In A Place Where No One Appeared
by Gefionne

Summary

Following the destruction of Starkiller Base, General Hux is ordered to remove a wounded Kylo Ren to a place where he can recuperate. Knowing nowhere else to house him safely and discreetly, Hux takes Ren to his family’s estate on Arkanis. He anticipates adding this experience to the already long list of abhorrent memories he has of his childhood home, but six weeks in company with Ren turns out to be something quite unlike Hux expected.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
This guided me
more surely than the light of noon
  to where he was awaiting me
     - him I knew so well -
    there in a place where no one appeared.

- “Dark Night of the Soul,” St. John of the Cross

Chapter One

The planet was crumbling in on itself, fiery explosions from the internal structure that had been Starkiller Base erupting across its surface. Though the Finalizer was moving away from it and toward a minimum safe distance, General Hux had ordered that the viewscreens continue to display it. If these were the final moments of what he had spent a quarter of his career creating, he was going to appreciate them.

“Sir, Captain Phasma’s drop team has reported back,” said one of the communications techs, a young man whose name Hux did not know. “They’re returning to the Finalizer now.”

“Were they successful?”

“They were, general. Kylo Ren is aboard.”

The tension in Hux’s jaw relaxed slightly. Though Ren was always quick to remind Hux that he was not under his command, Hux knew that Supreme Leader Snoke would have considered it another failure if Hux did not ensure his favored pet was returned to him. However, chasing Ren was not among his favored tasks. He would have felt no pangs of conscience in leaving him behind. Phasma, though, he would have missed.

“Very well,” he said to the communications tech. “Have them report to me as soon as the shuttle docks.”

“I would, sir, but the captain expressly requested that you join them in the hangar.” He looked up nervously. “She said it’s an urgent matter.”

Hux’s nostrils flared. His place was on the bridge, where he could witness the death of Starkiller, as was his duty. Phasma was his subordinate and should do as she was told. Yet, if she went so far as to countermand a direct order, she must have had good reason.

“What is their estimated time of arrival?”

“Eight minutes, general.”

“Fine.” To the officer at his left he said, “Commander Odar, you have the conn.”

“Yes, sir.”

Taking a last look at the fracturing planet in the viewscreen display, he turned and strode toward the door.
Innumerable cargo transports, loading equipment, and packs of stormtroopers were moving across the hangar bay floor when Hux arrived. He passed among them, his hands held stiffly at his sides. A few crewmen saluted as he went past, though they went unacknowledged. Hux’s gaze was fixed on the shuttle arriving in its designated landing area. He stopped just outside the painted red circle, the exposed skin of his face buffeted by the wind from the shuttle’s engines.

As soon as its landing gear touched the ground, the loading door at the stern began to lower. Jets of decompressing air shot down, creating a halo of mist around Captain Phasma’s feet as she stepped down the ramp.

Hux raised a brow. He had expected Ren to appear first, to come storming out with indignance. Though he was almost always masked, he had little ability to hide his emotions. He wore fury and impatience as he did his foolish black cloak: ostentatiously. Had he not known Ren’s penchant for lethal fits of temper, Hux would have laughed aloud at his theatrical attempts at creating a forbidding presence with his sweeping robes. He wondered in passing if all the Knights of Ren were so enamored of melodrama.

“Captain,” he called, loudly enough to be heard over the din of the engines. “My presence was required here?”

“Yes, sir,” she said, resting a hand on the grip of her pulse pistol. “We have a situation.”

“One more dire than the loss of Starkiller Base?” Hux asked, curt.

Phasma didn’t reply. She looked back over her shoulder at the troopers that were descending the ramp. There were two of them, each carrying the handles of a field stretcher. Lying upon it was Kylo Ren, barefaced. A long slash cut across his forehead, the bridge of his nose, and down his cheek. His eyes were closed.

“Is he alive?” Hux demanded of Phasma.

“Yes, sir, but he’s unconscious.”

“What happened?”

“We don’t know. When we found him, he was already down, lying in the snow. He was bleeding heavily.”

Hux held back a curse. To the troopers carrying the stretcher, he said, “Get him up to medical immediately. I want the damage assessed and controlled.” He turned to Phasma. “Captain, I need your full report of the situation. What else did you see? He was alone?”

“He was when we found him, sir,” she said, “but he hadn’t been there long. There were prints in the snow leading away from him. Two sets. Smaller and larger. Male and female I suspect.”

“What else?”

“Whoever he was fighting wasn’t using a blaster. It was close combat.”

“No one can get close to Ren when he has that saber in his hand.”

“Unless they had one themselves,” said Phasma.

Hux frowned. “The Jedi are gone, Ren told me that himself.”
“As you say, sir.”

“Is that all?” he asked. “There was nothing else?”

“There were some residual heat signatures on a ridge just beyond where we located Lord Ren,” she replied. “A ship took off there not long before we arrived. I assume it’s how whomever Lord Ren was fighting escaped.”

“Any idea what kind of transport?”

“Had to be an older vessel, sir. The newer models don’t expend that kind of heat. Their fuel cells are more efficient.”

Hux rubbed a thumb along his wrist where he held it behind his back, considering. “Ren will be able to tell us more.”

“Undoubtedly, sir.”

“You did well in retrieving him, captain,” he said. “You are dismissed.”

Phasma gave a brief salute as Hux made his way back across the hangar floor toward the lifts. It was blessedly silent in the small, superfast capsule that took him from the lowest decks to midship, where the medical bay was housed. It was large enough to accommodate more than a hundred wounded, though it was rarely fully occupied. Crossing the threshold into the main bay, Hux saw at least six of the ten staff medics flitting about between screened beds, the thin datapads in their hands displaying the medical histories of their patients.

“General Hux, sir,” said a tall soldier with a nursing corps emblem on his jacket, pausing a few paces from him. “Can I direct you to someone?”

“To the physician attending Lord Ren,” Hux said.

“That would be Medic Andan. He’s this way, general.” The soldier led him to the far end of the medbay, where there was less activity.

As they approached, a narrow-faced man with round eyeglasses—Andan presumably—stepped out from behind a privacy partition. His eyes widened as he saw them, and he stammered, “G-general.”

“You are in charge of Lord Ren,” Hux said. “What is his status?”

“Status, sir?”

“Is he all right?”

“Oh, yes, general. Well, no. I mean, yes.”

Clasping his hands behind his back and raising his chin, Hux stepped close to the medic. Andan swallowed audibly. “What are the extent of his injuries?”

“They’re severe, sir, but not fatal.”

“Elaborate please.”

“Of course, sir. He, ah, took blaster fire to the left side of his abdomen. It went deep. He lost a significant amount of blood, but we were able to stop the bleeding. The wound has been stapled and dressed.”
“What else?”

“There’s a stab wound to his left shoulder as well, but it didn’t bleed.”

“What do you mean, it didn’t bleed?”

“It was cauterized, sir.”

Hux’s brows rose. “How?”

“An energy weapon.”

“A high-grade pulse pistol?”

“No, sir. This was a puncture wound. It was made by a blade. Likely a lightsaber like the one Lord Ren carries.”

“You think someone stabbed him with his own weapon?” Hux asked.

Andan pushed his glasses up his nose. “Could be, sir. You’ll likely have to ask him when he wakes up.”

Hux narrowed his eyes. “He’s still unconscious?”

“Sedated, sir. We didn’t want him struggling while we replenish the blood he lost. And the pain...”

“I’m certain that he could endure the pain,” said Hux. “What of the cut on his face?”

“It’s superficial,” the medic said. “It was cauterized as well. Lord Ren is very lucky if he came that close to the blade of a lightsaber and came away with only that small wound.”

“Indeed. How long will he be sedated?”

“As long as is required, sir.”

Hux looked down his nose. “And that is?”

“A few hours, general. He’s very weak. Shall I send word when he’s recovered enough to wake?”

Hux nodded curtly. “And until then I expect a report of his condition every hour.”

“Yes, sir.”

Hux left him, intending to return to the bridge. He had not yet reached it again when his wristcomm beeped with an incoming transmission. “Hux,” he said as he accepted it.

“General, this is Commander Odar. We’ve reached the edge of the system and are ready to initiate FTL transit. We are awaiting your orders for a destination.”

“Rendezvous with the rest of the fleet in the Outer Rim. We’ll wait to receive our next orders there.”

“Yes, sir. Course set. Will you be taking the conn again?”

“In an hour,” Hux said. “I have some matters to attend to.”

“Understood, general.”
Hux severed the link and let his hand fall back to his side. If they had already arrived at the
terminus of the solar system, what was left of Starkiller Base was now little more than dust and
debris. There would be no more to see even if he returned to his post on the bridge. Resigned, he
entered the command for the lift to take him to his quarters. He had not had time to so much as
splash water on his face since the previous day cycle. His uniform was wrinkled and the shirt
beneath was stiff with dried sweat. He needed a shower and two fingers of the whiskey he kept in
his desk drawer.

His quarters, while not richly appointed, suited him. The desk stood across from a large viewport,
which afforded a view of the starscape beyond the ship’s hull. Past the aft bulkhead and through a
sliding door was a double bed and partitioned space for a narrow shower, sink, and toilet.

Hux bypassed the bedroom, going instead to the desk and pulling out the bottle he wanted. Setting
it on the desktop, he unfastened the clasps of his jacket and shrugged it off. Though his superiors
at Arkanis Academy would have chastised him for laziness, he tossed the jacket over the back of
his chair instead of hanging it immediately up in the wardrobe that was built into the wall beside
the bed.

Taking a tumbler, he splashed the whiskey into it. He lowered himself into his desk chair and took
a sip. The liquor burned its way down his throat, leaving a pleasant tingling sensation and the taste
of oak and peat.

Slowly, he unbuttoned the cuffs of his black duty shirt and rolled the sleeves up to his elbows. He
raked his short fingernails down his forearms, leaving pink trails on his skin. Reaching across to
the console at the center of his desk, he tapped in a command to bring up the last vid footage of
Starkiller.

The planet’s surface was fissured, each crack glowing a vibrant orange as the underground
explosions continued to belch flame into the upper atmosphere. And then in a brilliant flash, it was
all over. The world shattered into billions of pieces, some the size of starships, others no larger
than a grain of sand. It was strangely beautiful, just as the destruction of the New Republic system
planets had been. But the end of this world came with neither glory nor infamy. It was a failure, the
collapsing and waste of the First Order’s resources. It did not cripple them, of course, but it was a
significant loss. Hux had no illusions about the magnitude of his misprision. There would be
consequences for this, and they would not be insignificant.

Drinking down the rest of the whiskey, he poured himself another glass. The repercussions were
not within the realm of his control, so he wasted little thought on them. He would confront them
when the time came. Until then, he intended to enjoy his drink and then spend a few minutes under
the scorching spray of the shower.

Most personnel aboard the Finalizer only had access to the gang showers on the bunk decks, all of
which had time limits. Water, while carefully filtered and replenished when they had the
opportunity, was not abundant aboard a starship. The officers’ quarters, fortunately, had
showers with deeper reserves. Hux, who had learned to keep his hygienic routines as quick and
efficient as possible during his tenure at Arkanis Academy, rarely spent more than five minutes in
his personal shower, but tonight he intended to take his time.

When he had finished the second glass of whiskey, his head was pleasantly humming. Rising, he
left the opened bottle and tumbler on his desk and made his way to the bedroom. He unbuttoned
his shirt as he walked, casting it onto the neatly made bed as he passed it. He sat only for a moment
to pull off his boots and then his pants.

The shower hissed to life as soon as he pressed the button to engage it, hot water stinging his bare
back. Hux braced his hands against the wall and allowed it to wash over him. He stood there, still but for the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed, for several minutes, until his skin was reddened and warm to the touch.

Blinking his eyes open, he reached for the dispenser of standard issue soap, its scent unchanged in all the years of his service. He scrubbed his chest and shoulders first, then his arms and legs. He scowled as his fingers brushed over the long scar on his right thigh. It was a memento from his years at the Academy.

Some soldiers were proud of their scars, of the wounds that marked them as courageous, but Hux despised his. In part it was vanity; it marred the clean lines of his leg. But the scar was also bound up in his past with his father, much of which he preferred not to recall.

The wound had not been particularly deep, but it had bled a considerable amount, making it seem rather more severe than it was. Hux had taken it during a live fire training exercise at the age of seventeen. It had earned him a place in the elite, albeit clandestine squadron of the Academy, the Commandant’s Cadets; his father’s hand-picked protégés. Hux’s fellows had had to go to extraordinary measures to secure their invitations to the Cadets, but far more was always expected from the commandant’s only son. Nothing less than an overt display of commitment would do; the more bloodshed, the better.

Had Hux been just a few millimeters in one direction or another when the energy pulse hit him, it would have severed a major artery, and he would have died within minutes. As fortune would have it, though, he survived, and so did the cadet he had stepped in front of when he had seen that she was standing in the line of fire.

The girl had come to him in the medbay after the wound had been seen to and thanked him for what he had done. He couldn’t remember anymore what he had said to her, but she had seemed satisfied with it. As she had turned to go, however, she had nearly collided with the commandant himself.

Brendol Hux was not a large man, but his presence was never overlooked. For as long as his son could remember, he had worn both his hair and beard close-cropped. This despite the fact that both were thick and full if allowed to grow.

“Excuse me, commandant,” the girl had said as she scurried away from Hux’s bedside, leaving him with his father.

Their greeting was brief and matter-of-fact, superior to subordinate. Then, Brendol asked, “What drove you to put yourself in jeopardy for the sake of another cadet?”

Hux had been carefully considering his answer to that question since he had been carried into medical several hours before. If he did not provide the acceptable response, his father would wait until he gave it. This process sometimes took minutes, other times days. Brendol would give no outward signs of the answer he desired. He simply expected that it would eventually come if Hux—or anyone else for that matter—had the capacity to produce it.

There were two kinds of people in Brendol Hux’s world: commanders and soldiers. Soldiers were not required to examine strategy or study the outcomes of maneuvers. Soldiers were to take orders and follow them unconditionally. That required loyalty and commitment to a cause, but little higher reasoning. Commanders, on the other hand, had to have sharp minds and ready answers to the logic puzzles the commandant enjoyed presenting them with. Commanders were capable of providing the responses Brendol Hux deemed correct, even if after some reflection. Everyone else was a soldier.
Even though all the cadets at Arkanis Academy were in training to be officers, Brendol did not consider them all commanders. Those with the true potential to lead, he decided, should be separated from the chaff and given the opportunity to advance unhindered by their lesser compatriots. The Commandant's Cadets were intended to do just that.

Hux had never once assumed that his acceptance into their ranks was a given. He knew from the day he entered the Academy that he would have to prove himself twice over before he was given even passing consideration. And he had spent years preparing for the moment that the opportunity to do so would arrive. At last, it had. He had only to provide the answer a true commander would give.

“She was in charge of strategic operations for our team during the exercise, sir,” Hux had said. “She had knowledge about the plans that no one else in the squadron did. She was indispensable, but clearly unaware that the position she had put herself in placed her in danger. I took the pulse to prevent our team from losing a significant asset.”

“Did you not consider yourself an asset to the your team, Cadet Hux?”

“I do, sir, but I was more aware of the situation than she was. I was only wounded by the pulse. She would have been killed.”

“And you needed to preserve your strategist.”

“Yes, sir.”

Brendol set his hands on the edge of Hux’s bed rail, his fingers curling around the silver metal. “If she had fallen, could you have found a way to finish the skirmish?”

Hux paused, swallowing. “I could have, sir, but I believed the largest margin of victory lay with her plan. It was too late to change our strategy and still succeed.”

“A fair assessment,” said Brendol. “You thought of your victory above yourself. But in the future, cadet, make sure the only man in that fight who cannot be done without is you.”

“Yes, sir,” said Hux.

Brendol had turned, and for a moment Hux had believed that he had failed, that there was still more to do before he could enter the Commandant's Cadets. But then his father had removed a gold pin from the pocket of his pressed trousers. It bore the emblem of the First Order.

“Report at 0500 tomorrow,” he had said to his son. “It’s time you met the others.”

Hux turned off the water in the shower and ran his hands through his hair. Drops of water hit the floor with soft pats, punctuating the ever-present rumble of the Finalizer’s drive core. He dried himself quickly, hanging the towel on a hook beside the door. He took only a moment to appraise himself in the wardrobe’s full-length mirror before sliding it away to reveal his clean clothes.

He dressed with the precision afforded him by years of donning uniforms, one layer after another without pausing to consider which came first or last. When he had pulled his boots back up to his knees, he took a moment to comb his hair. He had never been able to cut it as his father had done. Vanity again. He had gotten his coloring from his mother, a woman of particular beauty, who had always told her son never to be ashamed of his own fiery hair. Brendol Hux had been a handsome man, but not a beautiful one. His son, however, had been told that he was both.

The beeping of Hux’s console drew him out into the office again. Though he would gladly have
enjoyed another glass of whiskey, he corked the bottle and slid it back into the lowest drawer of the desk before accepting the incoming communication.

“General, we’ve received a request from the Supreme Leader to speak to you.”

“Very well,” said Hux. “I will see him in the audience room on Deck Thirty.” Licking his lips, he cleared his throat and tugged at the hem of his coat. The heels of his boots snapped smartly along the corridor as he left his quarters behind.

Even the Finalizer’s largest audience room was dwarfed by the space in which Snoke had conferred with Hux on Starkiller Base. There, his image had towered. Here, it was little larger than Hux assumed the Supreme Leader was in life. He had, of course, never had the honor of being in his physical presence. He wasn’t sure anyone in the Order had.

“General Hux,” said Snoke, his voice still amplified to suit a larger image. “I sent for my apprentice as well. Where is Kylo Ren?”

“He is indisposed, Supreme Leader,” said Hux. “He was severely wounded in the fighting and is being treated in the medical bay.”

Snoke folded his hands at the level of his chin. “Wounded, you say? What manner of enemies did he face?”

“I do not know, Supreme Leader. I have yet to speak to him. As I said, his wounds were grievous and he has been sedated.”

“But you know something more.”

Hux nodded. “He was struck with a lightsaber, and I do not believe it was his own wielded against him.”

“No, it would not be,” said Snoke. “This is the work of Skywalker and his Resistance allies.”

“Do you believe Skywalker himself has returned?” Hux asked.

“No, but there is another.”

“The girl from Jakku. The one Ren let escape.”

If Snoke recognized the venom in Hux’s tone, he did not let it show. “Yes,” he said. “She is capable of much more than Lord Ren suspected. He will not make the same mistake again.”

“I’ve no doubt,” said Hux, thinking of the cut across Ren’s face.

“Nor will you, general.”

Hux looked up sharply.

“The girl played a part in the destruction of Starkiller. As did FN-2187, a trooper under your command, who you let escape.” Snoke sat back in his chair, his fingers tapping the ends of the arms. “I know you find fault with Lord Ren, but do not be so quick to forget your own missteps, general.”

“Supreme Leader, I—”

Snoke raised a hand, silencing him. “There is time yet before I am fully prepared to consider what
will become of you after this, General Hux. The same will be said for Kylo Ren. For now, he will need time in the coming days to recuperate. He must soon complete his training, but that cannot be done without the full use of his physical body. You, general, must see to it that he recovers.”

“Of course, Supreme Leader. I will assign the best physicians to him.”

“No. You will oversee this personally.”

Hux tensed. “I am not trained in medicine, Supreme Leader. How am I to care for him?”

“You will leave the doctoring to the medics, of course, but it must be taken care of away from prying eyes. Away from the Finalizer. Take him to a secure location and ensure he is attended to.”

“Where, Supreme Leader?”

Snoke raised his brows. “Does your family not own an extensive rural estate near Arkanis Academy?”

Hux’s fingernails dug into his palms as he clenched his hands. His parents’ home was on Arkanis, though he had not set foot there in fourteen years and he had had no intention of returning unless it was the raze the place to the ground. “Is there no other location that belongs to the Order that might be better suited to this?” he asked.

“Perhaps,” said Snoke, “but it will do you good to be removed from the workings of the Order for a time, general. There are things I must consider about your future. In the interim, you will take Lord Ren to Arkanis.”

Hux could taste bile in the back of his mouth, but he forced himself to say, “Yes, Supreme Leader.”

Upon leaving the audience, Hux returned to the bridge to relieve Commander Odar. There was little to oversee while the Finalizer traveled through hyperspace toward the Outer Rim, but Hux preferred to spend as much time there as possible before he and Ren were exiled to Arkanis. Pressing his forefingers to his temple, he massaged it gently.

The last time he had been at his family’s estate was the day he had graduated from the Academy, the day of the disastrous party his mother had thrown for him. He had fought with his father that afternoon over his first commission, which soured the evening from the very start. Before dinner had even been served, Hux had packed a small bag and caught the first transport off world.

He didn’t attend his father’s funeral three years later, and his mother had long since left the estate in the care of the staff. It was part of Hux’s inheritance, but he had always intended to sell the place the moment he had the opportunity.

“General Hux, there’s a transmission for you from medical.”

Glancing up from the dossier he had been looking over, Hux accepted the handheld receiver. “What?”

“Sir, this is Andan.”

“Yes, and?”
“I, ah, you wanted to know when Lord Ren was awake. He is, sir.

Hux heard a crash in the background. It was followed very swiftly by a bellowing yell.

“Yes,” said Hux. “I can hear that he’s conscious again. Keep him down there until I arrive.”

Another crash. Hux could imagine Andan jumping at the noise and struggling to push his eyeglasses back up his nose.

“Yes, general,” the medic said. “We’ll...try.”

With a distasteful scoff, Hux handed the receiver back to the communications tech, who was looking at him curiously. “I’m needed in medbay. I’ll return as soon as I’m able.”

“Yes, sir.”

When Hux arrived, the medical station was quieter that it had been before, though perhaps that was only because all the attention in the room was focused on the far corner, where Hux knew Ren was being housed.

“Get your hands off of me!” Ren’s voice. “I don’t need your fucking help.”

“My lord, please lie back. Your sutures could tear.”

“I don’t care. I’m fine. I want out of this bed!”

“But General Hux ordered—”

“I don’t take orders from him!”

“I believe you’ve made that abundantly clear, Lord Ren,” said Hux, rounding the corner into the partitioned area where Ren was sitting in a narrow bed, his stomach and chest wrapped with bandages. Hux gestured to the medics and nurses around them. “They, however, do take their orders from me. And they’re only doing as they were told, which is see to your injuries.”

Ren glared, the cut on his face making him seem somewhat more sinister. “They’ve done that. Now, tell them to let me out of here. I have to speak with my master.”

“You may, if you wish,” said Hux, “but he will have nothing more to say to you than I do.”

“Which is?”

“That you’re confined to your bed until your physicians release you from it.”

“Snoke didn’t say that,” Ren snarled, digging his fingers into the bedclothes that covered his thighs.

“Not in so many words, no,” said Hux, “but he did put me in charge of your care during your convalescence.”

“I’m fine.”

Hux glanced at Andan, raising a brow. “Is that true?”

The medic’s eyes were round with fright as he looked between Ren and Hux, unsure which of them to speak to. He settled on Ren. “We’ve made up for the blood loss you suffered, my lord, but the
sutures on your shoulder and side are still very new. You should move as little as possible.”

“You would recommend bedrest, then?” Hux asked.

“For the time being, yes.”

“No,” said Ren.

Hux nearly rolled his eyes. “How long must Lord Ren remain in medical?”

“Preferably until the next day cycle, sir,” said Andan. “We need to make sure there’s no other trauma.”

“Order them to let me go,” Ren said to Hux.

“I’ll order them to sedate you again before I do that.”

Ren glowered, his knuckles white as he fisted his hands in the sheets. “I want to speak to Snoke.”

“You may do what you want when you’ve recovered, but until….” He looked over at Andan. “Until the next day cycle at least, you’ll remain here. The Supreme Leader requires you to be physically well if you are to complete your training.”

The fury in Ren’s face gave way slightly. “He spoke of my training? To you?”

Hux recognized the curiosity in him and resolved to use it to his advantage. Like an uncooperative child, Ren simply needed the proper enticement to behave. “He said only that it is my responsibility to make certain you are prepared to continue training when he is ready for you.” Hux offered his open hands. “I am only doing as I was bid, Ren. I am not, and I do not have any desire to be your keeper.”

Ren narrowed his eyes, but his grip on his blankets released as he said, “Fine. I’ll stay here tonight. In the morning—”

“In the morning,” Hux interjected, "if you are well enough, you will travel with me to a secure location where we will await word from the Supreme Leader.”

Ren’s tone grew dark again. “What?”

To the medical staff, Hux said, “Leave us.”

They did.

Hux approached Ren cautiously, lowering his voice. “I will say this only once, Ren. In order for you to continue your training, you must leave this ship. I do not pretend to understand your rituals or your Force, but the Supreme Leader ordered me to take you from here, and I will do my duty even if I have to knock you unconscious and drag you myself.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “It will be far simpler, though, if you will cooperate. So, will you?”

Ren eyed him. “Where are we going?”

“To Arkanis. Do you know it?”

“I’ve heard of it,” said Ren. “Is there an outpost there?”

“Of sorts. We’ll be staying there until you are well enough to begin your training again.” Hux took
a slow step back. “Is that acceptable to you?”

Ren nodded.

“Good. Now, I need to know what happened to you during the fighting at Starkiller. How did you get outside the base?”

“I was following the girl and your former trooper, FN…”

“2187, yes. They were both there?”

“Yes,” Ren spat. “Along with Han Solo and his Wookiee.”

“Solo?” Hux asked. “I thought he was a myth, an embellishment of the tale of the fall of the Empire.”

Ren barked a laugh. “He was real enough, but he’s dead now.”

“You killed him.”

“Yes.”

“But not the girl or FN-2187? Or this...Wookiee?”

“They escaped,” said Ren. “I chased them to the forest, but-” He trailed off, clenching his teeth.

His anger, Hux realized, was not only for them. He had allowed them to best him, and he loathed himself for it. Hux was not altogether unsympathetic.

“It was four against one,” Hux said. “They had a significant advantage.”

“Two,” said Ren. “Solo was already dead, and the Wookiee was elsewhere. Getting Solo’s ship.”

“Don’t tell me the Millennium Falcon is also real.”

“Of course, it is.”

Hux shook his head. Unbelievable as it may seem that it was actually present, a ship as old as Solo’s could easily have left the heat trails that Phasma and her drop team had noticed near where they found Ren.

“So, you fought only the girl and FN-2187?”

“Is that not what I said?”

Hux frowned. Gesturing to Ren’s face, he asked, “Which one of them cut you?”

“The girl,” Ren replied. “She carries Skywalker’s lightsaber. And she is...strong with the Force.”

“Stronger than you?”

The look Ren shot him was murderous. “She’s untrained. With my guidance she could learn to wield the Force as I do, but no, she doesn’t have my abilities.”

“Good,” said Hux. “Do you know where she and FN-2187 might have gone?”

“No, but I’ll kill them both when I find them.”
“Perhaps, but they’re not your primary concern.”

“I won’t stay in bed for weeks,” Ren snapped. “I’m ready to pursue them now.”

“You have your orders from the Supreme Leader. Rest and wait for further instruction.” Taking a step back, he said, “I’ll leave you to do both.”

“Why is he sending you with me?”

Hux stilled. When he didn’t immediately reply, Ren turned a cold smile on him.

“He’s removing you from command.”

“Temporarily.”

“And you believe that?”

Hux’s jaw twitched as he ground his teeth. “Goodnight, Lord Ren.”

A dry laugh followed him out of the medbay.

When Hux returned to his quarters, he summoned Captain Phasma. She appeared not in her usual armor, but in duty fatigues, her head uncovered.

“Good evening, general,” she said.

“Captain, thank you for coming,” Hux said, walking around from behind his desk. “Will you have a drink?” He offered her the half-empty bottle of whiskey to examine.

“I have an inspection to oversee within the hour,” she said, “otherwise I would.”

“Trooper units?”

She nodded. “A few of them have had to be reconstituted after the losses we took at Starkiller Base. I need to make sure the transfers are settling into their new assignments.”

“New assignments,” Hux mused. “Speaking of that, I myself am soon going to be taking up a new post. A temporary one.” The words, reminiscent of what he had said to Ren earlier, irked him.

Phasma raised a white-blond brow.

Hux sighed softly. “The Supreme Leader has given me a special assignment planetside.”

“For how long?”

“I’m not certain.”

“Is he forcing you out?” Phasma asked, never one for niceties.

“It’s a possibility,” Hux replied, “but one never knows when Ren is involved.”

Phasma didn’t bother to look surprised. So, word of Hux’s conversation with him in the medbay
had made its way to her. Undoubtedly half the ship now knew that Hux was to accompany Ren off the Finalizer on the Supreme Leader’s orders.

“You have your duties, of course, captain,” Hux said, “but I did hope that you might be willing to take the time to compile an intermittent report while I’m away.”

The corner of Phasma’s mouth twitched up. “Of course, sir. The Finalizer is your ship. You should be kept abreast of what’s happening aboard her in your absence.”

“Thank you, captain.”

“Yes, sir.” Inclining her head, she turned on her heel and went out.

When he was alone again, Hux considered having another glass of whiskey, but decided against it. Instead, he went to his console and pulled up the contact information for the housekeeper at his family’s estate. He recorded a brief message for her, telling her that he would need the house prepared for him and a guest in two local days’ time. It was a short window, but Hux was certain that the guest rooms were kept clean at all times, even if no one had been in residence in over a decade.

His mother had never been one to suffer negligence from her staff, and as far as Hux knew, Lorna Havlis was still in charge of the household. She would have had the preparations laid for a formal banquet in two days if he had requested it. He smiled to himself at the thought of giving her a challenge. She would chastise him for it later, but she would never disappoint him.

