, bitter colors of his life. She had her chance at having someone teach her to tame that Dark, hungry power inside her. Now she could just get eaten alive by it for all he cared.

“The galaxy can be greater than the sum of its parts,” was this how Hux felt trying to recruit people? “But they won’t do it on their own. The New Republic proved that to everyone. Force is the only way.”

“Force is causing the war,” she countered, “Enslaving people. Blowing up planets. You think that’s right?”

No, he didn’t. “I think compromise hurts everyone. One side *has* to win. Otherwise nothing changes and everyone suffers.”

Rey deflated a little. “What happened to you? I know why you hated Luke, but this… This is bigger than that, isn’t it?”

Kylo shrugged, “I grew up under the seat of the New Republic.” It was a bit truer than he had intended. A bit too raw and open. But it didn’t matter. This would be the last time he spoke to her if he had anything to say about it.

“Ben—“

“You can call that dead boy’s name all you want,” he snipped, “It won’t drag him out of me.”

With a wave of his hand, he found a thread and pulled. Everything unraveled. He retreated back into himself. Rey vanished a blink later, her presence clawing at him like a dozen hands, none of them finding purchase. When she was fully gone, he felt lighter, emptier, but calm again. The beginnings of a headache throbbed behind his eyes. He watched the space she’d occupied until the air grew damp and sticky on his skin. Listened, ear tilted to the sky, but only got the night sounds of nature. No calling. No memories. She wasn’t going to try again.
The stormtrooper outside their room sagged in relief when she saw him coming. It was a quick thing, blink and you’d miss it, but Kylo caught it. He didn’t say anything, nor did he comment on how she reported to the other stormtroopers, “He’s here. You can come back now,” before he’d shut the door behind him.

The suite was dark like it hadn’t been touched in hours. Hux’s boots were by the door, his things on top of the divan instead of under it. He was still here. Hadn’t even prepared to leave. The balcony door was slightly ajar, night air billowing the nearest curtains. Hux was just beyond the window, his back to the room.

Kylo tried to swallow the spark of hope rising in his chest, but it was persistent. Hux was a reasonable man, it reminded him. Dramatic and stubborn, yes. Capable of holding a grudge forever, yes. Prone to pettiness, also yes. But not completely unreasonable. Not about to waste resources for it. There was still a chance to salvage what he’d spent his day building. Maybe.

He took off his boots by the door, careful not to call attention to his presence until he was ready. He detoured across the room to the minibar and poured a generous glass of the most expensive thing he could spot. Snoke’s meddling had ultimately been the cause of his ruined evening, his dime would pay for the repairs. He overpoured by a hair and took a small sip. Kylo wasn’t much of a drinker even on his worst day, but he could tell a quality liquor from cheap swill with a posh price tag. A blood relation to Han Solo had to pay off somehow.

Hux was stripped down to basics powering through a shiny new pack of cigarettes. And, of course, his basics were First Order standard issue: black, well fitted, and modest, covering him from just below the shoulder, to collarbone, down to mid-thigh. The splattering of deepening purples and reds peeked out from under his sleeve. He had his elbows resting on the rail, flicking ashes over the edge to catch on the wind and glitter against the privacy shield.

Kylo slipped outside with him. It would be nothing to stay hidden from him, to just observe, even so close. Hux’s mind was on other things. He wasn’t looking for him. But what would that solve? What had that ever solved, really? He cleared his throat at the door and Hux glanced at him in acknowledgement.

“Don’t tell Phasma,” Hux said, taking a long drag and letting it out through his nose, “She thinks I quit.”

“She probably wouldn’t believe me if I told her. But your secret is safe with me.” He left a healthy breadth of space between them when he joined Hux at the railing. He should apologize, he knew. For hurting him, for spooking, for rattling his trust; the way one apologizes when they step on a dog’s tail. Fruitless, pointless, but sincere. Instead, he said, “Peace offering?” and held up the glass, letting it glint in the dim glow of the street and flashing security lights below them, then set it on the railing where Hux could reach it.

“Peace? With you here?” Hux scoffed and picked up the glass. He brought it too his nose a moment, took a sip, and set it right back down where Kylo had placed it.

And that was it. No snappy comments. No rage. No petty retaliation. Kylo couldn’t even sense more than Hux’s baseline level of pissed-off-at-the-galaxy. “You-” Kylo started, uncertain of whether it was wise to look this gift horse in the mouth. But curiosity gnawed at him. He had to know. “You aren’t mad at me.”
Hux cocked an eyebrow but didn’t look at him. “You had a point. Stupid though that point may have been.” He clicked his tongue. “How an accident like that occurs escapes me.”

There it was. An invitation to explain himself. Though, now that he had the opportunity, Kylo wasn’t even sure he wanted to. Hux wouldn’t understand, no matter how he tried to explain it. The Force was just hokey mysticism to him. Excuses. Hux didn’t press him on it either. None of Leia’s what were you thinking or Luke’s you should know better or Snoke’s doubt on the efficacy of his lessons. No guilt or scolding. Just patience. Infinite patience.

“I heard something.” Hux looked at him and Kylo knew he had to elaborate. “A voice through the Force.” To his surprise, Hux’s expression didn’t sour. “The scavenger girl from Jakku. She was calling out to me.”

Hux’s face pinched in confusion. “It was truly her?”

Kylo nodded. “Snoke put a line between us once before. I guess some of it remained and she used it to find me.”

Disgust tinted Hux’s voice, “Good heavens, why would he do that?”

He shrugged, “I don’t know. At first, I thought it was fake. That he was… testing my loyalty after my moment of weakness on Starkiller. He never consulted me on it. He just,” he laughed helplessly at the memories, “sprang her on me at random.”

“Snoke never did quite understand human interaction, did he? Or boundaries.”

Kylo laughed, “No he did not.” A deep breath and he confessed, “Hearing her voice again made me think Snoke was still alive and I… panicked I guess.”

“How would that even be? He was cut in half when I got there.”

“It’s amazing what a Dark Side Force user could live through if pressed.”

Hux polished off the glass of liquor in one go. “I saw your blaster wound,” he agreed. A moment passed. “What did she want?”

“You believe me?”

“Ren, you’ve choked me from ten feet away and thrown Phasma across a room with a thought. Snoke slammed my face into the bridge floor from a completely different vessel.” He had? This was news to Kylo. “You could tell me you could -I don’t know- shoot lightning from your fingertips or something silly and I’d probably believe you at this point.”

The honesty of the statement was jarring enough that Kylo answered, “I had a vision,” before he could think to stop himself. He didn’t go into the particulars. “She had a similar one and wanted to ask me about it.”

“What did you tell her?”

“Surrender or fuck off. And she fucked off without her answers.”

Hux made a thoughtful noise but didn’t pose any more questions. Kylo was grateful for it. Silence was a welcome addition to the balcony. Relieved of awkwardness and tension. Hux hit the filter on his cigarette and snuffed it out on the railing. It joined the other butts in his back. He didn’t light another one. His surface thoughts were clockwork again; logistics of bringing the recruited children
to Phasma on the *Finalizer*, whether the stormtroopers had noticed Kylo’s return.

*He’s always looking at me…*

Kylo startled, noticing the way Hux was watching him out of the corner of his eye. He cleared his throat, “Hey, I’m not the one in his basics right now.” Forgetting entirely that the thought had been an internal one and to answer it was a damning offense.

Without missing a beat or altering his expression, Hux replied. “Ren, you’ve been inside me.”

Kylo laughed. And once he started, he couldn’t stop.

Even when Hux’s brow lowered and he added. “And stay out of my thoughts. Oh? Oh, is this funny?” his anger popped off like harmless fireworks. “Am I joke to you?” He dropped his pack into the glass and picked both up. As he skirted around Kylo toward the door he hissed, “The nerve of some people. I swear.”

He took Hux by the wrist before the general could slip out of his reach and dragged him back. Hux stumbled a bit, the glass slipping from his hand to shatter against the stone at their feet. Kylo crushed him to his chest and fitted their lips together. A noise of surprise, a muffled moan, and Hux relaxed in his grip, leaning into him.

“We should go in,” Hux whispered when they stopped to breathe, “I need to tell the troopers to-“

“Your girl outside saw me,” Kylo interrupted, but followed Hux in anyway.

Hux fell back against the bed the second his knees hit the edge. Kylo only had to push him a little. He recovered quickly, crawling backwards on his elbows to get centered, and Kylo pursued. As he drew closer, he could hear the faint undercurrent of frustration in Hux’s thoughts, some of them just loud enough to be picked out as complete sentences. *What am I doing? This is ridiculous. Once was bad enough. I can’t justify-*

So, Kylo surged forward and kissed him again before he had too much time to overthink. Hux didn’t fight him, giving into the lazy, meandering kiss Kylo had so craved in the street and every hour of held breath that led up to this little adventure.

They didn’t kiss much that first time they fell into bed together. Nor in general except when Kylo took him by the throat in private and rattled the man out of his own head like a hard reset to a misbehaving computer. But that encounter when Hux had pushed him up against the wall and growled “Enough” before dragging Kylo into his quarters had been especially vicious. He’d been more eager to leave marks in his wake and Hux had done everything in his power to stay silent even as he melted into touches and tangled himself in his colleague. It was a shame, in hindsight, that they’d missed the boat on this. A heady fog was already settling behind Kylo’s eyes. He could do this for hours, until his whole face went numb. And he intended to.

Hux tasted of smoke and liquor and stress in a way that was absolutely sinful. Right at home in the best suite of a ritzy casino. He was pretty enough to be bought company, Kylo mused when he pulled back to take off his shirt and looked Hux over. Ginger hair and pale skin stark against the blankets. His clothes blending in almost completely. Bright green eyes with pupils so wide their color was nearly lost. Mouth bitten-red and swelling, half open to show his teeth. The stuff of a younger Kylo’s fantasies.

But, oh, the real thing was banquet of details. The way he shivered when Kylo pinned his arms over his head. The smell of fresh air, the smoke of roadside food vendors lingering on his skin and hair,
blending in with tobacco and bacta and sweat. The sigh when Kylo rucked up his undershirt with his free hand and counted Hux’s ribs on the way back down. Skin warm and dried out from a lifetime of industrial soaps and recycled water. He wanted nothing more than to press his lips to it and wipe away every little imperfection and scar with a swipe of his tongue.

So, he did, starting at Hux’s jaw.

Hux tipped his head back with a sigh, hands bunching up the soft blankets. The skin of is throat ripe for biting, an urge easier to resist when skin already tasted of iron. No, tonight he’d go easy. No bruises, no marks, no blood. Just a gentle coaxing of every quiet little sound Hux knew how to make.

As he started working his way down, past where his tag chain usually rested, he caught a new sound. A phrase. An echo pinging across Hux’s thoughts in a voice he didn’t know. No source or context, it was just there. Kylo listened for it, trying to pick out the exact words and eventually got:

“Gorgeous creature.”

And the space between them chilled, suddenly devoid of air.

“Don’t-“ Hux’s voice was quiet and strained, his eyes trained on the ceiling. That isn’t for you. You can’t have it. “Call me whatever you want, just,” a thick swallow, “not that.” It came from somewhere dark and turbulent and too much like that black thing in Hux’s aura for Kylo’s liking.

He let him have this one. “Okay.”

“Thank you.” He wasn’t certain Hux even realized he’d said it.

Kylo couldn’t tell which version of Hux he liked more at this point. The angered-to- breaking version of their first encounter; that rush of a situation spiraling dangerously out of control in sparks of pain and iron on is tongue. Or this version; soft, pliant, staying where he was put and letting himself be consumed. Slowly, since Kylo had all night now. No shift changes or schedules to poke holes into his plans until they couldn’t hold water. And he was going wring every last drop of value out of every second.

He felt Hux hold his breath when he dipped past his breastbone and on to softer skin. Then, it came out sharply when his lips found fabric again showed no signs of stopping at that border. How easy it was to get a reaction out of the man almost made Kylo feel like a seasoned veteran.

Not that he wasn’t experienced. Hux was by no means his first encounter. Just the first one he had more than a passing interest in. Was more than a box to be checked or a milestone to meet, like a hyperspace kick in a clunker or that first mouthful of hanger hooch a teenager takes when he thinks no one is looking. No, if anything, Hux was a freefall dive in atmosphere. Thrilling and dangerous and something to be experienced over and over again.

He’d never been one for repeat performances before. His dalliances always just enough to take the edge off and little else. Get the craving for contact out of his system and recalibrate his mindset. Snoke had indulged him that much; cutting him loose every few months to do as he pleased. So long as his identity didn’t circulate, and he came back on time.

But this was a new kind of animal for him. He didn’t have to hide from Hux. Lie to him. He’d already known who he was. Had, up until very recently, hated him for it. Resented his very existence. Got snippy and short and petty with him because of all the things he knew. It fueled his initial resistance of Kylo’s advances, and continued it when his better judgment had waned and their
desires aligned, simply to be spiteful. He was a challenge in the best sense. An intelligent quarry to be hunted. An adversary in war.

And Kylo wanted surrender. Complete and total. No minor victories in rumpled sheets and hidden bruises. Kylo wanted to *ruin* him. Salt the earth in his wake so no matter whose arms Hux found himself in, he'd never get Kylo out of his head. Even if that meant giving ground a little. Taking a loss on the chin every now and again. Give Hux what he wanted, drown him in things he secretly craved and had been taught to never admit to out loud. Lull him into a false sense of victory only to cut him down when the winter came.

He wanted to be the best Hux could ever possibly get, and he wanted Hux to know it.
Visions VIII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A peal of thunder brought him back to the throne room of the Supremacy. A distant rumble and sound of rain that lingered well after he opened his eyes and realized that a rainstorm would not be possible. Ahead of him, the viewport was showing Jakku, observed from a safe distance as a black fissure spread across the surface. It moved slowly, erratic, from two edges of the sphere. Kylo held his breath while he waited for them to meet in the middle. A sinking feeling of failure pulled his heart right out of his chest.

A sideways glance showed him Hux. His regal dress whites were stained grey and pink with soot and blood. A tear and deep red gash marred his right sleeve just above the elbow. Bruising darkened his cheekbone and blood splatter clashed with his freckles and the stubble that had started along his jaw. “Ren,” he panted, sounding like he’d just run the length of the ship. Like he was in agony. “I was wondering when you’d show up.”

“What’s going on?”

Hux swallowed hard. “Nothing that isn’t under control.”

He was lying this time.

Something clawed at Kylo’s throat, demanding to be given a voice. It wanted to spout reassurances. That there was still hope. Still something that could be done. Still time. Ben Solo’s voice inside him. His Light. His enduring, relentless memory. It screamed and bit and cried, struggling against its bonds. Throwing itself at the locked door Kylo kept it trapped behind.

He tore his eyes away from the fracturing planet, focusing on Hux instead. The general looked back at him, his left eye a mess of burst blood vessels and bruising; he’d lose vision in it if it wasn’t treated soon. One look at the room showed it was similarly wrecked; the way Kylo and Rey had left it after killing Snoke and his guards. No red curtains, no polished floors. The corridor out was just darkness with the occasional lightning strike of exposed wires showering sparks onto the floor.

He couldn’t sense anyone else there with them but felt something pulling at him anyway. A vacuum instead of a presence. It was massive, rattling its way up the hall.

“Ren…” Hux’s hand on his arm startled him. He looked so resigned. So hopeless and lost. His sunlight completely devoured by that dark, horrible thing. And now it was reaching out for Kylo too.

He opened his mouth to speak but Hux wobbled forward before he could, falling into him. Kylo caught him awkwardly with his left arm, stumbling as he took the man’s full weight. There was a gasp, a gagging sound, a splatter on the floor and Kylo’s feet.

No, no, no.

They sank to the floor together. The distinct hot slickness of blood running down Kylo’s arm. Iron and salt flooded his senses. His knees hit the floor and a wave of exhaustion overtook him. His body flaring up in a star chart of wounds and pains. Ozone and burnt leather. His left palm on fire as he rolled Hux over and pulled the crystal out of his chest.

It left behind a sucking, deep wound. Blood spread out through the white of his jacket with every
heartbeat. Kylo did what he could to put pressure on it, but it was meager even with Hux’s attempt to help him. He could feel the man’s pulse slowing like water through his fingers.

Hux laughed quietly in his ear. A distorted, wheezy sound. It was better than crying.

The thing that had rattled in the hallway slipped into the room.

“Leave,” Kylo ground through his teeth, staring out the viewport at Jakku. The fissures were finding each other. The line straight. There was no reflection in the transparisteel. Not even his own. “You are not welcome here.” But he was in no position to fight and he knew it. But when had that ever stopped him?

Its breathing was like radio static. The buzzing hum of live electricity. Of a running lightsaber. It stood the hairs on the back of Kylo’s neck on end when it drew up close behind him.

The fracture widened. Kylo imagined it sounding like thunder. Hux had stopped laughing, his weight limp in Kylo’s arms.

“I didn’t want this,” Kylo growled to the planet, to the room, to the dead man laying across his lap. “I never wanted any of this.” Bristling anger, a breath like warm metal across his back. “I only ever wanted my freedom.” His nose swelled shut. His eyes burned and water blurred his vision. “To live my life in peace.”

“There can be no peace for you,” a voice of pure distortion, a choir of familiar sounds too muddied to pick out individuals. It wasn’t behind him this time. It was inside him. His own internal voice. He could recognize it without the acoustics of a room to change it. Once upon a time he’d mistaken it for Snoke, for the man that would be Kylo Ren, for Darkness itself calling out to him, tempting him, goading him to action. But now, on the other side of all those walls, he realized he didn’t know what it was. “In this, or any, lifetime.”

“Why?” Ben sobbed, rain-damp grass soaking the knees of his robes. The chill air sinking into his bones even with fire and warmth so close, “What did I do to deserve this?”

Teeth pressed against the back of his neck. “It is the way of things.” And sank in.