However, he would permit no one in the house save for him and Ren. The estate was meant to be a safe house for them while they were there, a convalescent home rather than the rural retreat it had often been for his parents’ city-dwelling friends. Hux wasn’t certain he could stomach spending more than a week with only Kylo Ren and the house’s staff for company, but he was afraid that he would have to.

Going to the chair behind his desk, Hux sat and considered Ren. Though his ability to manipulate the battlefield using the Force was advantageous in some situations, it seemed that his volatility in all others significantly limited his value. He made for a poor soldier; he thought himself above the command structure of the Order. And perhaps he was, but Hux would have found little use for such a blunt tool. He preferred precision, which Ren did not lend himself to.

Hux had been tolerant of Ren’s presence aboard the Finalizer because the Supreme Leader insisted upon it, but he had never enjoyed the man’s company and particularly disdained his affinity for defacing the ship when the mood took him. They spoke to each other only when necessary, which, up to that point, had thankfully been little. Hux preferred to allow Ren to conduct his business unhindered and meet with him, even by chance, as seldom as possible.

He had arranged it so that Ren’s residence was several decks away from the officers’ quarters, and that his sequestered space included private amenities, from offices and briefing rooms to combat training simulators. While he had free rein of the ship, he, to Hux’s satisfaction, did not stray beyond his own realm unless his presence was required by the Supreme Leader or he was embarking on one of the missions he planned and most often undertook alone.

Perhaps that was why it had been so startling for Hux to find him in the officers’ observation lounge early in the day cycle some weeks after he had first come onto the Finalizer. Hux, newly risen and dressed, had arrived a few minutes before Commanders Tryla and Odar, with whom he was meeting. He had expected the lounge to be empty, as it generally was at that time. Instead, he had walked in to find a figure standing before the large viewport at the far end of the room. From
behind, Hux could not readily discern his identity and initially assumed that he was one of the other officers.

“Good morning,” he had said, clipped, but not rude, as he strode toward the dispenser to make a cup of tea.

“General Hux.” The voice was different without the modulator in his helmet, but not unrecognizable.

Hux stopped, his back stiffening. “Lord Ren.”

“You were expecting someone else,” he said, turning slightly so that the dim light from the overhead illuminators struck his uncovered face.

Hux’s mouth opened, though just minutely. He had suspected that the mask hid a disfigurement of some sort, or at least an unremarkable face that lacked the necessary unpleasantness to intimidate his enemies. But Ren’s was neither marred nor plain.

He was a young man, certainly no older than Hux himself. His dark hair hung to his shoulders in waves that women would have envied. His face was long, his nose straight. He gazed impassively at the planet they were orbiting, though there was almost a mournful look about him. Perhaps that came from his eyes, which were set deep beneath dark brows.

Hux wet his lips and pressed them back together. “I am. The first of several meetings today.”

“Do you enjoy them, these meetings?” Ren asked. “From what I’ve seen, you spend half of your days in them.”

Hux’s own red brows drew in. “You keep yourself apprised of my schedule, Lord Ren?”

“The workings of this ship revolve around several main points. You’re one of them. And you make no effort to hide your movements on board.”

No, Hux didn’t suppose he did. “The meetings are necessary.”

“Yes,” said Ren. He turned back to the viewport.

It wasn’t a dismissal, but there was finality enough about that single word that Hux could have gone then to retrieve his tea, sat, and sipped at it without saying anything more. Yet, he took a step closer to the viewport and asked, “Have you been to Jakku before?”

“Why would I have? There’s nothing here but desert and ruins.”

“Ruins of one of the Empire’s finest Star Destroyers,” said Hux, putting his hands behind his back. “The Inflictor. Scuttled on the planet’s surface to keep her from the New Republic. An admirable decision by her captain, Ciena Ree.”

“I know the story,” said Ren, “though it’s not always told that way.”

“Oh?”

“More than half of Ree’s crew died when the ship crashed. Had she allowed it to be captured, the Republic would have taken them as prisoners. Many would likely have been pardoned.”

Hux eyed him. “The loss of life was regrettable, but would you have allowed the ship to fall into enemy hands?”
“No.”

“Nor would I, though I will endeavour to avoid a situation in which I would have to consider sabotaging the Finalizer deliberately.”

Ren met Hux’s gaze. His eyes were brown. “I imagine your crew is grateful for that, general.”

“Yes,” said Hux, though his throat was tight.

Ren continued to watch him, unblinking. Hux wondered if he appraised everyone so intently from behind his mask.

Before either of them could speak again, the fall of boots on the floor announced the arrival of company. As Hux glanced toward the door, Ren pulled the hood of his robes up over his head.

“General,” said Commander Tryla, saluting. “Lord Ren.”

Hux nodded in greeting. “Commander.”

Ren said nothing. Hux couldn’t see him, but he had the impression that he did not appreciate being interrupted. Though they had hardly been conversing.

“Is Odar on his way?” Hux asked.

“He is, sir.”

“Very good.” Hux turned to Ren. “Will you join us?”

“No,” was the terse reply as he swept past Tryla and into the corridor.

Once Ren had gone, Hux had turned his attention to the matters at hand, but when he had a few quiet moments later in the day, he had found himself thinking of the one curl of dark hair that had hung over Ren’s brow or the glimpses of the slight gap between his front teeth that Hux had caught as Ren had spoken to him. There was an asymmetry to his features, but it did not make them unappealing.

Leaning back in his desk chair, Hux thought of the cut that was now across Ren’s face. The edges had been almost black when he had first been carried to medical, but when Hux saw him again, the charred flesh had been removed and only the pinkness of new skin remained. With the aid of bacta, the scar would soon turn pale and then begin to fade. Hux wondered if Ren would now consider himself disfigured. Despite the visibility of the wound, Hux did not think it was hideous. In a way, it became Ren as it would few other men, Hux among them.

The flash of an incoming message on his console caught Hux’s eye. Tapping the screen, he engaged the playback. Lorna Havlis, his mother’s housekeeper, appeared, though her face was more deeply lined than he remembered.

“Master Hux, we were pleased to hear from you. I will see the house made ready for your arrival. Have your transport contact us when it docks in Scaparus Port. I’ll send the driver for you and your guest.” She smiled, a warm and familiar expression. “It will be fine indeed to see you home again.”

Hux rubbed his face as the message concluded.

*Home.*
“We’ll have the ship in order for you when you return, sir,” said Commander Odar, standing across from Hux in the hangar bay.

Hux shook his hand. “Excellent, commander. I expect nothing less.” To the others in the bay, he said, “Odar is executive officer aboard this ship, effective immediately.”

The soldiers saluted him, but Hux’s attention was drawn from them to the figure approaching from the lift. Kylo Ren was, perhaps for the first time since Hux had known him, without his hooded robes. In their place were plain, black pants, a tunic belted at the waist, and a pair of soft ankle boots. His hair was pulled into a knot at the base of his skull.

His movements lacked their usual fluidity, Hux could see. There was a blatant stiffness in his torso, likely the result of the bandages he still had wrapped around his stomach and shoulder.

Medic Andan had cleared him for release from the medbay that morning. Hux had received the report as he was finishing his breakfast. He had replied that Ren was to gather all the things he would need for an extended stay planetside and meet him in the hangar at 1000 hours. Glancing down at his wrist chronometer, Hux saw at he had appeared on time.

“Ren,” he said, looking him over. “Do you have everything that you require? We’ll need to be going as soon as possible.”

“I do.”

“I don’t recall seeing any of your belongings brought aboard.”

Ren looked down at the clothes he wore. “These are my things.”

“Ah,” said Hux. “Very well then.” He held out a hand toward the loading door. Ren strode past him and onto the shuttle, ducking slightly as he passed inside. Hux exchanged a last look with Odar.

“Good luck, sir,” said the commander.

Hux nodded to him curtly before turning toward the shuttle. The interior was dim and spartan. There were only two chairs beyond those of the pilots. Ren occupied one of them already. Hux took the other. At the back of the passenger compartment was a single footlocker that contained Hux’s personal effects.

“What is our estimated travel time?” he asked the senior pilot.

“Three standard hours, general,” the woman replied. “Port to port.”

“Very good. Send word ahead when we depart. We’re expected at Scaparus by later afternoon.”

“We’ll have you there on schedule, sir.”

Hux sat back against his chair and buckled the chest restraints. Ren, he saw, was not wearing his. He was sitting with his hands flat on his thighs, and his eyes were closed. He was breathing soundlessly.

Hux watched him out of the corner of his eye for a moment, wondering if perhaps he would change position, but he remained perfectly still even as the shuttle’s engines roared to life and the cabin
began to pitch with the ship’s motion.

Ren said nothing for the entirety of the journey, for which Hux was grateful. He had no interest in discussing their destination until he was forced to.

Scaparus Port was a backwater by most standards, a city whose export had for many years had been almost exclusively young Imperial and then First Order officers. Arkanis Academy had been one of the finest training facilities in the Empire. When the peace and disarmament accords had been signed at the end of the war, it had been closed. The senior administration had lobbied the New Republic to allow them to establish a school for Republic military leaders, but their efforts had been fruitless. The military was not the jewel in the crown of the New Republic, as it had been in the Empire; the senators had no intention of creating an interplanetary fleet sizable enough to warrant the reestablishment the Academy.

When the foundations were laid for the First Order, though—when the few representatives who had spoken for a stronger, more ordered government than a senate had broken away from the Republic—the Academy was once again put to use as the source of military leadership. Brendol Hux, who had been commandant in the last days of the Empire, came out of the retirement he had been forced into by the treaties to oversee the rebuilding of the Academy to serve the Order. It had already been back in service for several years by the time Hux, then fifteen, entered the ranks.

Though the Academy was located near Scaparus Port, the cadets had rarely been permitted to venture outside its barracks. What few trips to the city they took were closely monitored so as to keep the them—young men and women both—from the cantinas and brothels that were hallmarks of any port town. That didn’t always stop them, of course.

When Hux was eighteen, he had been instrumental in orchestrating a plan to lose their supervisory detail. Having always excelled at strategy, he had succeeded. He and four others—three boys and one young woman—had spent the afternoon getting stumbling drunk and spending their meager allowances on the company of whores. They had all been female, however, which had kept Hux at a distance. His preference was for men and had been all his life.

The distance had worked to his advantage as it turned out. The others had had a peculiar itch to explain to the staff medics later that week. Hux, most fortunately, avoided that fate and the four weeks of latrine duty that it earned them. He had been reprimanded for inebriation, of course, but the punishment had not been particularly severe. His father, who had dealt with the matter, had actually been marginally impressed by the ingenuity it took to escape from under the thumb of their security. And Brendol Hux always encouraged ingenuity in his cadets.

After that adventure, Hux had lost most of his interest in Scaparus. He generally declined to join further excursions into the city, preferring to spend the time in the combat sims or reading the classics of military history in the Academy’s library. It was there that he had met Arcan Wile, the librarian.

Wile had arrived that year to take over the post from the older woman who had held it since before the end of the war. He was fresh out of university, which, as Hux would discover, he had finished two years early. He was only twenty years old, and Hux had been immediately taken with him.

He was cautious at first, remaining resolutely formal when he spoke to him. But Wile had a manner about him that encouraged familiarity. Before long, Hux was addressing him by his first name and conversing with him more freely than he did any of his fellow cadets. The Academy had strict regulations forbidding fraternization, which both of them were conscious of, but were willing to ignore as their acquaintance grew more intimate.
At the beginning, Hux had assumed his attachment was one-sided. Wile was friendly and warm with him, as he was with everyone. Yet, there were subtle changes in his behavior when he and Hux were alone, which was quite often. There were passing touches when he handed Hux one of the old manuscripts, small smiles that made Hux’s stomach clench. It wasn’t until nearly six months had passed, though, that he understood that Wile had been struggling as much as he had to keep their friendship platonic.

Hux had been standing in front of a shelf that held archaic texts from the days even before the Empire when Wile stepped up next him. There was no reason from him to stand with his shoulder touching Hux’s, but he did.

“This one,” he said, reaching out to trace the spine of a particular volume with the fingertips of his left hand. “You’ll enjoy it.”

Hux nearly jumped as he felt the brush of warm skin against his own hand. He thought it was inadvertent at first, but then it came again; the soft contact of Wile’s right hand against the back of his left.

“What’s the topic?” Hux asked, his fingers twitching slightly.

“A tribal conflict on a world called Tansint Gamma,” Wile replied as he hooked his fifth finger around Hux’s.

Hux turned to him, his lips parted as he took in a shaky breath. Wile regarded him silently, waiting. He would not push further without Hux’s consent. Tentatively, Hux raised his right hand to Wile’s jaw.

“Yes,” said Hux. “I believe I would like that very much.”

“I had hoped you would,” said Wile, closing the distance between them and pressing a light kiss to Hux’s mouth.

The affair lasted for the remaining two years Hux was at the Academy. For the most part it was intellectual, as he still slept in the barracks and was required to be present for lights out every night, but they did enjoy the physical aspects of a youthful liaison when they were afforded the opportunity. Wile taught him to give pleasure and to receive it, two aspects of love that Hux had not conceived of as so different before he had experienced both.

When Hux received his first commission, he told Wile that he would write to him. Smiling softly, Wile had cupped his cheek and shaken his head.

“The whole galaxy is ahead of you,” he had said. “This place, me...it’s your past. Leave us behind now.”

Hux had protested, but Wile had stood firm. When Hux left his bed that afternoon, he did not return to it. He saw Wile once more at the commencement ceremony, but after that Hux did as he was bid; he left him and the Academy behind.

“General, we’re inbound,” said the shuttle’s pilot. “We’ll be docking within five minutes.”

Hux stretched as much as the restraints of his chair would allow. Looking over at Ren, who was still sitting perfectly still, he wondered if he had heard. He was certain he wasn’t asleep, but perhaps he was not aware of his surroundings.

Almost as if he had heard Hux’s thoughts, he opened his eyes and turned to him. “How far is our
destination from the port?” he asked.

“Three quarters of an hour by speeder,” Hux replied.

Ren nodded and fell silent again.

When they had landed, Hux got to his feet and made his way out of the shuttle. Unsurprisingly, it was raining. However, an older man in a wrinkled shirt and scuffed boots appeared with an umbrella. Hux thanked him.

“Certainly, Master Hux.”

He paused to examine the man more closely. “Harron?”

“Yes, sir,” he said, cracking a smile that revealed crooked teeth. “I didn’t know that you would recognize me. It’s been a fair piece of time since I last drove you home from Scaparus Port.”

“Indeed it has. Shall we, then?”

“Of course, sir.” The old man, who had driven speeder transports for Hux’s family for as long as he could remember, led the way to a luxurious, but now antiquated vehicle just beyond the dock. Hux recalled when it was new.

Stepping inside, he slid over to the far end of the bench seat to make space for Ren. He had waved Harron and his umbrella away, so his hair was damp when he ducked into the speeder. He wiped his face with the sleeve of his tunic as Harron closed the door.

A few moments later, the speeder hummed as it powered up. It eased away from the dock and into the flow of traffic from the port. Hux glanced one last time at the shuttle, the emblem of the First Order painted on its side, and then turned to face forward.

Once they left Scaparus behind, they entered the countryside just beyond the city. Despite the presence of the Academy, the majority of the planet remained agricultural. Though it often rained on the coast, the climate was drier inland. The summers were warm, the winters mild. It made for an ideal environment for growing grapes. Arkanis’s wines were famous throughout the galaxy. That, at least, was one thing Hux could look forward to when it came to returning to the estate. He and Ren certainly would not want for good drink.

Again, Ren had remained unspeaking as they rode through the hills, though this time he kept his eyes open to look out the window. Hux paid him little mind, especially once they turned off the main track through the region and onto the private drive that led to the estate.

“Here we are, sir,” said Harron as he opened the door after they had come to a stop.

The white gravel crunched beneath Hux’s boots as he stepped out of the transport. Before him was the glass and brick monstrosity that his father had built for himself as a hunting retreat. It had been featured in a few society publications back when it had first been completed, lauded as an example of refined urban tastes transplanted to the country. Hux had always found it rambling and cold, especially when only he and his parents had been in residence.
As he looked it over, the broad front door swung open, revealing a tall woman with iron gray hair and sharp features. She wore a cream colored pantsuit, its creases perfectly pressed.

“Master Hux,” she said. “Welcome home.”

Hux smiled. “Lorna, you’re looking well.”

Her eyes flicked over his uniform approvingly. “As are you, general.” Looking over his shoulder, she said, “This must be our guest.”

Hux turned to see that Ren was standing a pace behind him. “Yes,” he said. “Lorna Havlis, this is Lord Ren.”

The housekeeper’s brows rose at the title, though just enough for Hux to see. Her expression was schooled again almost immediately. To Ren she said, “My lord, you are most welcome. Please, come inside before the rains start again.”

Hux followed her through the door and into the entryway. It was as airy as he remembered, the ceiling canted and lined with glass. The carefully manicured shrubs his mother had once placed there still remained, their colorful foliage meant to brighten up a space made often dreary by the frequent storms.

“I’ve prepared your room for you, Master Hux,” said Lorna, appearing at his side. “Lord Ren I’ve put in the largest of the guest rooms.” She turned to him. “I’ll show you there now. I’m sure you’d like to clean up before dinner is served.” To Hux, she added, “I trust you can find your way.”

He nodded. She flashed him a brief smile before ushering Ren toward the guest wing. Hux was surprised that he followed without protest or comment. Ren had never seemed one to go along with anything easily, but he gave no trouble to Lorna, at least not that Hux could see. He held back a laugh. Even if Ren had been difficult, Hux had no doubt that the housekeeper would have set him straight. She always had with Hux and his friends from the Academy.

Taking a breath, he started down the hallway to the left. He followed it until he came to the room that had belonged to him as a boy. Hesitantly, he pushed the door open and went inside. It was larger than he remembered, or perhaps it just seemed that way after fourteen years of living aboard starships and on military bases. He had not enjoyed the comforts of civilian accommodations for a long time.

His footlocker had be set in the corner of the room near the closet. Flicking on the light, Hux saw that a full wardrobe had been provided for him. He had asked Lorna to choose a few things, as he had nothing to wear beyond his uniforms, but clearly she had understood that to mean enough shirts and trousers for an entire season. Glancing at the floor, he saw four pairs of shoes lined up neatly. The housekeeper never did anything by halves.

Turning, Hux went to the glass doors opposite the bed. They led out onto a private veranda that looked out over a neighboring vineyard. On the other side of the house was a patch of forest several acres wide that housed the game animals his father used to hunt, but this side, the north side, had a better view.

Hux glanced down at the polished toes of his boots. They seemed out of place against the plush carpet beneath them. Everything about his family’s estate was sumptuous and comfortable, something that Hux’s life was not. He appreciated the uniformity and almost aseptic nature of military life. It was an ordered life, a structured world that Hux fit into. The estate was not a part of that familiar territory.
As Hux gazed out over the vast spaces beyond the veranda, it once again began to rain.

After a brief shower and a change of clothes—he chose a charcoal gray suit with a red shirt under the jacket—Hux made his way to the formal dining room, where he knew Lorna would have dinner laid. Though the table seated twenty, only two places were set near the head. A pair of tapered candles burned between them.

When Hux arrived, Ren was already there. He was standing in front of the window, much like he had been in the officers’ observation lounge on the day Hux had first seen his face. He was wearing the same clothes he had had on for the journey, but his hair was loose and still slightly wet from the shower.

“Please sit,” said Hux as he pulled out his chair.

Ren didn’t immediately move. “What is this place?”

Hux folded his hands on the table in front of him. “A secure location.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“No?”

Ren turned, his gaze accusatory. “This is a home, and not one that belongs to the First Order.”

Hux held back a sigh. “No, it belongs to me. To my family.”

“Why?”

“Why do we own it?”

“Why did you bring me here?”

“Because we’re unlikely to be found here,” said Hux. “The Resistance is not searching for a personal residence.” He gestured to the seat across from him. “Sit. We won’t be served until you do.”

Stalking over, Ren tugged the chair out from under the table and sank onto it.

Almost immediately, a footman appeared from the unmarked servants’ door. He carried a decanter of red wine. He poured a glass for Hux first and then went to Ren.

“No,” he said. “I don’t want any.”

“It’s good,” said Hux.

Ren shook his head. “I don’t drink wine.”

“Very well,” Hux said with a dismissive wave to the footman. He disappeared through the door again. Hux swirled the red around in his glass, sniffed it, and then drank. It was a good vintage.

Dinner was brought out in short order. It was roast fowl native to Arkanis, long green beans in
butter sauce, and whipped tubers. It went well with the wine.

“If this is your family’s house,” Ren said, breaking the silence that had descended between them as they ate, “did you spend your youth here?”

Hux took a sip of water, a little surprised by the personal nature of the question. “Parts of it. Summers mostly. I attended boarding school for the majority of the year. Before I entered the Academy, of course.”

Ren blinked at him. “Cadets enter the Academy at fifteen. You were at boarding school before that?”

“As from the time I was eight, yes,” said Hux. “And before that I had daily instruction from private tutors. My father put a great value on education.”

Ren fell silent, though he hardly ate any more.

“Do you not care for the fowl?” Hux asked.

“It’s fine,” Ren replied, terse. Taking up his knife, he tore into the breast and cut off a large chunk. He bit half of it and chewed, leaving the rest on his fork. The tender meat didn’t lend itself to it, though, and fell almost immediately back to the plate. It splashed in the butter sauce, leaving droplets on the opaque glass of the table.

Hux pursed his lips in distaste, but returned to his own meat without comment. He sliced a more manageable piece and drew it politely off the delicate tines of his fork. His mother would have been pleased. Ren’s manners—or lack thereof—would have offended her in the extreme. Of course, she never would have let on during the meal. She simply would have complained of it when she and Hux were alone later.

“You would think he was brought up by rathtars,” he could imagine her saying as she sipped at her fourth glass of sherry. “Hardly civilized.”

Indeed, uncivilized seemed an appropriate description of Kylo Ren. He was boorish and unpredictable. His fits of temper were dangerous and his conversation generally left something to be desired. He exhibited every behavior that had been bred, bought, or beaten out of Hux as the child of a city socialite and her commandant husband.

“Is your room to your liking?” he asked Ren. “If you’d prefer a different one, that can be arranged.”

“It’s fine.” It seemed that was the only answer he was going to give.

“Good. If you need anything, you have only to say. Lorna will see to it.”

“I need to find the Resistance,” Ren snapped. “I should be following the girl. I need to find her before she gets to Skywalker.”

“The Supreme Leader has ordered us to remain here for the time being,” said Hux. “Would you challenge his direct command?”

Ren glared. “I want to speak to him.”

“He’ll contact us when the time is right.”
“And what are we supposed to do until then?”

Hux set his fork and knife down gently. “Medic Andan said that you are to rest and heal for the next week before the physician from Scaparus comes to check in on you.”

“I don’t need to be minded like the child.”

“And you won’t be. You have free rein of the house while you’re here. If you need anything—”

“I don’t need anything from you!” Getting to his feet, Ren stormed out of the room. Hux watched him go, annoyed.

“Master Hux,” said a footman, poking his head into the dining room. “Is everything all right, sir?”

“Yes,” he said, drinking down the rest of his wine. “Everything is just fine.”
Chapter Two

Birdsong was strange accompaniment to Hux’s morning meal. He was accustomed to a cup of tea and two slices of buttered toast in the quiet of his quarters, seated at his desk as he looked over the briefings that had arrived over the course of the night cycle. But at the estate he was far removed from his usual routine.

Though he had closed the curtains over the windows before getting into bed the night before, the sun had been shining through them almost as soon as it crested the horizon. The illuminators aboard the Finalizer ran on timed dimmers that he had set to his personal preference. They brightened the room gradually at the time Hux had appointed. The sunrise on Arkanis occurred nearly an hour before that time should have been, he discovered.

Unable to continue sleeping with the sun in his eyes, he had risen and gone to the closet. After a brief perusal, he had found a pair of soft linen pants and a plain shirt. Clothed, but barefoot, he had opened the glass double doors and gone out onto the veranda.

The heavy rains had passed, though a dampness still pervaded the air. Closing his eyes, he drew in a breath. The array of scents could not have been accurately reproduced even by the finest olfactory simulator. Not that he kept one in his quarters; he had never been bothered by the metallic smell of recirculated air aboard starships.

He had stood at the edge of the veranda for a few minutes, leaning absently on the railing as he listened to the calls of birds he could not identify. As a boy, his tutor had once taken him out into the countryside with a digital guide and compact binoculars to spot them, but he had spent more time waiting to see shuttles decelerating through the lower atmosphere as they came into port at Scaparus than he did watching for birds. Tech had always been far more fascinating to him than nature, which had been a matter of some disappointment for his father, who had a great interest in Arkanis’s fauna. Mainly the most efficient way to kill and mount it.

Brendol Hux had taught his son to shoot as soon as he was big enough to handle a blaster. Young Hux had taken to it, quickly mastering the techniques his father taught him. He was a keen hunter when he bothered to venture into the forest, which had generally been only during the summers when he was home from boarding school. However, he had kept his skills up during the academic year by shooting for the school riflery team. As far as he knew, he still held the record at Arkanis Preparatory School for long range accuracy.

When he had entered the Academy at fifteen, he had selected firearms as his combat specialty. All cadets learned hand-to-hand techniques and trained with several types of blasters, but only a few were chosen to enter the rifle corps. Hux had excelled there, too. He had a good eye and a steady hand on the trigger. By the time he graduated, he was the top sniper in his cohort.

His first assignment out of the Academy was as the chief riflery lieutenant for a combat unit on one of the border planets in the Unknown Regions (a name which Hux had always found foolish; the region was no longer unknown after it had been occupied and colonized by the First Order). His father had been furious that he had accepted it. He had expected his son to take a post aboard a
starship—the most efficient way to rise in the ranks—not go out to the outskirts and fight raiders.

However, after two years of doing just that, Hux had been promoted to major and oversaw the operations of the entire division on the planet. He had been formally commended for several missions he had not only coordinated but participated in. When his colonel had presented the recommendation for his promotion, he had called him a “great asset to the First Order.”

A soft knocking drew Hux’s attention from the birds and back to his room. Padding across the wood floor, he opened the door to find a footman carrying a tray laden with fresh scones, whipped butter, a plate of fruit, and a small carafe of what he assumed would be hot caf. Not the cheap, watery stuff they served on the Finalizer, but freshly ground. He stepped out of the way to allow the footman inside.

“Outside on the table,” Hux said, leading the way out onto the veranda again, where a small table with two chairs sat. As he took one of them, the footman poured a cup of steaming caf for him. With the shallow bow, he left Hux with his breakfast.

The scones—apricot with slivers of ginger baked into them—were still warm, and the butter he smoothed onto each piece melted straight away. He ate them slowly, having almost forgotten how good food outside of the officers’ mess could be. He drank his caf with a splash of milk. He was just finishing it when Lorna, the housekeeper, appeared from inside. She carried another carafe, this one larger. Seeing Hux’s empty cup, she refilled it.

“Bringing me caf yourself?” he said, cocking a brow. “Lorna, this is beneath you.”

She huffed a laugh. “Maybe, but it’s been ten years since we’ve had anyone in this house. I just want to make certain you’re taken care of, Master Hux.”

“I never wanted for anything when I was here,” he said, taking a sip from his cup. Setting it down, he gestured to the chair across from him. “Has it really been a decade since Mother left for Pantin City?”

“Almost to the day,” said Lorna, sitting.

“I’m surprised she didn’t want you to come manage her house there.”

“Oh, she did, but I found her someone better suited to a city home.” Looking out at the vineyard beyond the veranda, she smiled. “My place is here.”

“Very little has changed,” Hux said.

“You have. You’re a general now.” She gave him an admonishing look. “Which I had to tell your mother about.”

Hux looked down at his empty plate. “I wrote to her.”

“When?”

“A few months after the promotion.”

“It could have been sooner.”

“I know.”

Lorna shook her head. “She’d like to see you.”
“If I were on leave, I would consider it.”

“So, you are here on duty. I suspected as much.”

Hux sighed. “You know I can’t discuss it.”

“I do,” she said.

Reaching for his caf, Hux found it had gone cold. Lorna made no move to pour him more, so he did it himself.

“How did you know I was awake earlier?” he asked. “When you sent breakfast.”

“I didn’t know,” she replied, “but I had a feeling. Before you were born, when your father still served on starships, he could never sleep past sunrise on the first few mornings he was here. He said it was the light.” She shrugged one shoulder. “I thought it might be the same with you.”

He smiled. “It was. Thank you.”

“I sent a tray for Lord Ren as well, but he refused it.”

Hux frowned. “He’s not eating?”

Lorna cocked her head. “Had something at dinner last night, didn’t he? Perhaps he’s not a morning eater.”

Hux considered that. He had no idea what Ren’s habits were. “Did the footman wake him when he got there?”

“He said Lord Ren was already up. And that the bed seemed untouched.”

Hux rubbed his temple. “He’s supposed to be resting.”

“Feelix, the footman, told me he was wearing bandages.”

“At least he hasn’t torn them off yet.”

Lorna raised her brows. “Is that within the realm of things you can’t discuss?”

“Not that aspect, no,” said Hux. “Ren was wounded in a recent battle. He’s convalescing here.”

“Willingly?”

“He has his orders.”

“And you have yours. To mind him.”

Hux laughed lightly. He should not have been surprised at Lorna’s perceptiveness. “Yes.”

“What do you intend to do with him while you’re here? He doesn’t seem the type to remain still for long. Though, neither are you.”

“I haven’t the slightest idea.”

Lorna tapped her fingers lightly on the table, watching Hux all the while. “I would ask you what his interests are, but I don’t believe you know that either.”
“No.”

“It seems for the moment that he wants to be left alone, so let’s indulge him. But, when he’s had his fill of solitude, we’ll find a way to amuse him.”

As she rose, Hux stood as well. “You’re indispensable, Lorna.”

“Oh, I know that, Master Hux.” Glancing down at the remnants of his breakfast, she said, “I’ll send someone to clear this.” And then she turned and disappeared into the house.

Hux remained on the veranda for a few more minutes. He saw a pair of birds fly past, their plumage in shades of green and brown to match the trees just beyond the crest of the nearest hill. Committing their coloring to memory as best he could, he resolved to find out their names. After all, he had little else to do.

Ren had still not emerged from his room by midafternoon. Hux had spent the morning reading A Guide to the Wild Birds of Arkanis in a chair by the window in his own bedroom, though he had expected to be interrupted at some point by more than the footman with his lunch. The sandwiches had been delicious, of course, but as he ate them he found himself thinking about whether Ren had eaten his. He resented the necessity of those thoughts. There were innumerable things that he could have been thinking about, all of which were more stimulating than Kylo Ren’s diet. Yet, Hux was responsible for seeing to it that he recuperated to the Supreme Leader’s satisfaction. Unfortunately, that included mundanities such as making sure he fed himself.

Once he had finished the cup of tea that had arrived with lunch, Hux set down the datapad he had been reading on and ventured out into the hallway. The guest wing was across the house from the family residences, and Lorna had said that she had put Ren in the largest of the rooms there. Hux kept a leisurely pace as he passed through the central corridors of the house, most of which were lined with skylights. They offered only watery illumination, though. A misting rain had begun to fall in the late morning, and gray clouds had crept across the sky, hiding the sun.

On his way past the summer parlor, he paused to look at the four paintings that hung in a nearby alcove. One was of his mother when she was sixteen and just recently debuted into Pantin City society. The Empire had been at its zenith then, and she had been painted wearing the simple, but gem-encrusted jewelry that had been in fashion at the time. She wore a deep green gown that brought out the copper shine of her hair.

Across from the image of her as a girl, was one of her at thirty, standing with her husband and their six-month-old son. Her dress was more subdued in this portrait, as was befitting the wife of an officer in the Imperial military. Brendol, of course, was in uniform. Hux was swaddled and held in his mother’s arms. It had been painted just four years before the Empire fell.

The last two portraits were of the same subject—Hux—though they had been commissioned ten years apart. In the first, he was a small boy of five, dressed in a neat pair of blue trousers and a white shirt buttoned up to the neck. He was sitting in a straight-backed chair and appeared to be looking out of the frame. Hux had very few memories from that time in his life, but he did recall sitting for the portrait. He had hated having to remain in the same position for hours.

On the opposite wall was a portrait of him in his cadet’s uniform the year he had entered the
Academy. He was standing with a datapad in his left hand and a blaster rifle across his back. He had been more patient for this one than he had the first, thinking that he would look the part of an officer in it. Seeing it now, Hux saw an untried boy who had no idea what it meant to lead men.

Or to fail them.

He left the portraits behind, resuming the path that would take him to the guest wing. There were seven rooms in total, and all of their doors were closed when he arrived. The largest was at the end of the hall, where the master suite lay on the family’s side of the house. As he approached, Hux saw a lunch tray sitting on the floor beside the door. Nothing on it had been disturbed. He stopped and listened for a moment, but when he heard nothing from the other side of the door, he rapped curtly on it.

Slowly, the knob turned and the door opened. Hux expected Ren to appear, but there was no one. Brows knit, he stepped across the threshold.

“What do you want, General Hux?”

Ren was sitting cross-legged on the carpet at the foot of the bed. He wore only black trousers, and his feet were bare. The bandages that the medics had wrapped around his chest and shoulder the day before were gone, exposing the wounds. Both were still red and tender, the skin slightly swollen. Hux imagined that the tugging of the sutures as Ren moved would have been quite painful.

“What are you doing?” Hux asked.

Ren’s eyes remained closed, though he replied, “Meditating.”

Hux glanced around the room. Ren’s tunic and belt were hanging off the back of a chair. The bandages, parts of them stained a rusty red, were piled on the seat. His shoes had been thrown on the floor by the legs. As Lorna had said, the bed appeared untouched.

“You’ve been meditating all day?”

Silence.

Hux persisted. “You haven’t eaten. Did you sleep?”

Silence.

He said, more forcefully, “Ren.”

“What?” His tone was sharp, but his expression remained serene.

“You heard me,” Hux snapped.

“Yes.”

“And you won’t answer me?”

When Ren opened his eyes, he scowled. “I’ve been meditating. I won’t be disturbed.”

Hux glared back at him. “You’re supposed to be healing. That requires both sleep and food.”

“I’ll have both when I need them,” said Ren, setting is palms on his knees. “Now, leave me.” He closed his eyes again.
“Not until you eat something.”

“No.”

Hux’s temper flared. Taking a step closer, he said, “Ren.”

“Get out.”

Undeterred, Hux reached out and grabbed Ren’s uninjured shoulder. “Don’t be a fool.”

In a second, Ren was on his feet, his right hand extended. Hux was shoved back several paces, the impact of what he assumed to be the Force knocking the breath from his lungs.

“Get. Out.”

Though he was struggling to draw in air, Hux managed a laugh. “You mistake me for someone who fears you, Ren. You and your Force.” He shook his head. “I’ll go, but if you think I’m going to allow you to starve and go without rest, you’re wrong. It can’t be all that difficult to tranquilize you again.”

“You won’t dare,” Ren snarled.

Hux narrowed his eyes. “I don’t make idle threats.”

“Neither do I. And I can give you a reason to fear to the Force.”

“As you did the girl from Jakku?” Hux sneered. “She seems terrified.”

A vase on the bedside table shattered as Ren clenched his fist. “You know nothing of her, or me, or the Force.”

Hux looked at him disdainfully. “I’m not required to. My only task here to to ensure that you are returned to the Supreme Leader in good condition. But it seems you are set on making that difficult for me.”

“I don’t need you.” He looked around the room. “I don’t need this. I’m ready to continue my training now.” Flicking his wrist, he sent the chair on which his shirt was hanging careening into the fireplace. Its back splintered and fell onto the floor.

“Have more care with your clothing, Ren,” said Hux, unimpressed. “It’s all you brought.”

A decorative plate exploded above the broken chair.

“Get out of my sight!” Ren roared.

“I will,” Hux said, backing up a step, “if only for the sake of my mother’s decor.” He smirked. “You are remarkably destructive, even without your lightsaber.” A string of curses followed him out of the room and into the hall.

Feelux, the footman, was standing just outside the door, his eyes wide and mouth hanging open.

“Take the tray,” said Hux. “He doesn’t want it.” Brushing back a lock of hair that had fallen onto his brow in the commotion, he walked away.
Hux ate dinner alone that night. Two places had been set, but he ignored Ren’s. *Foolish boy.* If he wanted to sulk in his room for a while longer, Hux would allow it. At least for now. Come tomorrow, he would be less forgiving.

Sipping his wine—white to pair well with the mushroom risotto the chef had prepared—Hux considered how he had arrived at this point, one at which he had to contemplate the best way to coerce Kylo Ren into taking even the most basic care of himself.

Starkiller had performed to specifications when Hux had ordered the destruction of the New Republic worlds, and it would have done so again when turned on the Resistance base on D’Qar. Its security and defense weapons had been fully operational and more than capable of fending off an attack, but they had not been prepared for an assault at the hands of one of their own.

FN-2187, as a low ranking trooper, should not have been privy to information that could have compromised the base. Only senior leadership and the engineers had known the exact layout of its internal structure, Hux had made sure of that. Yet, somehow he had been able to provide the Resistance with all they required to infiltrate the base, lower its triple-redundant shields, and destroy the thermal oscillator. Someone was responsible for letting a trooper get ahold of secret intelligence, and Hux should have been on the *Finalizer* leading the investigation to identify the leak and close it by whatever means proved necessary.

But instead he was sitting in his appointed place at his father’s dining table, staring in silence at the landscape painting on the opposite wall while the remnants of his dinner grew cold. And his charge, the Supreme Leader’s apprentice and one of the only men left in the galaxy capable of wielding the Force, was sitting on the floor of his bedroom in the *single set* of clothes he owned and refusing to come out. The whole situation was so appalling that it bordered on farcical. Setting his wineglass down, Hux laughed. His whole body shook with it, his eyes tearing at the corners as he fought to keep his breathing steady.

Feelix, who had come in bearing the decanter of wine, had taken one look at him and returned to the kitchen. It only made Hux laugh harder.

When, at last, the fit subsided, Hux wiped his face with his napkin and drained the rest of his wine. Rising, he took a last look at the painting—it depicted an idyllic hillside vineyard likely meant to resemble one nearby—scoffed, and left. He read for a time when he returned to his room, but soon found his eyes sinking closed. He succumbed to the urge to go to bed early for the first time in years.

Thankfully, he had been able to sleep later into the next morning than he had the day before. And he got up only because of the enticing smell of freshly fried bacon. Once again, he sat out on the veranda and had breakfast. It was raining, but he didn’t mind the occasional cool mist when the wind blew. He was just finishing his second cup of caf when Lorna arrived, a fabric measuring tape hanging around her neck.

“You slept better last night,” she said, taking the seat across from him.

“Much.” He eyed the measuring tape. “I see you’ve been busy this morning. What did we need to know the size of today?”

“Lord Ren.”
Hux coughed, choking on the caf he had been drinking. “What?”

“I learned yesterday that he travels very light,” she said. “You could have told me to have a wardrobe prepared for him as well.”

Hux dabbed at his mouth with a napkin. “Had I known he required it, I would have.” He asked, “You spoke to him yesterday? Before or after he threw me out of his room?”

Lorna smiled. “After. In fact, it was after you’d gone to bed.”

“Oh?”

“I was asked not to speak of it.”

Hux gave her a long-suffering look. “You wouldn’t have mentioned it if you meant to keep it in confidence.”

She pursed her lips and raised her chin, but said, “Very well, then. I was getting ready to turn in myself, but I wanted to check the stocks in the wine cellar for a bottle of brut. I happened upon Lord Ren in the pantry.”

Hux crossed his arms over his chest. “Scavenging.”

“He hadn’t eaten all day,” Lorna said, reproving.

“That was his own choice.”

“It was.”

“But…”

“But, if he wanted something, I wasn’t going to refuse him.”

Hux’s brows rose. “You made something for him?”

“Please, Master Hux, you know better than to accuse me of cooking,” she said, waving a hand dismissively. “I woke the chef.”

“Yes, I suppose that makes more sense, doesn’t it?” Hux said, one side of his mouth turning up into a half smile. “Though I’m sure the chef didn’t appreciate it.”

“He won’t soon forgive me, but his crepes were well received by Lord Ren, so he was not too put out by the whole affair.”

Hux looked down at his plate, where one savory and one sweet crepe had been just a few minutes before. “Did I just enjoy last night’s leavings?”

“Of course not,” said Lorna, affronted. “They were made fresh this morning.”

“I’m relieved to hear it.” Reaching out, he tugged at one end of the measuring tape that hung down by her elbow. “Now, what were you saying about Ren’s wardrobe?”

She snatched the tape out of his hand and began rolling it tidily. “I noticed that he was wearing the same things he had been when he arrived. Since Harron didn’t bring any luggage into his room, I assumed—correctly—that he had nothing else. I told him I would order him some things from town.” She tapped the measuring tape on the table. “He didn’t know his measurements, so I took
them this morning when I brought him breakfast.”

“You’ve fed and clothed him,” said Hux. “Did you get him to sleep as well?”

“By the looks of his bed, he did.”

Taking one of Lorna’s hands, Hux squeezed it. “I’ve already told you you’re indispensable, haven’t I?”

“You have, Master Hux.”

“Well, it bears repeating now and likely will again before this is all over.”

“Already looking ahead to leaving us, then?”

He studied her slender fingers in his, rubbing his thumb over her knuckles. “I have a ship to command. My primary responsibilities are to the Order.”

She lowered her head until she could meet his eyes. “I know that, and I would never expect you to do anything else, but you do have a home here, too.”

“This is your home, Lorna. You care for it more deeply than Mother or Father ever did. We just happened to live here for a while.” Clearing his throat, he drew his hand back from hers. “Did Ren say anything else to you that I should know?”

“Only that he’d still prefer not to be disturbed. But I believe everyone in the house knows that after yesterday afternoon.” She gave Hux a curious look. “Has a spot of temper, doesn’t he?”

“Mildly put, yes. I meant to suggest that you remove anything overly valuable from his room.”

“I believe he’s already done that for me.”

Hux laughed lightly. “I suppose that’s true. Was anything irreplaceable?”

“No.”

“Good. And thank you, Lorna, for taking care of all this.” He moved to get up, but paused to ask, “The clothes for Ren are coming out of my account, aren’t they?”

She blinked up at him with abject innocence. “There’s no other account I have access to.”

“Of course not,” he sighed. “Very well. I’m certain he’ll approve of your choices...as long as they’re black.”

“You really think I’d allow that?”

He winced. “You won’t make an exception?”

“You know me better than that, Master Hux.”

“Yes, Lorna, I do.” He looked briefly over her lavender suit. “Just be conservative.”

She laughed as she left him.

Once she had gone, Hux retreated to the refresher. He lingered far longer than necessary under the water, knowing there was no limit to its heat and that there was nothing else he had to attend to.
Likely he would just be spending another day with a book for company. He had once had a good appetite for books, though since he had left the Academy’s library (and Wile with it), he had spent more time skimming briefs and field reports.

The thought of reports brought Phasma to mind. He had requested them from her, but had not specified a timeline. It could be days yet before he had word of what was going on aboard his ship. He assumed that they had rendezvoused with the rest of the First Order’s fleet in the Unknown Regions and were in the process of regrouping and planning retaliation against the Resistance.

Hux struck the wall with the flat of his hand, frustrated. He should have been there at the Supreme Leader’s side, ensuring that plans were progressing, not on Arkanis. And Ren should have been out pursuing the slip of a girl who had somehow managed to get the better of him in combat. Just days before, both of them had been central to the all of the Supreme Leader’s plans; now they had been sent away like scolded children. Hux hated thinking he was as replaceable as one of the supposed heirlooms that Ren had destroyed in his room.

“Make sure the only man in a fight who cannot be done without is you,” Brendol had said to him on the day he was wounded by blaster fire. He had made it his prerogative since that day to do as his father had instructed, and he believed he had done it. He was the youngest general in the First Order and answered only to the Supreme Leader. Such a man could not just be done away with and another like him step into his place.

Commander Odar, certainly, was not likely to assume command of the *Finalizer*. He was a capable soldier and a passable commander, but he was not the type of man who stood at the center of the bridge in a firefight. Commander Tryla, too, had already spent too much time in the lower ranks to ever amount to more. There were other generals in the Order, of course, though none of them came to mind as likely replacements.

Hux smiled with grim satisfaction. Calamitous as the destruction of Starkiller had been, he doubted it would result in his demotion. After all, though the situation with Ren was far from ideal, he did not believe that the Supreme Leader would have removed them both to Arkanis if he intended to exile Hux to some outskirts planet to manage recruits for the rest of his career. Distasteful as it was to admit, Ren was too valuable to have his recovery supervised by someone the Supreme Leader did not trust. Hux was at least still favored enough to merit serving as a nursemaid for his apprentice.

Scowling, he turned off the water and stepped out into the steam-filled room. He toweled himself dry in quick, brusque strokes and walked naked out to the closet. As he dressed, he eyed the chair where his datapad lay, struggling to muster his interest in *A Guide to the Wild Birds of Arkanis*. His enthusiasm for avian life in the region had waned since yesterday and was not likely to be renewed at that particular moment. He considered choosing another book from the selection on his datapad, but his earlier thought about the Academy’s library had reminded him of the estate’s small collection of physical volumes. They were in his father’s study, which was adjacent to the parlor on the south side of the house.

Neither Hux nor his mother had often ventured into the study. She, while having attended prestigious schools as a girl, much preferred to spend her time among her friends at parties and charity banquets than she did reading. Hux himself had considered the study his father’s realm, and did not trespass there unless he was given express permission to do so. Though his father had been dead for years and Hux was no longer a boy, he still felt a twinge of excited apprehension as he set his hand on the doorknob and turned it.

The lights came up as he stepped inside, illuminating the broad, oak desk that stood to the left of
Hux ran his fingertips along the edge of the desk, half expecting them to come away dusty. Lorna and her staff were too fastidious to allow that, however. A lamp stood at the leftmost corner of the desktop, its shade a mosaic of colorful glass. A pewter cup filled with styluses stood beside it. Hux knew that the central part of the desk would slide away to reveal a screen and console, but he didn’t engage the mechanism. There was nothing he would be disturbing—his father hadn’t touched it in eleven years—but it still felt intrusive. He would save that exploration for another day.

Going to the nearby shelf, he skimmed the titles. A Chronicle of the Battle of Bothawui. The Biological Anomalies of Takodana. Military Vessels of the Galactic Empire. There seemed to be no discernable system of organization among the volumes, which would have frustrated Wile to no end, but didn’t surprise Hux. His father had had his own way of remembering things. He would have known where any given book was, but anyone else would have been at a loss. Perhaps that was his way to protecting the library; if only he could find what he wanted, he could control who used it. And Brendol Hux had been a bastion of control.

Hux browsed for a while longer before finally settling on a text on the design and manufacture of blasters during the era of the Clone Wars. Skimming the first few pages, he decided it would keep him occupied for the rest of the morning. He glanced once at the leather chair that stood behind the desk, but then away. Taking the book, he left the study and returned to his room.
“Very good, sir.” He started to fill the glass again, but nearly spilled wine over Hux’s plate as the dining room door swung open with a crash.

Hux looked sharply up to see Ren standing at the threshold. He expression was as taciturn as ever, but his plain tunic and pants had been replaced by a pair of well-fitted trousers and a black vest over a charcoal gray shirt. So, his new wardrobe had arrived that afternoon. Lorna must have sent someone into town first thing to ensure that he would have something to wear by dinnertime. The simple, but elegantly cut clothes suited him, Hux thought, making him appear less like the Supreme Leader’s forbidding apprentice and more like the son of a wealthy trade magnate from Pantin City society.

Hux rose, perhaps out of surprise, perhaps out of habit. “Lord Ren.”

“General Hux.” He closed the door behind him more delicately than he had opened it.

Hux watched him walk to his chair in three long strides. “I wasn’t certain that you’d be joining me tonight.”

Ren curled his fingers around the back of the chair. “I was told dinner would be here.”

Hux held back a smile. That, too, must have been Lorna’s doing. She surely hadn’t flatly refused to bring Ren dinner in his room, but she had likely made it more than clear that he was expected to eat in the dining room. Hux resolved to double her salary.

“Are we standing for a reason?”

“No,” said Hux. “Please sit.”

As they settled into their seats, Feelix once again offered Ren the wine. When he shook his head, the footman went away.

Hux took a sip from his glass. “Is wine forbidden to you and your Knights,” he asked, “or do you just not care for it?”

Ren’s eyes flashed darkly. “Nothing is forbidden to me.”

“As wine forbidden to you and your Knights,” he asked, “or do you just not care for it?”

“Of course. I might have guessed.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Hux held back a sigh. “You do as you will. I am already aware of that.”

“No,” he said. “I do as my master commands.”

“Yes, but you have complete freedom in your methods. You are not bound by the regulations of the First or any other order.”

Ren frowned. “You mean the Jedi Order.”

Hux steepled his fingers beneath his chin. “Forgive me if I’m mistaken, but were they not once the body that governed all in the galaxy who could use the Force?”

“Not all. There have always been others outside the Jedi Order. Those who could see the greater power that lies on the dark side.”

“Like the Supreme Leader. And you.”
Ren swallowed. “Yes.”

“My point stands, then. You are answerable to no one.”

“The Supreme Leader—”

Hux waved a hand. “Yes, yes. But you may use whatever means you deem necessary to carry out his commands. I, on the other hand, operate within the purview of the First Order. I must keep to rank and regulation.”

“Discipline is necessary for an army.”

“It is necessary for the galaxy.”

Ren cocked his head slightly. Hux took it as a sign for him to continue.

“Chaos is the enemy of progress,” he said. “Without structure and discipline, the galaxy will continue to spiral into instability. The Empire once provided that stability, and civilization was stronger, more prosperous for it. Trade flourished, the military kept peace. But since the Rebellion, we have been flailing impotently, barely able to survive anarchy under the New Republic. Order must be restored.” Pausing, he took a drink of wine. “Do you not agree?”

“I do,” said Ren. “I may not answer to you and your hierarchy of command, general, but I am loyal to the First Order’s cause.”

“I do not doubt your loyalties, Ren, I only question your methods.”

“But not your own? Considering the destruction of Starkiller Base, I would think you might.”

Hux scowled. “I don’t deny that I am partly the blame for what happened, but had we found the droid, the BB-unit, or perhaps executed the girl from Jakku instead of allowing her to escape—”

Ren’s fists landed hard on the table, making the silverware ring. “We would have had the droid if your trooper hadn’t betrayed the Order! Where was your prized discipline, then, general?”

“FN-2187 had been a model trooper up until his desertion,” Hux snapped. “We could not have anticipated it.”

“And you think I expected the girl—an untrained child—to be able to escape me?” he demanded, his face twisted with fury. The scar across it was stretched white and taut.

“She should have been done away with the moment you discovered her affinity for the Force, as the Jedi were during the Purge.”

“She could have been valuable to us. If I could teach her—”

“But she refused and now we have one more powerful enemy to contend with.”

“Her power is useless to the Resistance without Skywalker.”

“They have the map,” Hux said. “It’s only a matter of time.”

“And yet we’re here,” said Ren, gesturing around them. “Wasting that time.”

“It is not my choice! Do you think I want to be here? I detest this house, this planet. I should be on my ship with my men.”
“Then why won’t you contact the Supreme Leader? Tell him my wounds are healed.”

“Because I was ordered to wait. And because your wounds are *not* healed. I saw them yesterday. You’ll tear the stitches if you so much as move too quickly.”

“I’ve fought with worse injuries before.”

“That does nothing to change the current situation. Our instructions were clear. I’ll not repeat them again.”

Ren sat back against his chair. He crossed his arms, still fuming, but fell silent.

Hux emptied his wineglass and set it down so hard that a crack split up the foot and into the stem. He bit back the urge to throw it across the room and shatter it properly. That would have been something Ren would have done, and he refused to be half as uncouth.

As silence crept across the room, the servants’ door opened and Feelix peeked in. “Master Hux, would you care for your dinner now?”

“Yes,” he said, curt. Neither he nor Ren spoke again as they ate, the clacking of their utensils against the china the only sound. Hux drank another glass of wine, hoping that it would calm him somewhat. It was not particularly effective.

Ren ate quickly and with no decorum, assuring Hux that the illusion of gentility created by his clothing was exactly that; a fantasy. When he was finished, he stood, turned on his heel, and left. Hux didn’t even pause in chewing to bid him goodnight.

The next day passed similarly to those that preceded it. Hux woke and ate, bathed and dressed, and then spent several hours reading. He did manage to pick up *A Guide to the Wild Birds of Arkanis* again and, in fact, finished it by midmorning. Putting his datapad aside, he looked out through the window. The clouds that had come with the earlier rains were beginning to thin and there were patches of blue in the sky. It wouldn’t last, Hux knew that, so he donned the pair of stout boots Lorna had purchased for him and slipped out into the back garden.

It wasn’t really a proper garden. There were no beds of flowers or manicured walks. It was little more than a field with cropped grass. As Arkanis’s rains made entertaining outdoors impractical, Hux’s mother had always hosted her guests inside. Although he did recall a single garden party that had occurred under the cover of a broad tent.

The toes of Hux’s boots quickly grew dark with moisture from the grass as he walked. There was approximately half a kilometer between the back door of the house and the edge of the forest, where he expected he would find some of the birds he had been reading about. As he watched the ground ahead of him, he wondered how his subordinates would perceive General Hux, amateur birder. It fit him almost as well as knitting might have Captain Phasma; not in the least.

Throughout his career, he had seen no need to pursue pastimes beyond his work. When he wasn’t attending briefings and overseeing operations, he would go to the firing range and shoot targets. He hadn’t been in the field in nearly eight years, but he saw no reason to allow his skills to slip. And shooting was cathartic, calming in a way few other things were. Perhaps when he returned to the house later in the day, he would seek out his father’s rifle collection.
As he crossed into the forest, the meager sunlight faded, unable to penetrate the cover of canopy above. Arkanis’s trees were predominantly deciduous, their foliage rich and green during the long summers and colorful in the autumn. Most of the forests in the wine country had been razed, but his father had kept this patch to preserve the game animals’ habitat. Hux recalled once that Brendol had received some kind of conservation award. He had always found that highly ironic, since Brendol had protected the land so that he could hunt on it. That hardly seemed like conservation of native creatures.

A flash of red caught Hux’s eye. Glancing up to a nearby branch, he spotted a small, black bird with crimson-tipped wings. It trotted along the branch, its head swiveling around in quick jerks. Arrinsen’s blackbird. Hux had discovered that the birders were not particularly creative in naming the various species; many of them were simply named after the people who had first seen them. Or at least claimed to be the first to see them.

The blackbird gave a peeping call and flew away. Hux moved on, keeping his eyes turned up to see what others he could identify. He passed nearly an hour at it, finding twelve distinct species, though he could only name seven of them. The others he would look up when he returned. It was the height of excitement, to be sure.

When he reached the treeline again, he found that the light rain had returned. It fell, dewey onto his head and shoulders. As he made his way across the field toward the house, though, it began to come harder. With little warning, it turned into a downpour. Cursing, Hux began to jog. The house was straight ahead, but still more than two hundred meters away. The speeder garage, however, was far closer. Hux turned toward it, hoping it wasn’t locked.

Unfortunately, the side door that he reached first was, but when he went around the front of the building, he found that the main door was open. He sprinted through it and out of the rain. As he caught his breath, he looked around. The interior of the garage was dim, but he could make out the shapes of the speeders covered with gray tarpaulins. Only one was uncovered: the six-seated transport that he and Ren had ridden in from the port.

“Master Hux?”

He turned to see Harron, the driver, standing on the other side of the main door. He was wearing oil-stained coveralls and had a smear of black grease across his right cheek. Hux greeted him.

Harron pulled a threadbare, but clean towel from a pile on a nearby shelf and held it out to Hux.

“Out for a walk, sir?”

“Twas, yes,” he said as he dried his face and neck. “I didn’t expect the weather to turn quite so suddenly.”

“That’s just this time of year, sir,” Harron said, looking out at the gravel-lined drive just beyond the garage. The rain was still pouring down. “In ten minutes this will have blown by. You’ll be fine to return to the house then, if that’s what you were aiming to do in the first place.”

“That was the intention.” He ran the towel over his hair before putting it down. “I see Father’s speeders are still here. Mother didn’t sell any of them?”

“The mistress told me that Master Hux—the elder Master Hux, I mean—left them to you, sir.”

“To me? What use do I have for them?”

“Can’t say I know, sir. I’ve kept them in good order for you, though, should you want to go for a
“Yes,” he said, finding he was genuinely curious. He had never been drawn to speeders the way some were, but they were more interesting than the birds.

Harron led him first to far end of the garage, where he uncovered a silver speeder with a long front end and two seats near the back.

“This one here’s the T509,” he, running his hand along the pilot’s side door. “She was Master Hux—er, Master Brendol’s favorite. He had her imported from Eufornis Major in the Core back when you were just a boy, sir.”

Hux remembered riding in the performance speeder. His father hadn’t often taken him out in it, but he vividly recalled the times he had. It was uncovered, so he had had to wear goggles. They had belonged to his mother and were too big, so he had had to hold them in place, but it hadn’t mattered to him. He had just wanted to be in the speeder going as fast as his father could make it fly.

“You should take her out, sir,” said Harron. “It’s been a long time since someone really put her through her paces. I imagine you’re a fine pilot.”

Hux had passed all of his piloting requirements at the Academy, but he had never been truly adept at it. “Perhaps another day.”

“You just say the word, Master Hux, and I’ll have her ready for you.” Harron patted the rear thruster as he passed.

The speeder next to it was another specialty model, though this one had smoother lines. It had been Hux’s mother’s. Unlike most city-born Arkanians, she had loved to drive. Hux could remember her teasing Harron that they had hired him for show only.

“We don’t need a dedicated pilot,” she had said. “But everyone has one, so we must, too.”

They moved on to the next, which was far smaller than all the others.

“Now this, Master Hux,” said Harron, “was Master Brendol’s favorite.” Removing the tarpaulin, he revealed a polished, black jumpspeeder. It would seat two astride if necessary, but had most often been ridden by his father alone. He had taken it to and from the Academy for as long as Hux could remember. Reaching out, he traced the steering column with his palm.

“It’s an impressive piece. It suited Father.”

“And it would suit you, too, sir.”

Hux tried to imagine himself on it, but couldn’t. The figure in his mind’s eye was larger, broader than him. His hair was dark. Ren.

“I prefer the T509.”

Harron didn’t reply immediately. He was looking out at the drive, his eyes narrowed. “Were you expecting company, sir?”

Hux tensed. “No. Excuse me, Harron.”

“Oh course, sir.”

The rain had let up some as he strode toward the small, modest speeder that had pulled up to the
As he rounded it, he saw a petite woman standing just inside the front door, a leather bag in her hand. She was speaking to Lorna.

As Hux approached, Lorna eyed his sodden trousers and shirt, the latter of which was clinging wetly to his chest. “Ah, Master Hux, I was just about to go looking for you.”

He looked past her and down at the unannounced visitor. “Who are you?”

“Medic Ylana,” she said.

“She’s come from Scaparus to check in on our guest,” said Lorna. “It was arranged when you arrived.”

“Yes,” he said. “Though I don’t recall today being the day you were to come.”

“I had an opening,” said the medic. “And I don’t usually make house calls.”