Kylo woke with a start, sitting bolt upright in a dark room he didn’t recognize. He couldn’t breathe, his chest refusing to expand the way it needed to. Hot, fat tears pooled in his eyes and left itching trails across his face, too fast to be stopped. His arms shook as he dug the heels of his hands into his eyes until he saw stars. Get it together.

Clenched teeth, held breath, and his tongue pressed to the roof of his mouth were enough to stop the sobs in his chest from bubbling out. When his lungs burned, he dared breathing again and was a little calmer for it. Every subsequent breath took lingering feelings with its exhale. “My chains are broken,” he whispered to himself, chanting it like a holy mantra. In a way it was. “I am the master of my destiny. I will not let this happen.”

He wasn’t calm, but under control was close enough for now. He opened his eyes again to the dark and unfamiliar, but it wasn’t quite so alarming when he rationalized it. The room in Canto Bight. Judging by the light level, he’d only been asleep an hour. He took a deep breath and let it out in a long, low sigh.

Beside him, Hux hadn’t stirred; curled up comfortably on his side, arms loosely wrapped around one of the longer pillows. The band of bruising dark enough to stand out even in the low light. Kylo bit back the urge to reach out and brush his fingers against it. To collapse back down and pull him close.
Peaceful sleep was too precious a thing to deny him.

Chapter End Notes

That's it for Part One!
Just under twenty-three hours remaining.

He was drowning.


Hux forced his eyes open. Or tried to, but only managed success with one. His vision was a blur of blacks and golds. His limbs, still fighting through the paralysis of sleep, were reluctant to obey his commands to roll over. When they did, it took him a moment to get his bearings. A plush bed. A room bathed in light tones, golds, pastel sunlight. Cool, fresh air.

Canto Bight and Ren’s silly little venture. The day before came back to him in pieces as he stretched out his limbs. The outing, the pickpocket the argument in the alley, Ren- His knuckles bumped against something under the pillow; smooth plastic, cylindrical, sturdy lid. He pulled his hand back.

No. He shook his head to dislodge the memory. He was not going to think about that now. Even if he did catch a glimpse of Ren’s head between his thighs every time he tried to rub the sleep from his eyelids. Oh, what had he been thinking? Once was bad enough but twice was a sign of permanently impaired judgment. This whole trip was arguably one of, if not the, grossest breach of professionalism of his entire career. He should have just put his foot down, said no, stayed on the Upsilon. Sure, it would have been cramped and the bench cots were no better than sleeping on the floor, but he’d slept in worse conditions. Ren shouldn’t be allowed to abuse his power like this. No matter how staunch his resolve. Or tender his gaze, earnest his kiss, skilled his-

Enough. Stars, what had gotten into him? Oh well, a shower would wash the linger traces of Ren off him. Steam the thoughts clear out of his head.

A glance to his right told him that Ren wasn’t in the bed with him. Sitting up revealed he wasn’t in the room at all. Even his boots were gone. Fantastic. Most powerful man in the galaxy vanishes a second time in twelve hours. Hux ran his hands over his face, wondering if he should send out the search party again. Not that they’d be able to find Ren if he didn’t want to be found. But it was ‘t’ that would need crossing.

Ultimately, he decided against it as he rose. Better to let Ren come back on his own like a stray cat. It gave him time to relax a little. Engage in some self-beratement without fear of an eavesdropper to his thoughts. Unless, of course, Ren was just somewhere nearby listening in like the creep he was deep down.

Hux tipped his head up and listened but heard nothing.

He supposed he should have expected as much.

The man that looked back at him in the mirror as the water heated up was a surprise. The shadows under his eyes had faded to only the most permanent stains. His face had taken on color, replacing that disquieting yellow with a livelier pink. No hickeys this time, thank the stars, but a few faint marks below his ribs. Curse his poor genetics and easy bruising. The mark around his arm had gotten nastier with time, turning green around the edges. Hux wondered as he twisted his arm and poked at it to test its sensitivity, if the handprint would have been clearer if he’d just waited for Ren to let go instead of fighting.
The hotel shower was the highlight of this trip by miles.

His upgrade to a water-capable shower from a sonic-only on the Finalizer had been a relatively recent change. One made on the advice of the medics for muscle tension that interfered with day-to-day life. It wasn’t a dramatic upgrade by any stretch of the imagination, but the water got substantially hot and that was something. Even if Hux still kept is his default setting “sonic.”

But this one could reach near intolerable temperatures and the water didn’t reek of softeners, salt, the residual chlorine from the recycler filters. The shower head had settings -settings!- that Hux gradually ratcheted up until the dial refused to turn and scalding needles dug into his neck and shoulders. It was heavenly. If left to his own devices in a room of his own, he might have stayed in until the water cooled on its own. This was the kind of luxury he could get behind.

Ren still hadn’t made an appearance by the time Hux emerged scrubbed raw and freshly shaved, dressed in yesterday’s clothes. Hux had to actively fight the urge to go hunting for him. Ren had forced him on this stupid trip, he was not about to start playing the man’s keeper.

Habit dragged him to the desk and its terminal. There was no way the channels on it were secure, which made it unfit for any work of substance. But that didn’t mean he couldn’t get on the First Order’s gen-pop networks with it. Check the pulse of public opinion, file through gossip and rumors, find out what news had trickled down to the journalists. The propaganda machine was only so powerful, and only as good as the circulating truth it spun.

He powered on the terminal and flicked through the limited functions on it. Holovid streaming (standard came free with the room, premium cost so much extra Hux was convinced it was all niche porn), a newsfeed (editorial stories about the survivors of Hosnian Prime, stocks in upheaval, a rise in crime lord activities in the planets the First Order hadn’t gotten to yet, predictable things), an event calendar, and holocalls (local and interplanetary).

Hux curled up in the chair, his heels up on the edge, the side of the desk digging into his knees. He skimmed the news articles, extra-planetary and FO alike. But it all bored him to death. Shame the caller only supported planet-to-planet. He would have killed to have been able to call Phasma. If not to check in on the repairs, then to just commiserate about the trip. Damn Phasma shelling out her leave hours as a reward system.

He opened the app anyway. His list of potential calls wasn’t very long. Maratelle would just hang up on him and he had nothing to say to her anyway. The Academy heads would shoo him away with reminders that they weren’t his responsibility anymore. He didn’t exactly have friends. He watched the idle screen, a little cartoon dog-creature (falthiers the locals called them) scratched its ear under the words Please Enter Frequency. With a deep breath, he punched in a familiar set of numbers and hit call before he could think better of it. The cartoon turned and started running in place the loop just a hair off. Verifying Frequency…

Connecting…

The worktop hummed, rising and falling in time with the falthier’s run cycle. High, low, back up again. Hux clenched his fists, nails digging into his palms. Would it even connect? A small, doubtful voice in the back of his head whispered that this might not even be the right frequency anymore. And what if it wasn’t? Oh, that would be a world of awkward he’d carry around forever. Better to just hang up now, spare himself the indignity. He was about to uncurl himself and tap the disconnect button when the screen flashed white. Connection successful.

It must have been late on Arkanis. Hux kicked himself for not checking the time first.
Not that his contact seemed to mind. The small uptick in her mouth wasn’t lost on Hux. Nor was the way she settled into her chair, tying her thick grey hair back with an elastic from the front pocket of her sleep shirt. Her eyes narrowed at the screen. “This isn’t your usual frequency. Where are you?”

There was still something disorienting about seeing Sloane out of uniform. No matter how many times Hux did so. She was a lot like him in that respect, unassuming and painfully normal without the trappings of authority. A completely different person, if not for an austere gaze and clear voice giving away a life in the military.

“Coruscant Hotel, Canto Bight,” He answered honestly, knowing she’d just look it up anyway. It didn’t feel right to be dishonest with her about it. “Imperial Suite.”

She whistled. “Lush. What business could you possibly have on Canto Bight?”

“Not business. I’m on shore leave.” The way her eyebrows shot up was almost insulting. She stared him down, waiting, until he cracked. “Mandatory shore leave.”

“There it is,” she said quietly, and it stung just a little.

Hux clicked his tongue and shook his head. “Kylo Ren dragged me here. And now he’s keeping me pinned by the scruff of the neck and demand I enjoy myself.”

“Kinky.”

Hux winced and covered his eyes. This call was a mistake.

She laughed at him. “There are worse places you could be pinned though. Stars know you probably need it after your little brush with death.”

Hux snapped his eyes to her. How did word reach Arkanis? Word had barely spread across the Finalizer. Someone must have told her, but who would think to? Ren didn’t know her. Phasma didn’t talk to people. The medics wouldn’t—Oh, that was right. Phasma had been out of commission when he’d gone down. Sloane was the second emergency contact on his list. He made a mental note to delete her when he got back.

Had she worried, he wondered, when she got the news? Probably not. She hadn’t said a word to him afterward. None the same harassment he’d gotten the last time he almost died. No anger, no stern reprimands. Maratelle told me what happened. Stars, her words had burned him when she loomed over his bed in the medbay. What in the cold hell were you thinking, son?

No, she had no reason to care now. She was retired. Hadn’t been his mentor for years. He was no longer a reflection on her and attempts on his life were part of his job description now.

“I got your message,” he said when he realized the silence was dragging on too long.

She didn’t have a saucy rebuttal for that. Her gaze dropped below the lens of her camera like she was taking aim at his heart. “Good.” Sloane squinted at him and leaned closer. “What happened to your arm?”

Hux refused to glance at it again. “Workplace hazard.” It was technically the truth which Hux was sure would be good enough for Sloane.

“I thought you were done with workplace hazards.”

“So did I,” he shrugged, “But when you work with Kylo Ren every workplace is hazardous.
Sloan laughed once. “Is it true? That he’s Supreme Leader? Word hasn’t gotten far yet, but there are whispers. Snoke’s dead and now his apprentice is in charge.”

He nodded.

“Stars preserve us,” she rubbed her temples, “the transition?”

Hux considered his answer. “Better than I feared, worse than I’d hoped.”

“You hoped?”

He sighed, caught. “No, not really.”

“Well,” Sloane straightened her back, “we’re still standing. That’s something. You have plans going forward?”

“You know I can’t tell you that.” Though he sorely wanted to. How he missed the days when he could pitch a plan to her and watch her trim the fat from it. When he could ask advice and tap into her wealth of experience. When she could demand better of him and he would scramble to find it between the lines of his proposals.

She groaned. “Never retire. It’s awful. No one tells you anything and you’re expected to just be okay with it.”

“I wasn’t planning on it.” Another long, awkward silence Hux wasn’t sure how to fill. Why had he called her? What did he expect to get out of this? “I suppose this where we make small talk? Should I ask you about the weather?”

“Get fucked,” her middle finger of her hologram flickered out of focus when she held it up to the camera.

They shared a quiet little laugh. The kinds shared when standing at attention, waiting to be inspected but still out of earshot. Easy to snap out of. Only this time there were no dirty looks or threats of scathing reprimand, so they just got to peter out into silence on their own.

“How’s the missus?”

“She’s good,” Sloane settled, the angle implying that she propped her feet up on her desk. “Blindness has not slowed her down in the slightest.” As if on cue, there was a crash and the distressed whir of a droid picked up on Sloane’s microphone. A familiar voice shouted curses in a language Hux didn’t speak. Sloane put her head down and rubbed her forehead. “Though I sorely wish it would,” she muttered.

A little laugh at her expense bubbled its way out of Hux. The missus had been notoriously energetic when Hux knew her. Go, go, go. Couldn’t sit still if her life depended on it. What she and Sloane had in common Hux had never really seen. As far as he could tell, they annoyed the daylights out of each other. Every visit he’d made as a teenager was littered with their bickering. Sloane punctuated those trips with a warning, “Never get married,” whenever they were alone together, and this was no exception.

“I’m serious. It’s not worth it,” she added this time.

“I’ll keep that in mind, sir.”

Sloane shook her head, “You still calling me that?”
“What else am I supposed to call you?”

“I’ve got a name, son.”

He didn’t miss a beat. “I’m not your son.” The tug at the corners of his mouth was impossible to fight.

She scoffed and rolled her eyes, but she was smiling too. There was another commotion, closer this time. Sloane turned to her left and shouted, “Minerva!” so loud her microphone cut out and came back at much lower sensitivity. “What are you doing?”

Hux couldn’t hear the response but Sloane was shaking her head.

“I swear,” she reached forward, her feet falling back to the floor, and readjusted her settings. “The nerve of some people.” She looked up, “She is going to destroy my house, mark my words.”

Hux opened his mouth to respond, but a third voice joined the fray. Higher than Sloane’s, the Imperial accent sharper with just the faintest hint of native Arkanis. “What are you still doing in here?”

“I got a call,” Sloane said to the space on her left.

“You’re taking business calls at this hour? Rae, goddamn it, we talked about this.” The voice scolded.

Hux bit his lip but couldn’t keep his expression passive even in the face of Sloane’s glare. It was always a treat to watch a superior get in trouble. Even if said superior was retired and the trouble was a marital spat. Especially if said retired superior teased him for working all hours.

“It’s not a business call,” Sloane held up her hands, “I swear.”

Hux very seriously considered not throwing her a bone. What could she do if he just hung up on her? Left her alone with no proof to deal with the scolding of her wife? But he couldn’t bring himself to hit the button. “Hello, missus,” he called out instead.

“Armitage!” The missus squeezed herself into the field of the holocameras alongside her wife. Sloane scooted back and physically adjusted her so they were both in field. She’d lost weight since he’d seen her last. Her big bottle glasses replaced with sleek, dark shades Sloane no doubt picked out for her. “You never call! Who died?”

Was that really the last time he called? When Brendol died. That couldn’t be right, that was years ago. “No, I was,” why was he calling? “Just checking in. A lot has happened these past few weeks.”

“We heard!” This time it was Sloane’s turn to bite her lip and shoot him a mischievous, don’t say a word sort of look. “You’re okay though?”

“Yes, ma’am. Everything’s under control.”

A smile split her face. She was so open with her emotions, with her care. A polishing cloth to buff out the scratches left by Sloane’s abrasiveness. “It’s been too long. You should come visit when you’re on leave next. We’d love to have you for dinner. It’s been ages.”

He and Sloane shared a look. “I’d-“ he hesitated. If he accepted, would he even go? Arkanis was so far out of his way now. Then again, so was Canto Bight and here he was. And at least then he’d have somewhere to go next time he was kicked out of his post. Not just wherever Ren decided to put
him. “I’d like that.”

“Perfect! I expect to hear from you soon about plans. Don’t leave me waiting.” She got up, kissed her wife on the cheek, and scampered out of the field.

“I should go,” Sloane said when they were alone, “It’s late. And you have vacationing to do.”

“Don’t remind me.”

She laughed, “Godspeed, Hux.”

“Goodnight, Sloane.” He disconnected the feed feeling a little lighter than he had before. He really should call more. Talking to them had always been so grounding. Maybe he could find some time to set aside for it.

He sat back in his chair and noticed Kylo Ren leaning against the doorway. How long he’d been there was a guess Hux wasn’t comfortable making. But he’d settled in enough to have been there more than a few seconds.

“You’re just going to eavesdrop on my calls now?” Hux accused, “My thoughts weren’t enough?”

“I didn’t want to interrupt.” Ren replied with a shrug.

Sure he didn’t. But Hux didn’t have the fight in him to pick an argument. Not now, but he filed it away for later. A bullet in a growing arsenal of target-specific ammunition.

“C’mom. We’re going down to the lobby for breakfast. And get a move on, I’m hungry.”

Hux rolled his eyes and reached for his boots. “Where have you been?”

“Down in the garden. Meditating.”

Hux glanced at the chrono on the desk’s still open interface. The gardens didn’t open for another twenty minutes.

“You’d be amazed how easy it is to get through a locked door in this place.”
They avoided Old Town on their second outing. From the plaza, Hux could see a few streets cordoned off. He tried not to think about it, but knew it had something to do with his companion. He should have expected as much, leaving Ren alone with his frustrations, and the fact that the man had disappeared for hours didn’t bode well. But so long as they weren’t questioned and the First Order wasn’t slapped with the bill, Hux told himself he didn’t care.

Instead, at Ren’s suspicious request, they lingered around the hotel, observing the higher-end luxuries and the people that partook. This was easier than poking around shops and being expected to buy something. One didn’t have to look at price tags to mock people. Ren made for strangely good company too, becoming one with his shadow and sometimes vanishing entirely until Hux said something to him or he bothered to speak up himself. The only thing that stopped him from jumping at Ren’s sudden appearances was knowledge that he wasn’t straying far when he wasn’t there. Some of the people around them though, got a little scare at the sudden voice and presence when they passed too closely.

He could only imagine what Ren might have been like when he first came into his bizarre invisibility. Playing pranks at some New Republic party or sneaking out entirely. He smothered a smile at the mental image of a smaller, softer boy with big ears and messy hair making old women in fine dresses clutch their jewelry and drop their drinks by simply saying hello and laughing when he was carted off by the scruff. He pictured Maratelle and her obnoxious, avian squawk of surprise and offense.

“Enjoying yourself?” Ren asked.

Hux forced his expression into neutrality. “I can think of more enjoyable things I could be doing.”

“You smiled,” he accused, “It was genuine. I saw it.”

“You’re hallucinating. Maybe all this sunshine is getting to you.”

“Hmph.”

They detoured indoors, weaving between traps and the tourists ensnared in them until they ended up at an open-air shooting range. Hux was almost tempted to ask to stop; he couldn’t remember the last time he’d fired a blaster in earnest. Years probably. But before he could say anything, Ren was already slowing down and listing inside. Sometimes Ren’s weird mind-reading nonsense paid off. It spared him the indignity of having to ask for things at the very least. Or maybe he was reading too much into it. Ren did always have a penchant for weapons and breaking things with them. And at a range he was less likely to get in trouble for either.