Hux frowned, disliking her tone. “Well, we appreciate you taking the time to make this one. Come inside. I’ll take you to your patient.” He led the way down the corridor toward the guest wing.

“Could you tell me a little more about the injuries this...guest suffered, general?” asked Ylana. “Was it some kind of accident?”

Hux chose his words carefully. “He was hit in the shoulder and side during a conflict offworld. And there was a minor cut to his face.”

“I see. The housekeeper said he had already been tended to by another medic, but that you just wanted to make sure he was healing properly.”

“That’s correct.”

“And you couldn’t bring him into town to be checked out?”

“This is a matter that requires discretion,” said Hux. “I’ll see to it that you have double your usual fee.”

“Sounds good to me, general.”

As they arrived at Ren’s door, Hux knocked. It opened almost immediately. Ren stood on the other side, looking displeased. “What?”

“The medic is here. Will you permit her to examine you?”

He looked her over briefly, but then nodded.

“I’ll wait for you in the parlor,” said Hux.

“No,” said Ren. “You should stay. You have to report back my condition.”

Hux would have preferred to change into something dry and take the medic’s report after the examination was complete, but he said, “Very well,” as he closed the door behind him.

Unbuttoning his shirt, Ren shrugged it over his shoulders and dropped it on the ground. He offered his injured side to the medic. She snapped on a pair of gloves before touching him.

“How long ago did this happen?” she asked as she traced the sutures with her forefinger. The
redness Hux had seen before had faded and the swelling had gone down.

“Four days,” Ren replied.

“Then it was treated with bacta. Only once?”

Ren nodded. “When they bandaged it.”

“It’s looking good for a single treatment, but I’m going to do it again. It won’t need to be covered, but don’t wash the gel off before tomorrow morning.” From her bag, she drew a small tube. She squeezed a fair amount of clear gel onto her palm and then began to spread it over Ren’s wound. If it hurt, he didn’t show it; his expression remained impassive.

“You’ll have to sit for the shoulder,” the medic said, looking up at Ren. Her eyes were level with the center of his chest. Hux pulled over a chair, new since Ren had broken the last one.

Ylana’s brows knit as she looked over the cut on Ren’s shoulder. “The healing pattern here is unusual. What happened?”

Ren looked up at Hux, who shook his head slightly. *Don’t tell her.*

“An cautery iron,” he said. “A large cautery iron.”

She reared back to look at Hux. “If you’re going to lie to me, I’m charging triple.”

“Done,” he said.

With a sigh, she returned to the wound. “It’s not going to be pretty, but it’ll heal fine.” She touched Ren’s jaw where the scar slashed across it. He pulled back sharply. “Sorry,” Ylana said. “I was just looking. I know a reconstruction specialist who could work wonders on this.”

“No,” said Ren.

“Okay.” She took a step back from him and removed her gloves. “Everything’s on track. The sutures will dissolve by themselves over the next week. Barring anything unusual, you shouldn’t need to see a medic again.”

“Then I can resume training?”

“What kind of training?”

“Combat.”

She chewed her cheek. “Well, I’d give it another day to let the bacta work and I’d avoid getting hit for a while, but technically you’ll be fine.”

Ren was looking at Hux as he said, “Good.”

“Thank you, Medic Ylana,” said Hux. “I’ll see you out and make sure we settle the bill.”

“Very good, general. Your housekeeper has my fund transfer code. I assume she’ll take care of the additional charges.”

“Triple, yes,” said Hux, as he ushered her out of the room. Lorna met them at the end of the hall and escorted the medic away. Hux returned to Ren.
He was pacing the length of the room, still barechested. The light from the overhead illuminators reflected off the gel on his side. “I must speak to my master. I know you can contact him.”

“I can’t,” said Hux. “We don’t have the communication protocols here. He has to reach out to us.”

“There has to be a way.”

Hux considered. “Not a direct way, no. But, I could send a message to the Finalizer. Captain Phasma could pass along a request.”

“That could take days.”

“Yes.”

“It’s too long. I’m ready now. You heard the medic say it.”

“She said tomorrow.”

Ren glared. “A negligible difference.”

“Admittedly. However, we still have no way to reach the Supreme Leader.”

“Send your message to Phasma.”

“She may not be successful in reaching him.”

“Try.”

Hux nodded. “I’ll write it now.” Turning, he left Ren to his pacing.

The only long-range communication apparatus in the house was in the study, so he went there. It took him a few moments to puzzle out how to engage the console, but he managed it. Though the interface was antiquated, it would serve.

The missive he composed was brief, requesting that Phasma pass the request to speak with the Supreme Leader along the necessary channels. At the bottom he added: “I will look forward to your first report within the next day.” He had gone long enough without knowing what was happening aboard his ship.

As the console indicated the message had been sent, he typed in a command to link his wristcomm to it. He wanted to be alerted if a reply arrived. Sitting back in his father’s chair, he took a breath. If the Supreme Leader was willing to meet with him and Ren, perhaps they could be gone before Phasma’s report came.

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Hux was just about to enter the dining room for dinner that night when the urgent transmission indicator on his wristcomm began to blink. He charged through the door, calling for Ren. He was standing by the sideboard, a glass of water in his hand.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“The Supreme Leader wishes to speak with us.”
“Now?”

Hux nodded. “Come with me.” He swept back out into the hall. Ren followed him, catching up easily. When they entered the study, Hux went immediately to the desk and powered on the communications interface. An image projector descended from the ceiling at the far side of the room, casting a circle of blue light onto the center of the floor.

Coming around the front of the desk, Hux said to Ren, “Stand here or he won’t be able to see you.”

Ren moved up to Hux without protest, his attention fixed on the blue circle. Hux watched it, too, waiting. A moment later, the image of Snoke—slightly grainy in the decades-old projection unit—appeared.


“Master,” Ren said, inclining his head.

“My apprentice, General Hux reports that your wounds are healing well.”

“Yes, master. I am ready to resume my training.”

“No yet.”

“Master, we’re wasting time we don’t have not pursuing the girl, Rey. If she reaches Skywalker—”

“She already has. Can you not feel it? Her connection to the Force is growing stronger.”

“I have felt it, master. And it cannot be allowed to progress further. Not unless I can bring her to you. She has great potential if she would only allow the dark in.”

“She has chosen her allegiance. She will have to be destroyed with Skywalker.”

Ren bit his lower lip. “Then let me seek them out, master. The longer I wait, the stronger she will become.”

Snoke blinked at him. “Do you fear that, Kylo Ren?”

“No, master. But it means I must be even more powerful.” He looked up, his expression almost imploring. “I must be permitted to finish my training.”

“Your mind is too unsettled, your body too weak.”

“I’ve spent the past three days in meditation, master. I’ve calmed my mind, contemplated how I failed with the girl. I’m ready—”

“That is not enough. You require more time to quiet your being and to regain your physical strength.”

“A few more days, then.”

Snoke raised a hand. “No. You are to remain on Arkanis for the coming six weeks.”

Hux’s stomach tightened. “Supreme Leader,” he said, stepping forward, “would Ren not be better served to regain his strength on the Finalizer, where he could recover under the supervision of the medics? There are facilities for physical training there, as well. This estate does not have anything of that kind.”
“A starship is not the place to center the mind, general,” Snoke said. “My apprentice will do best where he is. As will you.”

“Am I being punished, Supreme Leader? If so, I would prefer the pillory or the brig.”

Snoke lifted a brow. “This assignment is of the utmost importance to me and to the First Order, general. It is not a responsibility I would place upon anyone. Surely you are aware of that.”

“Yes, Supreme Leader, but I have duties about the Finalizer.”

“Captain Phasma will keep you apprised of the ship’s status. You already had such an agreement with her.” Snoke folded his hands across his lap. “You, too, should take this time to center yourself, general. When you return, I will need you ready for our next offensive.”

There was little about the estate that worked to center any part of Hux’s mind, but he said, “As you command, Supreme Leader.”

“In six weeks’ time, you will both come to me, but until then, you must remain on Arkanis. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Supreme Leader.”

“Yes, master.”

“Good.”

The lights in the study came back up as Snoke ended the transmission. Hux stared into the space where his image had been.

With a roar, Ren knocked the lamp from the corner of the desk.

Rounding on him, Hux said, “Enough! You will contain yourself while you’re in this house. I won’t have you tearing it apart.”

“What does it matter to you? You hate this place.”

“How do you know that?”

“You said as much. And it’s coming off of you in waves. I can feel it across a room.”

Hux balked. “You can...feel that?”

“Only a vague impression,” Ren said, dismissive. “When it’s projected strongly enough.”

Dread pooled in the pit of Hux’s gut. “Can you perceive it at any time?”

“I could get into your mind if I wanted to,” said Ren.

“Without my knowledge?”

“No. The process is...uncomfortable.”

The tension in Hux’s jaw released. It was true he did not fear the Force, but he did not relish the idea of having Ren invade his thoughts. It was enough to have to spend the coming weeks with him.
“You’re going to need a place to train.”

Ren’s brow knit. “What?”

“The Supreme Leader requires you to rebuild your physical strength. You will need a space in which to do that.”

“I can go outside.”

Hux shot him a look. “In the rain? No. I’ll have Harron clear a space in the garage. Will that be enough?”

Ren nodded.

“Do you require any other clothes or equipment? I can have things sent up from town.”

“Something for saber drills.”

“You don’t have your lightsaber?”

“It was destroyed.”

“Can you buy another?”

Ren scowled. “No.”

“Then what can you use?”

“A bokken. A wooden sword.”

Hux rubbed his chin. “Very well. Make up a list of the things you need and Lorna will see them purchased.”

“Fine.”

“Indeed. Shall we return to dinner, then?”

Ren didn’t reply. He simply strode through the door. Hux watched his back until he disappeared around the corner.

“Dammit,” he cursed. Powering down the console, he turned off the illuminators and followed Ren back to the dining room.

Chapter End Notes

The incredibly talented alyruko did this stunning piece of Hux on the veranda at the estate.

The wonderful ottenebrare did this lovely portrait of Hux and Kylo as they might be painted together in the portrait gallery at the estate.
Chapter Three

Ren was already seated when Hux arrived. He was sipping from his glass of water, looking darkly down at his plate. He said nothing as Hux took his own place across from him.

Feelix came and went with the wine and with their dinner; a roast game hen with lemon pepper. Hux enjoyed it in silence, preoccupied with the Supreme Leader’s directive. *Six weeks.* In the larger scheme of things, that was not a particularly long period of time. The loss of Starkiller was a catastrophic blow to the resources of the First Order, and they would likely need even longer than that to recoup their losses and mobilize for another assault on the Resistance.

In turn, the Republic had greater casualties to contend with. They had lost *worlds,* not just a base, even one as substantial as Starkiller. The Resistance’s resources would be greatly taxed. Even if the remnants of their fleet were prepared to mount an attack, their supply lines and sources of funding were all but obliterated with the Hosnian System.

Despite historians’ propensity to condense timelines into major turning points, wars took time. It would likely be months before the First Order would be prepared to strike at the Resistance. Still, Hux had no desire to be removed from the efforts to assess the damage and move forward with the next steps to crush the New Republic. His place was on the bridge of his ship, not marooned at the estate for weeks on end.

And there was the matter of the girl from Jakku, Rey, and Luke Skywalker. Those problems were more Ren’s than his, but two Jedi would be great assets to the Resistance, and would make it all the harder for Hux to destroy.

His frown deepening, he glanced up at Ren. He was picking at his food, pushing it around his plate more than he was eating it. Hux considered asking if he didn’t care for it, but he assumed he once again would receive “It’s fine” in reply. That told him nothing and he had no interest in hearing it.

Instead, he said, “I’m no more pleased about this than you are, I assure you.”

Ren stabbed at his nearly untouched game hen. “I didn’t say you were.”

“No. You say almost nothing to me.”

“What do you want me to do?” Ren snapped. “Talk about the weather, the food, your house? Idle banter isn’t worth the breath.”

Hux shrugged. “It passes the time. And we have quite a bit of it now.”

“Wasted time.”

“Yes, well, there’s nothing to be done about it. Unless you plan on escaping.”

Ren scowled. “It’s not beyond my power. There are shuttles in Scaparus Port that could get us off world.”

“Us?” asked Hux, cocking a brow.
“You would stay here?”

“I’ve been ordered to.”

“And you always follow your orders.”

“We’ve already discussed the necessity for discipline in the ranks of a military force,” Hux said. “I don’t believe we need to repeat ourselves. Would that not be a waste of breath as well?”

“Not as much as the weather,” Ren grumbled.

“No, I’d imagine not. And there’s not much to talk about in terms of that anyway. It rains here. Often.”

“You don’t like it.”

“Actually I do.” Hux pulled back the cuff of his sleeve, exposing the fair skin of his wrist. “I don’t do well in sunnier climes. Jakku, for instance, would be an unfortunate place for me to reside.” He paused to take a sip of wine. “Is your own homeworld less dreary than this one?”

Ren stiffened. “No.”

Hux leaned forward, curious. “No, it’s just as deary, or no, you won’t answer my question?”

“I don’t have a homeworld.”

“Everyone was born somewhere, Ren.”

“That doesn’t make it your home.”

Hux didn’t disagree. He had spent his youth on Arkanis, but he had not felt as if his recent return was a homecoming. His quarters on the Finalizer were not homelike, either, but he would far rather be sleeping there with the hum of the engines in his ears than in his childhood bed.

“Then perhaps I should ask where you originated from,” he said. “Is that more appropriate?”

“What difference does it make?” asked Ren, dropping his fork so that it clattered onto his plate. “Where we come from doesn’t matter. It’s where we are now.”

“That’s rather idealistic of you,” Hux said. “We make ourselves what we are no matter our origins?”

“You don’t think it’s true.”

“Perhaps in rare cases, but in my experience, our pasts are not so easily done away with.”

“You mean that you became a general because your father was one.”

“My father never reached the rank of general,” Hux said. “He was a colonel before they made him commandant of the Imperial Academy. I surpassed that years ago.”

Ren eyed him. “Did you inherit your arrogance from your father?”

Hux chuckled. “I believe that is distilled from both of my parents. My mother is vain and haughty, and my father was nearly as bad.”
“The housekeeper said your father is dead,” said Ren, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms, “but that your mother still lives. Why isn’t she here?”

“She prefers a metropolitan life. After my father died, she left the estate.”

“Will you see her while you’re here?”

“No. Pantin City is halfway across the continent.” Hux looked up and around the room. “And even if we were permitted to leave this house—which I’m certain we’re not—I would not put us in a position where we could be recognized.”

“The people in the house already know we’re here.”

“And they know how to keep their mouths shut. Others do not.”

“You didn’t tell them who I am,” said Ren.

“They don’t need to know,” said Hux. “You are Lord Ren and my guest. That’s all the information they require to make sure your needs are seen to.”

“There’s little I need. Only a place to train and quiet to meditate.”

“And you’ll have both. I will go tell Harron to clear the garage now if you wish to do some of your training tonight.”

“It’s not necessary.”

“Very well. I’ll see to it in the morning.” Laying down his utensils, Hux finished his glass of wine and stood. Ren followed suit, abandoning his dinner. Hux looked down at his plate and then back up at him. “The chef will not be pleased if he has to be woken again at midnight because you’re hungry.”

“I thought they were to see to all my needs,” said Ren.

Hux was about to rebuke him, but he saw the smallest twitch at the corner of his mouth; the barest hint of a smile. “I believe you intended that as a joke.”

Ren’s lips moved again, but he quickly schooled his expression. “I don’t joke, General Hux.”

“No, of course not,” said Hux, dry. “How foolish of me to presume.”

Ren regarded him serenely, but just before he turned to leave, Hux could have sworn he saw a flash of amusement in his eyes.

“Goodnight, Lord Ren,” Hux said to his back.

The garage echoed with the rumble of the jumpspeeder’s engine as it started, making Hux wince. He was standing a few paces away, watching as Harron maneuvered it out of the space on the near side of the garage and over behind the other speeders. Harron had offered to allow Hux to move it, but he had declined. He remained in the area that had been cleared, looking over the bare concrete floor. Approximately four meters square, it was a far cry from the Finalizer’s fully equipped
training facilities, but it was the only place they had. Hux resolved to order a set of mats to cover
the floors, offering some cushioning, even if crude.

“Will that do, sir?” asked Harron after he had cut off the engine and stepped down from the
jumpspeeder.

“I believe it will,” Hux replied. “I will have to inquire with Lord Ren.”

“It will serve,” said Ren, rounding the corner into the garage. He was dressed simply, in soft, gray
pants and a burgundy shirt, both lightly speckled with wet spots from the rain. He acknowledged
Hux’s presence only in passing as he strode toward the nearest speeder, the two-seated blue one
that had belonged to Hux’s mother. It was still uncovered from the day before, when Hux had
looked it over.

“PR71 Spinnaker,” Ren said, reaching out to touch the rounded nose of the speeder. “Imperial era.”

“Right you are, my lord,” said Harron. “Manufactured here on Arkanis nearly fifteen years before
the fall.”

“It’s in excellent condition.”

Harron’s cheeks grew ruddy. “I’ve done my best to keep it that way, my lord. The mistress
wouldn’t have tolerated less.”

Hux gave a quiet, “Hmph.”

“What’s its top speed?” Ren asked Harron. “With half-meter thrusters and this repulsor system, it
has to be at least four hundred kilometers per hour.”

“Four hundred and eighty, in fact, my lord.”

“Four hundred and eighty,” Ren mused, running his hand along the seam of the hood that covered
the engine block. “Can I look?”

“Of course, my lord,” said Harron, though he caught himself and turned to Hux. “If it’s all right
with you, Master Hux.”

“Yes, yes,” he said.

Ren released the mechanism that held the hood in place and lifted it. The maze of components he
revealed was beyond Hux. He knew how to pilot a speeder, yes, but he relied on mechanics to keep
them running.

Ren examined the inner workings for a few moments. “This type of compressor hasn’t been used
in thirty years. And it’s almost impossible to get a hold of one now.”

“Don’t I know it, my lord,” said Harron. “This is the second one this speeder’s had in it. The
mistress ran the first one too hard. I had to replace it, what? Twenty years ago? Maybe. I can’t say I
recall. Had to chase halfway across the star system to find one, though. Hell of a thing.”

“This one’s in good shape,” said Ren, lifting a cap of some sort to peer at whatever it concealed.
Hux hadn’t the slightest notion. “It will last another decade.”

“More if she isn’t driven much,” Harron said, rubbing the back of his neck. “And she isn’t these
days. Not since the mistress left.”
Ren took a step back, placing his weight on his back foot as he appraised the speeder. “You could sell it. It has to be worth quadruple what was paid for it originally. There are collectors who would pay more than that, too, for one like this.”

“Well, that’s up to Master Hux, of course, my lord,” said Harron. The old man looked almost forlorn at the mere mention of it, however.

“I don’t plan on it just now,” Hux said. It was meant to placate Harron, but it was also true. The others—those that had been his father’s—he might have considered selling, but as long as his mother lived and had the opportunity to return to the estate, he would keep her speeder for her. It seemed sentimental, perhaps, but he simply didn’t want to contend with her complaints when she found it gone.

Closing the hood again, Ren looked over at the jumpspeeder. He rattled off another model number and a few specifics about its thrust capacity and cooling system as he approached it.

Harron raised his bushy eyebrows. “You know a fair bit about speeders, my lord. How did you come to it?”

Ren paused for a moment in his inspection. Hux could see the muscles in his neck move as he swallowed. “I used to work on them with...with my uncle.”

Hux tried to imagine Ren as a younger man bent over the front of a speeder, much as he had been before, with his uncle at his shoulder giving him direction. He had no face to put to the uncle, of course, so that part of him remained in shadow. Ren, though, he could see as a somewhat gawky boy, tall, but not yet grown into his shoulders.

“He must have been a good hand at it,” said Harron, drawing Hux’s attention back to the garage. “To teach you all that he did.”

“He was,” Ren said, resting a hand on the seat of the jumpspeeder. It suited him, Hux thought; sleek, dark, and a little forbidding.

Clearing his throat, Hux took a step toward him. “You said this space will do for your training, yes?”

Ren nodded curtly.

“Good. Have you given Lorna the list of supplies you need? They have to be ordered from Scaparus and will likely take a day or so to arrive.”

“She has it.”

“Excellent. I’ll see to it that the floor is padded as well.”

“This will do.”

Hux shook his head. “I insist on it. This place will at least resemble a training room, then.”

Ren shrugged. “Fine.”

Hux nearly rolled his eyes at the familiar response, but managed to check himself. “I’ll arrange to have the mats delivered as soon as possible so that you can start your training.”

“I’ll start now.”
“Ah, very well. We will leave you to it then.” Hux gestured to the old driver. “Harron?”

“He doesn’t have to go,” said Ren. “This is his garage. He won’t bother me.”

“All right.” Folding his hands behind his back, Hux turned away. As he was walking out, he heard Harron say, “Thank you for letting me stay on, my lord. I won’t be any trouble. I’ll stay quiet.”

“I don’t need silence for this,” Ren said. “And I’ll stay out of your way.”

Hux stopped, glancing back over his shoulder. Harron had disappeared, but Ren was standing at the center of his training space, facing away from Hux. Reaching around to the back of his shirt, he pulled it over his head and tossed it aside. There was none of the youthful gawkiness that Hux had envisioned about him. As he stretched his arms across his chest, Hux could see the smooth interplay of the muscles beneath the skin of his back.

He caught a brief glimpse of the wound on Ren’s side, but before he could assess how it was healing, Ren turned. His gaze fell on Hux, who had somehow come almost all the way around to face him. Hux stood frozen for a moment, seemingly pinned to the spot. Ren remained equally still, just watching him. Then, one of his brows rose, questioning. Unable to provide an answer, Hux whirled around and stormed toward the house.

Unsurprisingly, it was silent inside, the staff going about their business beyond the main corridors. Hux stood in the foyer, uncertain of how to spend the rest of the morning. He envied Ren his training. It would keep him busy for at least a few hours during the day, hours that Hux had yet to find a way to use. His options for amusements remained unchanged: reading, walking, contemplating his situation. The latter had no appeal whatsoever; he could do nothing to alter it. He was too restless to read, and a walk seemed equally tedious, even if it would allow him to be up and moving.

Giving a small sigh, he glanced up at the painting hanging adjacent to the door. It depicted a classical hunting scene: a party of men toting blaster rifles, three dogs sniffing the ground at their feet. Eyeing the rifles, Hux tried to remember where his father had kept his. He assumed they were in the den, where Brendol’s trophies were mounted. Hux set off down the hall toward it, his fingers suddenly itching for the weight of a blaster. It had been months since he had last shot. Things aboard the Finalizer and at Starkiller base had been too chaotic to allow for it.

The den was dark when Hux arrived, the illuminators off and the curtains drawn over the two large windows. Still, he could see the shadowed shapes of animal heads and pelts hanging on the walls. His mouth pinched in distaste. The conspicuous display of butchery, no matter how tastefully presented, had never been attractive to him. He didn’t object to hunting for sport, but disliked the culture of showmanship that surrounded it.

Crossing the room, he pulled open the drapes. Unusually bright sunlight shone in, forming long rectangles on the black pelt that covered the center of the floor. The light reflected in the glass of the blaster cabinet, its face open to show off the array of rifles and pistols that Hux’s father had taken so much pride in. Like the speeders, many of them could be considered antiques. Hux recognized the duty pistol that his father had carried in the early days of his career in the Imperial army. Beside it were several others, some with longer barrels and others with contoured grips. They had likely been custom manufactured to suit Brendol’s specifications.

The rifles were arranged on the right side of the cabinet, tucked into velvet-lined stalls. There were three hunting blasters, powerful and meant to be fired at a medium range. Hux looked past them, however, his eyes drawn to the largest rifle. Brendol had rarely used it, as it was not as useful for game. It was meant to penetrate shields and armor at eight hundred meters.
Hux pulled on the handle of the cabinet door, only to find it locked. As he bent to examine it, he saw the cleverly disguised thumbprint scanner set into the wood. He didn’t expect to have access, and was not surprised when a small red light flashed as he pressed his thumb against it. It seemed unlikely that no one had touched the rifles since his father’s death—they were clean and free of dust—so there had to be someone in the house who could open the cabinet. Hux had little doubt about who it was.

He found Lorna in the summer parlor. She was arranging a vase of flowers on the sideboard.

“Who exactly are those for?” he asked, leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed.

“Anyone who might pass through the room,” she replied as she pulled a sprig of white blossoms out from the edge of the bouquet and slid it into the middle.

“I don’t think Ren and I will be having afternoon tea here as Mother used to do with her friends.”

Lorna looked unperturbed. “Well, you’re here now, so why shouldn’t the room be ready for you?”

“No detail escapes you, does it?”

“No, Master Hux, it doesn’t.” Giving the flowers a last touch, she stepped back and turned to him.

“You need something. What is it?”

“I’d like to do some shooting.”

“And your father’s blasters are locked away.”

“I’m afraid so, though they’ve clearly been cared for. Do you hire someone to clean them once a year?”

“Twice,” she said. “The proprietor of the arms shop in Scaparus takes care of it. He’s offered to buy them at rather exorbitant prices several times.”

“I’ve no doubt,” said Hux. “I assume, then, that you can open the cabinet.”

She nodded. “I’ll have your print indexed so that you can do so as well. The blasters belong to you now, after all.”

“Another gift from Father in his will?”

Lorna cocked her head. “Did the solicitor never write to you?”

“Years ago, when Father died. Why?”

“Because he deeded the entire estate to you.”

Hux blinked, surprised. “What? All the property belongs to Mother.”

“No,” said Lorna. “This house belongs to you.” She rested her hands on the back of the sofa, tracing the upholstery with her forefinger. “And your father asked me to keep it for you.”

Hux went to her, laying his hands alongside hers. “You could have gone to Pantin with Mother, but you stayed in an empty house because he asked you to?”

“Don’t sound so shocked,” she said. “You might not always have gotten on with your father, but he was a good man in his way. I respected him and his wishes.” She smiled up at Hux. “And you did
“come back, as he said you would.”

“Said that, did he?”

“On the day you left. He came looking for you, asking when you were coming to dinner. I had to
 tell him you’d gone already.”

Hux remembered that day vividly. His mother had planned an extravagant dinner party to celebrate
his graduation from the Academy. She had invited acquaintances from his cohort and some of her
friends whose adult children she, for some reason, considered to be Hux’s friends. In his youth, he
had never been particularly fond of any of them, relying mainly on the Academy’s librarian (and
his lover), Arcan Wile, for companionship.

Hux had been prepared to sit through the dinner for his mother’s benefit, but an hour before it was
to begin, his father had called him into his study. Brendol had charged at him as soon as he arrived,
brandishing a sheet of plastivellum.

“What is the meaning of this, boy?” he demanded. “The riflery corps?”

Hux could only assume the ‘vellum sheet was the dispatch that described his first commission:
lieutenant and chief rifleman for the Fourteenth Combat Division on Artif Gamma in the Unknown
Regions. Holding his hands stiff at his sides, he said, “I wanted an active posting, sir.”

“You chose this?” Brendol said, his face reddening. “You stupid boy, I’d secured a place for you
aboard the Inquisitor. You would report directly to the First Commander. You could make that
rank yourself in eight, maybe ten years.” He slapped the ‘vellum on his desk. “With this you’ll
never get seen by senior leadership. Is that what you want? Obscurity?”

“I want to command,” said Hux, firm, “but that requires experience. And before you even say it,
simulations are not enough.”

Brendol scowled. “You’ll get experience on a starship.”

“Some, but how am I supposed to give orders to my soldiers if I’ve never been one myself?”

“You’re not a common infantryman. You were raised to lead.”

“I’m going to. I’ll have twenty men under my command, and that’s only to start. I wouldn’t have
anyone as a lieutenant on the bloody Inquisitor. I’d be little more than an ensign to the First
Commander’s attendants.”

“At least you would be able to study how true commanders behave,” said Brendol. “You’ll never
get that dragging a squadron of green recruits through the jungle on Artif.”

Hux lifted his chin. “I want time on the ground. I want to fight.”

His father scoffed. “That’s what troopers are for. Think, boy, about what this is going to mean for
your career, for our name.”

“Oh, I see. This isn’t about me.”

“Of course, it is.”

“No,” Hux snapped. “You want me to take a post on a starship because it’s visible. You want to
put me on display, the Hux heir following in the footsteps of his illustrious father.” He shook his
head, disgusted. “I will not be a toadying lackey just because it suits your delusions of what is necessary to become someone in the Order.”

“Delusions?” Brendol roared, grabbing the collar of Hux’s shirt and shoving him back against the door. “You know nothing about what I did to get where I am. Ungrateful whelp, you wouldn’t have anything without me.”

Reaching up, Hux wiped his cheek, where his father’s saliva had landed as he spoke. “And you would have much less without Mother’s fortune. You’d still be commandant, yes, but you wouldn’t be on the committees, have the clout if she hadn’t bought it for you.” Pain exploded in the right side of his face, the force of the blow turning it to the left.

Brendol took a step away, rubbing the back of his hand. “Get out.”

“Gladly,” Hux said, as he reached for the handle and opened the door. He had gone from the study to his room, where he had changed out of his fine suit—it had been purchased specifically for the party that night—and into plainclothes. He had packed a few necessary items in a bag and thrown it over his shoulder. He left the rest of his extensive wardrobe behind, heading for the front door.

On his way, he had encountered Lorna. She had looked him over, from his hastily tied shoes to the cheek that was still red from his father’s backhanded slap, and said, “Harron will take you into town, young master.” She had led the way to the garage. As Harron started the speeder, Lorna had caught Hux’s arm. “What shall I tell them?”

“I don’t care,” Hux replied. “I’m not coming back here.” Pulling away from Lorna’s grip, he had stepped up into the speeder and slammed the door.