Entry was free but they had to rent blasters and purchase duraplast target discs at the booths. Each one was outfitted with a variety of target docks (modified mouse droids by the looks of them) that could be set on timers, placed at specific distances, and even told to move. Ren equated it to a carnival game, only in this instance the blasters were real and not pellet guns. Hux wondered just what kind of carnivals the New Republic really put on. To him, it was a reminder of his cadet days, bittersweet in its nostalgia, target practice and precision simulations before they moved up to live targets.
Many of the booths near the entrance were occupied. It wasn’t quite what Hux would call busy, but it wasn’t as empty as he might have liked either. Ren seemed to have a similar idea, marching right past most of the lanes to the ones at the far end of the facility. Which, it turned out, wasn’t the emptiest spot in the place.

A twi’lek girl was at the end of the row surrounded by a small group of men. Hux pegged her for mid-twenties. Her skin a sunny yellow, dressed in a loose-fitting pilot’s jumpsuit tied off around her waist and a sleeveless white undershirt. Around her neck, a long metallic cord held a datastick and bunch of little bits that looked suspiciously like can-tabs at a distance. A dark red ribbon wrapped around her left lekku. She was sitting on the banister separating the hall from the range, hawking a game of skill and flashing a roll of casino tokens nearly the length of her forearm at anyone who would listen. There must have been five hundred credits worth in tokens in that thing. A similar, half empty roll sat beside her on the banister.

“C’mon,” she waved her hand at the crowd. “You all really that chicken? No takers?”

Ren nudged him with his elbow. “Low hanging fruit,” he whispered.

“She’ll cheat,” Hux replied, “She’s clearly hustling.”

“So, we hustle right back.”

Hux shook his head, but Ren was already moving past him toward the girl. Didn’t he talk about laying low yesterday? Now he wanted to manipulate blaster fire in public. He reached out, trying to stop him, “Ren-“

But it was too late, she’d already seen him. “A new challenger approaches!” she called out. “Off-worlder too. Tell me, man, you a good shot?”

“Not really,” Ren said, then took a half-step to his right so that Hux and the girl had a clear line of sight to each other, “But he is.”

What the fuck, Ren?

The girl hopped down from her perch and strode over to them. She snorted, looking Hux up and down. She was a full head shorter than him. “Well. Suppose he’s gotta be good at something.”

This little bitch. “Excuse me?” Hux shook off the insult. He wasn’t here to pick fights. Instead, he aimed his glare at Ren who was clearly not trying hard enough to conceal his amusement. “Stop signing me up for things I didn’t consent to.”

Ren leaned in and whispered, “You have to hustle the hustler. Her guard’s down. She doesn’t expect you to do well.”

But Ren did? What was he basing his judgment on? He’d worked so hard to keep his shooting record modest to avoid the sights of the sniper corps. Nothing, not a single piece of his file would say that he was more than an average shot at best. Five people knew otherwise in the entirety of the First Order and two them were dead.

“What? Your guy too coward to pick up a rifle?”

Hux felt his skin crawl at her tone. Oh, if he hadn’t gotten enough of that bullshit at the Academy. Infantrymen thinking they were the Force’s gift to the galaxy because each was somehow under the impression he was the only one that could bullseye a target with a carbine. As a teenager Hux had longed for the impossible day when he could make them eat their words. It never came for them, but
he could shove this girl’s insult right down her throat, and no one would stop him. In fact, judging by
the dark, angry eyes of the crowd around her, the audience would probably cheer to see her
unseated.

“What are the rules?”

He could practically hear Ren smirking over his shoulder.

“Three shots, three targets. Randomized. Best shot wins the round. Win a round get tokens, or
double down and go again. Five rounds gets you the roll.”

“I assume you’ll go first.”

She went back over to the banister and picked up her rifle with wink. “Naturally.”

“How much initial?”

“Twenty.”

Hux did the math. He stood to lose more than he’d hope to win if he couldn’t figure out the core of
her hustle. Not that it mattered. He pulled the money clip off his tag chain and dropped it on the
banister in front of her. “One hundred,” he lied, wondering if she would bother to count it.

She didn’t. But she did quirk an eyebrow at him as she slid the whole thing over with the rest of her
winnings. “Singles?”

“I tip well.”

She scoffed and loaded the first three discs, punching a code into the computer terminal built into the
banister. “We got ourselves a fuckin’ comedian.”

Her game was a simple one of reflexes and skill. Three moving targets at varying distances moving
at different speeds. He counted the seconds between each one. A slow first round, designed to be
easy to win.

The girl looked so proud of herself as the mouse droids brought her discs to her. Perfect shots in all
of them. She smacked the barrel of her rifle with the heel of her hand in triumph, then passed it to
Hux while she loaded new discs onto the droids.

It gave Hux time to examine the blaster. A decent replica of an early DC-15. Too lightweight to be
the real thing though. Modern materials could never match the heft and punch of Clone Wars era
weaponry. Brendol had always bemoaned that particular line of progress and Hux had inherited his
traditionalism. A shame in the end, the real thing would have made this little game a lot more
interesting.

Curious, he fiddled with the settings. Most of them were disabled and the power supply wasn’t
enough to get actual lethality. Second degree impact burn at the worst. If he drained the whole pack
and aimed for the head, he might have been able to get off a single kill shot.

“Hey!” The girl stopped plucking away at the controls to frown at him. “Be careful with that! It’s an
antique!”

“No, it’s not.” Hux lifted the blaster and checked the sights. Ren lifted an eyebrow at him through
the crosshairs daring him to fire a test shot.
She snorted, “And you would know?”

“I owned a real one.”

She blinked in surprise. “Wait- what? Really?”

Really, Brendol had owned the real one. Hux only ever collected sidearms, never wanting to rival his father’s collection. When he’d been younger and more naïve, he’d hoped to inherit Brendol’s someday. Aside from control of the stormtrooper program it was the only thing he’d wanted from his father. His only fond memories of the Hux household were centered on those rifles. Brendol lecturing himself blue in the face about Imperial craftsmanship. Maratelle making him sit in the den and break each one down to parts to clean them so he’d be out of sight and occupied like it was some kind of punishment.

Brendol left all his antiques to his wife when he died. Hux found out through the missus, weeks too late to stop it, that Maratelle had auctioned them all off for a fraction of their worth.

“Whenever you’re ready, collector” the girl said, figuring she wasn’t going to get an answer. She pointed to a bright red start button that took up most of the display.

Hux took a deep breath and hit the button. It wasn’t a challenge. Then again, the first round of a hustle was never meant to be. One target, two, three. The lightweight material of the blaster cut through the air with too much ease. Each squeeze of the trigger unsatisfying and weak like he was holding a child’s toy. It was insulting to the weapon it was imitating.

“Huh,” the girl huffed when Hux’s discs came back, a trio of near-perfect hits. Bullseyes, but not as centered as he would have liked. He blamed it on rustiness. “Color me surprised. Double your money?”

“Is round two actually challenging?”

“Ha-ha! The man has spine after all.” She set up the next round, taking her sweet time with the controls. “You know guns then, collector?”

Hux worked his jaw. Of course, she was going to try and make small talk. Distract him in any way she could. “I would say so,” he said, only so she wouldn’t take the step up into annoying by teasing him with remarks about his silence. “I’m a ballistics engineer.” It’s what his degree said anyway, even though he hadn’t done much in the way of actual engineering since the Starkiller proposals. Aside from his blaster and Ren’s Silencer, but those were pet projects at best.

“Hm. You got a specialty?” She hit the button. Slightly faster targets at a generally longer range. Closer to what Hux had grown up with.

“Jack of all trades.” He said, watching her pick them off in succession. “But I prefer cannons and starfighters.”

Hux had never much cared for small talk. It was pointless. Ate up time he could be spending thinking about other things, better things, important things. He couldn’t even remember the last time he’d been to an even opent to the public. Or generally talked to civilians that weren’t contractors, coworkers, or spouses-of-coworkers. Just regular people whose names he didn’t need to remember. Wouldn’t even learn if he didn’t ask. People he didn’t have to make a lasting impression on but could if he wanted to. He couldn’t tell if it was a liberating feeling or a nerve wracking one. Perhaps a little of both.

She smacked her blaster again when her discs came back. Another round of perfect shots. She gave
him a serious look when she passed the rifle to him. “You looking for work?”

Hux scoffed through his nose and checked the settings and sights again. If there was anything she could tamper with that would force him to lose, it would have to be the rifle. He was certain. “I have a job.”

“Freelance or contract?”

“Contract.” He hit the start button. One, two, three. Still weak. Still unsatisfying. He should have brought his pistol, at least it had some kick. Though she probably wouldn’t have let him use it if he had.

“When’s it up?”

He watched her out of the corner of his eye as the droids brought his targets back. A little better, but still not perfect. Phasma would have torn into him by now if she could see this. He needed to focus. “Doesn’t expire. Next round.”

As they started the third round the cluster of gamblers around them went quiet, paying attention. The extra eyes on him were like an adrenaline shot, a test, a class of students older than him waiting for him to fail like hungry dogs watching a piece of meat dangle just out of reach. Ren had taken up the very unsafe spot by the window on Hux’s left. Little more than a shadow. Just barely out of view when he was aiming. Front row seat to this farce; an instructor Hux was expected to impress.

Third launch. Flash targets this time instead of moving. Two seconds to react and fire on each. A smack to the barrel, she handed the rifle to him. “You like it?”

That made him pause mid-check. “I beg your pardon?”

“Your job,” she clarified, “You like it? Most people I know in life contracts work for the scum of the galaxy doin’ things they hate. Crime lords, ex-Imps, FO. Y’know kind of people that still believe in slavery. Your job good to you?”

It could stand to be better, he supposed, though most of the awful things life had thrown at him had little to nothing to do with his actual work and more the people he worked with, present company included. “It’s the best in the galaxy,” he said.

“Don’t hear that often.”

The start button flashed waiting for him to hit it. He took a slow, deep breath, tuned out the murmuring around him, steeled himself to the feeling of being watched. The rifle felt like nothing in his hands. In the back of his mind he heard Brendol’s voice: Don’t disappoint me, boy. Start. One-two-three. And noise came back in a wave of approving chatter. Everything smoothed out and brightened like pulling off of a scope and back into sunlight and color.

The girl whistled low when the mouse droids came back. Her shots had been consistently good, but his were improving. “You might wanna reconsider. I know a guy making good offers to capable people with technical know-how. No questions.” Ah, she was trying to recruit him. Well, that quelled his fear of being recognized. Unless, of course, she knew exactly who he was and that was why she was trying to convince him to defect. Was this what the Resistance lowered themselves to? Snapping up the other side’s talent because they had none of their own? What could they possibly have on offer that the First Order -hell, the crime lords- couldn’t match or double? Moral superiority? Mortality rates?

“Your guy can’t beat this.” He handed the rifle back and she set up the fourth round without waiting
for him to ask. Without demanding payment up front. Hux laughed through his nose. She must have
caught a lot of people off guard when they lost and suddenly owed her money they didn’t have.

She launched her round. Delay timers now. All different counts. She looked so smug when the
mouse droids brought back her discs and all her shots were good. The red centers of the duraplast
still a little molten at the edges. The tick of a smack to the rifle. “What are they paying you?”

This time he watched her put in the settings. Flash target. Count: 3> Distance; randomize > Timers:
yes > Duration: randomize > Submit. Loading… set ready. Start! He checked the rifle again:
calibration the same. Sights lined up. Damn it. Where was the snag? The cheat. There was no way
this girl was running an honest game of skill in the shadow of a casino. It would be foolish with so
many easy gamblers to exploit.

Hux sucked his teeth and considered her question. He could play it close, deflect, look cowed and
avoidant. Make her think she’d appealed to him a little bit and just let it die when he left and never
contacted her outside of this moment. But, a quick glance behind him made him reconsider. Hollow
eyes, ill-fitting clothes. Maintenance people, cleaning crews, jumpsuits tied and folded down to hide
company logos and name tags. Hardened gamblers, but not petty ones. Thieves maybe, collecting a
huge pot together and then competing for that shiny pile of tickets out from under the spun silk
opulence of the plaza. The kinds that came to shoot and blow off steam. He knew these people, not
in a literal sense, but they were the same type he’d gone to school with. The same type that filled the
Order’s tech crew.

The First Order could use them, but that all depended on if he could even get through to them. He
wondered if they were in on the hustle. A paid crowd to give legitimacy to the girl and convince the
rich to buy in not because they would win but because they could feel superior in front of the rabble.
Then lingered for a cut of the pot when the workday was over.

Well, he was gambling anyway.

He hit the start button.

One. “Room and board.” He said, “A six-figure biannual spending stipend starting in seven and
ending in nine.” Meant for business expenses, but they didn’t need to know that. “Health insurance
that covers things I don’t even need.” Two. “A pension. Life insurance that puts my net worth in the
millions or damn close.” Three. “I haven’t checked on it recently.” He lowered the rifle. “But if your
guy has a counteroffer, I’m all ears.”

Silence.

He passed the rifle back to the twi’lek girl, “That’s what I thought.” He turned to the crowd, “Oh, by
the way, we are in the market to hire.”

An eruption of murmurings and questions.

At a glance he caught Ren covering his mouth, looking terribly amused and entirely too pleased with
himself over the whole affair. Ren caught his eye, all mischief. The son of a scoundrel and scoundrel
himself. Without his powers, he’d probably be out on a hustle of his own. Being a thorn in Hux’s
side some other way. Roping other unwilling victims into his nonsense. Ren tilted his head curiously.

Get out of my head, you bastard.

Ren huffed at him.

The girl whistled to shut the crowd up. “Who the fuck do you work for?”
Maybe a little of Ren’s mischief was rubbing off on him because he didn’t answer her directly. He just reached into his shirt collar and pulled out his tags. His name, rank, and number hidden from view, but the First Order insignia emblazoned in black clearly visible on the display side. There was no mistaking it. And it felt like he’d already won the last round when he watched some of that sunshine yellow drain from her face.

“I believe we have one round left.” He reminded her when the silence dragged on.

She cleared her throat and loaded in the last round. “Y-yeah. Yeah we do.” This time the mouse droids launched the discs into the air in low, wide arcs.

“FO take freelancers?” Someone behind them asked.

“For sixty cycles, then if you don’t contract in, you’re blacklisted.”

Someone else: “That’s fucked up.”

“We have a system,” Hux shrugged, “We don’t pay you just for your service, we pay for loyalty. Last thing we need is people coming in, spilling secrets or sabotaging us. You have to commit, but the First Order takes care of its own.”

“And yet you still have traitors in your midst,” the girl growled. The droids brought her discs back. Her shots were all off, one missed entirely. She didn’t even look at them, just smacked her rifle and held it out to him.

“I said it was a system. I didn’t say it was perfect.” Hux replied. “But our rates are competitive, and contractors aren’t soldiers.”

That got him a ripple of approval. When he took the rifle from her, she turned and snapped at the group. “What is wrong with you people?”

But they dismissed her.

She didn’t say anything to him as he checked the calibration of the rifle. Didn’t even fiddle with the settings at the terminal; the screen taken up by a flashing retry? button and the prompt to change the settings underneath it. She just watched him like he’d suddenly grown sharp spikes and could stick her and fill her with venom at any moment. Just as well. Her cheeriness had been exhausting.

He held up the rifle to check the sights and it lined up with Ren’s left eye instead of between them. Figured.

When he reached to fix it, she gave him another sharp “Hey!” but recoiled from the burn of his glare. All talk and no bite. This wasn’t the kind of person that should be out recruiting. She lacked conviction, teeth, intensity. The only person she could win over were those already on her side. Laughable.

She sighed in defeat when hit the button.

Skeet had been his game at the Academy in later years though it was an unadvertised hobby more than anything else. He’d even gone so far as to bribe the attendants with his father’s money to keep things hushed. Anything to pull his sights above the bleak, grey Arkanis horizon. He would much rather shoot ships out of the sky than skirmish with others. This wasn’t even close to that, more a recreation of what children thought skeet was; throwing dinner plates and trying to make them shatter. But it scratched an itch. Hux could pour his whole focus into listening of the whir of a droid
lining up to throw. The world slowed down while he waited, the reds of the targets deepened to stand out at the highest points of their arcs. He could have done this for hours. Would have if there wasn’t some bigger point to prove.

As he lowered the rifle, he caught Ren’s eye. He looked more surprised than triumphant, his brows knitted together, and eyes trained on Hux. The warmth in them had melted away into something darker and uncertain. His fist clenched tightly in the crook of his elbow. It took him a second to realize he’d been spotted and soften his expression, but it read as insincere.

His shots were all centered, but the victory seemed too bittersweet to really gloat about. “I think,” he mused aloud, handing the weapon back. “This means I win.”

She didn’t answer but took a step back so he could claim the roll of casino tokens. When they were close enough for him and only to hear her, she whispered at him: “You are everything that’s wrong with the galaxy.”

He laughed, the dark and threatening sound of his father's voice moving through him “Just wondering: what’s the exchange rate on karma?” The sinister tone felt like needles in his mouth, dangerously close to stabbing him but infinitely more painful to the people he bit. “It’s what the Resistance pays you in, right?”

“Go to hell.”

Hux just saluted her, tucked his tags away, and departed with his winnings and Ren close on his heels.

Neither said a word until they were clear of the building. And then it was Ren that broke the silence, “Excellent shooting.”

“Just take it,” he swung the roll of coins at Ren, a little shock when it connected. “I know you helped me cheat.”

Ren took him by the chin, grinding them both to a halt, and kissed him. In public. Hux had half a mind to just bite him as hard as he could on principle. But the fight drained out of him quickly. It was a chaste thing. Gentle. Encouraging. The kisses Ren had mocked him with on the Finalizer. In that contact, he felt invisible. Not unnoticed, but like he wasn’t there to be noticed. Eyes wouldn’t glance their way because there was nothing to see. Nothing to fill the space they occupied. Just a trick of the light.