“I spoke harshly to you that day,” he said to her as they stood in the parlor. “I apologize.”

“I never faulted you for that,” said Lorna. “It was the first time a row between you and your father had come to blows. You had every right to be angry.”

Hux conceded that. “You said he told you he believed I would come back?”

“He did. Though, it was something along the lines of you seeing sense.”

“Of course he thought I would come around to his way of thinking. He considered himself infallible.”

Lorna sighed. “He may not have said it in as many words, but he did want the best for you. He just thought the best could only be had by his means.”

Hux turned, leaning back against the sofa. “And he died without seeing that he was wrong.”

“He wouldn’t have liked that, but he would have been proud to see you succeed. We’re all proud of you.”

He offered a wan smile, but let her words fall without reply.

“Well, then,” she said. “Let’s go to the den and see about those blasters. I’m afraid we don’t have any of the targets your father used to use, but I can order new ones from town.”

Hux was about to decline, thinking that he could find some bioplas storage containers from the kitchen to use as targets for the day, but then he considered the coming weeks; if he wanted to shoot again—which he likely would—he would need something more substantial, something that
could take more than one plasma bolt before collapsing.

“Please do,” he said.

Lorna nodded. “Certainly. I’ll call down right after we’re finished here and have them delivered with Lord Ren’s supplies tomorrow.”

“Were there a great number of things be required?”

“No. In fact, there were only two: a heavy boxing bag and wooden sword of some sort. I ordered two of those just in case he breaks one.”

“Very thoughtful of you.”

“More practical,” she said. “It seems he breaks things quite easily.”

Hux stifled a laugh. “Yes, it does, doesn’t it?”

When they entered the den, Lorna made quick work of the lock. “Leave it open for now. I’ll have your print entered into the database later today.”

Hux thanked her as she went out. Though he was tempted to take the long-range rifle out, he decided against it. A single bolt from it would destroy any target he could find at that moment. Blasters of that caliber could easily split a man’s head. Instead, he chose a blaster with an inlaid stock, likely a favorite of his father’s. Clicking the magazine display, he saw that it was fully charged with plasma. Out of habit, he checked that the safety was on and then leaned it against his shoulder as he left the room.

He stopped by the kitchen to collect a few bioplas containers to shoot at before venturing outside. The chef had been more than willing to part with them; it saved his assistant a trip to the waste compactor. Hux set them up at varying distances in the back garden before retreating about a hundred meters to set up his shots.

He picked off the one nearest him first, testing the feel of the rifle. It was more cumbersome than a newer blaster would have been, but fired precisely. Pleased, Hux fired at a container a half a meter back from the first. It flew back, singed and smoking slightly as the bioplas burned. He shot six more in quick succession to test his speed as well as accuracy. He struck all but the last, which was almost two hundred meters from where he stood. Pausing to take a breath, he sighted along the barrel more cautiously. The impact of the bolt knocked the container back a meter and left a black mark on the side.

He reset the containers and shot them again, reset and shot, reset and shot until nothing remained of them but charred bits. By then the sun was high in the afternoon sky, remarkably still uncovered by clouds. Collecting the remnant of his targets, he returned to the house.

After he had placed the rifle back in its case—making sure to leave the cabinet door open—he went to his room to wash his hands. He cursed as he caught sight of himself in the mirror. The skin over his cheekbones and the bridge of his nose was just slightly redder than it had been before. It wasn’t a severe burn, but he would have be more cautious about spending time outdoors. He had not been exposed to unfiltered UV rays in months, perhaps even more than a year. Starships had natural light illuminators, but none that would damage the skin as the light of a sun would.

A sun the size of that Arkanis orbited would have given Starkiller enough power to destroy the whole system. One part of Hux took a vindictive sort of pleasure in the thought of wiping out the estate, the Academy, and everything else he had grown to despise in the years he had spent there,
but he knew that the planet was of use to the First Order. And it certainly would have been a shame to lose all the wineries.

Going to the veranda, he looked out over the neighboring vineyards. He knew very little about the production of wine, only that the varieties of grapes grown in this part of the continent had been specially engineered to withstand the frequent rains. With ample time at his disposal, he resolved to learn more about it. Perhaps there was a book in the library that dealt with the subject. If there was, he would take it to the summer parlor and read. Someone had to appreciate Lorna’s flowers.

The rifle targets did arrive the next day, along with the items Ren had requested. Hux inquired at dinner that night about whether they were adequate.

“Yes,” Ren said, hardly looking up from the stew he was eating. Since he had begun training again, his appetite had returned. He had finished everything on his plate the evening before and was already well on his way to doing the same that night. His table manners had improved little, but Hux had learned to overlook it. As long as he was eating, that was satisfactory enough.

“Good,” said Hux. “If there’s anything else-”

“I’ll speak to you. I know.”

Little more was said after that. Ren left the table first, leaving Hux to finish his wine alone. The conversations over the next two meals were equally sparse. While Hux had never considered himself overly garrulous, he did find that the sullen silences were beginning to wear on him.

“Tell me,” he said as they sat at the dining table on the eighth day of their residence, “what manner of skills are required to become a Knight of Ren?”

Ren paused with a forkful of steak poised just at the level of his mouth. “What?”

“There must be something the Supreme Leader seeks when selecting his elite guard,” said Hux. “That is what you are, is it not?”

“No.”

“Then what is it that you and your Knights do? Aside from tracking Jedi.”

“Whatever’s necessary.”

Hux stirred the wine around in his glass. “How appropriately vague. Are you sworn to secrecy or do you enjoy being deliberately cryptic about these matters?”

Ren shot him a dark look. “Why are you asking if you think I won’t answer?”

“Perhaps it’s my insatiable curiosity,” said Hux, wry.

Biting the meat from his fork, Ren chewed thoughtfully. “You are.”

“I am what?” Hux asked.

“Curious. About the Knights.” He swallowed, leaning forward just slightly. “About me.”
Hux recognized the quirk at the corner of his mouth; a minute smile. Arching a brow, Hux said, “Perhaps. Though if you’re going to continue to avoid my questions, I see no reason in asking them.”

“But you will,” said Ren. “You’ll persist until you get the answers you want or I refuse you outright.”

Hux ground his teeth. “You flatter yourself if you think my interest in you is that great. I was just—”

“Making conversation?” Ren asked, looking distinctly smug.

Hux’s scowl was met with low chuckle, which only served to rancle him further. “Very well,” he said, taking up his utensils again. “Let’s return to sitting in silence and glowering at each other, shall we?” He focused on his plate, slicing through the tender filet in quick strokes with his knife. He could feel Ren watching him, but he disregarded it. He popped the steak into his mouth, already cutting the next piece as he chewed.

“Our skills vary.”

Hux paused, but didn’t look up.

Ren continued, “No one among the Knights shares the same training. We all have tasks suited to us. We fight together on occasion, but not often. The Supreme Leader rarely calls for us all at once.”

Hux licked his lips, remaining quiet despite the questions that were already forming in his mind.

“There are six others,” said Ren. “I don’t know where they are or anything about their current missions. I was the only one sent to find Skywalker.” He spat the name out.

When Hux glanced up, he could see fury in Ren’s expression, but there was something else simmering beneath it. Disappointment, perhaps. Regret. Whatever it was, it was hurriedly masked when Ren realized Hux was looking at him again.

“Do the others share your particular abilities?”

“No. They don’t wield the Force.”

Hux folded his hands at the edge of the table. “I was under the impression that you led the Knights. Was I mistaken in that?”

“I’ve led them in battle before,” Ren said, “but I’m not their commander. We’re not like your army.”

“No, you’re certainly not.”

“You say that as if it’s an insult.”

“I didn’t mean it as such,” said Hux. “I’m aware that not all combat maneuvers are best handled by a platoon of troopers.”

“I’d think so, considering your service record.”

Hux squinted, brackish. “You read my service record? When?”

“When I first came aboard the Finalizer,” said Ren.
“And what did you discover?”

“You ran a small sniper patrol. Unconventional warfare.” Picking up his water glass, he shrugged. “I didn’t expect that. The other generals are...not like you.”

Hux regarded him coolly. “Was *that* meant as an insult?”

Ren held his gaze. “No. You’re better than them.”

The bluntness of the compliment caught Hux off guard. He had no illusions about his abilities, no false modesty, and over the years he had grown used to being lauded by colleagues and superiors. Praise from any of them no longer caused his chest to tighten with pride. Yet, he felt its distinct twinge then at Ren’s words.

“Did you ever fight close combat?” Ren asked.

Hux gave him a sidelong look. “As a sniper?”

“If you were ambushed-”

“We never botched a mission badly enough to land ourselves in a skirmish.”

“So, you can’t fight hand-to-hand.”

“I went through basic training like any other cadet. Passed my martial trials.”

“Were you good?”

“Middling,” Hux admitted. “Why do you ask?”

Ren made a noncommittal noise.

Hux let it lie. “Did you chose a saber as your weapon or is it part and parcel to your training in the Force?”

“It’s customary,” Ren said flatly. He turned to his plate, clearly not intending to elaborate.

Hux smiled slyly as he asked, “Are you good?”

Ren’s eyes flashed as he looked up. “Very.”

“You call the Supreme Leader your master. Did he teach you?”

“No,” said Ren, his voice strained. “I learned...before I became his apprentice.”

Hux was reminded of the uncle Ren had spoken of. It was the only allusion he had ever made to his past, to a life that preceded his apprenticeship with Snoke. If he had been old enough to tinker with speeders then, it seemed likely that he had learned swordplay at that time as well. That had certain implications about the nature of his family and their affinity for the Force, which, if Hux understood the legends correctly, often ran in bloodlines. The question burned at the back of his throat, but he swallowed it down. This was not the time to ask; he would be overstepping and Ren would likely shut down completely.

“Indeed,” Hux said. “You lost your lightsaber on Starkiller. I assume you’ll need another, but you told me you can’t purchase one. How will you come by it?”
“I have to build it.”

“Is it a complicated process?”

“Yes.”

“Is it something you could do here? We have time enough, I’m sure.”

Ren’s brows drew together. “Parts of it, but I’d still be missing an essential component. I can’t get it on this world.”

“I see.” He returned to his steak, taking another bite.

“You’re not going to ask what it is?” said Ren as he pushed his empty plate back an inch or so.

“Can you tell me?”

“Saber technology isn’t a secret. You could build one yourself.”

“To what end? I’ve never used a sword.”

“You can learn.”

“Are you offering to teach me?” Hux asked.

“We have time enough,” Ren replied.

Hux considered. He had little use for fencing; he would never wield a real blade. However, the idea intrigued him, and it would certainly be a welcome respite from the tedium of the days at the estate. Nodding once, he said, “All right.”

Hux woke to pounding on his door. “Just one bloody minute,” he called as he rolled out of bed. The knocking didn’t stop as he tugged on his pants and stalked over the the door. He pulled it open with a scowl. “What the hell is going on?”

Ren, dressed in his training clothes, his hair pulled into a knot at the back of his head, was standing in the hall across from him. “I’ve been waiting for three hours.”

Hux blinked at him. “What?”

Ren gave him an exasperated look.

Hux rubbed his forehead, his mind still half clouded with sleep. He glanced at the digital chronometer on his bedside table. It read 0700. “You were...waiting for me?” he asked Ren. “Since before dawn?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I told you we would start today. With saber training.”
Hux recalled that. After they had finished their dinner the night before, they had agreed to meet the next day for Hux’s first fencing lesson. What they had not decided, though, was when. Ren, it seemed, believed that was first thing in the morning. Hux strongly disagreed.

“I thought we might wait until after lunch,” he said.

“No.”

“No,” Hux repeated.

“Get dressed,” said Ren.

“Fine. Give me five minutes.” He slammed the door in Ren’s face. Going to the closet, he searched until he found a suitable shirt. The boots Lorna had acquired for him were heavier than he preferred for exercise, but he put them on anyway.

When he emerged from his bedroom, Ren was gone. Feelix was in his place, carrying a tray with Hux’s breakfast. His stomach rumbled appreciatively. However, he did not believe Ren was in the mood to wait much longer, so he grabbed a piece of toast from the tray and set off down the hall.

The main door to the garage was open, leaving the training space open to the elements. Fortunately, the rain was little more than a mist. Ren stood at the center of the padded floor, a wooden sword with a slight curve to the “blade” in his right hand. He spun it deftly, then swung it up for a quick blow at the heavy boxing bag. It landed with a heavy thunk.

“Take those off,” he said, gesturing to Hux’s boots as he stepped inside.

Hux dropped the boots next to Ren’s beside the mats. As he approached, Ren tossed the bokken to him. He caught it by the blade, earning him a disdainful look.

“You’d have lost your fingers if you did that with a lightsaber,” Ren said as he picked up the second bokken.

“Fortunately this isn’t one, then,” said Hux, curt. Moving his hand down, he took the bokken the grip. He barely had time to get the blade up to block Ren’s strike. “What the hell was that?” he snarled.

“A test of your reflexes,” Ren replied. “You turned to the weapon first, rather than stepping back. That’s good.”

“I sincerely hope you don’t intend to employ a ‘learning by doing’ method. If you do, at least show me how to hold the damn thing first.”

Ren must have found that amusing, since he smiled broadly. Hux was struck by the transformation in his features. His teeth flashed white against pink lips. The dourness left his eyes, their edges crinkled. There was a boyish humor in his face that Hux would not have believed belonged to Kylo Ren if not for the slightly mocking edge to his grin.

“We’ll start there, then,” he said.

Holding the bokken up at the level of his chest, Ren placed his right hand near the collar at the top of the grip and his left just below it, closer to the pommel. “Begin with two hands. You can fight with one, too, but that comes later.”
Hux mimicked the grip on his own bokken.

“Not so tight,” said Ren. He moved his fingers, demonstrating. Hux loosened his hold. “The balance comes from your palms. The fingers are just there to keep the blade in your hand.” He guided the tip of the bokken from side to side, releasing his fingers as the pommele pressed against the opposite palm. He tapped the blade against Hux’s, indicating that he should do the same.

Hux felt foolish miming what Ren was doing; it had been many years since he had started learning something that was completely unfamiliar to him. He was unaccustomed to being a novice. He stilled when Ren stepped across the space between them and turned to face the same direction as Hux.

“The first principle of striking is to cut through your target. You don’t imagine hitting the shoulder if that’s where you intend to hit him. Imagine cutting the ribs on the opposite side, where the blade would exit if it went through him. Follow through.” Ren slashed the bokken down across the front of his body, stopping only when his forearms were resting against his lower abdomen and hips.

Hux did the same, albeit somewhat slower.

“Don’t hold back,” said Ren. “You’ve had hand-to-hand training. They taught you to follow through with your blows?”

“Yes.”

“Then do it.”

Hux glared at him, but bit back any retort. Taking a breath, he reset his form, moved his fingers on the hilt of the bokken, and then swung.

“Better,” said Ren. “Try the other side.”

Hux did, though his range of motion was slightly more limited.

Ren tapped his left arm. “Your non-dominant side will be weaker for a while. Come straight down now.”

Hux slashed the wooden sword down until the tip struck the mats.

Ren nodded. “You followed through.”

Hux rolled his eyes. “Yes, as directed.”

Ren called out strikes, watching Hux execute them until he seemed satisfied. Then he showed him another starting position, this one called a low guard. From there Hux could swing the bokken up, as if through the lower ribs of his opponent and out through his shoulder. The motions were repetitive, but Hux knew what it was to to drill the basics: perform the same movements until the body learned to do it without thinking, until it felt familiar. Though the bokken weighed no more than three kilograms, the muscles of his arms soon began to fatigue.

After perhaps three quarters of an hour, Ren said, “That’s enough for now.”

Hux dropped the tip of the bokken onto the mats and leaned on it. “I didn’t even take a step from this spot.”

“We’ll start with footwork tomorrow.”
“Is it similar to a hand-to-hand stance?” Hux asked.

Ren set his right foot slightly ahead of the left and bent his knees. He held the bokken up at middle guard at the center of his chest. “A little wider.”

Hux took up the same position. As he swung the bokken, Ren snapped his blade out to meet it. Startled, Hux immediately pulled his weapon back.

Ren frowned at him. “Follow through. Again.”

Hux struck, this time envisioning his bokken passing through Ren’s. The impact was harder; Hux felt it in the bones of his hands.

“Good,” said Ren. “When you hit next time, step your left foot forward. Put the momentum into the blow.”

Hux swung the sword straight down. Ren stepped to the side, bringing his crossed wrists up over his face and catching Hux’s blade on his. With a low growl, he shoved Hux back a pace. Hux stumbled, but managed to catch himself and settle back into a fighter’s crouch, his bokken at low guard.

Ren’s smile was predatory. “Come again.”

“What about the footwork?” Hux asked.

“It’s just one step.”

It was, but Hux was not as comfortable with striking in motion. He took a moment to set up and check his form, and then lunged forward. This time Ren knocked his sword the side with a sweeping block. It sent the blade spinning from Hux’s hands.

“Shit,” he grumbled, going to pick it up.

“Leave it,” said Ren. He tossed his own weapon to the side and held up his fists. “Hit me.”

Hux looked at him warily. “It’s been years since I’ve sparred.”

Ren bounced up on his toes. “I’ll start slowly.”

“Fine.” Putting up his own fisted hands, Hux took a step toward him.

Ren punched first, a jab at Hux’s left. He countered it with his forearm, though he caught the blow on the bone, jarring it. He hissed, falling back a step. Ren gave him no time to recover; he charged forward. Hux feinted to the side, Ren’s fist nearly brushing his ear.

“You’re quick,” Ren said.

“I had to be,” said Hux. “Not built to take hits. So I got out of the way.”

“You’ll be fast with a blade, too, if you can learn to be accurate.”

Hux jabbed at Ren’s side, striking just below his ribs. He grunted and retaliated, catching Hux in the chin. Hux cursed. “This is real match?” he asked, working his jaw to dispel in pain.

Reaching out, Ren grabbed Hux’s arm and twisted it, pinning him against his side. “Every match is real.”
“Very well,” Hux ground out as he drove his elbow into Ren’s gut. Ren exhaled sharply and released him. Hux spun away. His next assault was fast and sharp, though Ren managed to counter it.

They circled each other, charging and retreating, dodging and blocking strikes. Hux felt a rivulet of sweat fall down his neck as they paused a few paces apart. He flinched as Ren feinted to the right, ducking the opposite and moving almost directly into his path. Catching Hux’s wrist, Ren pulled him in. He bent, putting his shoulder into Hux’s middle. The world spun as Hux was flipped over Ren’s back and thrown onto the mats at his feet.

He went to roll away, but Ren was too fast. He pinned Hux’s arms over his head and knelt astride his hips. He pressed his chest against Hux’s.

“Yield?” he asked, his face close enough to for Hux to feel his breath on his skin.

Hux struggled, but Ren held him fast. “Yield,” he conceded.

Ren didn’t back off immediately. He hovered above Hux, scanning his face. Hux could feel the heat of his body, see the light sheen of sweat on his arms and shoulders. His hair was coming loose from the tail, and the strands swayed slightly as Hux breathed. The air stuck in his lungs, though, as Ren licked his lower lip, his teeth catching it slightly.

Seeming to read the response, Ren adjusted his grip on Hux’s wrists, moving a centimeter closer so that their noses were nearly touching. Hux felt the blood in his stomach drop lower.

“Do you plan on releasing me?” he managed to say, the words stilted.

Ren’s nostrils flared, but he drew away. As he got to his feet, he held out his hand. Hux took it and allowed Ren to pull him up. They stood close together for a moment, their hands trapped between them. Ren’s eyes were dark.

“Thank you for the lesson,” Hux said.

Ren nodded and let go of him, stepping back. He went to collect the bokken they had cast aside. Hux watched him in silence, feeling rooted to the spot.

“Are you coming inside?” he asked.

Ren turned back to him, brushing the loose locks of hair back from his forehead. “Later. I still have drills to do.”

“Yes, of course,” said Hux. Going to the edge of the mats, he retrieved his boots and pulled them on. He could feel Ren’s gaze on him as he stooped to tie the laces. “Am I expected to be here at 0700 tomorrow?”

“0800 will do,” said Ren, the corners of his mouth turning up.

“Right,” Hux said. “Until then.”

“Yes.”

With a final nod, Hux spun and strode out of the garage.
Chapter Four

The sharp snap of wood striking wood punctuated the steady fall of rain on the roof of the garage. Ren’s attack had come hard and fast, forcing Hux to draw his bokken up in a high parry that he barely managed to execute in time. Falling back a step, he slid the weapon out from under Ren’s. He pivoted to the left, swinging hard at Ren’s shoulder. Ren ducked, evading the blow easily, but Hux didn’t back down; he advanced with a slashing strike. Ren jumped to the side, tucked, and rolled across the mats, coming up deftly into a combat stance a few paces away. Breathing hard, Hux dropped the tip of his bokken down by his feet and leaned into it.

“I take it I’ll learn that later,” he said, sardonic.

One side of Ren’s mouth curved up as he straightened. “Much later.”

In the two days that had passed since his initial lesson, Hux had learned the essentials of footwork and methods of attack. They still went slowly enough for him to manage the steps and swings without compromising his form, but Ren was, as far as Hux could decipher, satisfied with his progress. However, he was still far from mastering more than the most basic techniques.

A beep from the chronometer Hux wore on his wrist drew his attention. Glancing down, he saw that it was 1035—they had been training for two and a half hours—but also that he had an incoming transmission.

“What is it?” Ren asked, setting his bokken over the back of his neck and across his shoulders.

Hux wiped his damp brow, pushing aside the strands of hair that had stuck to it. “A message.”

Ren crossed the distance between them in two strides. “From the Supreme Leader?”

“Doubtful. I imagine it’s from Phasma. She’s due to send a report from the Finalizer.”

“She’s still aboard?”

“Presumably,” said Hux. “Her division is there and she’s been stationed with them for as long as I’ve been in command.”

Was in command. He frowned at that. He had thought remarkably little about his absence from his post in the past few days, which disconcerted him. He had sought distractions in saber training and in the afternoons he spent target shooting, but he had not expected them to be particularly effective. A certain sense of regret roiled in his gut at the notion of letting his responsibilities fall by the wayside in favor of trivial pastimes.

Ren pressed him further. “Have they deployed again?”

“I don’t know,” Hux replied, brusque. “Let me hear the report and perhaps I’ll be able to tell you.”

“I want to hear it, too.”
“I’m not certain it’s from Phasma. It could be a personal matter.” He doubted that, though.

“Then I’ll leave,” said Ren. “But if she has news of Skywalker or the girl—”

“You need to know it.”

Ren looked at him darkly. “Yes.”

“I don’t believe she’s privy to that sort of information,” said Hux.

“If there’s even the slightest chance she knows something,” Ren growled, “I have to be there to hear it.”

Hux held up a hand, capitulating. “All right.”

They left their bokken on the table in the corner of the training space. Hux grimaced as he looked out at the rain pouring down on the gravel drive outside the main door of the garage. It was likely their clothes would be soaked through by the time they reached the house.

“Come on,” said Ren as he strode out into the storm. Hux followed him.

They left a trail of wet footprints as they entered through the front door and wound their way through the corridors to the study. Hux powered on the console at the desk and brought up the message. It was heavily encrypted, but when he had entered his personal passcodes, the projector flickered to life, rendering an image of Captain Phasma standing in her duty fatigues with her hands behind her back.

She began with the date and time the message had been recorded—a few hours earlier—before addressing Hux. “General, as requested, I’ve compiled a status report of the situation aboard the Finalizer. We are currently docked at the fleet staging center in Ektal System in the Unknown Regions and have been since you disembarked. Our present mission prerogatives are to maintain our position and reconstitute our trooper ranks after the losses we sustained at Starkiller. I am overseeing the addition of new troops. It is progressing as expected.

“Commander Odar has remained executive officer and is performing his duties admirably. He attended a strategy meeting with several of the Order’s generals yesterday. I was not present and cannot speak to the matters discussed. I’m certain you will be caught up when you return.”

Hux bristled at the thought of Odar taking part in critical sessions in his stead. The man was an acceptable first officer, but he had no place planning the Order’s next moves with the senior leadership.

“We’ve received no news of when we will be leaving the staging center,” Phasma continued. “The latest intelligence suggests that the Resistance is struggling to recover from the annihilation of the Hosnian System. As of now, none of our destroyers have been sent to pursue them.”

That Hux also disliked. Though the main offensive may not take place for weeks or months yet, sending at least one ship out to make operations more difficult for the Resistance would have been prudent. If he was in command, it would have been his first suggestion to the other generals and to the Supreme Leader.

“As soon as our spies provide us with more detailed information,” said Phasma, “I will make sure it reaches you. I’ll contact you again if anything changes.” She bent forward and disengaged the recorder. The projector went dark.
Ren slammed his fist down on the desktop. “Dammit! Nothing about the map to Skywalker or the girl.”

Hux came around the desk, having shut down the console. “I did warn you that she might not—”

“I know what you said,” Ren snapped. He began to pace, pushing his fingers through his wet hair. “This is absurd. I should be following them. They could be anywhere in the galaxy by now.”

Hux pursed his lips. “Could you have tracked them from Starkiller? The implosion of the planet likely wiped out any traces of their energy trail. And if they got to lightspeed, they would disappear. And we had already lost the map.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Ren demanded, rounding on him. “They escaped from me.” His face twisted with fury. “I should have killed the girl when I had the chance.”

“But if she was our only key to finding Skywalker,” said Hux, “we needed her alive.”

“She would never have told us.”

“You could have extracted the location from her, could you not? You said you could get into my mind if you wished to. Why not hers?”

“I tried,” said Ren. “She was strong enough to resist me.”

Hux balked. Ren had said that the girl was powerful, albeit untrained, but Hux had not expected her to be capable enough to remain unbroken under his interrogation. “I see.”

“You don’t. You have no understanding of the Force.”

“You’re right,” said Hux, “but I do understand failure. My troopers were sent to get the droid, and I…” He paused, his expression scornful. “I was unable to protect the Order’s greatest weapon.”

“If you expect me to have sympathy for you, then you’re a fool.”

Hux scoffed. “I don’t want your pity, Ren. Nor do I need it. I may have made mistakes, but I have no intention of scurrying off with my tail between my legs. I plan to resume my post and lead our soldiers to crush the Resistance and the Republic.”

“And when I find Skywalker again, I will kill him.”

“What do you mean ‘again?’” said Hux, brows rising. “You’ve known his location before?”

Ren stilled, his back to Hux. “I did once.”

“And you told no one of this?”

“Leader Snoke knows.” He turned, pinning Hux with his gaze. “But it doesn’t matter. Skywalker’s long since moved on.”

Hux blinked at him. Perhaps the location was no longer relevant to their search, but it wasn’t inconsequential. It meant something to Ren. Hux could discern that much from the tension in him.

“What do you know about him?” Hux asked. “Skywalker.”

A muscle in Ren’s jaw twitched as he clenched it. “He’s the last Jedi master in the galaxy.”
“I’m not an imbecile, Ren. I’m not going to believe that’s the extent of your knowledge.”

“It’s not your concern.”

“The hell it isn’t,” Hux barked, taking a step toward him. “It’s crucial to the success of the First Order’s campaign against the New Republic. Tell me.”

“No.”

Hux’s hands curled into fists. “Petulant child,” he said under his breath. In a second, he was across the room, his back slammed against the bookshelf. A phantom hand closed around his throat, constricting painfully.

“Say that again,” Ren snarled. Hux felt him tighten the hold on his neck even though he still stood a meter away.

“Foolish boy,” Hux managed to croak.

Flicking his wrist, Ren threw him down. Hux landed hard, grunting in pain as his knees struck the wood floor.

“I could kill you,” Ren said.

Hux gave a ragged laugh. “I’ve no doubt. But you won’t. The Supreme Leader would be most displeased.”

“You think he’d protect you after Starkiller? You may have been favored before, but now…”

That barb stung. However, if Snoke had intended to have him executed or brought before a tribunal, he would have done it already. And threats from Ren did nothing to intimidate him.

Hux got shakily to his feet. “I’m aware that I’m in a precarious position when it comes to Snoke’s favor, but so are you.”

Ren scowled, but he didn’t contradict him.

Assuming their conversation had reached an end, Hux made for the door. He held it open, tipping his head toward the hall. Ren brushed past him. They said nothing by way of parting as they went to their rooms.

Hux left his training clothes in a pile on the floor as he stepped into the shower a few minutes later. Standing under the spray, he lifted his fingers to his throat. It was tender, but the skin was unbruised. He was glad for that; it would be have been uncomfortable explaining the marks to Lorna. And she most certainly would have asked.

“You have no understanding of the Force,” Ren had said. That was true enough. Before Ren had arrived on the _Finalizer_, Hux had assumed it was a myth or had at least been overstated in the legends of the Old Republic. Apparently it had not been, and Hux was sure he had only seen the parlor tricks. Ren likely could have crushed his windpipe, even snapped his neck with little more than a gesture. Perhaps that should have inspired Hux to be more cautious, to avoid provoking him, but instead anger simmered through him at the thought of ceding to Ren’s volatile moods.

Taking the soap, Hux began to scrub away the sweat from training. It struck him that the Ren who had been guiding him in his saber drills that morning was altogether different from the man who had nearly choked him unconscious in the study. Ren was a demanding tutor and his corrections
were always firm, but he wasn’t harsh or mocking of Hux’s inexperience. And his sullenness seemed to fade when he picked up his bokken.

When he fought, he moved with a fluid agility that Hux could never hope to emulate. He had complete control over all of his movements, from the shortest step to the most powerful blows. As Hux watched him demonstrate combinations, he could not help but envision him unleashed in a true fight. It would be elegant carnage as he cut his opponents down.