When they pulled apart Ren’s smugness had mellowed out, “I was but a casual observer.”

“Sure.” Sarcasm wouldn’t win him any favors, but it made him feel grounded.

Ren laughed, took the roll, and started off again.
Eleven hours, eight minutes remaining.

The First Order was a meritocracy.

Some of the time.

Officers of the Empire were grandfathered into ranks they did not deserve to keep. Their children placed in positions they had not earned. People were promoted based on who they sucked up to, how much money they had. The rank and file were the quiet ones, the nameless, the passed over. Comfortable positions given to the easily manipulatable, the soft, the weak. Leadership came to those that could hold on or snatch it from the lap of someone with a weaker grip.

Hux knew he was no exception. He wasn’t about to pretend otherwise. Aggressive ingratiatation and polishing boots had pulled him out from under Brendol and the bodies of his peers kept him out. Intensity, fanaticism, and notorious inability to say “no” had pulled into Snoke’s terrible orbit and then Kylo Ren’s.

And Ren was even less of an exception to the rule than he was. Born into power and prestige by the random chance of genetics. Ascending by default rather than process of elimination. It’s hard to be under a boot when anyone that could compete with you was dead or terrified.

That didn’t mean they didn’t work hard. He’d seen Ren train in Starkiller’s gym, set after set after set until most mortal men would have dropped and then a little beyond it. Powering through injury and exhaustion. And Hux was a metronome that kept a relentless beat everyone else played to. He’d forgotten some time ago how to turn that ticking in his brain off. It was just always there now; sleep, off-shifts, meal breaks, drinks with colleagues, dinner with superiors, a forced vacation, there was no reprieve from it.

Still, in the end, merit had very little to do with the overall pecking order and it drove him mad sometimes.

But on paper the First Order was a meritocracy.

They found a quiet spot in view of the racetrack to settle in and wait for the dinner crowd to disperse. A shadowy little corner where they could sit and people watch undisturbed by foot traffic or security. Eventually they turned it to something of a game. Ren would point out a person sitting on a veranda or fast walking to make a reservation. Hux would try to get a read on them. Ren would confirm or deny or supply a better alternative. The longer it went on, the more outlandish Hux made his guesses and Ren would counter them with bizarre tidbits.

“Rich people have the strangest inner lives,” Ren defended himself, hands raised and shoulders hunched, when Hux accused him of lying about a woman’s extra-marital affair that may or may not
have involved Wookiee costumes. “I could give you nightmares with some of the stuff I found out at New Republic dinners.”

“Stars preserve me.”

A commotion from the racetrack behind them caught their attention before they could move on to the next target of their joint ridicule. They turned to face it. The children from yesterday, whose names Hux had already forgotten, came out of the stables in a frenzied rush. Their overseer, another name lost, was quick on their heels. He shouted at them, waving what looked like a riding taser. They cowered in front of him, the older ones braving the front line. He seemed to struggle between targets and instead just shouted at all of them. Only bits and pieces carried over to them. Something—something ungrateful.

Hux’s heart leapt into his throat. The sight was something he’d never quite managed to fully harden himself too. Whenever Brendol had raised his hand to someone else, Armitage had found something to engage his attention or supplied the man with a worthier target if his ire was unwarranted. But in this, he could do neither. He was no child’s guardian angel. Intervention would make his intentions suspect, call attention to his lie the previous day. As far as that overseer had been concerned, Hux was a rich no one. And rich no ones didn’t intervene for poor orphans.

“We don’t have to let him do this.” Ren offered, not looking at him. Hux wanted to smack him for it, not just the comment but the fact that more of his mind-reading had prompted it.

He fished his pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and tapped them against his forearm instead. “No.”

“But you want to.”

“I can want to do something and not do it,” Hux said firmly, “That’s the definition of restraint.”

Ren frowned, “You think that’s the right course of action?”

Hux stuck a filter between his teeth and dug out a lighter. “What I think is right doesn’t matter. It’s about what is necessary. Inaction is my best course of action. Let pieces fall where they may. I can pick up the useful ones after.” How many times had he heard Brendol say that when fighting broke out on the Contingency? A dozen? Enough to get it stuck in his head, surely.

“You almost sound like a Jedi when you talk like that.”

Hux choked on the first puff of smoke and had to hold his breath to mask his coughing. “What?” he wheezed when he recovered, “I thought—“ he tried to recall the old stories, “I thought the Jedi were heroes. Champions of the Republic during the Clone Wars and all that.”

Ren shrugged, still watching the scene unfold in front of them. The overseer was threatening to leave the kids out on the street, and they were begging him not to. “That’s the tale they spun. But when you look at the records closely it doesn’t hold up. All the Jedi have ever done is scramble to fix the problems their own indifference and superiority complexes caused.”

“And the problems of the other side?” Hux teased, unable to resist. “Is that just hubris?”

A short, barking laugh under his breath. “We tend to act without thinking,” Ren admitted, a tremor in the floor made of words that knocked Hux off balance, “Passion clouds judgment.”

Hux couldn’t find a response. Ren took his silence as an opportunity to change the subject. “What did it feel like for you? Hosnian. I just realized we’ve never spoken about it.
Across the way, one of the children shouted, “You can’t do this to us!” and the overseer had a target
to make an example of. He took the boy by the wrist and dragged him to the front of the group. They
could hear the yelp even at range.

A surge of nicotine stopped the shaking in Hux’s hands from being too visible. “What do you mean
‘feel like’?”

Ren took a second to answer. “A cataclysm of that scale sends,” he gestured vaguely in front of him,
“ripples through the Force. And, since the Force moves through all living things, people feel them,
but register them differently. I’m curious as to what it felt like for you, being on the other side of it.”

Hux turned his attention to Ren. “I thought I was -what was it?- Force blind? Doesn’t that mean I
can’t do anything with it?”

“Consciously,” Ren nodded, “But it still moves through you. I’ve even seen you use it a few times.”

Now he was just confused. “What?”

“It’s like,” Ren made a face, struggling with an appropriate analogy and eventually landing on, “It
like how someone who’s never picked up a brush before can still technically paint. They might not
make a masterpiece, they might not even be able to see the colors or the lines or the form, but the
potential is there in all people. Including you. I’ve seen it. At the range earlier, with those kids
yesterday, just now with your eerily accurate assessments of rich assholes. You’re like a prism
through which Light breaks apart into useful color.”

Hux didn’t really want to think about why that last sentence made his face feel warm. “That
preposterous.”

Another blow landed. A sharp crack and yelp of pain. Hux winced without realizing until he opened
his eyes again, counting the impacts out of habit, even though there would be no second or third
sample to take averages with, make predictions from. The phantom sting of leather and metal ghosted
across his own face where his uniform couldn’t protect him (if he’d been wearing it).

Don’t sabotage yourself.

Ren scoffed, “People all over the galaxy have been calling the Force by different names since the
beginning of time. Luck, intuition, faith. At the end of the day, it’s all the same thing.” He gestured
again, but with purpose this time. “Energy.”

The taser the overseer had used to strike the boy in his grip slipped from his hand. It flew in a
suspiciously wide arch and then clattered farther than any reasonable amount of momentum could
have taken it. Out of sight and out of reach. The overseer dropped the child and rounded on the

The knot in his chest loosened.

“You didn’t answer my question.” Ren said.

Hux could have sworn the boy on the ground saw Ren before he lowered his arm. But maybe he
was just imagining things. “Oh yes. Hosnian.” He chewed the inside of his cheek as he thought.
Closed his eyes to put himself back there on that stage watching a chilling red pillar of every hour of
work he’d ever done cut through the sky. To think it was so recent but felt like a lifetime ago. Like it
had been someone else’s achievement entirely. The culmination of years of long nights and
exhaustive oversight. A life of unstable steps upward coming to fruition to destroy the thing that had
robbed him of a better life. How had it felt? Were there words for it? Exhilarating? Exhausting?
Something else in the asymptote of human language?

When he got to something close, he warned Ren, “It’s… a little silly.”

“I doubt that.”

“It felt like…” Hux started and stopped a few times. “Like an epiphany you lose halfway through. You know, when you’re hit with this brilliant idea out of nowhere but by the time you can finally write it down it’s just,” he flicked the fingers of his free hand, “gone?”

Ren made a thoughtful noise.

“I told you it was silly.” Hux felt his face warming again. If he was being completely honest, Hux never thought he’d make it that far. He always thought he’d go the way of Krennic. Killed by his own creation before seeing its success. Or Tarkin, destroyed with it shortly thereafter. Reassigned or sabotaged. Anything but success and then just the after. Even if it came with a failure inextricably tangled with the success. As the sky dimmed, Hux realized he’d had no plan for the after. He’d been carried on inertia alone through the destruction, the Supremacy, Crait, and everything up to that moment the world went dark in his quarters with Ren standing ten feet away. He’d done everything to try and keep his momentum and spun out. And now…

What was there now?

“I genuinely didn’t think I’d live this long,” Hux confessed.

“Yet here you are.”

“Not by choice.” He hadn’t meant to say it out loud but was sure Ren would have heard it in his thoughts anyway if he hadn’t. He saw the dark shape on his periphery turn to face him and, not wanting to be questioned, scrambled to recover. “What about you? What did Hosnian feel like to you? Surely it must have been different for someone so sensitive to such things.”

Ren watched him closely. For a moment Hux feared he’d be questioned anyway. But, instead, Ren offered, “It was like a gasp of alarm that didn’t exhale.” He said, and when Hux turned his head to look at him, he demonstrated. A sharp, audible gasp. A brief flash of horror across his face. Then, the second his mouth closed, nothing. Passive flatness and held breath.

It made the underside of Hux’s skin itch. “Oh, I hate that.”

Ren finally exhaled through his nose, “It was drastically more unpleasant at the time too, I assure you.”

They petered off into silence. A fresh blow landed on a new target. The girl that had pickpocketed him when she moved too close. It was she got for calling attention to herself. The overseer dragged her by the scruff back to the stables and tossed her in before rounding on the others. Was it Brendol’s voice or the overseer’s? I’ll sell the lot of you sniveling-

“I have a question,” Hux said. “About the Force.” He cleared his throat when Ren gave him a warning look. “If you’ll indulge me, of course.”

“Shoot.”

“What is the difference between Dark and Light? If it’s all one energy as you said earlier.”

“Perspective,” Ren answered without hesitation. "The way push and pull are different. High and low
“tide.” He pulled out one of the tokens Hux had won from the roll at his side and spun it between his fingers. “The sides of a coin.”

“And yet you choose to align yourself with the side typically perceived as evil.”

“Good and evil are just words people use to distinguish themselves from others. Make them feel superior and force those around them to pick sides,” Ren countered. “It’s all arbitrary and has no place in my Order.” He flipped the coin in the air.

“Heads,” Hux called.

Across the way, the overseer had left. The girl, and the others were tending to their friend.

It landed on tails. Hux couldn’t be sure if that was by chance or Ren’s design. “Huh.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Just sometimes you surprise me with your viewpoints. Your wisdom.” Hux admitted. “I forget you’re more than just a—” only when he reached the end of the sentence, did he realize he didn’t know how to finish it.

Ren made a face at him. “An animal?” Before Hux could correct him, he asked, “You know how I found out my grandfather was Vader?” His tone implied the set up to a diatribe.

“Snoke?”

The racetrack empty, they turned back around. Much of the dinner crowd had dissipated too.

Ren folded his arms across his chest. “I thought for the longest time that he was lying.” He huffed. “Saying how my family thought I was evil. Tainted. That they saw Darkness in me and were afraid of me for it. And I wanted so badly for it to be a lie.” His anger melted into something liquid and thin that soaked into the air around him. “But it was true. It was all true. They’d been afraid of me my whole life and when I finally found out the reason why it came from the mouth of a stranger broadcast across the galaxy.”

Hux only vaguely remembered what he was talking about. He’d been swept up in other matters when word had gotten about Leia Organa’s connection to Darth Vader. The officers’ lounges had been abuzz with the news and people trying to puzzle out its legitimacy. It had been exhausting to hear about at the time. What did it matter? It wasn’t like she was suddenly going to defect to the First Order now that people knew. If she’d been loyal to her father, the Empire would still be standing.

The idea that Ren hadn’t known before then, had only known the truth for six years, that was the bigger surprise. He acted like he’d always known. Always been obsessed and defined his life this way. But no, that persona was created for the First Order. A piece of Kylo Ren not the man that wore his name.

A small part of Hux wondered what Ren was like before he knew. Was he the charmingly awkward man from the balcony? The mischievous scoundrel of the shooting range? The fearless nobody. The quiet patient shadow that had haunted Hux ever since his stint in isolation. Anxious, honest, introspective like he was now? All of those things or someone else entirely?

“They all knew,” Kylo continued. “They knew about Vader. They watched me fight so hard with this Darkness inside me. Ben Solo spent his entire life trying to control it. Be the perfect student. The respectable son even though it wasn’t his nature. And they quarantined him like a diseased animal. Isolated and curled in on himself until there was nothing left of him.” He steadied himself with a
At one point he might have. A recent point too. On Crait. If he’d been asked, he might have called Kylo a beast and a liability. But now he wasn’t so certain. There was something there, just below the surface, hidden by the rational man. Something not wholly human that reared its ugly head from time to time in his rages and lingering, hungry stares. In the subtle shifts in the energy of a room when he entered and left. Bestial, yes, but intelligent. Clever even.

“No,” Hux said when Kylo prompted him a second time. “No, I don’t think you’re an animal. I think you’re a monster.” The responding cringe was subtle, but Hux caught it. “A monster in like company.”

Kylo huffed again, but the stern set of his face softened.

“Why tell me this?” The question tumbled out after rattling around in Hux’s brain for a while. It didn’t make sense. Kylo wasn’t exactly the sharing type. Hux had never expected him to be.

He shrugged, “I owed you one.”

What the hell was that supposed to mean? Owed him for what? Hux scanned the ground trying to recall a time when he’d said or done anything with that kind of personal value. Or even left it readily available to find after the painful and laborious things he and Brendol had done to curate the perfect professional dossier. He wasn’t a chatty drunk. Even if he was, Kylo had never seen him well and truly plastered. He was much too professional for that. The only time he might have was when-

Oh. It hit him on a wave of nausea. His mother. The stars and the kidnapping.

“Well,” he cleared his throat awkwardly and snuffed out his cigarette. “I suppose we’re even then.”

Kylo followed his lead on the hasty escape from whatever dark place this conversation had gone. “Dinner?”

They wandered in the direction of the plaza but didn’t make it far before they were hailed by a trio of familiar children, all hopeful eyes and tear-streaked, fearful faces.
A little over seven hours remaining.

Bacta healed the worst of the sunburn pretty quickly. Just another reason Hux hated going planetside. He couldn’t burn on a star destroyer where the stars couldn’t fight back. There were some stubborn spots along the back of his neck and the bridge of his nose that refused to let go of their color. Even with the judicious application of ice.

“It’s fine,” Kylo had said as he collected his things when Hux first started tending to the burn. “No one will notice.”

“No one?” Hux had rounded on him, “What?”

“When we go down to the casino later.” Kylo had clarified with the subtle annoyance of an obvious answer. “I’m going down and you’re going with me. I’m not going to spend your winnings without you.”

The sentiment hidden in the statement had given him pause, but Hux was tired of being dragged around. “I’ve followed you all over this blasted city. I’m not going down there too.” Where the rich go to get richer and laugh at the poor that had saved up to be there. He could tolerate shops and shooting ranges. Places where people walked from point to point and were barely noticed. But a casino was a finite space Hux knew he had no place in.

“You’re going,” Kylo had replied sweeping past him into the refresher to shower and straighten up his vagabond appearance. “I won’t make you gamble, but you’ll at least sit with me. Enjoy the evening.” When that hadn’t landed, he sweetened the pot, “Maybe have a drink or two.”

He’d shut the door before Hux could respond. Not that Hux had a response. He knew saying ‘no’ again was going to gain him no ground. Kylo could match him tit-for-tat in stubbornness even on his best, pettiest day. He needed another tactic and had the whole span of a shower to think about it. He stared daggers at the wall when the running water had stopped. Bitter, angry, I’m not going thoughts blared in the man’s direction. Maybe then he’d get the hint.

Hux had wrangled his color from ‘roasted crustacean’ to ‘healthy glow’ when Kylo came back out. He’d really dolled up for the casino. Hux hadn’t even known he owned finery still. It caught him off guard when he first appeared in the doorway.

Black robes really suited him, but these Hux hadn’t seen before. Loose, fine things that sat in layers with hems down to the knee and floated as he moved across the room. They were cinched at the waist by a sturdy leather belt with engraved black metal buckle. A loop for his lightsaber sat empty on his left hip. Pants cut so close to the thigh they might as well have been tights. Polished boots that came midway up the shin. Silk ribbons covered scarred knuckles and wove around his wrists. His hair was pulled up on one side to show an intricate black metal cuff on his left ear. The rest wavy and soft around his face, making him look years younger and prettier than he had any business being.
What really caught Hux’s attention though was just how much skin he had on display. The neck of his robes scandalously low with nothing underneath it. His arms were entirely bare. Muscle and strength worn like expensive accessories. Hux caught his eyes jumping from freckles and moles to scars and lines. On his way back up, Kylo flexed his arm, bicep bulging just a little. Hux turned his face away only to look freshly sunburnt again when he caught his reflection in the mirror. What the hell was he doing ogling the man like some horny teenager?

“I’m not going downstairs with you.” He said.

“Yes, you are.” Kylo said back, unfazed.

“I can’t go down there dressed like this,” He gestured to his clothing. He hadn’t, in any sense of the word, prepared for the eventuality that he would wind up at a posh event without being able to wear the First Order insignia plainly. He’d brought his best dress uniform, of course, but he’d been wearing the tailored shirt for two days now and the jacket had his rank stitched into the sleeve. “They’ll kick me out for not meeting some kind of dress code. Or attire price minimum. And you’re the one that said no uniforms.”

Kylo narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips a little, looking him over. He turned and went over to the bag of things that had, according to stormtroopers, been delivered that afternoon. Hux, foolishly, thought that would be the end of things. That it was over, and he could get on with his night alone. He went back to the mirror and pulled off his dress shirt, the sleeves wrinkled beyond repair. His tags came next, their clattering muffled by the fabric.

Something heavy fell across his shoulders while he had his head down. Cold metal brushed against the side of his neck. He looked up and, in the mirror, he saw white leather, silver rivets, delicate hand-stitching. Hux pulled it off his shoulders and inspected the material. Soft, satiny lining, rigid craftsmanship, the knot at the end of the sleeve where the price tag had been tied then snipped away. The leather was supple in his hands, the smell of it pleasantly intoxicating. And the white of it was so pure it stung his eyes a little.

Hux’s heart decided that now was the most opportune time for a daring prison break through his rib cage. Kylo had bought this? Why? It was closer to Hux’s size than his own. And terribly frivolous and expensive.

He was snapped out of his thoughts by a childish flick to his temple. “Stop that.” Kylo scolded. He was leaning against the dresser next to him, gauging his reaction and apparently none too thrilled with what he was seeing.

“I can’t take this,” Hux blurted, ready to give the jacket and all that it implied back to Kylo despite the tiny voice in the back of his head whining that he should keep it. To not let go now that it was in his hands. No. He couldn’t. He hadn’t earned-

Kylo cut off his thoughts with a firm. “It’s a gift, Hux. You know when-“

“I know what a gift is,” Hux interrupted. “I just- I can’t take this one.”

“Why not?”

Because he didn’t deserve it. Because a gift meant something but Hux didn’t know what this something was. Wasn’t sure he wanted to. “I don’t know what you want in return.”

“Maybe,” Kylo suggested, pushing off from the dresser, “I just want you to look nice when you go downstairs with me. Be able to stay and not get kicked out because you don’t meet some dress code
or attire price minimum.”

Oh, this bastard. But he knew fighting would do him no good. Ren was too stubborn to take it back. A small, selfish part of him frothed at the mouth with rage at the idea of him giving it to someone else, someone that might actually want to keep it. What to do with it then? Just tossing it would be a waste of both the money spent on it and the materials that went into making it. He could sell it, potentially at a mark-up, once they left Canto Bight, but that would be an insult dealt to Kylo who had just admitted to getting it for him. But he couldn’t keep it, he knew that much. It felt stolen in his hands. Like he’d somehow get in trouble for having it if the wrong person laid eyes on him.

So, he turned his ire on the garment in his hands. A part of him silently wished it would just vanish when he blinked. He couldn’t help but resent its fine make and luxurious materials. He ground his teeth, struggling to keep his hands still and not destroy the thing.

What had he done to deserve this? Tolerate Kylo’s nonsense on this increasingly ridiculous trip? Did that even warrant rewarding? He looked back farther and all he could see were failures. His being barred from staff meetings, the threats of court martial, his moment of weakness Kylo had been audience to, Crait, the Supremacy, Snoke, Starkiller, the traitor, Cardinal, letting Maratelle take Brendol’s estate, waiting too long to kill Brendol in the first place- on and on and on. Every career setback, every hiccups at the Academy, every step that didn’t go to plan or made him stumble trying to find solidity in shaky ground.

There’d been a time when he’d accepted gifts like this. When he’d been given books and liquor and antique weapons. Objects with just as much practical use as a piece of designer civilian clothing, but somehow seemed less insulting to receive. He’d accomplished something when he’d gotten those. A promotion, an assignment, a victory.

This was just given to him for the sake of it. Because Kylo wanted to or wanted some currency-to-be-named-later. Hux suspected the latter. Why else would he do something so- Nice didn’t feel like the right word for it. Generous wasn’t right either. A true gift was a selfless gesture but Hux couldn’t wrap his head around the idea of Kylo Ren being a selfless man even for a fleeting moment. Perhaps he was just mocking him. He hadn’t said anything for the duration of this little crisis. Had this been what he wanted?

“I want you to accept it and enjoy it,” Kylo offered.

“Stay out of my head.”

“Your thoughts are a siren. I could be in the casino right now and still hear you freak out about this. It’s a gift, prism. It’s not that deep.”

Did he just- Was that a- This motherfucker-

“We don’t have forever,” Kylo pressed. “Put it on.”

Hux sighed and decided he could be mad about the name and the gift later. But now his arguments were just making him look ungrateful. Despite every anxious nerve in his brain screaming not to, he slipped it on. It was warm, heavy, a little long in the sleeves but otherwise a good fit. The cut was sharp, narrow at the waist and broad at the shoulder. It made him look less willowy. The high collar looked better open, studded in polished silver. The pockets were deep, lined with the same slick satiny stuff of the interior. Stars, it was nice. The white so pure it didn’t wash him out so much as call attention to the pops of color in his face, eyes, and hair. As if to say this is what white really is and he could never hope to be so pale.
Kylo’s reflection joined his in the mirror, appraising their reflections together. The black and white made for a striking contrast. Though, compared to Kylo he still felt woefully underdressed.

A decade ago, he’d stood in front of a different mirror. A smaller one. Sloane’s bathroom mirror, fiddling with the collar of a black shirt and smoothing his hands over a deep turquoise jacket. At the time, that suit had been the finest thing Armitage owned. Arkanian wool, a tribute to his heritage. The linen shirt had been an import he’d found for a bargain. He’d had to wear his uniform boots, having completely forgotten about dress shoes in the flurry that had surrounded his invitation to Carise Sindian’s dinner. Well, Brendol’s invitation that had been passed on to him simply because his father hadn’t wanted to go, and someone named Hux had to honor it.

He’d looked pretty sharp, in his own opinion. The missus had outdone herself in a feat of slapdash tailoring. Her discrete seams pulled him in the right places and filled him out in others to stop him from looking too frail. Sloane had loaned him a pair of crystal cufflinks from her wedding. A pyrite scarab brooch sparkled on his lapel, linked by a thin chain to a hexagonal tie pin; a gift from Phasma when their first attempt at housing a Parnassos Water Beetle went south converted to jewelry at the missus’s sewing table. He’d done his best to hide the stress that aged him prematurely. Triple checked the line of his sideburns, the coif of his hair, despite all reassurances that he looked fine.

At dinner, he’d been called cheap under breaths and stared at when no one thought he could see them.

He forced himself to stop fiddling in the present. “I always hated it,” he told his reflection. “The way you were always expected to wear something different and expensive to every dinner. How there were different pieces and changing arbitrary standards on what colors were okay or what cuts. It was all supposed to be refined or custom or pretty.” He scoffed at himself, “You were judged on how attractive you were to the others in attendance.”

“You think you aren’t attractive?”

Hux’s eyes snapped to the image of Kylo in the mirror, of warm brown eyes watching him. He was still getting used to seeing the man’s face all the time. He looked so painfully human. So expressive and handsome in a boyish, awkward sort of way. Even all dressed up. It tugged at something frozen in his chest. Chipping away ice and padlocks. Hux forced himself to smile but it looked fake enough to be cringe-worthy even to him. “I look as good in a bespoke suit as any other man in the galaxy. That isn’t the point.”

Kylo’s head turned to look at the real Hux.

“I hated the idea of conspicuous consumption,” Hux confessed. “Even all this. It’s- “ he used a breath to buy himself the time to collect his thoughts. “It’s what made the Empire bloated and weak. And the New Republic after it. What’s the point to it, Ren? Flaunting one’s wealth and status simply because you were born into money or married into money or inherited something. Being celebrated when you’ve done nothing.” He looked away from his reflection, choosing a spot in the mirror’s frame to hold his focus. “I’d rather be judged on what I’ve done.”

“I don’t think you have much to worry about when it comes to that anymore,” it was gentler than Hux had been expecting. Comforting enough to soothe the ten-year-old wound to his pride. The warm puff of air against his jaw when Kylo leaned in close and whispered, “General Starkiller,” made Hux shiver.

He nudged his companion back with his elbow. “I suppose you have a point.”

“Damn straight I do.”
His reflection had an exasperated smile on his face that complimented Kylo’s cocky one quite well. Reflexively, he pulled in the corners of his mouth and bit down on the inside of his cheeks. The urge, that tingling in the muscles of his face, took a long time to pass.

“We should go. Not like we have all night. Departure’s at oh-five.”

“Who scheduled that again?” Kylo offered his arm to Hux, nudging him with it when he pretended not to notice.

“Hush.” And with a roll of his eyes, Hux took it, acting like he didn’t enjoy the feeling of powerful muscle under his fingertips.

The Coruscant Hotel’s casino had seemed an extravagant thing during the day. Chandeliers and ornate rugs, everything polished and in its place. At night, it was downright Republican in its opulence. Light glittered through crystal; tokens shone like real, precious gold in their neat stacks on tables. Well-dressed people in black and white outfits that cost more than Hux spent in a year, three years, ten years, were clustered around tables. Some playing, others just standing with drinks and looking pretty. They divided themselves into cliques by game of choice and size of winnings. It reminded him of common rooms and cafeterias at the Academy only with considerably more variety. The only plus side was no one had noticed him yet.

“There’s an opening at the sabaac table,” Kylo said, offering a third of the token roll to Hux.

“It’s not really my game.” Hux tried to weasel his way out. Sure, he could count cards pretty well, maybe even win a decent chunk of change before the dealer got wise to what he was doing. He vividly remembered Maratelle catching catching-on and banning him from the dining room despite the protests from her friends that wanted to hassle the “charming young man” with inane drivel and numbers to daughters he’d never call.

Oh, this was going to be a rough evening of flashbacks and awkward silences, wasn’t it? Exciting. At least they’d only be down here for a couple hours.

Kylo tugged him along anyway, because of course he did. Hux didn’t have a choice in any of the roads his life took anymore. Not that he ever did in the first place. In a way, Hux thought, this whole trip was a metaphor for his life. Forced into nonsense by superiors, managing to turn a profit, hating every second of it as it descended into the inane and downright comical. All it needed was a cataclysm of his own design. Though, knowing his companion, a cataclysm now would probably kill him. As they sat Hux got a round of looks, the double takes turning into appraisals. Furrowed brows and subtly curling lips. Death wasn’t looking like such a bad option now.

Hux lost his first two hands by comical margins, like he didn’t even know how to play. Another round of reproving looks and what was left of his tattered soul started chew its own hand off in a bid to leave his body for good. It only stopped when an arm draped around the back of his chair and the looks moved to Kylo and dispersed in seconds. Then, his mind caught up with what was happening and focused on numbers and odds and what went into a deck.

It turned out his companion was genuinely good at the game. If he was cheating, Hux couldn’t point it out. A part of him wanted to think he wasn’t, that he’d play the game fairly just for the challenge of it.

Eventually though, the dealer started noticing the consistency of Hux’s wins. He threw a few hands, but it did him little good. A swift and quiet exit was his only option, lest he be called out and bring that headache upon himself. Kylo almost got up to go with him, but Hux stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t get up on my account. I’m not going far.”
That earned him a scowl, but Kylo didn’t follow him.

Hux seriously considered fucking off back to the room. He could handle an argument infinitely better when he wasn’t playing the part of a civilian. Mundanity felt like a weight in his chest, a looming, ominous presence over his shoulder ready to smack him across the back of the head at the smallest infraction. Only when he reached it did he realize he’d headed to the bar instead of the stairs, the bartender nearest already approaching. Oh well, one drink wouldn’t undo him. In fact, it might numb his senses to this whole awful business.

“Something strong and neat. Surprise me.” He told the bartender, so he didn’t have to admit to being unfamiliar with the local fare. The haggard tone got him a throaty laugh and a nod in response. A few seconds later a squat glass of a clear, ever so slightly green liquid slid across the bar to him on a coaster. The first sip nearly burned a hole in his throat. This wasn’t liquor, it was starfighter fuel and he wasn’t about to start complaining.

Hux turned and leaned his back against the bar, drink at his elbow. He pulled a token from his jacket pocket and rolled it between his fingers. Something to keep his hands occupied so that he wasn’t digging his nails into his palms. Up and down. Repetitive in the little dexterity exercise he’d been taught late one night in the barracks by someone with better reflexes that kissed his cheek whenever he got it right.

He switched hands and took another sip of his drink.

A gaggle of young women had collected around a man in a white suit at a dice table and their laughter carried all the way to him. A pair of broad-shouldered persons he couldn’t place the species of argued at a roulette wheel, the table’s operator holding his hands up to quiet them. The row of slot machines was occupied by all manner of creatures, the ease and price of the game drawing in all kinds. Finely dressed ladies with delicate crystal glasses of foggy, bubbling liquids clustered around standing tables and whispered amongst themselves.

Switch hands, another sip.

He caught sight of Kylo still at the sabaac table. He looked so in his element sitting opposite the dealer, legs crossed under table, arm slung over the back of his chair. A balance between good breeding and cutthroat determination. He belonged there among the war profiteers, arms dealers, slicers and smugglers. Had Hux never met him, he would have pegged the man for a crime lord; the representative of a powerful syndicate checking the pulse of his rivals to make sure they were still clinging to life. He tossed coins into the pot without looking at them. Their theoretical value meant nothing to him. He kept his face forward, like he couldn’t feel Hux watching him.

Hux’s chest started to burn from lack of air.

Switch-

The token didn’t land in his hand.

Hux startled, standing up straighter and looking down only to see a clenched fist between his hands. “You look bored,” the voice that teased him was honey smooth, “Waiting on someone?”

“No, I-“ Hux took a breath to collect himself, “No, just people watching.”

“A noble pastime.” The man that sidled up next to him had a youthful face, but the grey at his temples aged him unfairly. His tanned skinned the product of good genes rather than prolonged sun exposure. His deep green eyes sparkled when he talked. “Though it is a travesty for someone as
pretty as you to be benched like this.” He rolled the coin in his hands just as Hux had been doing.

Pretty?

“I’m not benched,” he hadn’t meant for it to sound so defensive, “I’m just not much of a gambler.”

“No, I don’t imagine a soldier like you would be the type, eh, general?” When Hux’s eyes snapped to his, he smiled. A cat with a canary. “I knew I’d seen you somewhere before.”

Hux wouldn’t let himself be rattled no matter how hard this guy shook. “A lot of people have seen me before.”

“Yes, but never out in the wild. So far from home.” He leaned his elbow against the bar, so low it put his eyeline below Hux’s shoulder. “What brings you here, to our seedy little corner of the galaxy?” He gestured out across the floor. “Can’t imagine the First Order just ships its best and brightest to places like this for shits and giggles.”

Hux weighed his options. If he was up front, he ran the risk of souring the conversation with business talk out the gate. If he was subtle, he could miss the opportunity entirely. He split the difference with a half-truth, “Headhunting.”

He bit. “Oh?”

“I’m in the market for investors on a new project.”

His companion made an interested little noise, “Intriguing,” his eyes were back on Hux. “Tell me more.”

“You expect me to spill all of my secrets before you even give me a name?”

He laughed and put his closed fist to his chest. “Pardon my manners. Schrinn Fosse, at your service.” He gave a little bow of his head then reached behind Hux to hail the bartender. “And it just so happens that I have a decent sum of money I’m looking to part with. Perhaps to a project worth investing in?”

Fosse was a name he’d heard before. So long ago he couldn’t place it, but very familiar. The kind of familiarity that left a bitter taste on the back of his tongue.

“How much money?”

“Eight trillion.”

Hux whistled. “Impressive. But I can’t fund projects in spice.”

“What about coaxium?”

Hux arched a brow at him. An old market standard more precious than gold or drugs or slave labor. What did a man like Fosse have to do to get so much of the stuff?

Fosse just smiled, nodding a thank you to the bartender when a drink was set down in front of him, much darker and richer than Hux’s, a sphere of ice taking up most of the glass. “Now, tell me about your project, general. A new superweapon perhaps?”

“No, nothing so flashy.” Hux knew he couldn’t tell him that the money would immediately go into restoring the fleet and hunting the Resistance, no matter how true that was. Admission of defeat was a death sentence to discerning investors. He needed something that would appeal to Fosse, reflect
well on him, the Order, and justify such a large sum without sounding ridiculous or self-indulgent. “Project Stronghold,” he said eventually. Fosse tipped his head and Hux continued, “The New Republic is dead, the war is ending, and the First Order made promises she must deliver on.”

“Those promises being?”

“Infrastructure.”

Fosse laughed.

“Hear me out,” Hux continued, unfazed. “The galaxy is like a stray animal. On its own, it will starve. It will pick fights. It will get sicker and sicker until it wastes away. But, under the hand of a kind master, it has the chance to flourish. To live a long and happy life. But that kind of thing requires money for food, for training, for medicine. It has to be taught to obey again.”

“But ultimately the FO ends up with a kept pet.”

“And the galaxy wants for nothing,” Hux agreed. “It may not sound like much. It’s not attention-grabbing like a superweapon might be, or a mining facility, or the next wave of experimental starfighters. But it’ll build the groundwork necessary to make those things possible. A solid foundation for the prosperity of the galaxy you can say you had a hand in building.”

“A noble proposition.” Fosse said. “Not one I expected from you.”

“I do like to surprise.”

“Alright. I may be willing to throw some start-up capital your way. Contribute to getting your noble little project off the ground. Six hundred million and the start of a friendship. How does that sound?”

Not as good as eight trillion and no follow-up, but he would have been a fool to have expected all that money. Or even a more substantial sum. “And what do you want in return for that generous donation to the cause? A percentage? I must warn you that returns will be slow coming at first.”