Despite the heat of the water, Hux felt his skin prickle and sensitize. Killing, especially when done expertly, had a carnality about it that he savored. He had recognized it as a young riflery lieutenant on his first assignment. He had been waiting for two hours in position outside of a raider camp for the leader to appear. The woman didn’t get more than half a meter from the door of her crude hut before the bolt from Hux’s blaster cut through her jugular. Blood arched out, strangely graceful as it stained the scrub and dry soil of the hillside. Hux had felt his own blood burning at the sight.

He could imagine Ren standing at the center of a circle of broken men, red sliding down his blade to pool at his feet. Hux caught himself. There wouldn’t have been any bloodshed if Ren was carrying his lightsaber. The energy of it would have cauterized the wounds. That detracted somewhat from the vision, but it didn’t spoil it. Watching Ren destroy them would have been stirring enough to satisfy.

The memory of the sparring match two days before came into Hux’s mind, and not for the first time since it had occurred. Though Ren had said he would start slowly, he had been unrelenting. He had thrown Hux to the ground easily.

Exhaling, Hux touched his wrists in the place where Ren had held them as he pressed him down into the mats. He had drawn close enough for Hux to feel the heat of his breath against his lips. Hux’s cock twitched. The weight of Ren across his thighs, of Ren’s chest against his as he caught his breath had marked the conjunction of primal desires: one to fight and the other to fuck. He knew the two could be reconciled, of course, and often to highly satisfying results; Ren’s proximity had brought that into sharp relief. The man was maddening, changeable and often bad-tempered. Yet, Hux had willingly lain beneath him on the mats when he could likely have found a way to escape.

He looked down at himself, watching rivulets of soap slide down his stomach and into the neatly trimmed red hair between his legs. In just a few strokes, he could be hard. Release wouldn’t be far behind; it had been some time since he had last indulged. However, as he cleared his throat, he recalled the painful grip of the Force around his neck. Aversion welled, dousing the craving.

“I could kill you,” Ren had said.

Yes, and Hux would do well to remember it.

Quickly rinsing himself clean, he turned off the shower and put Ren from his thoughts.

It continued to rain into the afternoon, so Hux forwent shooting. He read for a time—now a volume on battlefield tactics during the Clone Wars—but when he grew tired of it, he ventured out into the house, seeking the few places he had not yet seen since he had returned.
Across from his father’s den was the sitting room, where his mother and her guests had enjoyed discussing whatever inane topics came to mind over a few glasses of sherry after dinner. Hux was fortunate to have avoided most of those parties during his youth, though he had been obligated to attend a few while he was on leave from the Academy. He had a number of recollections of painfully forced conversations with the vapid, but admittedly beautiful sons of society that his mother had attempted to foist on him. He had snuck away to shadowed alcoves with one or two of them for a few hurried kisses, but none of those liaisons had led to anything more. By the time Hux had met Arcan Wile, the Academy’s librarian, he had no longer bothered to feign interest in his mother’s choices.

The only aspect of those gatherings that Hux had enjoyed was the point in the evening when his mother had imbibed enough to sit down at the piano in the corner and sing. Most often she had begun with familiar tunes, their lyrics irreverent enough to amuse the guests, but by the end of her performance, she almost always chose slow, mournful songs that showcased the rich timbre of her alto. As a debutante in Pantin City, she had been known for her singing voice. She had a true talent and likely could have made a career of it if she had pursued that course, but as the daughter of a shipping magnate and a high society matron, she had been destined to marry and carry on the tradition of parties spent drowning herself and her friends in exquisite wines and self importance.

Leaving the sitting room, Hux had bypassed the other rooms in the central part of the house. The den and study he had already spent time in; the dining room and summer parlor as well. He considered a stop in the kitchen, but he had long ago learned not to trespass on the chef’s domain unless it was absolutely necessary. He took only a passing glance down the hall of the guest wing. He could have explored the unoccupied bedrooms there, but he also could have encountered Ren, which, after that morning’s altercation, he had no interest in doing. So, he returned to the family wing.

There were seven residences there, though only two of them had ever been used by members of the family. Hux’s bedroom had once been the one directly adjacent to the master suite, but after he had entered his teenage years, he had sought more distance from his parents’ space. He chose the room at the center of the south side of the wing. He walked past it then, though, not yet ready to return. Instead he went to the double doors at the far end of the hall. Turning the handle of the rightmost door, he stepped inside.

The master bedroom had supposedly been shared by both his parents, but Brendol had spent so many of his nights in the commandant’s quarters at the Academy that the space had belonged almost exclusively to Hux’s mother. The scent of rosewater still hung in the air, as it had around his mother herself. The bed took up a good portion of the room, a white canopy trimmed with gold hanging above it. The closet was empty now, but had once been filled with his mother’s many gowns. Beside it was her dressing table, where she had sat to arrange her hair and choose jewelry. The small chest of drawers next to the table was filled with various ornaments. Hux was certain he had never seen her wear all of them.

Going to the nearest window, Hux drew back the curtain. Light filtered through the murky half darkness of the room, reflecting in the mirror above the dressing table. Hux approached it, pulling the cushioned chair out. He sat and looked at himself. His face was an amalgam of his parents’ features: a narrow, straight nose like his mother’s, his father’s chin and mouth, the green eyes they both had shared. His father’s hair had been dark, though, almost black. Hux’s coloring had come the maternal side.

His mother’s long, red hair had been her greatest vanity. Hux remembered sitting on the floor of her room as a small boy, playing with model ships and an AT-AT he had been particularly fond of, while she sat at her dressing table and brushed her hair; one hundred strokes on each side. Once she
was finished, she had called for her maid, Nyra, to wind it up into an intricate braid for the dinner party she was hosting that night.

Young Hux had watched as she put in her earrings—long and encrusted with diamonds—before returning to his game. He made the sounds of explosions as he pretended the AT-AT was storming across the surface of a Rebel-occupied planet, destroying their forces in the name of the Empire.

“Darling,” his mother had said, “can you stop that? Mummy and Nyra are trying to have a conversation.”

Hux had done as he was asked, but it only lasted for a few minutes before he got caught up in the make-believe battle and was once again bashing the toys together to the sounds laser cannons and detonations.

His mother had given an exasperated sigh and called for Lorna. The housekeeper had appeared a moment later from the hall. Her hair had been cut in a bob then, too, though it had been brown rather than gray.

“Yes, madam?” she said.

His mother gestured to the floor where Hux sat. “Will you take him elsewhere? I have to finish dressing before the guests start arriving.”

“Of course, madam.” Stepping toward Hux, Lorna had held out her hand. “Young master.”

Hux had set one of his toy ships into her palm. “Are you going to play with me?”

Lorna had smiled. “Perhaps later. Come with me now. I think I have something you might like.”

His childish curiosity piqued, he got to his feet and followed her out of the room. Lorna closed the door behind them.

“Where are we going?” asked Hux as he toddled along next to her. They were leaving the family wing.

“It’s a surprise,” she replied.

“What kind of surprise?”

“You’ll just have to be patient and see, young master.”

Hux had pouted a little at that, but excitedly followed her through the entry hall. Delectable smells filled his nose as they walked into the kitchen. The chef, rotund and bearded, was standing at the stove, stirring something in a large silver pot.

“Are you here to work?” he asked Lorna.

She laughed. “Of course not, Antyl. We’ve just come for a little snack before bed.”

The chef scowled down at Hux, who was grinning at the mention of snacks. “Make sure he doesn’t touch anything. Hand it to him if you have to.”

Lorna ignored the chef, gesturing Hux over to a table at the far side of the kitchen. It was covered end to end in desserts: petite glasses of mousse, bite size cakes, fruit tarts. Hux’s mouth watered at the sight.
“What would you like?” asked Lorna.

“Everything,” Hux replied, rising up on his toes to see over the edge of the table.

“You’d be sick if you tried to eat it all,” she said, poking a finger into his ribs. He laughed. “How about chocolate cake?”

He nodded vigorously.

She selected one of the little treats and set it on a napkin. “What do you say?”

“Please.”

“Here you are.” She handed it to him.

“Aren’t you going to have one?” Hux asked.

Lorna cocked her head. “Well, I suppose I could.” Reaching out, she took an identical cake. “Come, let’s sit.” She led him over to the low windowsill nearby. His feet dangled a few inches from the ground as he sat and dug into the cake. It was rich and filled with ganache.

“Good?” Lorna said as Hux licked the chocolate from the corners of his mouth.

“Can I have another one?”

“Not tonight, young master. Perhaps tomorrow.”

Hux made a face. “I’ll all be gone tomorrow.”

“Well then, we had best tuck in now.” She rose and returned with two more cakes. They had laughed as they ate them together.

Returning to himself, Hux got up from the dressing table. It had been years since he had had chocolate cake. Sweets were rarely a part of the standard rations aboard a starship. Tugging the curtain back in place over the window, he set off for the kitchen to request that the chef prepare something for after dinner.

Hux didn’t expect an apology from Ren for his behavior in the study, and he didn’t receive one as they ate in the dining room that evening. Unsurprisingly, they said very little at the beginning of the meal. It wasn’t until after Hux had finished his first glass of wine that he spoke.

“Did you have a pleasant afternoon?”

Ren looked at him dubiously. “It was fine.”

“Good,” said Hux, slicing a green bean in half and skewering it with his fork. “Did you spend part of it meditating?”

“Most of it.”

“So long,” Hux said. “Tell me, is it meant to be an act of centering, as the Supreme Leader
suggested you do?"

Ren swallowed a mouthful of potatoes. Hux thought for a moment that he might not reply, but he said, “It is.”

“And is there something in particular that you must meditate on?”

“Do you plan on taking up the practice, general?” Ren asked.

“I hadn’t considered it.”

“Then why do you need to know anything about it?”

Hux shrugged. “Just a passing curiosity. I don’t imagine I could sit in stillness and silence for several hours.”

“It only requires discipline,” said Ren.

“And practice, I should think. Have you been doing it for many years?”

Ren nodded. “It’s necessary.”

“For what?”

“Connecting to the Force.”

“Ah,” said Hux. “Of course. I should have assumed that.” He cut another green bean. “What does it feel like? The Force, I mean.”

Ren’s brows drew together. “It’s difficult to describe. I’ve never felt what it’s like to be without it.”

“Then you’re born with the sensitivity,” Hux said. “It doesn’t develop over time.”

“The connection is innate, but most powers don’t manifest until five or six. Sensitivity strengthens with age. And training.”

“What sort of powers do children first exhibit?”

“Kinetic manipulation in most cases,” Ren said. “Unintentionally at the start. Things will break, move when the child is upset.”

“That must be rather startling for a parent.”

“Maybe for someone who doesn’t expect it.”

“Does that happen often?” asked Hux. “Children with a sensitivity born to parents who lack it?”

“If there’s a latent ability in the bloodline, it can eventually appear.”

“Is there a way to test for it?”

“Not one that’s reliable.”

“Shame,” Hux said. “I would be interested to know if I had an untapped affinity for the Force.”

Ren eyed him. “Were you ever a pilot?”
“Only as far as the required courses at the Academy went.”

“You weren’t good at it?”

“I managed, but I didn’t have any exceptional abilities. Would that indicate sensitivity?”

“It can. The Force can sharpen reflexes that pilots need.”

“Are you a good pilot?”

“It was not how my abilities manifested.”

“Yours started kinetically, then?”

Ren looked down at his plate. “There are other ways.”

Hux frowned, recognizing Ren’s manner of avoidance. And he had been so forthcoming; Hux wasn’t ready for it to stop. He took a different tack. “Is it true that you can use the Force to control someone? In the stories, the Jedi and the...what were they called? The other order.”

“The Sith.”

“Yes, the Sith. It was said they could make others do things. Force them, if you will.” Hux held back a chuckle at the poor joke.

Ren gave him a sour look, but said, “It’s not mind control, but it’s possible to influence those without Force sensitivity. A kind of coercion.”

“You could do that to me.”

“Maybe I already have.”

Hux raised a brow. “Would I know if you had?”

“No.”

“That’s discomforting.”

“We’re taught not to use it unless we have to,” said Ren. “It’s...rude.”

“The etiquette of the Force,” Hux mused. “I hadn’t thought of that. What other inappropriate uses are there?”

Ren looked up at him, intent. “A case can be made for any use under certain circumstances.”

Unbidden, Hux’s hand went to his neck. Ren’s gaze followed it. “That argument can apply to almost any action,” said Hux. “Even the most nefarious ones.”

“Like killing?”

“A good example, yes.” Hux took a sip of wine. “Have you taken a life by means of the Force?”

“Yes.”

“Many?”

“Yes.”
Hux stirred the red around in his glass. “When in your apprenticeship are you taught to kill?”

“Later. We learn to defend ourselves first.” Ren’s expression darkened. “Some masters don’t even teach offensive tactics beyond saber combat.”

“But your master did.”

“My second master.”

“Leader Snoke.”

“Yes.”

Hux was quite certain that he was stepping too far, but he asked, “Was he a Jedi?”

“Never,” Ren spat.

“Of course,” said Hux, backing down. He turned back to his food, but finding it had gone cold, pushed his plate away. Ren, too, set down his fork. The sat quietly for a time before the servants’ door swung open and Feelix appeared. He cleared the table quickly, skillfully balancing the plates on his forearms, before returning with dessert.

The chef had grumbled when Hux had appeared in the kitchen that afternoon, but he had been pleased when Hux complimented his cakes by asking for them specifically. The ones he had made for that evening were slightly larger than those Hux and Lorna had eaten many years ago, but they looked much the same. When Ren saw them, he sat up a bit straighter in his chair. Hux bit back a smile. Apparently Kylo Ren favored sweet things.

The cake was just as good as Hux remembered, decadent and heavy. Ren devoured his, scraping the plate with his spoon to get the last bits of ganache. When he was finished, he drained his glass of water and sat back with a satisfied sound. Amused, Hux resolved to have the chef make dessert for them more often.

The grass in the back garden was still slightly wet from the morning storms when Hux got outside after lunch the next day. Fortunately, he had found a sizable canvas tarpaulin in his father’s collection of hunting supplies. He took it and the long-range blaster from the cabinet in the den, intending at last to shoot it. Laying the canvas down on the ground, he unfolded the small sniper’s tripod and set it a few centimeters from the edge of the tarpaulin. He lowered himself down onto his stomach and positioned the rifle’s barrel on the tripod. Sighting in the scope, he lined up a shot at the nearest target, five hundred meters away.

His first bolt struck the outer ring. He let that one go, chalking it up to not yet having a feel for the blaster. The next shot was better. The rifle felt good in his hands, longer and more solid than the hunting blasters. He moved on to the more distant targets as he got better acquainted with it.

The farthest of them was eight hundred meters away. Hux took several minutes to prepare the shot. The initial plasma bolt struck the target mere centimeters from the center, leaving a burn. Hux chewed his lip, lining up again. He sighted through the scope, breathed out, and fired. The bolt left a perfect circle in the middle of the smallest ring.
“You’re good at that.”

Hux jumped, jarring the rifle out of position. Rolling up onto his hip, he saw Ren standing a few paces behind him. “Yes,” he said after a moment, “though perhaps not as good as I used to be.” Flipping the safety on the rifle, he got to his feet.

“That’s an old blaster,” Ren said, taking a step forward.

“Practically an antique,” said Hux. “It was my father’s.”

“He taught you to shoot.”

“He did.” Hux adjusted his grip on the blaster. “Do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Shoot.”

“I learned to fire a pistol.”

“Never anything bigger?” asked Hux.

Ren shook his head.

“Do you want to learn?”

Ren glanced down at the blaster, considering. “I could.”

Hux held out the rifle. “Here then.” Ren took it, looking it over.

“This one is a bit too much to start with,” said Hux, “but it’ll do.”

“Do I need to lie on the ground?” Ren asked, eyeing the spot where Hux had been before.

“It’s not necessary, but it does improve accuracy.”

“Then I’ll do it.” He went to the tarpaulin and lay down.

Hux followed him, settling into the spot at his side. He had never taught someone to shoot before, so he pondered for a moment how to begin. He settled on, “This isn’t like a pistol. It’s not about speed. The bolts are more powerful. You can take off half a man’s head with one shot.”

“I know that.”

Hux rolled his eyes. “I won’t teach you if you won’t listen.”

“Fine.”

Hux began again. “Your position is good, but the butt goes a little higher on your shoulder. Pistols don’t recoil much, but rifles do. You don’t want to catch it on your collarbone and break it.” Reaching over, he tapped the lower side of the rifle’s butt to slide it up against the meat of Ren’s shoulder. “Better. Is your right hand dominant?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’ll use it on the trigger. Steady the forestock with your left.”
Ren did as instructed.

“All right. Have a look into the scope and tell me what you see.”

“The grass.”

“Reposition it, then,” said Hux. “Don’t use the scope for now. Sight down the barrel.”

Ren looked, squinting one eye shut. “That target’s too far away. I can hardly see it.”

Hux leaned slightly closer to him to see where he was looking. “You just need a general idea of where it is. You’ll use the scope when you shoot. Look through it again and see if you can find the target.”

“I see it,” said Ren after a moment of positioning.

“What color is it?”

“Green.”

“Good. That’s the closest one. It’s still far for a first attempt, but you’ll manage, I think.” Hux couldn’t see all of Ren’s face, but he did notice the slightly contemptuous look. “I imagine you know to aim at the center.”

“Of course, I do.”

“Then hit it.”

Ren pulled the trigger. The bolt went wide as the rifle recoiled, disappearing into the woods beyond the target. He pulled back from scope, his frown deep.

“It would have been quite a wonder if you actually did make that,” said Hux. “Everyone misses their first time. Try again. Slowly.”

Ren readjusted the butt of the blaster on his shoulder and looked into the scope again.

“Don’t hold your breath,” said Hux. “Inhale when you have the position right. Exhale when you fire.” He heard Ren’s lungs fill and then empty. The bolt struck the outside of the target. “Well done. Another.”

Ren picked it up quickly. He was far from exemplary, but for his first time, he did rather well. He had a calm about him that was required for sniping. Hux could only presume that it came from meditation. He considered that for a moment. He had never sat crosslegged on the floor as Ren did, but there was a certain meditative aspect to the rituals he performed to prepare a shot. If anything centered his mind, clearing it of all thoughts but his target, it was shooting.

“Can I watch you once?” Ren asked, drawing Hux’s attention back to him. “I want to see how you do it.”

“All right,” Hux replied. Ren slid over on the tarpaulin to allow Hux to position himself behind the rifle. There was little space on Ren’s side, so he remained pressed close. Hux almost asked him to get up, but he stopped himself. It would be better for Ren to observe from the ground than standing.

Hux was careful as he lined up the shot. He chose the farthest target. It was cocky, but he thought he deserved to show off a little after seeing Ren wield his bokken with unparalleled grace that
morning. Taking a breath, he made a final adjustment to the alignment. He squeezed the trigger.

Warm air tickled his ear. “Hux.”

The shot careened off the mark, hitting the edge of the target rather than the center. Hux turned angrily to Ren. “You ass. Are you pleased with yourself?”

Ren surprised him by laughing. “Yes, general.”

Hux expected his annoyance to grow at that, but he found that it ebbed slightly. There was no trace of smugness about Ren’s laughter; he seemed genuinely, guilelessly amused. And that was, for lack of any other way to describe it, charming. The corner of Hux’s mouth almost twitched up, but he quickly schooled his expression.

“If you don’t intend to take this seriously,” he said, “we won’t do it again.” He grimaced, albeit inwardly, as soon as the words left his mouth. He hadn’t meant to sound as if he was chiding a child, even if Ren did give him occasion to do so.

Ren sobered, though his smile didn’t disappear altogether. “I accept those terms.”

“Very well, then,” said Hux. “We’ll start with the hunting blasters tomorrow.” He patted the body of the rifle in his hands. “We’ll return to this one when you’re ready.”

Ren glanced down at the blaster and then back up at Hux. “As you say.”

Hux held his gaze. They still lay shoulder to shoulder, close enough that Hux could feel it when he shifted even the slightest bit, which he did, turning slightly more toward Hux. As Hux swallowed, Ren followed the movement with his eyes. He was slow to look back up, seemingly appraising Hux’s features.

“This suits you,” he said.

“What does?” Hux asked.

“Shooting. Holding that blaster. It looks right.”

Hux hesitated, but said, “Thank you.”

Ren gave a minute nod and then pulled away, rolling up. When he held out his hand, Hux took it and let him pull him to his feet.

Hux had neglected to specify a time for them to shoot the next day, so in the afternoon he had to go in search of Ren. He went first to his bedroom, where Hux assumed he did most of his meditation. The guest wing was, after all, unoccupied save for him. When Hux knocked on the door, though, he heard nothing from the other side. He waited for a moment before rapping again. It produced the same result. Cautiously, he had reached for the handle.

The room was empty when he entered, but he gave it a cursory glance. The bed was tidily made, though not with the maid’s precision. A datapad lay on the table beside it, its display powered off. The closet door stood open, a dark blue shirt hanging over the top of it. The black shoes Ren generally wore to dinner were sitting next to it, holding it open. His other clothes hung inside.
There were various decorative items carefully placed on the other surfaces—a desk and a chest of drawers—to appear as if they had not been carefully thought about at all; Hux’s mother’s work. Though he had spent his youth in a house filled with such keepsakes, Hux had never preferred clutter in his living spaces. He had no personal effects in his quarters aboard the Finalizer. His bedroom at the estate was not quite as spartan, but it still lacked the ornamental junk that adorned Ren’s room. Though he knew nothing about Ren’s tastes, Hux thought that he, too, would have been more comfortable in a plainer space.

Taking a last look about the room, Hux considered where Ren might be. The most likely place was the training room. Closing the door, Hux headed toward the central part of the house and then out onto the gravel drive. As he approached the open front of the garage, he heard voices. Ducking to the side, he listened.

“Shorter fuel lines, you say, my lord?” said Harron. He was sitting on a stool beside the silver T509 speeder, cleaning some sort of metal object with a small brush.

“Yes,” came a muffled reply. “It will increase the power output and the maximum speed.”

Harron paused in his cleaning to scratch his chin. “Can’t say I’ve heard of that.”

“It’s a trick my uncle taught me.” A hand, the fingers stained with grease, appeared from under the speeder. “Hand me the pulse wrench.”

Harron picked up a bronze tool and dropped it into the outstretched fingers. The arm promptly disappeared again.

“Was he a mechanic, this uncle of yours?”

“In his spare time. He worked on droids, too.”

“Oh, that’s a complicated business. Far more little parts and gizmos to deal with. I don’t think I’d be able to do that.”

“I was never very good at it, either,” said Ren, sliding out from beneath the speeder on a rolling backboard. “I did better with these.” He patted the hull of the speeder. He frowned as he saw the greasy stain his hand left on the silver. Pulling a rag from his pocket, he buffed the grease away. “Have you always been a pilot?” he asked Harron as he got to his feet.

“Yes, my lord. Been working on speeders since I was ten years old. It was my father’s trade before it was mine.”

“Were you born on Arkanis?”

“Born and reared in Scaparus Port, my lord.”

Ren reached for a cup of water on the floor. He drained it and turned back to Harron. “How did you like it?”

Harron rubbed the back of his neck. “Well, it’s a fine enough town, my lord, but it can be a rough place if you’re not accustomed to it. The main business is shipping and trade. Brings a lot of strangers into port and sometimes they cause trouble. And the dockworkers don’t have such fine manners themselves.” He shrugged. “I was lucky to find a place here. It’s a better living than my father made, that’s for certain.”

“How old were you when you came here?” Ren asked, leaning back against the speeder and
crossing one ankle over the other.

“Let’s see now...eighteen maybe. I had been working in my father’s shop in town when Master Hux—that’s Master Brendol I mean—came in with his old F198 Trident. It was the finest speeder I’d ever seen. Its coolant had started leaking, though, and Master Brendol couldn’t get it back to the estate. My father wasn’t about, so I fixed it up for him. He offered me a job on the spot, and I’ve been here ever since.”

“That was a good decision on his part,” said Ren. He glanced around. “You’ve done well by these.”

Harron’s cheeks reddened as he looked bashfully at the ground. “That’s good of you to say, my lord.”

“Do you go back to Scaparus often?”

“When I drive Ms. Havlis or one of the others there, but I don’t go much for myself. My father died nearly twenty years ago and my mother just a few after. My brothers closed up the shop and went offworld. And I’ve got no sweetheart to visit.”

The corner of Ren’s mouth quirked. “Why not?”

“Oh, I used to have my fair share in the past, but these days…” Harron chuckled as he pulled off his cap, running a hand through his thin, white hair. “Not many girls will look my way.”

“Surely you could find one or two.”

“You say that because you’re young and handsome, my lord. I’d bet you’d have more than a few pretty girls clamoring over you in town. The same goes for young Master Hux.” He tugged his cap back on. “Well, if that’s what he favored, of course.”

Hux lifted a brow. He had made no secret of his preference for men when he was growing up at the estate. His mother, in fact, had made a point of throwing eligible ones in his path. It was not shocking that Harron knew. However, Hux wasn’t certain he was quite prepared to witness the old driver discuss the matter with Ren.

Fortunately, Ren managed to steer completely around it. “But we don’t have your experience.”

Harron laughed. “That’s true, my lord, but I’d trade a few years of that for a few more hours in the company of one of those girls I used to see.”

“No doubt,” said Ren. Taking the rag from his pocket again, he wiped his hands. Louder, he said, “Do you plan on joining us anytime soon, General Hux, or are you just going to stand there and listen?”

Harron looked up, startled. “Sir, I didn’t see you.”

Hux hadn’t thought Ren had either. “I’ve only been here for moment,” he lied.

Ren shot him a look, but thankfully said nothing to the contrary. “We were talking about Scaparus.”

“Were you?” said Hux, feigning ignorance as he made his way over to them.

“I’d like to see it.”
Hux frowned, coming up next to him. “We can’t do that.”

“How not?”

“You know why.”

Ren regarded him coolly. “I don’t.”

Hux stepped closer, lowering his voice. “We were ordered to remain here.”

“On Arkanis.”

“In this house.”

“The Supreme Leader didn’t say that.”

“It was implied,” snapped Hux.

Ren crossed his arms over his chest. “You don’t want to be seen.”

“No, I do not. And you shouldn’t either. Our location is meant to be undisclosed.”

“And it would stay that way. We’re not known here.”

Hux scoffed. “I grew up in this region, Ren. There is undoubtedly someone who knows me on this planet.”

“Why does that matter? This is your homeworld. It’s not strange for you to be here.”

“Maybe, but you—”

“No one knows me.”

“There is a considerable traffic of traders in Scaparus,” said Hux. “There’s a possibility that someone would.”

“No.”

“Because you’re not masked?”

Ren nodded.

That made sense, but Hux was still unconvinced. Though he might have appreciated a day off of the estate, the risks far outweighed any personal enjoyment. “We’re not going.”

“I could go without you,” Ren said.

“I’d be happy to take him, sir,” Harron interjected. “And if it’s a guide he needs, I can do that, too.”

“Absolutely not,” said Hux.

Ren took a step toward him. “Then come with me.”

Hux shook his head. “No.”

“I’ll go mad if we have to stay here,” Ren said, scowling.
“Blatant hyperbole,” said Hux, dismissive.

Ren let out frustrated growl, turning to rest his arms on the hull of the T509. “Then let me at least take a speeder out.”

“And draw attention to yourself? No.”


“Good,” said Hux.

Ren kept his back to Hux, turning to look at Harron. “Is the fuel pump cap ready to go back in?”

Harron, who had been making a show of looking at his feet, keeping out of the confrontation, sat up straight. “Yes, my lord. You can put it back in now.”

Ren held out his hand and the driver dropped the metal part he had been cleaning into it. Ren glanced down at it, weighing it in his palm. “If you don’t need anything else, general,” he said to Hux, “you can go.”

Hux bristled at the dismissal, but was in no mood to bicker further. “Would you like to come shooting later?” he asked.

“Tomorrow,” Ren replied. “I have to finish this.”

“Very well.” Nodding to Harron, Hux strode away.

The matter of Scaparus wasn’t mentioned the next morning as they trained or the day after. Hux fought several good rounds between their two sessions, though he still hadn’t managed to score a single point on Ren in the week since he had first begun his lessons. It was a sore spot for him, especially since Ren had started to improve at target shooting. He was better with the smaller hunting rifles, but Hux wouldn’t have been surprised if by the time their stay at the estate ended, he was ready to use the long-range rifle again.

Hux took a bite of his cucumber sandwich, chewing slowly as he read from his datapad. He had downloaded a book that afternoon about lightsaber combat and technique from the era of the Old Republic. It had been written by a Jedi master who had apparently been one of the best swordsmen of his generation. There were numerous allusions to utilizing the Force to better handle the saber, but since they did not apply to Hux, he simply ignored them.

“A lightsaber requires a kyber crystal to generate the blade,” Ren had told him during their training that morning. “The crystal is attuned to the Force. If you’re sensitive to it, it can make the saber feel like an extension of your arm. Your strikes are more accurate, more deadly.”

“So, no matter how proficient I become,” Hux had said, “I’ll never be as good as someone with Force sensitivity?”

“It’s unlikely.”

Hux shrugged. “It’s just as well. I’ll probably never be better than a novice.”
“Continue training and you can be.”

“And where will I find an instructor when I return to duty? As far as I’ve seen, you’re the only man in First Order who uses a saber.”

“If I can, I’ll keep practicing with you,” said Ren.

“I doubt either of us will have the time for that.”

“Time can be made.”

“Not if you’re halfway across the galaxy chasing Luke Skywalker.”

“You don’t think we’d both return to the *Finalizer*?”

Hux rubbed his brow. “I haven’t the slightest idea.”

Ren hadn’t replied. Instead, he had lifted his bokken to middle guard. Hux followed suit and they began another bout.