“Oh no. Though I won’t say no to a return on my investment eventually. My interest in the First Order’s - in your - endeavors is a bit more personal.” Fosse gave him a predatory grin. “I have, on good authority, heard that you have a wonderful singing voice.” To punctuate, Fosse bounced the coin in his hand against the bar. It landed with a soft plop and clink in Hux’s glass where it sank ominously to the bottom.

Hux sighed through his nose, watching the coin. A year ago, he thought that Starkiller would end such trifling things as singing for his supper. “And who told you that?”

Fosse straightened, crowding into Hux’s space a little bit. “Your reputation precedes you,” he purred into the rapidly closing space between them.

“That’s not my reputation anymore,” Hux said sharply, still not looking up. But it wasn’t true. He knew it wasn’t. It had been his reputation for his entire adult life and then some. It would follow him like a funeral march to his grave. He’d never escape it, even if he never contributed to it again. The damage had already been done. Which meant, of course, there would be little harm in adding to it now. Six hundred million credits were nothing to sneeze at. It could kick off a lot of things. Fund repairs. Maybe not full get any one big project off the ground, but it would loosen the belt a little on smaller things. He’d sung for much less.

“A pity.” Fosse didn’t believe him.
Hux sneered at the coin in his drink. With a deep breath, he brought the glass to his lips and tipped his head back. It burned all the way down his chest and up into his nose and eyes. Sickly sweet and slick under the acrid fire of it. He caught the coin between his teeth, the edges digging into the soft gilding, and set the empty glass down. The liquor hit him like a wave as he wiped the coin off with a napkin from the stack on the bar.

If he cared, he might have though Fosse looked impressed. “I’ll take that as a reconsideration?” he asked as he hailed the bartender for a refill of Hux’s drink and put it on his tab.

Hux rested his elbows on the bar trying to get the world to stop spinning by grounding himself. “You’d give me that much money for a song? Just the one?”

Fosse chuckled, showing his straight white teeth and too large canines. The right one, Hux noticed, had a diamond in the center, completely obscured when he spoke. “You fail to see what a prize commodity you are, and my heart weeps for it.” He leaned in so close their shoulders were touching. The leather kept out his warmth. “It wouldn’t just be any song.” His voice dipped low. “You are the man behind the death of an entire system. The dust has barely cleared on it. To hear you sing,” his hand found Hux’s wrist under the cuff of his jacket, “would be a rare, valuable thing indeed.”

Hux took a sip of his drink to muffle the derisive snort. If Fosse’d known just how many people Hux had sung for in his life, his tune would change quickly. He wondered just how that reputation of his was framed nowadays. Was each person that spoke of him now the only one? A prize-winner? A privileged, discerning gentleman that had melted the heart of an ice queen by warming his bed? It hadn’t been that way before his final promotion. Back when he was just called obedient and driven and ambitious; words that looked good on forms but were damning in person.

He considered the offer. What was one more, really? Another hash mark on his wall, marks of red and black in his ledger. Hell, it might be a good change of pace from the soldiers and diplomats that made up the bulk of past enterprises. Fosse wasn’t unattractive, though a bit too at home in Canto Bight for Hux’s tastes. A little small physically. But he seemed polite and if he wasn’t Hux could see just how far into six hundred million he could get before this one sent him on his way.

But he didn’t get a chance to answer. The air changed suddenly from warm and inviting to raw static and ozone. A sudden change in air pressure. Fosse’s face went white as paper, his eyes wide. He snapped his hand away from Hux’s wrist like it burned him and took a cautious step back.

And Hux knew what had happened a heartbeat before Kylo’s voice was in his ear. His breath ghosted against Hux’s cheek he was so close. “Do you have a moment?” It was low and even and the alcohol in Hux’s system convinced his brain that Kylo had gone back to using the vocoder.

Hux refused to look at him. Instead, he put on his brightest, most disarming smile for Fosse. Damage control. Don’t sever this connection. Don’t let this opportunity slip. Six hundred million for nothing. “If you don’t mind? I doubt this will take long.”

Fosse was already nodding before Hux could get the words out. “Yes, no. By all means. You handle what you need to. I’ve got all night.” The honey smoothness was gone. It was just tight and afraid now. “I’ll be right here.”

Hux downed the rest of his drink, waiting for Kylo’s boots to retreat far enough that he could be sure he wasn’t actively watching him anymore. He didn’t even try to think about what the man might want. Whether this was sabotage or a rescue. He didn’t care.

They stopped in an empty little spot just outside the garden exit. In the distance a small party was collected under strings of filament bulbs having a grand old time. Their music light and cheery,
catching on the wind and giving a discordant backdrop to whatever was happening. A golden glow poured out in portions from the windows. Light pollution blotted out the stars and turned the horizon into a muddy yellow and dark grey.

When Kylo rounded on him, his face was surprisingly neutral. “What the fuck are you doing?”

Hux blinked at him only partially feigning ignorance. “You’ll have to be more specific.”

“You’re just gonna pick up people at the bar?”

Hux rolled his eyes. What did he care? It wasn’t like Hux had planned to bring him back to their room. “That wasn’t the plan,” he said. It was true. Fosse had approached him, not the other way around.

“But you were going to sleep with him.”

Hux matched his tone, “I hadn’t decided yet.” When Kylo didn’t keep up his tirade, Hux plowed on, “And even if I had, what’s it to you? What did you think? That we were exclusive? That this was a relationship? But that last one died on his tongue.

Kylo didn’t respond, but the way he looked away told Hux everything he needed to know.

“He offered me six hundred million,” Hux said. He knew it wouldn’t smooth this over, but it was the only explanation he had.

“So that’s how much you’re worth?”

Oh, that stung, but he wasn’t wrong.

“It’s how much he was willing to pay me for an hour. Hour and a half at the most. It seemed a bargain in my favor.” Hux argued. “He got a notch in his belt. A story to brag about to his lads. And I get to kick off a project or put some starting capital into something important.”

Kylo huffed out a laugh, “That’s all it is to you? A transaction?”

“That’s all it is, Ren. Full stop. That’s all it’s ever been. Something for something. Favors for favors.” For as long as he could remember. Ten minutes and half a bottle of mouthwash got him a letter. Thirty and a new pair of gloves got him a job. An hour and bruised elbows got him a grant worth more than he made in a year. He didn’t even have to put on a show.

Something in Kylo’s face changed. Hux couldn’t place it at first, but it ate a hole in his chest. What was it? His eyes? The way his brow smoothed out? How his growling sneer dissolved into impassivity- no. No, it was pity. Dark, damning pity he didn’t need or want. Pity was for people without choices. People who didn’t know what they were getting into. The held down. The forced. Hux had reaped rewards, knew the costs of them, no one needed to feel sorry for him.

If he’d had something available, he would have thrown it. Caution be damned. He didn’t care if Ren could stop it and throw it back at him. He just wanted Ren to stop looking at him like that. He wanted to be left alone. “Fuck off. Get out of my head. And stay out of it. People drown out noise all the time, you can start too.” And once he started, he just couldn’t stop, “And don’t stand there and act like you haven’t been doing it too. Just because I haven’t figured out what you wanted yet doesn’t mean you don’t want something.”

“And if I don’t want something?” Ren shot back without even waiting for Hux to finish. “If you’re wrong? Has it ever crossed your mind that sometimes people just care? That they want what’s best
for you? Surely you must acknowledge these people exist in your life.”

“Must I?” Hux laughed bitterly.

Ren looked ready to take a bite out of him. “What about your father? He took the fall for a bad decision just to save your career.”

“That doesn’t make up for all the other shit he did to me,” Hux was snarling before he had time to think. “The only emotion Brendol and I ever felt for each other was contempt. And you insult me insinuating otherwise.”

The steadiness in Ren’s gaze betrayed he was expecting that answer. Which meant he had more accusations prepared. Lovely. “Your mother? She took a bolt trying to protect you. What did she gain from that?”

“The sweet release of death,” Hux snapped. What kind of game was Ren playing here? Rage and confusion kept him rooted to the spot when all reason told him to just walk away. “I was four when she was killed, Ren. I never really knew her.”

“The woman this morning. The one that called you son.” Sloane? What the fuck was he doing dragging her into this? Ren didn’t seem to be getting nervous as he went down his list either. There was some trick here. Some hustle. Some ace up his sleeve Hux couldn’t see yet.

“She was my mentor,” Hux said. It was obvious. “I’m an investment, I have to deliver and check in periodically.”

“You accepted a dinner invitation.”

“I was being polite,” He couldn’t even begin to process how stupid this all was. “Everyone does it. Agree to plans but never follow up, never act on them, because it’s proper to offer and accept. I haven’t seen her in person for years.”

Ren stared him down for a long time after that. Hux tried to tell himself it was because he was stalling, trying to figure out if he was lying. Gearing up to add his own name to the list and send the man into hysterical, suicidal rage. But deep down he knew. He was floundering and Ren was watching him drown, content to let him die here unless asked for help.

Hux wasn’t afraid to die.

“And Phasma?”

Hux tried to right himself but the liquor and anger in his blood made it difficult to recalibrate. It was that night in Brendol’s study all over again, only Ren couldn’t just kick him out like his father had. No, Ren could actually kill him, dead, where he stood. And in the end, Ren would probably look better with Hux out of his picture entirely. “What about Phasma?” was the safest answer he could divine from the look in Ren’s eyes.

“Everyone in the First Order knows you two are thicker than thieves. You let her call you by a nickname without so much as a blink in her direction. But read me rights when I call you by your given name even though I’m sleeping with you,” Present tense. Classy.

“I’ve told her to stop.” His comeback was weak, and he knew it.

“She was the first person you went to when you snuck out against orders.”
“That was a coincidence,” Hux argued. He’d never expected to cross paths with her in the gym that shift. “She would sell me into slavery in a heartbeat if she thought it would spare her hardship.” They weren’t friends. Confidants maybe. Allies yes. But Phasma didn’t give a shit about what happened to him at the end of the day. And if he lost her…

He didn’t want to think about it.

Ren folded his arms across his chest, clearly thinking he’d won.

But Hux wouldn’t let him claim that victory. Not that easily. Not without a fight. Ren would have to cut him down and pry this from his cold, dead hands. “Well, then, I guess you don’t know any of us all that well, do you, Ren? Phasma and I perpetuate each other. We aren’t close. Brendol got a legacy. Sloane gets someone to continue the road she started paving. You,” he snarled, “get to take a bite out of me.”

Something in Ren cracked. “And what do you get?” He wasn’t shouting, but it was close enough to it to make Hux clench his fists at his sides. “What do you gain from this, if it’s all transactional?”

Liquor made him stupid and brave in equal measure. “The trust of the most powerful man in the galaxy.”

Ren’s doe eyes widened with rage. Hux almost missed the mask. At least then he wouldn’t have to see the consequences of his mistakes, just the mistakes themselves reflected back at him. “Did you get on your knees for Snoke too?” Ren asked. He’d meant to hurt him but shot wide of the mark in Hux’s opinion.

“No literally, no.” Hux answered honestly. He was much better shot than Ren was: “But I would have if he asked me to. You’re not special. You’re just not wasting a resource.”

Ren brought up his hand. All at once the world moved. Hux slammed backwards into the wall, his feet unable to touch the ground, the wind knocked out of him. Ren didn’t let up, even when Hux struggled against the weight pinning him down. Anger and hurt written clearly on his face as he drew closer. The pressure drifted up, from the safe point of center mass to loop around his neck. Hux winced, bracing for the inevitable.

This is how I die.

But the invisible hand on his neck never closed. Hux opened his eyes to see Ren’s hard stare had faltered, broken into fragments. He was so close that Hux could have probably kicked him in the chest of his limbs didn’t feel bound by vices. “You look me in the eye,” Ren’s voice had lost its steadiness. “and tell me you don’t feel anything when we’re together.”

Hux held his gaze. In those dreadful, powerless moments, he was fifteen again. Petitioning a teacher for a letter of recommendation to the command college a year early. Looking to the War Games as his next target and hoping to springboard into them off this resumé booster. Wanting so badly to prove himself, distract himself, finally be free of Brendol’s shadow. And a man three times his age questioned his loyalty, said that he’d known about a fraternization with another cadet, tore open wounds that had only barely begun to close. A man that was supposed to instruct him asked if he would put the needs of the Order above his own desires. And when Armitage stood there, asserting with a fanatical zeal that he would do anything that was demanded of him, the officer parted his knees and told him to prove it.

And Armitage had obeyed without question. But Hux couldn’t bring himself to this time.
How many hands less kind than Ren’s had he subjected himself to? Dozens? Hundreds? Was he really willing to tolerate more?

Ren let him gravity slide him down the wall. Leather protected his skin from the bite of the stone. Reality came back in a dizzying barrage of sensory overload. His feet touched the ground again. The smell of ozone and blood. Ren’s hands sliding up to hold his face, to drag him closer, and Hux didn’t have it in him to pull away.

Yes, he did feel something when they were together. Far too many somethings. Regret. Bitterness and anger. Confusion. Grief. And, underneath, questions he didn’t want to hear, didn’t want to engage, didn’t have answers for. Why now? Why had the galaxy put him through so much just to land him here? Why this man and not the first? Why were there so many bad hands dealt between then and now? What could he possibly gain from playing a game so specifically designed to make him lose even when he thought the hands were good? Why, in the face of loss after loss, did he still put up money just to lose again?

Ren, a man he had every reason to despise. A man who could so easily have just taken what he wanted and given Hux nothing in return. No haggling, no tips, no good reviews or repeat business. A man who would soon have the entire galaxy on its knees at his feet. What was one soldier, one errant little tryst, in comparison? Why Ren? Why was it this man, the one who had the least to gain from his company of all his past transactions, that was holding his face and kissing him with a tenderness wholly unbefitting of his station?

And Hux, damn him, didn’t want it to end. Didn’t want to let it go. He could count the number of men that had kissed him like this, that touched him like this, on one hand with fingers to spare. He wanted to reach out, to knot his hands in that soft-looking fabric and hold on for dear life. But he was still pinned to the wall, unable to find purchase in the tide of Ren’s whims.

Ren pulled away until their only point of contact was Ren’s hand on Hux’s throat. Not squeezing, no pressure at all. Just holding him there as the weight pinning him to the wall fell away. Hux could feel him watching his face but couldn’t lift his eyes to meet that gaze.

And then the hand slipped away. Ren was gone. Hux was alone in that shadowy little space of the garden where no one could see him. He shook. His face burned; the heat coming from somewhere in the bruises under his eyes and spreading like a brushfire on a dry day. He covered his mouth with his hands, just to keep some of that heat in. Lest he go cold and empty again.

“What is happening to me?” he mumbled into his hands. And no answer came to him. Which was probably a good thing. Hux wouldn’t know what to do with one anyway.
Languages V

Chapter Notes

Content Warning: Some extremely dubious consent.

Four hours, twenty-seven minutes remaining.

Hux expected a reprise to their argument. A second, harsher thing in the privacy of their soundproofed room. Raised voices and vicious things neither would dare say in public where someone might overhear. He braced himself for it on the walk up, replaying everything Ren had said in the garden in his mind until he went numb to them. Other insults came later, words others had thrown at him in the past. Words he’d thrown at himself. Every possible combination of awful things until he was sure nothing would surprise him. He rolled his shoulders, his hands shoved into his empty pockets, and tried to loosen his body up as much as possible as he listed into the hall their room was on. Stiffness only made getting thrown around worse.

When he came in nothing happened. The lights were on. Nothing was broken or missing. Both stormtroopers had been at their stations and didn’t seem rattled or concerned when he passed them. Ren was sitting on the bed, dead center, legs crossed and wrists resting on his knees. His head was up, serene. Hair down. His fancy robes and boots were gone and Hux watched his chest rise and fall slowly, trying to match his own breathing to the rhythm.

Ren didn’t react to his entering. If he even noticed at all.

Hux wanted to stay angry. Wanted to force an outburst, pick the fight he’d prepared for, but it just fizzled out. The gentle, contemplative quiet unfairly soothing. He wobbled a bit and leaned against the wall to avoid bumping anything. While he was there, he took his boots off, watching Ren the whole time, burning with jealousy at his peaceful calm. How dare he? How dare this man swoop in, ruin his life thrice over, and then have the audacity to look so unscathed and pretty.

Hux shook off the thought and made his way to the refresher in as straight a line as he could manage. The darkness was a welcome reprieve from florescent lights and chandeliers. Cool tile lowered the ambient temperature by a noticeable margin. With a sigh, he leaned his weight against the door and let gravity pull him to the ground. A part of him was completely okay with just falling asleep like this, but his pride wouldn’t allow it. It suffered enough indignities at Ren’s hand, spending the night in a hotel refresher wasn’t going to be one of them.

But he could sit until his head cleared.

He took off his jacket and laid it across his lap. It glowed in a way, reflecting the dim light seeping in from under the door. Getting dragged against the wall hadn’t been kind to it. Scuffs darkened the back panel. When he ran his fingers over it the leather was rough and scraped up. He wouldn’t be able to fix it. Maybe get the scuffs out, buff and scrub them back to white. But the damage would stay, maybe invisible to the unsuspecting eye, but he’d know it was there.

Hux picked himself up and made his way to the sink. In the darkness he was little more than a black shape on a grey plane. No details, nothing to catch the light. And break it apart into useful color. Oh, goddamn Ren. That bastard and his-
He didn’t have the energy for this.

He occupied himself undressing for bed. Or at least he’d intended to, until he was reminded of the giant pins in his pants in the worst possible way. He grunted at the wave of dull pain, the muscle of his thigh warning him that something was embedded in it now. Luckily the pins weren’t that big, and the wound didn’t bleed too much while he pulled the rest out of the fabric with unsteady hands. He held them between his teeth until he’d gotten all of them, running his hands over the seams multiple times to make sure. Rolled socks served as a good improvised pin cushion and fit into the deep pocket of the jacket.

A few handfuls of cold water on his face and wet fingers through his hair made him feel a little more human again. Only a little. He sighed, leaning his elbows against the counter and letting his skin drip dry over the basin. The room swam when he lifted his head again; golds, oranges, and blacks bleeding together. Oh, those extra drinks had been a bad idea.

He squeezed his eyes shut until pink stars danced across his vision. He just wanted the ticking, the spinning, and the pounding in his head to stop. Just for a moment.

When he opened his eyes again, the colors had stabilized, though it still felt like everything was in motion. He realized he should have detoured for a change of clothes to bring in with him. Oh well. He still had his basics.

Outside, Ren was still sitting on the bed, but his eyes were open. Hux paid him no mind as he set his things with his shirt and tags on the dresser. He knew, on some level, he should pack up his things now, spare him the extra steps when he had to get up in a few hours. But he just couldn’t be bothered right now. That was going to be hungover Hux’s problem. Fuck that guy.

Ren broke the silence. “I didn’t expect you back so soon.”

“Neither did I.” There was a bitterness there he just couldn’t shake. A tightness in his chest. He seriously considered pouring himself a glass of the room’s brandy just to see if Ren would try to stop him. He got about halfway through the thought before he gave up on it. Nothing would come of that act of defiance. Ren would just let him. It didn’t matter. Nothing he did mattered.

He glared at Ren, not knowing what else to do.

All he got was an arched brow. “What about…” he trailed off and Hux wanted to think it was because he didn’t know how to phrase the question. What about your hook-up? Your deal? That guy at the bar I got so jealous of?

He wanted to laugh but there was something caught in his throat. Living, writhing, and wet. He hated it and the anxious, nauseous, stomach-in-knots feeling that came with it. “I told him,” he licked his teeth and they tasted like wood pulp. Paper just like the rest of him; a palimpsest upon which the First Order had written its declarations of war, but Ren was so goddamn determined to read the original words hidden in the stains. “I told him that you had informed me of a tragic death in my family.” Something was overflowing inside of him. “He bought me another drink.” And then I bought two more for myself so I could deal with you.

Ren said nothing.

Hux wanted to scream. To clench his fists at his sides and bark the way Brendol used to. To throw things and take swings just to feel it connect even though he knew it would hurt him more than it could ever hurt Ren. Give this energy vibrating just below his skin somewhere to go. Are you happy? Congratulations, you won, you absolute bastard.
Ren blinked at him, brows rising, and Hux realized he’d said some of that out loud. Shouted it even, if the way hit throat burned was any indication. Ren stared at him; eyes almost black in the dim lamplight searching for something. His teeth worried the edge of a plump lip.

A wall splintered painfully in Hux’s chest. He couldn’t breathe under the weight of that scrutiny. His jaw trembled and no amount of clenching could still it. All he could think of was the garden. Being pinned to the wall. Outside the range. The balcony. The alley under strings of dubious light. His quarters on the *Finalizer*. Every kiss, every tender gesture. A conversation, a cup of tea, a steadying hand on his throat that no one else saw but Hux felt. Every lurid suggestion. And he couldn’t puzzle it out: what Ren gained from this continued farce. He’d gotten his win. Twice now. What did it matter if he got a few more?

*Has it ever crossed your mind that sometimes people just care?*

Great. Ren’s voice was inside his head now. What was happening to him?

“Hux-“

“Shut up.” He didn’t want to think anymore. Didn’t want to play games or be three steps ahead of the current moment, watching it pass him by while he prepared for the next one. He was tired of it. His head hurt. His heart ached. He was burning out again only this time it was bright and impossible to contain like a dying star.

So, he crossed the room, consequences be damned. His knees hit the bed, his hands found Ren’s hair, and he tugged himself into the man’s lap silencing any questions or protests that might have come up with a kiss. Their teeth clicked together. And he just held on and refused to let go, his short nails digging into scalp and tangles. As if Ren was buoyant enough to keep him from drowning or solid enough to stop the pieces of him from blowing away. He was neither. Logically, Hux knew this, but it didn’t stop him. Not this time.

Ren didn’t fight him. He just fell back against the bed when he was suddenly supporting Hux’s weight as his own. His hands found the hem of Hux’s undershirt and slipped beneath it. “You’re drunk,” he accused when they broke for air. As if he was just now making that observation, tasting the liquor on his tongue. Like he hadn’t noticed in the garden or sensed it when Hux walked in the room.

“Shut up.” Hux growled against his mouth, hoping it would be enough.

A good man would have pushed him away for his own good. A gentle man might have held on to him but wouldn’t have dreamed of taking advantage of his clearly compromised state of mind. A kinder man would have just left him there to his own devices until the liquor worked its wicked magic and dragged Hux into unconsciousness. Maybe tease him the next morning so shame would stop it from happening again.

But. Kylo Ren was not a good man. He was not a kind man nor a gentle one.

And Hux liked him that way.

What Ren was, was an aggressive kisser. Brutish. Graceless. Usually the worst kind Hux had the misfortune to encounter; when he came across kissers at all. But, somehow, Ren made it work for him. Maybe it was because he didn’t lead with his teeth. Maybe it was because his lips were full and soft enough that they muffled whatever force he applied. Whatever it was, Ren’s lips against his own wasn’t something Hux was going to critique.
He had plenty of other things for that.

Ren had a certain clumsiness to him that Hux thought should have annoyed him. It wasn’t borne of inexperience. He knew how to do all the same things Hux did; had showed that knowledge off in spades the night before. But, instead of showing finesse and skill, he chose the widest-arching, bluntest force way of doing things. It seemed to be his nature.

Which suited Hux just fine when all he wanted was hands on his skin and a fog in his brain. His hands were warm, and his lips were soft. The edges of his teeth able to bring a spark of pain bright enough to keep him from getting lost in his own head. Perfection.

Clothing was tugged off in a tangle of limbs and tearing of fabric. Minor casualties. At some point, his lips went numb. At a different one, he sank his teeth into skin and tasted blood. At another, Ren’s fingers were slick and pressing into him. Maybe not in that exact order.

Hux had only ever done spice once. He was young and it got swept in with a bunch of other contraband. The other cadets had seized upon the opportunity. It had been wholly unpleasant. His heart had tried to hammer its way out of his chest, rattling around so much his lungs couldn’t fill the way they were supposed to. The lights were too bright, and his blood burned for the rest of the day. Exhilarating and awful in equal measure.

Ren’s touch was just about the same experience. Warm, intoxicating, addictive, and he just wanted to lean into it. Let it saturate his sense and numb him to the world. It was poison. Killing him slowly. Pulling him apart at the seams when he sank down, grossly underprepared on to something much thicker than fingers.

He’d regret it in the morning. Hell, the rational parts of him that were still awake regretted it now. The pull and stretch that strangled him from the inside. The burn that pricked at the underside of his eyes. The disquieting way the tension in his body just gave after a few rolls of his hips.

Ren tried to speed things along once they found something resembling a rhythm. Hux wasn’t having any of that nonsense. You did this to me. He thought he said it out loud but knew Ren would hear him even if he didn’t. He tangled his fingers in Ren’s hair, wrenching his head back, exposing his throat. “Do not waste my fucking time.”

And Ren stilled, blinking up at him with hooded eyes and blown pupils. Much better.

Ren kept one hand on the small of Hux’s back, holding him steady and upright. The other supported his own weight. Like he wanted to be a close, active participant in the riding Hux was subjecting him to. He rolled his hips up in slow, even counts of three. His mouth left a lazy, wet trail along Hux’s neck, shoulder, chest. It melted Hux’s joints, the very marrow of his bones. All the tension and stiffness from earlier turning to liquid heat so potent he couldn’t keep his eyes open.

One-two-three, breathe, one-two-three. More engaging than any waltz Maratelle had tried to teach him; pulling sounds from his chest one usually only heard in poorly staged holoporn.

Ren broke first. His teeth sinking into Hux’s shoulder and latching on. Hux only barely registered the change, having built up enough momentum to tumble over the edge. Release unraveled him to fibers and wrung out a cry that made his voice crack. His senses blurred, reality boiling down to anchor points: a fistful of hair, flesh beneath his fingernails, a solid form between his thighs.

After a second, Ren’s supporting arm buckled and he tumbled back against the pillows. Hux went with him. Some untangling, and he had his own section of the bed to cool off and catch his breath on. His eyes fluttered closed as he sucked down lungfuls of cool air. His blood warm and humming
with that satisfied, numb, floaty feeling he only ever really achieved alone.

When the glow subsided and Hux came back to himself, the lights were off. The breathing beside him had quieted. Time had slowed to a standstill. Hux’s voice of reason piped up then. He should move, it said. Rinse the sweat and foulness off while he still had the capacity to function; tend to the fallout of poor decisions. He needed to find solid ground to stand on when morning came and he had to organize his poor judgment into compartments.

For a fleeting moment, his body tried to obey.

A strong arm pulled him back down on to the bed, under layers of blankets and sheets. It could wait. They had to get up in a few hours anyway. Rest now, worry later. A hand pressed against his chest, just over his heart, and held him in place. Firm, protective, safe-

“Mine.”

It was so quiet Hux would have thought he imagined it had he not felt Ren’s breath across his skin. The word hit him like ice water, breathtaking in its suddenness, almost painful just beneath the skin. It left his heart pounding. Like his touch, like that clandestine hit of spice. Addictive. Deadly. To be wanted, possessed, instead of just shaved down like a slab of meat to feed the war machine until there was nothing left but bones.

He turned enough to catch Ren’s black eyes watching him over his shoulder. The threat of drowning felt so real, so close, now. The water up to his neck. His body failing him. His muscles too weary to keep treading water. His eyes burning and tired. What was the point of fighting it, he wondered. He had nothing left to protect. His life’s work had come and gone. The throne no longer his to claim. His life itself was forfeit. His destiny wrecked, just flotsam drifting through space alongside the hallmarks of his career.

Hux turned a little more. Enough that he could wrap an arm around Ren’s shoulders and let the knight’s weight pull him under. Maybe for good this time. He’d have to wait and see.
“Scoot over,” a voice hissed. A bony elbow jabbed into his back. Armitage obliged with a dramatic huff, inching forward until his knees hung off the edge.

And then, a second blanket draped over him. His bunkmate-now-bedmate had started taking his down from his bunk after grousing about Armitage shivering through the night and keeping him up. The two cadets had bickered about it under their breaths on walks out of the barracks. Armitage arguing that if he didn’t like it, he could just go back to the way things were supposed to be; one cadet per bunk. His companion, of course, had found a way to have his cake and eat it too.

“What’s this?” A puff of a breath against his ear. Fingertips skirted tight, bruised skin. “Who did this to you? Whose ass do I need to kick?”

Armitage pulled away, curling up tighter on himself. “It’s nothing.”

“Brendol. It’s always Brendol and his goddamn wedding ring.”

His bedmate didn’t press. He settled down behind him. But, instead of the solidness that usually came with sleeping back-to-back, Armitage felt a hand brush against his shoulder, bare knees pressed against the back of his thighs, a puff of air against his neck. “You deserve better,” the voice mumbled against his kin.

Armitage couldn’t help but laugh.

“Don’t fuckin’ laugh at me. It’s true.” Petulant. Childish. “You deserve better than that.”

“Oh really?” Armitage curled up around his pillow, “Like what?”

“The galaxy for starters.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“I’m right.” And that was his excuse to invade Armitage’s space. To crowd up against his back like he belonged there. “It’s your destiny, I don’t make the rules. I am but a mouthpiece for fate. Tige Hux, leader of the known galaxy. Hope you like crowns.”

Armitage elbowed him in the chest. He was solid. More than the gangly bastard had any right to be. “You are the single stupidest person I’ve ever met in my life.”

An arm wrapped around him, just below his ribs where bone couldn’t protect him. “Oh, I doubt that. Colonel Rourke teaches one of your classes.”

The name made his throat close up. “Stop.”

And, for a moment, there was silence. Armitage hadn’t expected him to listen and obey. He’d braced for a deluge of sassy comebacks, bickering until they fell asleep. Or, worse, getting shoved off his own bed again; on purpose or accident it didn’t really matter when one hit the cold concrete. But, he
stopped, still, breathed a warm, damp patch into fabric and let the weight of his arm rest more fully against Armitage’s side.

All that energy and preparedness had to go somewhere. It wasn’t content to just be bottled up. Try as Armitage might. Eventually it started rattling in its housing, shaking him at the core. The arm around his waist tightened, the body at his back pressed in tighter. Armitage couldn’t breathe through his nose anymore.

“Hey,” his voice sounded so far away. So different. Deeper and more adult. “Hey, shh, come here.”

With some reluctance, Armitage rolled over. He was immediately pulled in close, one arm tucked under his head, the other still around his waist. His nose was flooded with the smells of industrial soap and wet metal. But everything was so warm, and it was easy for Armitage to bury his face in the soft muscle of a shoulder. Once he did, the floodgates opened. He tried so hard to be quiet about it, but, in the end, there was really no hiding the muffled, choked sobs that bubbled out of him. The arms around him just held on tighter, wringing the emotion right out of him.

If anyone found out (if Brendol found out) he was in for something far worse than an engraved band of titanium tearing his skin. He felt it in the same place his stomach aches started. They should have stopped all this nonsense weeks ago. Nothing good would come of this.

But, stars, if it didn’t feel good in the moment. The hand on his back moving in gentle circles soothed the pains and weariness of his ego. The grounding entanglement made him feel human. Protected from the evils that Brendol and his cohort had leveled against him. Shielded from the glares of his peers and exasperation of his instructors. A space where he stopped being cadet or boy and was simply Armitage for a time.

“Shh.” A gentle pressure against the top of his head. “You’re okay.” That strange quality of his voice had worsened. But Armitage couldn’t place exactly what it was.

Outside, thunder rumbled, and rain pounded against the walls. Something rattled under the abuse, but the barracks for his class didn’t have windows. That was an upperclassman-only privilege he wouldn’t see for two more years.

A hand against his cheek pulled Armitage out of his thoughts. He couldn’t see a face through the dark, even so close. But he could make out a halo of messy hair a shade darker than the rest of the barracks. His bunkmate hadn’t been Native Arkanian, and never told the same story twice when asked where the First Order picked him up from, but he’d been blessed with muted colors and a handsome face. The Academy was probably going to make him cut his hair again soon. It was definitely too long if it was starting to curl and wave, but short hair had never suited him.

“Gorgeous creature,” the shadow whispered in the space between them. A calloused thumb wiped a trail of itching salt from his cheek.

Armitage’s heart forgot how beat properly and just shook in place to compensate. He was so impossibly close, the bunk not big enough for the two of them. Breaths mingled into something too hot and difficult to breathe that would suffocate them if they didn’t do something about it. Their teeth clicked together, the sudden connection clumsy, but easily corrected. The memory quickly melted away to a kiss of modern skill. The experience of adulthood and practice. Gentle, yet heated; the comfort of a warm blanket on a cold night.

Thunder rumbled and the body against his grew still. Heavy. Limp. Armitage smelled grass and blaster fumes. A cold, gloved hand pressed against the nape of his neck and squeezed. Learn from this. A skipping recording of his father’s voice, played right in his ear, repeating like the propaganda
cycle they made the stormtroopers listen to.

Armitage called out a name, strange and unfamiliar on his tongue. Ill-practiced and almost mistaken for something else. He whimpered through clenched teeth, tears in his eyes again, and shook the boy. “Wake up.” But he didn’t respond. “This isn’t funny, asshole.” The shaking just turned into Armitage clinging to him. Something molten burned his hand when he ran it up his back. “Sylan, no, I’m sorry. Please wake up. Please. I won’t do it again. I’m sorry.”

A rough shake and his bunk turned into a plush featherbed. His companion gone. His head suddenly so full of cotton and nails it was cracking his skull open and seeping down the back of his throat and into his sinuses. The air tasted of muddy acid and fur. Bone-deep aches radiated out from pressure points; the back of his neck, the curve of his spine, and something deeper that threatened to worsen dramatically if he sat up anytime soon. He opened his eyes to blackness and golden light half buried in down blankets and silk too warm to be comfortable but too heavy for his exhausted body to move.

“What-“ his voice came out like gravel against his vocal cords.

The hand on his shoulder moved up to card through his oily hair. “Get up,” his voice was lower than Sylan’s. Clearer. Oh, that’s right, Ren. “It’s oh-four. We need to get our shit together.”

One hour remaining. Apparently.

Hux pulled away from the hand in his hair and tried to suffocate himself in the pillows. The bed shifted as a weight left it.

“And here I thought you were the early riser.” Ren teased.

Hux glanced up at him. Ren had the nerve to be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed in the face of the truly wicked hangover bending Hux over its knee. This is what he got for drinking, he supposed. What he got for going on vacation at all.

A palm against his temple soothed the pain in his head a little. Closing his eyes helped too. “You look like miserable, prism.”

That goddamn pet name again. He’d have to tell Ren to stop at some point or he’d end up like Phasma, thinking he could call him whatever he liked. However, with his brain replaced with bomb-making materials, articulate arguments were beyond him. He only managed to conjure two words to say to Ren: “Get fucked.”

“Is that any way to talk to your boss?”

“You’re not my boss for another hour. I can talk to you however I want.” Maybe he was still a little drunk.

A dark, sultry laugh and Ren left him alone.

It took some willpower, a tap driven into the deepest reserves he had, to haul himself upright. His neck barely had the strength to support his over-full head, but he managed it somehow. Stars, everything hurt. Though, when he played back the events of the night (why couldn’t he be a blackout drunk like his father?) he supposed it could have been worse. Not that this was good. He could have slept on the floor. Ren could have been less polite. Alternative scenarios hid in the details.

Why were the lights on already? They could have just as easily packed up and left by moonlight. No brightness required. He forced himself to breathe through it and go. Collecting his things and getting as dressed as he needed to. A tap to the desk showed him 04:25. He could put on an inspection-
ready uniform in five minutes. He had time.