As he sat on the veranda having lunch, Hux scrolled to the next chapter of the book, one concerning blocks and deflections. Before he could start in on it, though, he heard the door to his bedroom open. Glancing up, he saw Lorna making her way toward him. She was carrying a parcel wrapped in paper in one hand and a pair of brown leather boots in the other.

“Good afternoon, Master Hux.”

“And to you,” he said. “Do you come bearing gifts?”

“Perhaps,” she replied. “Though I’m not certain that you’ll accept them.”

“Oh?”

Setting the boots down, Lorna handed him the parcel. He untied the string and unwrapped it. Inside were a pair of tan trousers and a green cotton shirt with pockets at the breast and buttons down the center. Both were plainer than anything else in Hux’s wardrobe. He gave Lorna an inquiring look.

“You’ll want to look unremarkable if you intend avoid notice in Scaparus.”

The corners of Hux’s mouth turned down. “What did Ren say to you?”

“I spoke to Harron.”

“Then you’ll know that we won’t be going into town. It’s too great a risk.”

“I disagree,” Lorna said. “It’s been nearly fifteen years since you were here last, and Lord Ren has never been to Arkanis before. I doubt you will be as readily recognized as you believe.”

“Maybe not, but our orders were to stay here.”

“Were you placed under direct house arrest?”

“Not necessarily,” he conceded, “but our presence here is not to be known.”

“Don’t mention your name and keep yourself out of sight of the Academy and you should be all right.” She blinked at him thoughtfully. “You’re restless, and so is Lord Ren. One day out of the
“...house would do you both good.”

She wasn’t wrong. While saber training and Ren’s target practice kept them busy for a good part of the day, Hux was still itching to get away from the estate. Despite that, he said, “It’s not a good idea.”

“There have been worse.”

Hux huffed a laugh. “That’s certainly true, but it doesn’t change anything.”

Lorna folded her hands in her lap, prim. “Lord Ren asked me yesterday for a number of things I’m not certain how to procure. A metal casing of some sort. Something called an energy gate. I haven’t the first idea what that is.” She paused for a moment, gauging Hux’s reaction. He simply waited for her to continue. “I’m sure he can find what he needs in the market in town.”

“And I suppose it would be more expedient for him to purchase them himself than describe them to you.”

“Indeed it would.”

Hux sighed. “You’re not going to relent until you’ve convinced me, are you?”

She smiled sweetly. “No, Master Hux.”

“All right,” he said, shaking his head. “I’ll speak to Ren about it tonight, and if he’s amenable to the idea, we’ll go tomorrow.”

“It’s supposed to rain all day tomorrow. Today is going to stay clear.”

Hux glanced at his chronometer. “It’s already after noon.”

“The markets are open until midnight.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “You’re relentless.”

“I prefer determined.”

“That, too. Fine, I’ll go talk to Ren.”

“Excellent,” said Lorna, standing. “I believe he’s in his room.” She took the remnants of Hux’s lunch out as she left.

Going inside, Hux stripped out of his linen shirt and pants and donned the clothes she had brought him. The boots came up to his knees, so he tucked the legs of the trousers into them. He looked himself over in the mirror, deciding that despite his bright hair, he did look unremarkable enough.

When he arrived at Ren’s door, he knocked curtly. “Enter,” he heard.

Ren was sitting on the floor as he had been the first time Hux had come into his bedroom, though now there were several objects—a small bust of an equine, a glass orb, and a silver bud vase—hovering around him, presumably by means of the Force. He was barechested, his legs crossed under him. It had been some time since Hux had seen his wounds. They were now little more than white scars.

“Ren?”
"General," he said, opening his eyes. Raising his right hand, he guided the floating objects to the ground. They landed in a neat line to his left. "What’s going on?"

"I, ah, reconsidered your proposition to go into Scaparus. I was told there are some things you need to purchase."

"There are," Ren said, rising. "And I see now why Lorna brought me new clothes this morning." He looked Hux over, examining his attire. "Something more like that."

"They’re...inconspicuous."

"I assume you want to leave soon, then?"

"There’s no particular hurry," said Hux. "The markets will remain open late into the night. But it would be preferable to go sooner rather than later. A port town can become somewhat unsavory after dark."

With a brief nod of acknowledgement, Ren stepped over to his bed, where a half-wrapped package similar to the one Lorna had brought Hux was sitting. As he went, he released the button at the fly of his pants. They slid a few centimeters down his hips, revealing a narrow line of dark hair trailing down below the waistband.

Hux felt his stomach clench. Seemingly unconcerned with Hux’s presence, Ren continued to push his pants down.

"I’ll meet you outside," Hux said, hurriedly turning away and making for the door. If Ren said anything in reply, he didn’t hear it.

Harron was in the garage when Hux got there. The old man greeted him and tugged the brim of his cap.

"Lord Ren and I are going into town," Hux said.

Harron’s brows rose, but he said, "Very good, sir. Let me get my coat and I’ll be ready to take you."

Harron stopped, looking to the sleek, silver speeder at the far end of the garage. "Of course, sir, if that’s what you’d like. Let me pull it around for you."

"No need. I can get it out." Hux went to it, opening the pilot’s side door and sliding into the seat. As he put his hands on the yoke, the instruments inside lit up and the engine roared to life. Setting his right hand on the throttle, he slowly gave the speeder some power. It moved smoothly out of the garage and onto the graveled drive. Hux smiled, remembering what it felt like to ride in it at high speed. He had every intention of doing so again on the way to Scaparus.

"Wasn’t the idea to be inconspicuous?" Ren asked as he approached. He wore black trousers and a dark jacket over a white shirt, the buttons at the collar undone. He had pulled his hair back into a tail. "This speeder isn’t that."

"None of them are," said Hux.

"We’ll have to leave it somewhere it won’t draw too much attention."
“There are a number of back streets that will serve.” Hux tapped his fingers against the handle of the yoke. “Well, are you coming?”

Setting his hands on the top of the door, Ren sprang up and over it. He landed squarely in his seat. Hux rolled his eyes.

“You said your modifications to the fuel lines would increase the top speed, yes?” Hux asked.

“It should,” Ren replied.

“Let’s find out.” Engaging the throttle, Hux guided them out onto the main road and they shot off toward the port.

They didn’t speak as they rode; they would have had to yell over the sound of the wind. As they reached the outskirts out town, though, Hux slowed down and guided them toward a secluded alley.

“When were you last here?” Ren asked.

“No counting when we arrived, almost fifteen years.”

“Is it different?”

“Hardly. It’s looked much like this for as long as I can remember.” They pulled up beside a derelict building and Hux powered down the speeder. “The markets aren’t far from here. It shouldn’t take more than a few minutes to walk there.”

“All right,” said Ren as he got out. He used the door this time.

Scaparus Port was by no means a metropolis. The population was maybe one hundred thousand, most of which was comprised of dock and warehouse workers. The rest operated the cantinas and markets that catered to the traders that passed through and to the cadets on leave from the Academy. Despite its size, though, there was little that couldn’t be had in town, from blasters and droids to strong drinks and prostitutes. As Lorna had said, whatever Ren wanted to buy, no matter how unusual, could be had somewhere.

“What exactly are you looking for here?” Hux asked him as they left the alley and walked onto one of the larger streets. A steady flow of traffic—people on foot, small speeders, large animals pulling carts—took up most of it, but there was space enough at the edge for them to make their way along.

“Components,” said Ren.

“For?”

“A project.”

Hux gave him a sidelong look. “An undisclosed project?”

Ren’s “yes” was clipped.

“I see. Can you tell me what manner of components so that I can decide where we should start looking for them?”

“Titanium casings, emitter shrouds, energy gates, wiring, and compact power cells. To start.”
Hux didn’t know what function emitter shrouds or energy gates performed, but he had an idea of what Ren intended to do with them. “You’re building a new lightsaber for yourself after all.”

If Ren was surprised, he didn’t show it. “Yes.”

“Have you found a way to get the crystal you need, then? Ky-something.”

“Kyber crystal,” said Ren. “No. It has to be mined by hand on Ilum. But the rest can be completed without it.”

“Ilum,” Hux said. “That’s in the Unknown Regions. Not so far from here.”

“I would already have gone if I could’ve.”

Hux stepped to the side, avoiding a vendor with a rickety wagon hawking some sort of food that resembled sausages. When he wound his way back to Ren’s side, he asked, “Is it difficult to harvest one of these crystals?”

“Navigating the caves can be, but finding a crystal takes a few hours, sometimes less.”

“Is there a certain kind you need to look for? One of a certain size or quality?”

Ren’s brows knit. “It’s not easy to explain. You have to feel the right one.”

“I assume you don’t mean by touch,” said Hux.

“No. You sense it with the Force when you find one that suits you.”

“And you’ve only ever had to harvest one before?”

“Two. My first saber was...no longer adequate when I started my training with Snoke.”

“Do they wear out over time?”

“The power cells sometimes have to be replaced, but nothing else. Unless the hilt casing is compromised.”

“Is that what happened to yours when it was destroyed on Starkiller base?”

“It was severed in two.”

“Highly compromised, then.”

Ren eyed him askance. “Yes.”

His reply had almost been lost in the noise of the markets, which they were approaching. The entrance was marked with an archway composed of scrap metal. Beyond it were stalls shaded with canvas sheeting to keep the rain off of the wares. The stalls were jumbled together, some larger than others, some jutting out into the winding pathways among them.

“Shall we begin with the casings?” Hux asked. “Or perhaps the power cells?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Ren replied. He was looking past Hux and into the chaos beyond the archway. He appeared quite eager.

Hux wasn’t as keen on spending the rest of the day and likely half of the night browsing through
stalls of junk to find a few good parts for Ren’s saber, but he wasn’t familiar enough with the markets anymore to guide them more directly. Sighing, he stepped inside and turned to the first stall. It turned out to have a selection of used blasters, most marked with years of wear.

“Hey, hey,” said the proprietor, a black-eyed Bith in a threadbare coat. “You look like you need a reliable pistol. Don’t have anything on your hip now, I see.”

Hux touched his thigh where a holster would have rested. All things considered, it likely would have been a good idea to bring one of his father’s weapons. It had been years since he had carried a duty pistol, however, and he hadn’t even thought of it before they’d left the estate.

“Not today,” he said.

“You, then?” said the Bith, looking to Ren. He shook his head and moved on.

The next few booths also proved not to have any of the supplies Ren needed, but as they rounded the first corner to a new thoroughfare, they arrived at one that sold small electronic parts. The girl behind the counter slid over to them as soon as she saw Ren reach out to pick up one of the items.

“That’s a nice pulse inductor right there,” she said, thumbs hooked at her belt. “Brand new. Perfect for a little blaster.”

“I need something larger,” said Ren. “A five centimeter energy gate.”

The girl smiled, revealing crooked front teeth. “You’re in luck, mister. I just got three of ‘em.” Reaching below the counter, she drew out a tray. It was covered in various parts that Hux knew nothing about.

Ren selected one of them and examined it. “Is this copper and carbon steel?”

“That’s right. High grade. Didn’t come cheap.”

“I’ll take two of them.”

She brightened. “Two, you say? That’ll be eighty credits.”

Hux reached for the credit transfer module in his pocket, but Ren’s fingers closed around his wrist. Hux looked at him, questioning.

“Fifty,” Ren said to the merchant.

She shook her head. “Seventy. No less.”

“Fifty-five. No more.”

“I paid almost that much to import them.”

“Almost,” said Ren.

She chewed her cheek. “Sixty. That’s the best I can do.”

“Done.” Ren let go of Hux, allowing him to retrieve the transfer module. No one in the galaxy carried physical money any longer; all business was done via encrypted funds transfer. If someone stole his module, it was possible to hack it, but took more effort than most petty thieves were willing to put in. Taking it, Hux plugged it into the merchant’s handheld receiver. In a few seconds, the credits had been deducted from his account.
"Thank you very kindly," she said, dropping the energy gates into a bag. "Come back and see me again."

Ren took the bag without a word and started away to the next stall.

They found emitter shrouds next, and then some kind of wiring that Ren spent nearly ten minutes arguing with the merchant about. The proprietor of that particular stall was a surly Rodian who only spoke Bocce, the amalgamated trade language. Hux knew a few basic phrases, but he was intrigued to discover that Ren spoke it fluently. Hux was perfectly content to let him do all the talking. He just stood by with his transfer module at the ready.

Hux wasn’t keeping close track of how much they were spending. His pay was more than satisfactory, and seeing as he hadn’t taken a leave in almost two years, he had had no cause to use it. His funds may not have been as extensive as his mother’s, but he had done well for himself.

The sun was beginning to set by the time Ren had negotiated a fair price for a set of power cells. Both he and Hux were carrying bags by then, though none of them were particularly heavy. The most substantial burden was the bag containing a length of titanium casing and various smaller metal pieces that Hux assumed would serve as ornaments on the grip of the saber. Taking their purchases, they headed back to the entrance to the markets.

As they walked along the street, Hux caught the scent of cooking meat. His stomach growled. Had they been at the estate, it would be nearing dinnertime. Turning to Ren, he asked if he was hungry.

“Yes. Let’s get a drink as well.” Tipping his head toward the cantina across the way, he said, “There.”

Hux didn’t recognize the place, but it didn’t look like much. “I suppose.”

They waited for a cart drawn by a hulking beast to pass before crossing. Ren pulled the door open and strode through, leaving Hux to follow him. It was dim inside, and it reeked of the requisite stale beer and fried food. Ren led them to a table in the corner farthest from the band that was playing on a small stage by the bar. They dropped their bags onto the innermost part of the booth’s seat as they sat.

“Evening, gents,” said a young woman with long yellow hair hanging in a braid to her waist. She was dressed, but barely. “What can I get for you tonight?”

“Juice,” Ren said. “Whatever you have.”

When the waitress got a good look at him, a slow, sultry smile spread across her face. “You sure you don’t want something stronger?”

Hux expected Ren to give his usual curt reply, but he didn’t immediately say anything. Instead, he looked the waitress up and down. “I’m sure,” he said, his voice low.

She cocked her hip out slightly and winked. “Whatever you want, honey.” When she looked up at Hux, her salaciousness faded. “How about you?”

“Whiskey with ice.”

“Anything to eat?”

“What’s good?” asked Ren.
“Oh, everything,” she replied. “What’re you in the mood for?”

Ren cocked a brow. “Anything. Pick your favorite. We’ll have that.”

The waitress grinned. “Coming right up.” Spinning on her toe so that her braid swung, she headed for the bar.

“I sincerely hope you didn’t just order us something vile,” said Hux.

Ren shrugged.

A loud bark of conversation reached their table. A group of humans, most of them in shipping company uniforms, were talking animatedly in trade speak. Hux recognized something about money being discussed.

“Can you understand them?” he asked Ren.

“They’re complaining about losing credits in a bet.”

Hux leaned his forearms on the table. “How is it that you came to speak Bocce?”

“How is it that you don’t?”

“It wasn’t in my tutor’s repertoire, I’m afraid. My second language is High Galactic.”

“The Imperial tongue?”

“Indeed.”

“It was hardly used outside of the core of the Empire.”

“And only then by the elite of society,” said Hux.

“Why would you learn it, then?”

“It was a matter of status. There are still some in the First Order who speak it, officers in the mood to feel superior mostly. There are a number of good books published exclusively in High Galactic, too.”

“It’s still not useful,” Ren said.

“Not particularly, no.”

“Here you are, gents,” said the waitress, reappearing. She handed Hux’s drink off to him without so much as a look in his direction. But she bent toward Ren as she offered him his glass of juice, providing him with a clear view down her shirt; not that that concealed much to begin with.

Ren took a sip of the reddish orange concoction. “This is good.”

“Glad you think so,” she said, biting her lower lip. Hux rolled his eyes at the clumsy seduction.

Despite his disinterest in women, Hux wasn’t completely unaware of an appealing form when he saw one. The waitress had a good shape: long legs and flared hips, a narrow waist and well proportioned breasts. But she was not a real beauty. Her manner was too provocative, too overt. It likely made her quite a bit of money in tips from the cantina’s clientele, but it held no appeal for Hux.
He took a drink as he heard her giggle. The sound grated against Hux’s nerves. Irritation continued to build as she chattered at Ren. He didn’t offer more than short comments, but she seemed to be enjoying them thoroughly. For nearly two and a half weeks, Ren had claimed to detest vacuous banter—which Hux had gone to great pains to avoid at the dinner table—yet there he sat making at least some manner of smalltalk with an insipid barmaid.

When she laughed again, pressing a hand to her breast, Hux had had enough. Dropping his empty glass on the table, he slid out from his seat. “Excuse me,” he said. “I need some air.”

He brushed the waitress’s shoulder as he passed, earning him an offended, “Hey!” Ignoring it, he cut through the crowd—which had increased significantly since they have arrived—until he reached the door.

It was cool and dark outside, the sun having set completely. The street was still busy, so Hux ducked into the alley beside the cantina. Stepping over scattered refuse and a suspiciously oily puddle, he found an empty stretch of wall and leaned against it. He tipped his head back, looking up at the sky.

Only a few stars were visible in the spaces uncovered by clouds. The damp in the air had increased since the afternoon, indicating an impending storm. It wouldn’t break for a while yet, but considering that he and Ren had driven an uncovered speeder into town, they would soon have to return if they wanted to avoid the rains. However, Hux was not yet prepared to go back in. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath.

“What’s this then?”

Hux turned to see four men standing at the mouth of the alley. “Can I help you?” he asked.

“Maybe, just maybe,” said one, a particularly burly specimen, taking a step toward him. “See, I was admiring those fine boots you have there. Fancy a trade?”

Hux eyed the man’s feet. They were easily two sizes bigger than his own. “I don’t, actually.”

The man pressed one fist into his palm. “No? You sure about that?”

Hux looked out past the group, trying to find a way to skirt around them. The alley ended behind him, so there was no egress in that direction. “I’m sure, yes.”

“Well, I can’t say that that’s going to work for me. So, here’s how it’s going to go. You give me those boots and your credits and we won’t have to knock you around.”

“I don’t have any credits,” said Hux. “And I intend to keep my shoes.”

“Have it your way, then,” said the ruffian, lunging.

Hux dodged out of the way, ducking to the side and sprinting for the street.

“Get him!”

Another of the men grabbed Hux by the arm and yanked him around. Hux struck him in the throat. He choked, falling back. Hux turned in time to block a punch from one of the other thugs. He landed a kick to the man’s knee, knocking it out from under him. Once more, he made for the street, but the fourth thug stepped into his path.

The hit caught Hux in the mouth, splitting his lip. He tasted blood. Stumbling back, he tried to
regain his bearings, but before he could, another fist landed in his gut. He gasped for air, doubling over. An arm came around his neck. He scrabbled at it, but the hold was firm. A hand slid into his pocket to retrieve his transfer module.

“I’ll be thanking you-” The thug’s words were cut sharply off as he made a strangled sound.

“Release him.”

Struggling to lift his head, Hux saw Ren standing at the entrance to the alley, his right arm extended and his face a mask of fury. The man holding Hux let him slip. Hux tripped forward a step, coughing. He turned just in time to see his assailant go flying into the nearby wall.

“What the fuck!” cried one of the others in the gang, staring at the unconscious heap that was his friend. In the space of time it took him to say it, Ren had crossed the distance between them and slammed his fist into his face. The man reeled, clutching his nose. Ren landed a kick to his chest, knocking him to the ground. Without a beat, he rounded on the others.

Baring his teeth, Ren grabbed one by the front of his shirt with his left hand and hit him with the right. The thug let loose a string of curses. Ren hit him again. He fell to his knees.

“To hell with this,” said the fourth man, raising his hands and backing away. As Ren turned, the thug whirled and ran. Ren gestured with his right hand and the man went sprawling onto the sidewalk.

“Leave him,” Hux said, reaching out to grab Ren’s arm as he started to storm toward the man. “They’re finished.”

Taking Hux by the shoulder, Ren spun him around to face him. His hand went to Hux’s chin, pulling it roughly up. “They hit you.” He brushed his thumb over the cut on Hux’s mouth, making him hiss.

“Yes,” said Hux, his lips rasping against the pad of Ren’s finger. “I’m all right.”

“They would have done worse before they were through. What the hell were you doing out here?”

“Just getting some air.”

Ren’s grip on his chin tightened as he leaned close. There was anger in his eyes, that much was clear, but there was something simmering beneath it, too. Something anxious. “That was stupid,” he growled.

“I’m aware of that,” said Hux.

“Apparently you aren’t, or you wouldn’t have come out here alone.”

“What, was I supposed to tear you from your riveting conversation to stand guard over me?” He sneered. “Please.”

“You should have,” said Ren. “I would’ve gone.”

“I didn’t want you there.”

“Why?”

“I just needed a moment to myself.”
Ren glared at him. “Take it back at the house.”

Releasing Hux, Ren ran a hand through his dark hair. It had come out of the tail and was hanging in waves around his face. Hux raised a hand to his own hair, which was disordered from being held in a headlock. His eyes widened as he recalled how his captor had been forced to let go of him: Ren had choked the man from ten paces.

“You idiot,” Hux said. “Do you realize what you did?”

“Prevented you from taking a beating?”

Hux kept his voice to a low snarl as he said, “You used the bloody Force. We were supposed stay inconspicuous. Throwing a man three meters into a wall without laying a hand on him is not that.”

That got Ren’s attention. “We need to go.”

“You’re damned right about that,” said Hux, pushing past him.

“Wait.”

Hux stopped, turning slowly. “What?”

Wetting his thumb, Ren reached out and wiped at the side of Hux’s mouth. Hux stilled, his back straight.

As Ren drew back, he said, “Blood from your lip.”

Hux licked the cut. Ren’s eyes followed it.

“Let’s go,” said Hux, setting off toward the street. Ren picked up the bags that were sitting at the edge of the alley—their purchases—and followed him.

They sat in silence as they rode back to the estate. After Hux had docked the speeder, Ren dropped the supplies they had bought on the worktable near the training space. Hux assumed he would see to them the next day.

When they entered the house, they found Lorna standing in the entry hall. She took in their rumpled appearances, the slight spatter of blood on the front of Ren’s shirt, and the quickly darkening bruise around Hux’s mouth.

“Do you need a medic?” she asked.

“Just some ice,” Hux replied.

“I’ll have it sent to your rooms.”

When she had gone, Hux glanced over at Ren. “Thank you...for what you did.”

Ren nodded, saying nothing.

“Well, ah, goodnight, then.”
“Goodnight, general,” Ren said.

Hux backed away a step before turning. As he strode toward the family wing, he continued to feel Ren’s gaze on his back.

Once again in his room, he removed his clothes and pulled on a pair of loose linen pants. Feelix came and went with a bag of ice wrapped in a cloth. Leaning his head against the back of the plush armchair by the window, Hux pressed the ice to his face. The cut on his lip still burned. Perhaps there was some bacta to be had somewhere in the house.

He almost laughed at that. It was barely a scratch compared to the long, deep wounds Ren had suffered. Inconsequential when considering the plasma bolt Hux had taken to the leg in the Academy, too. He touched his thigh absently. He hardly remembered the pain now, though it had been terrible then. He imagined that Ren’s wounds had been far more agonizing.

Ren. Hux truly had been fortunate that he had appeared in the alley when he had. Hux could fight, but he had never had cause to use the sparring skills he had in an actual brawl. And no matter how well he had performed in his combat trials as a cadet, he never would have been able to take down four assailants as Ren had done.

It had been foolish of him to use the Force openly, but Hux could not help but admit that it had been an impressive display of power. And Ren had appeared to enjoy it, to relish the opportunity to fight.

“This suits you,” Ren had said of Hux’s talent with a rifle. Well, martial combat suited Ren. He had moved with lethal precision. It was alluring in its brutality.

The image of Ren standing amidst corpses, his lightsaber burning and snapping with energy, returned. Hux wanted to see it. In fact, he would have been delighted to watch him kill the men in the alley. Hux’s pulse jumped at the thought, the blood in his belly dropping toward his groin. The fingers of his right hand twitched where they rested over the scar on his leg, mere centimeters from his cock.

His tongue darted out to wet his lips as he recalled how Ren’s thumb had brushed across the cut there, how his fingers had curled around Hux’s chin. They had been warm and slightly calloused as he rubbed at Hux’s skin. His knuckles had been red and starting to bruise.

It would have been so simple for Ren to trail his hand down to Hux’s throat. The hold would be firm, but not painful. Hux swallowed, letting the vision fill his mind. Ren had been standing close to him in the alley, but he would step closer.

“That was stupid,” he would say, his breath cool on Hux’s face.

“Yes,” Hux would reply. Starting, he would feel a tug at his belt. The buckle would clack as it released. “What are you—”

Ren would cut him off by turning him and pressing him into the wall. Hux’s breath would be expelled in a surprised puff. Ren would say nothing as he released the button at the waist of Hux’s trousers and begin to lower the zipper.

“You shouldn’t have come out here alone.”

“I’m not alone.”

“No.”
In his room, Hux slid a hand into the waistband of his pants, his hand curling around his cock. He began to move slowly, bringing himself to hardness within a few strokes. It wasn’t difficult to imagine that it was another hand, though, the palm wider and fingers longer. Instead of the chair at his back, it would be the hard wall of the alley.

“Hux,” Ren would say, his mouth close to Hux’s ear as it had been when they were shooting for the first time.

Wetness spilled over Hux’s hand and belly as he came. He doubled over, his body trembling. As he regained his breath, his head, where Kylo Ren had no place, began to clear. Taking the towel from the bag of half melted ice, he used it to clean himself. He looked down at it for a moment before throwing it to the ground.

“Fuck.”

Chapter End Notes

The wonderful freedomconvicted did this incredible illustration of Hux and Ren on the firing range from this chapter.
Chapter Five

A narrow slash of orange at the horizon marked the sunrise, the light cutting across the only part of
the sky where it could penetrate the thick cover of clouds. Hux watched it from his veranda,
leaning against the railing and listening to the sound of rain spattering the roof.

He had slept fitfully in the night, what few hours he managed filled with disjointed,
incomprehensible dreams. He had finally given up at 0430. Leaving the bed sheets tangled, he had
walked naked across the room to the window. He saw a watery reflection of himself in the glass:
narrow shoulders and hips, pale planes of skin lightly tinged with pink, soft red hair on his legs and
between them.

“You’re fiery everywhere,” Arcan Wile had once said to him as they lay together in the librarian’s
small room at the Academy. Wile had been on his side, running his hand up Hux’s thigh. His
thumb just met the edge of the scar there.

“You like that?” Hux had asked, lying on his back with his arm behind his head.

“Very much,” Wile replied as he pressed a kiss to Hux’s shoulder. “You’re lovely.”

Hux had given him a look. “And you’re a sentimentalist.”

“It’s a compliment.”

“You don’t need to flatter me. I’m already in your bed.”

Wile had sighed, his breath warm against Hux’s skin. “It’s appreciation, not flattery. But I’ll desist
if you won’t accept even that.”

“No, you won’t,” Hux had said, brushing a few strands of Wile’s hair from his brow. He had
learned early that Arcan was free with his affection in a way that Hux was not. That wasn’t to say
that Hux had no affection for him; he did. He just didn’t speak of it in the manner Wile did, with
endearments and praise.

“I suppose you’re right,” Wile had said, his fingers moving up over Hux’s hip and along his side.
He brushed the tips across Hux’s flat nipple and into the center of his chest. “Beautiful.”

Taking Wile’s face between his hands, Hux had kissed him. That had put a stop to the talking for
quite some time.

Standing in his bedroom at the estate, Hux touched the place over his sternum where Wile’s
fingers had lain. It had been nearly two years now since he had had someone else’s hands on him.
He had been far too wrapped up in the completion of Starkiller Base to consider taking shore leave
to seek out companionship.

Though he knew of affairs going on between some of his fellow officers—and in some cases with
their subordinates—he had always taken the regulations about fraternization seriously. An
attachment to someone in the ranks could have compromised his authority, and he wouldn’t tolerate that.

All of his bedmates since he had left Wile and the Academy behind had been civilians and with him only one night, maybe two. He had had no desire to maintain a connection across star systems, not when he had both Starkiller and the Finalizer to command. Between the infrequent leaves, he took care of his physical needs himself.

Looking over his shoulder, he saw the towel that still lay on the floor beside the armchair. He felt a flash of disgust, of contempt for his behavior the night before. The act, of course, was not condemnable, but the thought of relishing a tryst in a filthy back alley in Scaparus Port with a man that vexed him immeasurably was abhorrent. Hux had been with men in less than desirable places—most often their small, shabby lodgings—but he had never sunk so low as to do so in a place where they could be seen. Or a place that smelled faintly of garbage, as the alley had. His skin crawled at the very idea. Feeling soiled, he stalked across to the chair, picked up the towel, and tossed it into the hamper on his way to the refresher.

He spent a fair amount of time in the shower, and when he got out, he did feel somewhat better. He hesitated only slightly as he reached for his training clothes. He had no intention of avoiding Ren, but he was not necessarily looking forward to seeing him, either.

“Pathetic,” he chided as he snatched his pants from the hanger and pulled them on. He tugged his shirt over his head and closed the door to his closet with a sharp snap.

Glancing at the chronometer, he saw that it was just past 0515. He still had three hours before he was due to appear for training. He considered picking up the book on Corellian trade routes in the Imperial Era that he had been reading, but knew he wouldn’t be able to focus on it. Instead, he chose his place on the veranda, watching the skyline for first light.

In the days he had been at the estate—he counted seventeen—he had begun to grow accustomed to the sunlight, limited though it may have been around the frequent rains. He wouldn’t say that he would the feel loss of the natural light keenly when he returned to the Finalizer, but there was something about it he liked. Perhaps it was instinctual, a remnant of the past when humanity was bound to a few planets and did not traverse the galaxy.