Hux, his things as packed as they were going to get, collapsed back on the bed.

“Are you going to join me in the land of the living, general, or do I have to report you as a casualty?”

Hux lifted his arm so Ren could see his raised finger from the refresher. “You did this to me.”

“I didn’t make you drink past your limit at the bar.” Ren laughed.

“But you made me go to the bar. You made me go on this whole stupid trip that drove me to drink in the first place.”

“A glass of water wouldn’t have killed you.”

The bed rocked and triggered a wave of nausea that almost got away from him. But clenched teeth and willpower kept the burn of stomach acid and bile in his throat and not a step further. “Fuck me,” he groaned when it cleared, digging the heels of his hands into his forehead for some shred of relief.

“I don’t think that will help.”

“I will murder you in your sleep.”

Ren laughed again, unfazed by Hux’s impotent anger. He slid his hands under Hux’s shoulders and pushed him upright again, holding him there when Hux’s vision swam. “Go shower. Steam out your head. I’ll call for breakfast. I don’t think anyone will look at us sideways if we’re half an hour late. It’s not like they can leave without us.”

“I have never been half an hour late for anything in my life.”

“First time for everything, prism.” Ren pushed him and Hux nearly fell off the bed. “Scram. And take your time. I want you functioning.”

With some reluctance, Hux did as he was told. The hot water helped considerably but not nearly enough to motivate him to do anything more than get dressed. At least he didn’t reek of sex and poor life choices anymore. That soothed his pride a little.

He came back out and breakfast was already there. A modest spread of local things Hux didn’t recognize, but by the smell could probably guess consisted of fried starches, fatty meats, and buttered breads. Two cups of coffee—the real stuff—sat already loaded with cream and sweeteners.

Ren gestured to the empty plate next to his own. “Eat. It’ll help.”

Hux’s stomach growled loudly in agreement. Well, it wasn’t like he was going to eat like this again any time soon, and the food had already been ordered. Might as well enjoy it.

They wound up being closer to an hour late for their scheduled departure time, but not all of that was Ren’s fault. In fact, his demands only set them back ten minutes. But Hux’s recruitments over the last two days ate into their time. Defectors had to be processed, listed in the manifest, and tagged just in case. A process that took time even for children. In hindsight, Hux realized, he probably should have ordered them processed the night before, since they’d slept close to the Upsilon anyway.

There was also, to Hux’s surprise, a message from Schrinn Fosse left with the stormtroopers. It wished him luck “building his Stronghold” and offered him something that contained only a frequency by way of numbers, so he didn’t even bother to read it in full.
The trip back to the Finalizer was blissfully uneventful. They arrived in the middle of gamma and Hux kept up an air of professionalism through every check, every report about the repairs that crossed their paths, every series of orders he had to give regarding the new defectors. He held on to it from the hanger all the way to the lift. After that, though, it crumbled after two floors.

“Out,” he barked even though it felt like a needle straight to his brain. The troopers that had lingered on the lift with them startled at the sudden sound. “All of you.” They scrambled to do as they were told even though they all knew this wasn’t their floor.

When the door slid shut again, Ren laughed under his breath. “You know they’re supposed to report to the barracks, right?”

“I just wanted them off the lift.” Hux sighed, leaning against the wall and letting his bag slide off his shoulder. He rested his head against the wall, fighting a losing battle to keep his burning eyes open, though the vibration only worsened everything. “If they’re smart, they’ll just grab the next one.” At least no one else was around to see him like this. Well, no one else but Ren and probably Phasma. If she crossed paths with him, she’d see through whatever bluster he tried to put up.

They passed the troopers’ barracks, and even though they stopped, the doors didn’t open. Hux lifted his gaze just in time to see the little black security camera over the lift door tilt itself upward.

“Hmm?”

And then Ren was crowding into his space, all darkness and warmth. Hux was inclined to let him, to endure the hands at his jaw and the kiss pressed to his lips.

He probably tasted awful, he realized when Ren’s tongue slid into his mouth. But that didn’t seem to deter him at all. If he even noticed. No, instead, he situated himself between Hux’s knees, pressing him into the wall. Hux had to wrap his arms around his shoulders to keep from listing sideways. It was such a novel thing to be craved so intensely that someone would alter a security feed just to get a fix, a hit, a taste. Something more desperate than convenience. More detriment than gain.

After a few seconds, Hux nipped at him to get his attention; teeth sinking into a plush lower lip a good ways before they struck nerve. He got a low growl in response.

“You aren’t coming into my quarters,” Hux murmured when they broke to breathe. He didn’t have the fuel reserve for a repeat performance of last night, the engines sputtering out even now. Ren tried to argue with another kiss, but Hux stood his ground, “No.” Ren pressed his forehead to his and it soothed his headache more than anything had yet. On some level, Hux was certain he was cheating somehow, but it was too nice to justify calling him out. “I have things to do,” he kept talking, though he wasn’t entirely sure he was trying to convince Ren anymore, “messages to check, work to catch up on before my shift starts.” Sleep to get.

In the darkness behind his eyelids, Hux could imagine Ren approaching a boundary he’d built in haste; all flimsy string, twigs, and tension held up on prayers and good weather. Imagine him testing it with a tap from the side of his foot, watching it shiver and knowing how easy it could break and that it wouldn’t be put back up if he tried.

But in reality he left it alone. “Alright,” he huffed, put-out but not angry as far as Hux could tell. Another little kiss, and Hux had breathing room again.

He was reluctant to part with Kylo’s warmth. But, the chill of the lift woke him up a little. Focused him. Reminded him that he still needed to make it from the lift to his quarters without incident in order for this whole thing to be classified as a success. After a few moments, the lift stopped, the doors sliding open to the officers’ wing.
Hux hefted his things back on to his shoulder and started off. He only noticed Kylo hadn’t moved with him when he was halfway out. He lingered, foot against the door to stop it from shutting on him. Though he watched Kylo curiously, the man made no moves to follow him. “You’re not getting off?” His quarters were on this floor. Where else could he possibly need to be at this hour? Surely, he didn’t plan on making rounds. Most of the crew was still gone.

Kylo arched a brow and Hux immediately regretted asking. “Getting off? I thought you said I wasn’t allowed in your quarters.”

It took a second to land properly but when it did it physically hurt him. The headache condensed at the base of Hux’s skull. *This* was what he had to look forward to if he kept himself in Kylo Ren’s company and he hated it already. “You know,” he said, leaning against the door’s housing. “when you say things like that, it makes me question every single decision I made that led me to the point where I would let you fuck me.”

Kylo held up three fingers and mouthed the words *three times* as dramatically as he could to make sure Hux wouldn’t miss them. His straight face dissolved in seconds though. Oh, he was a child sometimes. When he recovered, there was an exhaustion to him. Like the lack of sleep was only just now hitting him. It sanded down his sharp edges to leave something soft and rounded.

Hux rolled his eyes and took a half step back out of the housing. A few seconds and the lift door would shut and carry Kylo up to wherever it was he planned to go.

He only barely caught the movement of Kylo’s wrist and reflex was the only thing that snatched the flash of light whipping toward his head out of the air before it hit him. A Canto Bight casino token with teeth marks in the gilding. “Good night, prism,” Kylo sang, and it was like a rubber bullet to the breastbone.

The pet name was starting to grow on him a little. “Good night, Kylo.”

He didn’t miss the way Kylo’s face lit up as the door shut between them.

Phasma was sitting in his desk chair when he got to his quarters. Grease paint and most of her armor still on; she must have just come off shift or was on break. She had his datapad hooked up to the drawing board on his desk by a series of exposed wires. Next to it was her helmet similarly hooked up. The board was projecting a true to life size Millicent across the work surface. A small white box floated next to it, displaying Phasma’s message feed. She had Milli’s ball of yarn on the end of the stylus and kept flicking her hand to keep it out of the virtual cat’s reach.

“You’re late,” she commented when the door whooshed shut behind him. She launched the ball into the air and closed the app before it came back into view. “How was the honeymoon?”

“It wasn’t a honeymoon.” Hux didn’t even look at her as he crossed the office. He tossed his bag on the bed with one hand and hooked his belt with the other. “It was a nightmare.”

Phasma put on a sickly-sweet tone, taunting him. “Oh, but you’re glowing”

“I’m hungover,” Hux matched her. His belt and his jacket joined his bag, “and lagged.”

She laughed. “Eh, I’ve seen you worse.”
He plopped down in the chair opposite her, letting his weight and gravity do the work for him. He immediately regretted it when a sharp *stab* reminded him of his impatience the night before. Hux didn’t have the fortitude to hide the way he winced or muffle the grunt of pain it forced out of him.

“The sex was that bad?” Phasma arched a pale brow at him.

“Shut up.” But his face was burning, and he knew she could see it.

“Out of ten.”

“I don’t see how it’s any of your business.”

She snorted and started unhooking her setup. “What crawled up your ass and died? Usually you’re roasting a guy before he’s even pulled out.”

Hux didn’t have an excuse for getting so defensive. Especially with Phasma over Kylo Ren. She’d been the first one there with a cup of caf and an eager ear to hear him bemoan the first encounter he’d had with the guy. Stayed up through shifts with him to laugh and contribute as he said horrible things about the men he’d never lay eyes on again that came before him. Hux tried to tell himself that it was because there was a new inherent danger in talking too much shit about Kylo Ren. That there was a risk of him finding out what was said through no traitorous action by either of them. But, honestly, he knew it wasn’t true.

He just had less ammunition than normal and didn’t want to be accused of going soft on Kylo. Loathe as he might be to acknowledge it, she’d be right if she accused him. Though, if he stayed defensive, she’d just suspect him anyway.

“Seven,” he said. “But a solid seven. Close to an eight.” Really, he probably should have gone with an eight, but again he didn’t want to be suspected of softness.

Phasma laughed, “Generous.”

“What can I say? I’m a giver,” he shrugged and let his head fall against the back of the chair.

And then things were quiet again, but Hux couldn’t find peace in it. Kylo’s words came back to him, echoing in the throbbing of his temples. *Everyone in the First Order knows you two are thicker than thieves.* Were they really? Sure, they were some kind of close. She knew him better than most people, could read him better than anybody. An argument could be made that they were friends, or as close an equivalent as the First Order was capable of. Hell, a rumor floated around that they were secretly married for a while that had been especially hilarious. They considered making it true for the bump in life insurance rates when they got hammered together at Brendol’s wake.

How easy would it be, he wondered, for her to replace him? She’d been so quick to turncoat on her home. Downright eager to leave it when he told her about the First Order and the galaxy writ large. She’d told him to his face she felt no remorse for giving up the codes to Starkiller and seemed surprised he was alive after everything went belly up. In all honesty, now that he was looking at it more closely, he didn’t know why she bothered with him. He was her boss, yes, and she had to take orders, but she didn’t have to bring him caf after a rough shift or listen to him when he spoke candidly. She hadn’t had to help him on personal endeavors. Feed his (virtual) cat when he was gone or overworked. And yet she did.

Maybe there was some bigger game at work he hadn’t noticed until Kylo called his attention to it. Maybe she was planning something. Whittling away at his guard like Kylo had, only more subtle about it. Like termites eating away at the load bearing walls for thirteen years.
Has it ever crossed your mind that sometimes people just care?

Hux watched her, waiting for her to look back at him. Phasma was never overly fond of being stared at, especially with her face so bare. “If I ask you question,” Hux said, holding her gaze, “will you answer it honestly?”

Without hesitation Phasma said, “Yes.” Just like she had all those weeks ago when he confronted her about Starkiller, the cover-up, if she’d though he’d never find out. If she thought he’d be able to forgive her for it.

“Do you care what happens to me?”

Phasma’s hard gaze faltered, but she recovered too quickly for Hux to make out what it nearly slipped into. “Why do you ask?”

Avoidance wasn’t a good sign. “Just answer the question.”

But she dug in her heels. “Are you still drunk? Where is this coming from?”

“Why are you stalling?” This didn’t bode well for him, even if it meant Kylo had been wrong. He’d expected a safe answer. A deflection designed to placate. You are part of the Order and I care about what happens to the Order. Or something similar. Non-committal, pride sparing, but easy to interpret however he needed to. But this was full avoidance. She only did that when she needed to stall enough to mince her truths into safe portions.

“Because I’m trying to figure out what the hell has gotten into you!” She snapped back, her voice taking on a sharper edge. Angry and vicious like she fully intended to slit his throat with it. “You’d never ask me a question like this. The fuck did Ren do to you?”

“It isn’t a hard question, Phasma.” What had Kylo done to him? “Why not just answer it and move on? Is it because the answer is yes and you don’t want it to be? Or you don’t want to deal with the fallout of a no?”

“Oh, fuck you.” She barked. Her voice got so much louder without the helmet. It was like a hammer to his skull.

He huffed out a laugh, “You could have just said no.”

“Don’t put fucking words in my mouth.”

“If you answered my question, I wouldn’t have to!”

“Oh, fuck you.” She barked. Her voice got so much louder without the helmet. It was like a hammer to his skull.

He huffed out a laugh, “You could have just said no.”

“Don’t put fucking words in my mouth.”

“If you answered my question, I wouldn’t have to!”

“Why can’t you just mind your own goddamn business?” They were shouting at each other now, on the edge of their seats, but neither wanting to be the first to snap and stand.

“It is my business to know where my allies stand when it comes to my well-being.”

A sharp breath through her nose. The desk was the only thing stopping her from swinging on him. “What does it matter if I give a shit if something happens to you?” She growled, hoping to cow him like she did her underlings. It wasn’t working. “Is it going to stop that thing from happening? Bring you back if it does?” Her accent was slipping. Twanging. “No! So, fuck this and fuck you. Dependence doesn’t suit you, Red. All this talk of caring about people, it makes you sound like... Like...” But the next word never came. She couldn’t even force it to.

“Like what Phasma?” His brain supplied an unreasonable number of things to fill in her blank.
Braced for all of them.

She chose none of them. She just stared him down.

Hux held his breath. He could see the exposed skin of her throat now. The steady, angry pumping of her jugular. All it would take was a bite. A single word. A reminder of a life a decade and a half ago. A name he hadn’t spoken in years, had promised her he’d never say again in exchange for her confidence and loyalty. He could cut her deep enough to kill with it. Or deep enough to make a permanent enemy of her if either of them survived the initial carnage of his betrayal.

She held his gaze. She knew what he’d figured it out. That the comeback would have tumbled out of a less controlled man already and if he did it now it wouldn’t be an accident. Her jaw clenched. Her posture changed, ready to come across the desk and strangle him for breaking his word after all they’d been through and done together.

He considered doing it anyway. If she didn’t give a shit about him why should he continue to care about her? But that was the bitterness talking. The anger. The same thing that had led him into steel-eyed silence when she’d said “the long game, remember? If I’m dead you’ve got nobody and the whole galaxy burns” during their little conflict about Starkiller. The thing that had vanished when he didn’t get word from her before he and the new Supreme Leader had departed for Crait.

Hux let out his breath in silence, eyes closing. A surrender with as much grace as he could manage.

And just like that it was over. Phasma’s hard stare softened. Her shoulders slumped. The room cooled. His heartbeat slowed.

“Armitage-“

Hux held up his hand. “Don’t.” He sighed and ran the hand over his face. “Just- You were right. I need to mind my own business. It’s all dust.”

“Dust,” Phasma echoed with a little nod.

They took a collective breath.

“He really got under your skin, didn’t he?” She asked, leaning her elbows on the desk.

“Yeah.”

“I thought you were supposed to have him in the palm of your hand not the other way around.”

Teasing. Gentler than she might have been when he first walked in, but not about to let him off easy.

Hux leaned back in his chair. “I guess I underestimated him. And now I’m in deep. I need to figure out how to stop this.”

She made a thoughtful noise.

“You disagree?”

Her jaw worked. The silence was agonizing, but Hux would wait as long as he needed to. It wasn’t like he needed her approval or consent to pursue an escape plan, or to follow the road he was on to its conclusion and jump ship there. But he would prefer to have her in his corner than out of reach.

“I think,” she said eventually, “that the pair of you have too much momentum to be stopped.”

Hux laughed. He couldn’t help himself.
She laughed too. “He cut you to the quick in fifty hours, Red. You are *fucked*. “ She sobered quickly and continued, “I also think, that it doesn’t really matter how much momentum you two have. What’s important is what you do with it.” Her blue eyes narrowed, scrutinizing his face for even the slightest tell. “Will you drive us forward or into the ground? Push us or tear through? I don’t know yet. It’s still too early to tell.”

“Well,” Hux sighed, “If you are ever concerned beyond doubt that it is the lesser option, you have my full consent to shoot me dead.”

“Bit egotistical of you to think I needed your consent.”

Hux scoffed. “I appreciate your candor.”

She gave a little grunt of approval. “Though if I could get you on record saying that, it’ll spare me some headaches later.”

A roll of his eyes, “You’ve got some nerve.”

She reached for her helmet and stood. Hux stood too and walked her to the door. If he thought she’d take it, he might seriously consider putting a promotion in the works for her. Or a raise at the very least. But she was worse than he was in many respects, money being the most obvious of them. He had no idea where her paychecks went, probably the same place her leave hours did. Frankly, he was better off not knowing.

Phasma slipped her helmet on before the door opened for them. “Get some sleep. You look like death warmed over. People will talk.”

“Yes, Captain.” He gave her a halfhearted salute.

He couldn’t see her face, but by the tilt of her head he could tell she was glaring at him. She lingered in his doorway just long enough to make him uncomfortable, only stepping back when he looked away from her.

Hux locked the door behind her, but didn’t step away until he couldn’t hear her boots in the hallway anymore.

Chapter End Notes

That’s it, that’s the whole thing.
Hope you guys liked it~

Again, you can find me on tumblr.
Or discord if you ask nicely.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!