Hux began to grow restless again after the sun had disappeared behind the clouds, leaving a gray brightness that would likely not change over the course of the day. Extending a hand into the rain, he let the drops fall onto his open palm. He wanted to move, to expend the energy that had somehow built in the night. Though Ren wouldn’t come to train until 0800, there was no reason Hux could not begin on his own. He knew the bokken drills well enough to do them without Ren’s guidance. Curling his fingers into a fist, he pulled it back beneath the cover of the veranda. The wetness on his skin dried as he made his way through the house and out into the garage.

The illuminators warmed up slowly after he flicked the switch on. He pulled off his shoes and set them to the side before stepping onto the mats. He stretched his body out slowly, working the sleep-tightened muscles loose. Going to the table in the corner, retrieved his bokken. He looked briefly over the bags that contained the parts for Ren’s new lightsaber. It was a pity he would not have the crystal to generate the blade. Hux would have liked to have seen it, wield it if Ren would permit that. Perhaps there was some rule that forbid it, though. Only the man who built the saber could carry it or some such.

Bokken in hand, Hux went to the heavy bag that hung from the ceiling at the far left edge of the mats. He twirled the wooden sword once, pleased by his own dexterity, before taking up middle guard. The slap of the blade against the bag echoed around the space, thundering in the quiet. At
first, Hux kept both hands on the grip, as he had been instructed, but he recalled seeing Ren handle the weapon one-handed. Chewing his cheek, he transferred it to his right hand and tried a few blows.

He couldn’t hit as hard, of course, but he found that he could move more freely. Trying to emulate Ren, he spun on his heel in a full circle, using his momentum to strike the bag. He knew that his form was likely incorrect, but he continued to work at it, calling up images of Ren deftly parrying and striking. Before long, he felt his brow prickling with sweat. Coming around for a wide hit, he grinned.

“Lift your elbow more.”

Startled, Hux turned to see Ren standing against the side door. He wore a pair of dark pants and a black undershirt that left his shoulders and arms bare.

“Swing from the shoulder,” he said, peeling himself languidly away from the wall and coming toward the mats. “You’ll have more power.”

“How long have you been here?” Hux asked. He hadn’t heard the door open.

Ren shrugged. “A few minutes.”

“What time is it?”

“0600.”

“Why have you come out so early?”

“I always start now.”

Hux considered that. Ren was always present by the time he arrived in the mornings. He assumed he came in earlier, but he hadn’t known that it was two hours before they began.

“Why are you here?” Ren asked, crossing to the center of the mats.

“I was up,” Hux replied. “I thought I could use the practice.”

“You could.”

Hux frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That you could use more practice,” said Ren. “If we’re going to start one-handed combat, you’ll need it.”

“I was just mucking about,” Hux said. “I imagine I’m not ready for it yet.”

Ren stopped half a pace in front of him, making Hux look slightly up to meet his eyes. “You are.” Reaching out, he took hold of Hux’s upper arm and wrist. He lifted both to the level of his shoulder. “From here.”

Hux adjusted his grip on the bokken, breathing in. He caught the scent of warm skin made stronger by a night in bed, the natural muskiness that clung to everyone. It faded as Ren stepped away.

“Swing,” he said, nodding to Hux’s blade. Hux did, cutting across the space between them. “Better, but keep your arm taut. Don’t let your elbow extend too far.”
Hux went again, holding his bicep tight to control the movement of his arm. Ren gave him a few more corrections, simply watching him rather than demonstrating. It wasn’t altogether comfortable to be observed so closely after the past few days of their lessons, when he and Ren had fought. However, he tried to focus his attention on himself as he moved, committing the swings and blocks to memory as best he could.

“Enough,” said Ren after a time. Hux stopped, catching his breath. He watched as Ren went to pick up his own bokken. A chill of apprehension snaked down Hux’s spine, as it always did before a bout.

“Keep to one hand for now,” Ren instructed. He spun his weapon around in his hand as he took up a combat stance. Hux followed suit, resetting his fingers along the hilt of his blade.

Ren waited for Hux to attack first. He led with a high blow across his chest, which Ren blocked from below, swinging his bokken in an arc. It pushed Hux’s back toward his face, nearly striking him in the nose. He cursed and fell back a step, preparing for the retaliation. It came swiftly and without mercy. Hux’s arm gave way under the hit, jarring his shoulder. Grinding his teeth, he surged forward again. Ren parried easily. Hux felt his temper flare. He wanted to hit Ren, even if only once. Allowing the anger to fuel him, he took hold of the hilt of his blade with both hands and snapped it up toward Ren’s side.

Ren sprang away, but not quite quickly enough; the tip of Hux’s bokken caught him in the arm. He grunted. Surprised, Hux barked a laugh. It was cut short, though, as Ren drew his blade up, stopping just shy of Hux’s cheek.

“You were supposed to keep to one hand,” he growled.

Hux slapped the bokken away. “Fine, but allow me this. I hit you.”

Ren backed off, though not too far. “I told you you’d be fast.”

“Faster than you?” Hux asked, decidedly pleased with himself.

Ren regarded him sedately. “In time maybe. That hit was lucky.”

Hux planted the tip of his bokken on the mats at his feet and wiped his damp brow. “Yes, very.” He shrugged one shoulder. “I’m sure you won’t let it happen again.”

“No.” Taking up high guard, Ren glared at him.

Hux rolled his feet into the mats, checking his stance. He kept his gaze on Ren’s chest, hoping to see the direction of his strike before the weapon snapped out. He didn’t. Ren moved in a flurry, swinging at Hux’s chest. Hux managed to block it, but barely. He had only a moment to recover before Ren came at him again, this time two-handed. Hux caught the hit low on his blade, making his hands sting. Ren kept in contact with him, using his weight to bear down against him. He wasn’t much taller than Hux, but he weighed at least ten kilos more. Hux fought him as best he could, pressing back. But then Ren was gone. With a yelp, Hux stumbled forward. Ren cast his bokken to the side and grabbed Hux’s arm. He twisted it up, forcing Hux to drop his weapon. Ren continued to hold him as the blade skittered across the mats.

Anger, hot and fierce, ignited in Hux’s gut. If Ren was spoiling for a fight, Hux was willing to oblige. Wrapping his leg around the back of Ren’s knee, Hux pulled, forcing the joint to collapse in. Tucking down, he flipped Ren over his shoulder and onto the ground. Ren’s breath was expelled sharply as he struck the mats, brushing past Hux’s ear as he wrenched himself out of Ren’s grip.
and got to his feet.

Ren was up quickly, lunging for Hux’s middle. Hux thrust his fist into his stomach, stopping him short. Hux made to hit him again, but Ren caught his wrist. Hux managed to swipe his hand away and fall back. He dodged Ren’s next strike, ducking deftly. Ren drew away, bouncing on his toes.

It had been years since Hux had tried for a kick, and he wasn’t sure he could still manage it, but as he saw Ren approaching, he had an opening. With a half-shouted snarl, he whipped his leg up and struck the center of Ren’s chest. Ren gave a soft grunt and tumbled back. Hux didn’t waste the opportunity. He charged in and pushed Ren down, sitting astride his hips and trapping his arms out to the side.

Hux bared his teeth, triumphant. “Yield?”

Ren didn’t bother to struggle. He looked at each of his hands, the wrists pinned down, and then up at Hux. His gaze was intent. “You have me at your mercy, general.”

Hux swallowed, anything he might have said sticking in his throat. Ren blinked once, slowly, and then he moved. It was just a slight adjustment of his hips beneath Hux’s, easily an attempt to ease whatever discomfort Hux was causing him, but there was something intentional about it that made Hux’s pulse jump. When he looked down at Ren, there was a predacious gleam in his eyes.

The line between bloodlust and proper lust was remarkably tenuous, Hux had discovered, and in that moment it seemed possible that Ren was toeing it. The thought sent a jolt of answering hunger through Hux. Seemingly unable to resist the compulsion, he looked down at Ren’s mouth.

Hux watched his lips move as he said, “I was right.”

“You fight better when you’re angry.”

Hux scowled down at him, annoyance tamping down the flash of want he had felt. “You deliberately provoked me to prove a point?” He felt Ren’s shrug. He scoffed, pushing away and getting to his feet. “Isn’t that the opposite of how it’s supposed to work? The better fighter is calm and collected. The anger of his opponent is his downfall.”

“The Jedi believe that.”

“But you don’t?”

Ren lay on the mats still, resting on his elbows. “Rage can focus you, help you to channel the dark side of the Force.”

“I can’t use the Force.”

“No, but that doesn’t mean you’re not connected to it. Everyone is, even if you can’t manipulate it.”

Hux cocked his head, curious. “Can I chose a side, then? Or am I predisposed to one or the other?”

“It’s said that everyone has both light and dark in them, though some may be drawn to one over the other.”

Hux raised a brow. “Were you drawn to the dark side, Lord Ren?”
He sat up, wrapping one arm around his bent knee. “There is power in the dark side that cannot be tapped by the light.”

“And you wanted to be powerful.”

“I am.”

“But yet an apprentice.”

Ren frowned. “Yes, but not for long. When I complete my training, I’ll be a master in my own right.”

“No wonder you wish to return to Snoke,” said Hux. “Will it take long to finishing your training?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know what it entails?”

“There are trials I have to face,” said Ren.

“What manner of trials?”

“Control of the Force, control of the mind.”

Hux allowed himself to sound a little disappointed. “That’s not particularly specific.”

Ren looked up at him, his expression unreadable. “I’m not certain what I’ll face. My master will test me as he sees fit.”

“Is everything involving the Force so nebulous?” Hux asked, rubbing his temple. “So subjective? There are regulations for the tests First Order cadets must pass that ensure their performance meets the acceptable standards. Are there no such standards for…those like you?”

“The Jedi had something like them once, or so I’ve been told.”

“But you do not adhere to them.”

“I’m not a Jedi,” said Ren, though without the usual venom.

Hux pushed a hand through his hair. “You didn’t answer my question before.”

Ren gave him an expectant look, waiting for him to continue.

“Can I choose a side? Dark or light?”

“It would have little effect on you if you did,” said Ren, unfolding himself and standing. He approached Hux, unhurried. “But you may choose if you wish to.”

Hux remained where he was, watching Ren stride toward him. “You said the dark side offers power. What kind?”

“Domination, coercion, control.” Each word rumbled deep in Ren’s chest.

“And the light?”

“The light is weakness,” he said, his distaste apparent. “They talk of unity and sacrifice. Reservation in attitude and action. Abnegation.”
“Abnegation of what?” asked Hux.


“They lived like monks? Celibate and in poverty?”

“That’s what they wanted us to believe,” said Ren.

Hux shook his head. “What a bleak existence. I would not willingly resign myself to that.”

“Nor would I.”

“Well, then,” said Hux, “I suppose I must declare myself for the dark side.”

The corner of Ren’s mouth twitched up. “The Supreme Leader would be pleased.”

Hux brushed his knuckles against his chin contemplatively. He could not imagine Snoke ever offering his approval for Hux’s all but meaningless claim to embrace the dark side of a Force that he could neither feel nor use. The notion was almost comical.

“What?” Ren asked, looking at him quizzically.

“Nothing,” Hux replied. He glanced down at their discarded bokken. “Are we finished for today?”

Bending down, Run took up one of the swords. He offered it to Hux hilt first. “Are you ready to be finished?”

Hux took the bokken by the grip. “No.”

The rain persisted into the afternoon that day, making it impossible to shoot, so Hux remained indoors. He was sitting in the summer parlor around 1600 hours when Lorna appeared with a laden tray in her hands.

“This is a surprise,” he said, setting his book aside. “It’s usually Feelix who comes with tea.”

“I’ve sent him into town for a few things,” said Lorna, setting the tray down on the side table. She poured tea into the two cups she had brought, added a slice of lemon to both, and handed one to Hux. She sat before taking the other. “Do you ever intend to tell me what happened to you and Lord Ren in town?”

Hux’s tongue darted out to brush the healing cut on his lip. “A scuffle. Nothing significant.”

Lorna gave him a reproving look over her cup. “Did you at least hit him once?”

“What?” asked Hux, his brows rising. “Are you implying that Ren did this to me?”

“I had hoped not, but considering the rows you’ve had, it’s not completely outside the realm of possibility. Is it?”

Recalling the pressure of the Force around his neck, Hux said, “Perhaps not.”

“But he didn’t give you that,” said Lorna, gesturing to his face.
“No. This came courtesy of a thug who was in the process of trying to rob me.”

Lorna’s eyes widened. “What part of Scaparus were you in? Certainly not by the markets.”

“A ways away, yes,” said Hux. “Outside an apparently unsavory cantina.” He told her what had happened, in broad strokes.

“Thankfully neither of you were harmed more severely,” she said when he was finished. “Had I known that was going to happen, I never would have suggested you go.”

Hux waved a hand dismissively as he reached to pour himself more tea. “We knew the risks, and in the end Ren got the components he needed, so it wasn’t entirely bad.”

“He seems quite consumed with his work on whatever he’s building,” said Lorna. “He hardly looked at the tea I brought him.”

“It’s an important project.”

“I’ve no doubt.” Picking up a plate of small cookies, she offered it to Hux. He took one. “Tell me, Master Hux, do you prefer lamb or beef?”

“There’s a change of topic,” he said, chewing slowly. “Why do you ask?”

“I need to tell the chef what to prepare for the main course for your dinner.”

Hux eyed her. “There’s going to be more than one course tonight?”

“Not tonight. In two days.” She lifted a brow. “For your birthday. Had you forgotten?”

Hux sat back heavily against his chair. He hadn’t marked that day in many years, having left Arkanis and its calendar behind after he graduated from the Academy. “That isn’t necessary,” he said.

“Maybe not,” said Lorna, “but I’d like to do it all the same.”

“What exactly are you plotting?”

She clicked her tongue. “I’m hardly plotting. It’s just a five-course dinner and dessert.”

“Five courses?”

“Would you prefer eight?”

“No. Five will be more than sufficient.”

She smiled. “Excellent. Now, beef or lamb?”

“Lamb.”

“Very good.” She set her empty cup down. “I took the liberty of ordering a suit for you. Something a little more formal.”

Hux sighed. “This is a formal dinner?”

“It’s a special occasion, Master Hux. Indulge me this once.”

“All right, Lorna. All right.”
The plasma bolt struck the target in a shower of sparks, leaving a singed spot on the inner rings. Ren lowered his blaster, looking pleased.

“Well done,” said Hux, who stood beside him. He was carrying another of Brendol’s hunting rifles, one with a narrow barrel that fired more like a longer range weapon than the stout blaster Ren preferred. “But you can do better.”

Ren eyed him askance, but said nothing. He lifted the rifle to his shoulder again and lined up another shot. It hit in nearly the same place. Ren made a disgruntled noise. Wiping his brow, he squinted up at the sky.

The sun had emerged the morning of that next day, and it was now burning brightly on a backdrop of blue. There was heat in it, too. Hux’s white shirt was sticking to his back in places where runnels of sweat had formed.

“Once more,” he said. “Take your time.”

“I do,” said Ren, curt.

“Take more, then.”

“Fine.”

Hux watched as Ren set himself up and sighted down the barrel. A few strands of his hair had escaped the tail and were blowing in the light breeze.

“Compensate for the wind,” said Hux. “Just slightly.”

The front of Ren’s shirt stretched as he drew in a breath, relaxed as he let it out. The bolt he fired hit the target dead center. His smile was wide and a little smug.

“A perfect shot to end on,” Hux said, flipping the safety on his own rifle. Taking it by the stock, he rested the barrel against his shoulder. He glanced at the house, craving something cool to drink.

“How deep is that pond?”

Hux turned. Ren was looking at the small body of water some hundred meters from their makeshift firing range. It was just over the crest of a hill that overlooked the forest. It was man-made, of course, meant to increase the ambiance of the estate.

“Three meters, give or take.”

“Perfect,” Ren said, starting toward it.

Hux trotted a few paces to catch up with him. “For what exactly?”

Ren shot him a look. “You never swam in it?”

“Certainly not. It’s full of fish and...mud.”

“And that’s a problem?”
Hux made a face. He had learned to swim as a boy in boarding school, taking lessons in the large, clean indoor pool there. Years had passed since he had last been in the water, though. And never filthy pond water. “You’re not serious about this,” he said.

Ren didn’t reply. He only continued toward the pond, his expression set.

The grass around the pond was neatly trimmed, the work of the landscaping droids. As expected, the water was a murky brown. Stopping a few paces from it, Ren set down his rifle and knelt to unlace his boots.

“I’m not getting in that cesspool,” said Hux, crossing his arms over his chest.

Ren shrugged, rising. “Fine.” Reaching around to the back of his shirt, he pulled it over his head and tossed it onto the ground.

Hux averted his eyes for a moment, but soon found them drawn back. The scars on Ren’s shoulder and side were still fresh, but had healed well. Otherwise, his chest was unmarred. Hux took in the breadth of him, wide shoulders that tapered to a narrow waist and square hips. He had clean lines, smooth swells of muscle along his arms, the veins pronounced beneath his skin.

If he was aware of Hux’s gaze on him, he didn’t show it. Unabashed, he unclasped the buckle of his belt, released the zipper on his pants, and pushed them down his legs. Long legs, almost rangy, but well formed and dusted with dark hair. The black shorts he wore were stretched taut across his thighs and buttocks.

“Are you just going to watch?”

Hux looked up sharply, feeling heat creep up his neck as he realized he had been staring openly.

Ren cocked a brow. “If you’re not going to swim, you don’t have to stay here. I’m not going to drown.”

Hux cleared his throat. “I...I’d prefer to stay out for a while longer.”

“Then get in.”

“No.”

Ren rolled his eyes. Going to the edge of the water, he slipped in, sinking immediately up to his neck. He flashed a smile before ducking under completely. He surfaced a moment later at the center of the pond, his mouth open as he took a deep breath. Letting it out in a long sigh, he lay back and started to float.

Hux felt a pang of envy. Admittedly, the coolness of the water would have been a welcome reprieve from the uncharacteristic heat. But the thought of wallowing in whatever grime polluted it was still as unappetising as ever. Perhaps if he only dipped his feet in, that would serve. Taking a seat on the grassy bank, he removed his boots. He rolled up the legs of his pants and, steeling himself, sank his feet into the water. It was blessedly chilly. Leaning back on his hands, he closed his eyes.

He could hear the calls of the birds and the hiss of the long grass on the other side of the pond, where it had been permitted to grow, but other than that, it was quiet. Of course, Ren had to ruin it. The water splashed up over Hux’s knees and over the front of his shirt, nearly soaking it through.

“You bloody child!” he snarled, sitting up.
Ren was treading water half a meter from him, laughing. “Get in, Hux.”

Hux’s brows drew together. As far as he knew, Ren had only ever addressed him by his title. The informality was somewhat disarming. “No,” he said again.

Ren swam a little closer. “I could make you.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

Ren moved too fast for Hux to dodge him. He shot out of the water and wrapped his arms around Hux’s waist. An instant later, they were both fully submerged. Hux kicked and twisted, attempting to get free. Ren released him, and he burst out of the water, sputtering and furious.

“You bastard,” he said, blinking the water from his eyelashes. “This is vile.”

Ren looked anything but contrite.

Hux made a disgusted noise and made for the bank. Long fingers closed around his ankle, stopping him. “Let me go, Ren. I’m getting out of here.” A kick of his free leg splashed at Ren’s face, making him draw back. Hux swam to the edge of the pond and heaved himself up onto the grass.

His shirt was all but transparent, plastered to his chest. He hated the feeling. Reaching for the buttons, he undid them and peeled the shirt away. He wrang it out, wrinkling it irreparably. Tossing it onto the grass, he fumbled with the zipper of his pants. He had to fight to get them down his legs. He twisted them to rid them of as much water as possible. He shivered slightly as the wind picked up, his skin prickling.

“Get back in. You’ll be warmer.”

Hux shot Ren a look. “It’s freezing in there.”

“You get used to it.”

“Thank you, no. I’m going back to the house.”

“Like that?”

Hux’s stomach clenched. Looking down at his discarded clothing, he felt suddenly, terribly exposed. He was wearing only his shorts, his skin stark white in the sunshine. And he could feel Ren’s eyes on him. Self-consciousness had been forced out of him after years in the Academy’s gang showers, but it had been a long time since he had stood all but naked in front of anyone. There was a thrill of anxiety, but below it a certain excitement simmered.

“Get in, Hux.”

Giving Ren a withering look, Hux crouched at the edge of the water before sliding back into it. “Bloody hell,” he cursed at the cold. It had felt good initially, but now it was almost too much. He shuddered, treading water to keep his body moving.

Ren swam a lazy sidestroke around him, his pale legs occasionally flashing under the murkiness of the water.

“You really enjoy this?” Hux asked, sour.

“You really hate it so much?”
“My mother would have been affronted if she found me in here when I was child.” He pursed his lips. “Especially having ruined my clothes.”

“They can be washed,” said Ren.

“It wouldn’t have made her any less forgiving. Swimming in a decorative pond is uncouth.”

Ren huffed. “Anything but that.”

“Not everyone has as little sense of propriety as you.”

“You think I have no manners?”

“Few,” said Hux.

“What’s the point?” asked Ren. “I’d rather speak plainly.”

Hux narrowed his eyes. “Be rude, you mean?”

“Is that what you think of me?”

“Among other things.”

Ren swam a little closer, a sly look on his face. “Tell me.”

Pushing with his arms, Hux floated back to preserve the space between them. Ren pursued him.

“My opinion of you?” asked Hux.

“Yes.”

Glancing behind him, Hux saw that the bank was less than a meter away. If Ren continued to advance, Hux would be pressed against it. Dodging quickly to the side, he swam back toward the center of the pond. “I’m not certain I’d know where to begin,” he said.

Ren lifted a single brow.

Hux sucked his teeth. He had no qualms about giving offense, but he wasn’t willing to speak as plainly as Ren might have. He did, after all, have some manner of tact. “You are immeasurably vexing at times.”

As if to prove the point, Ren’s lips quirked up. “How?”

Hux glared. “Your antics in this bloody pond are a good example.”

“Given. What else?”

“You behave as if your power entitles you to do whatever you like. You have no regard for regulations or decorum. And your lack of control over your temper is reprehensible. The cost of the damage you inflicted upon several control panels on the Finalizer…” He shook his head, frustrated. “Were you one of my men, I would have had you flogged.”

“Would you do it yourself?”

“What? Of course not.”

“You’d watch, then,” Ren said. “You’d want to make sure I took every blow, wouldn’t you?”
“I—” Hux started, trailing off as a vision appeared in his mind’s eye: Ren hanging by his wrists at the pillory, his dark hair soaked with sweat, and ten long, red stripes across his bare back. There wouldn’t be blood drawn, but he would certainly feel the sting of the whip. The image was grotesquely stirring. “I would, yes,” Hux said finally. “If I order such punishment, I should witness it. Wouldn’t you do the same?”

“I would carry it out.”

Hux imagined the roles reversed: the bindings cutting into his own hands as Ren lashed him. He quivered, and not from the cold. “Can you use the Force to administer a beating?”

“Not like a flogging. But there are other ways to inflict pain.”

“Are you well versed in those methods?”

“Are you asking me if I know how to torture a man?”

“Do you?”

“Yes,” said Ren, impassive. “Body and mind.”

Hux recalled the Resistance pilot Ren had captured. He had successfully extracted the information that they required to seek out the BB-unit that held the map to Skywalker. Certainly that had required some of his coercive talents. “Did Snoke teach you?”

“Some things. Others I discovered myself.” His expression darkened. “You could say I have an aptitude for it.”

“Do you enjoy it?” Hux asked before he could think to stop himself.

“I appreciate it,” Ren replied, “but I don’t take pleasure in it. That I take in getting what I want from them.”

Hux flared his nostrils. “You seem to have no problem doing that. Except for the girl, Rey. You couldn’t break her.”

Ren scowled. “I will be able to, when my training is complete. Any mind will give in, then.”

“Half of the First Order is terrified of you already. What will happen when they find out you can destroy them without laying a hand on them?”

“Do you fear me?”

Hux gave him a look. “You know I don’t.”

“Why? I’ve turned the Force against you before. Threatened to kill you.”

“If you intended to kill me, you would have done it by now.” Hux shrugged. “And as much as you might dislike me, I don’t believe it’s enough to end my life.”

“No,” said Ren.

They fell silent then, both floating aimlessly in the water. A shadow passed across it briefly, making Hux look up at the sky. A few clouds had begun to roll in from the east. They were just starting to appear, but on the horizon they were thicker, almost black.
“It’s going to storm. We’d best go inside.”

“All right.” Kicking toward the bank, Ren pulled himself out of the pond in one fluid motion. The sun appeared again as he rose, reflecting off the droplets of water across his skin.

Wile’s words echoed in Hux’s head: “You’re lovely.”

He pinched his eyes closed, dismissing the memory. When he opened them again, Ren was buckling his belt where it sat low on his hips. Turning, Hux went to the place where his own clothes were piled. They were still wet, so he grimaced as he put them on. Leaving the shirt unbuttoned, he laced up his boots and set off toward the house. Ren kept pace, though neither of them spoke again, even as they parted to return to their own rooms.

Hux chose a blue shirt to wear beneath his charcoal gray jacket that night for dinner. He had noticed a new addition to his wardrobe as he had dressed: the promised formal suit for his birthday meal. He took the deep green, satiny fabric of the coat between his thumb and forefinger, thinking of the general foolishness of celebrating the day of one’s birth anytime after the age of ten. Thirty-five would feel no different than thirty-four, and it would do nothing to change his present situation: trapped at the estate, removed from his command. Resigned, he closed the door to his closet and headed for the door.

Feelix was pouring glasses of water when Hux arrived in the dining room. “Good evening, sir,” he said, making a shallow bow.

“And to you,” said Hux as he went to his chair.

“I’ll bring the wine, sir.”

Hux nodded to young man, watching him disappear into the kitchen. He couldn’t have been more than twenty. Lorna had said something about him starting on the staff a year or so before. Hux hardly saw the point of employing a footman if he had no one to serve, but Lorna prided herself on being prepared. If Hux’s mother was willing to pay the boy’s salary, there was no reason he couldn’t stay on even in her absence.

The sound of the main door opening drew Hux’s attention just as Ren stepped through. He was wearing a pair of fresh trousers, the creases still visible below the knee, with a red shirt tucked into the waist. The long sleeves were rolled up to his elbows.

“Good evening,” said Hux. He had long ago stopped standing when Ren came into the room, though he could imagine his mother making a pinched, distasteful face at him for it.

Ren gave a quiet, “Hm,” as he sat, which did not bode well for conversation at the table that night. Hux wasn’t overly bothered, however. Despite himself, the afternoon swim had put him in in a good humor. He was willing to sit in silence if it came to it.

When Feelix came with the wine, he sipped it slowly, letting the bouquet linger on his tongue. It was an excellent vintage, and it paired well with the tender cutlets of meat that the footman set before him next.

“Delicious,” he said, aloud, after a few bites.
Ren looked up at him, skeptical.

“You don’t think so?” asked Hux.

“It’s fine.”

“‘Fine,’ yes. Of course, it’s ‘fine.’” Hux tapped his fork lightly on the side of his plate. “It’s far better than anything you’d get on the Finalizer, I can assure you of that.”

Ren shrugged one shoulder. “I never objected to standard rations.”

“That’s...commendable,” said Hux, making a face. “I admit, I do not share your opinion. I eat the fare in the mess because otherwise I would starve.”

“It’s your ship. Why don’t you change it?”

“Despite appearances to the contrary, there are aspects of running a battleship that do not fall within the commander’s purview.”

“But if it bothers you—”

Hux waved a hand. “Perhaps I am exaggerating some. Most days I hardly notice what they’re serving. I take sustenance so that I can perform my duties. The standard rations are good enough for that.” He picked up his glass. “The wine, however...this cannot be matched by the swill the Order keeps in the officers’ lounge. You really are missing something extraordinary, Ren.”

“It clouds the mind,” he said.

“Yes,” said Hux. “Most pleasantly. Do you object to that out of hand or does it have something to do with your abilities?”

“Only the capabilities of an unschooled child would be compromised by something as insignificant as alcohol.”

“Then what is the problem?”

“I prefer to keep my senses clear in case of attack.”

“Well, you’re not likely to be accosted here. You can indulge without fear.” Hux reached for the decanter that Feelix had left.

“No,” said Ren.

“Try it,” said Hux. “If you don’t care for it, then leave the rest. But trust me, it’s good. I have discerning tastes.”

Ren’s eyes flashed. “So I’ve learned.”

Hux stopped, the decanter hanging in his grip. “What do you mean?”

“Your preferences are particular,” said Ren, setting down his fork. “Rich food, expensive clothes, long-range blasters...men.”

Hux’s mouth dropped open as the decanter hit the table. “What the hell did you say?” he hissed when he had regained his voice.
“You want me to repeat myself? Fine. I said that you prefer men, as well as certain types of rifles —”

“Shut your mouth. Now.”

Ren had the audacity looked amused. “Why? It’s not meant to be a secret. Is it?”

“It doesn’t fucking matter if it was!” Hux said, slamming his fists down on the table. “You have no right to address it at all.”

“What not?”

Fury pooled like molten lead in Hux’s gut. “Why not? Because you don’t say such things. If you had any semblance of propriety, you would know that.”

“Fuck propriety,” said Ren.

“Get out.”

“No. I’m still eating.”

“I don’t care. Get out.”

“Are you going to force me? You’ll have to.”

Hux nearly knocked his chair to the ground as he shot to his feet. It was unlikely that he could physically overpower Ren, but he couldn’t bear to look at his arrogant, presumptuous face another minute. If Ren wouldn’t go, he would. He rounded the table, but as he approached the door, Ren stepped into his path.

“Why are you running?” he said, catching Hux by the arm.

“I can’t stand you,” Hux spat. He pulled at Ren’s grip. “Get out of my way.”

“No,” Ren growled. “I’m not finished yet.”

Hux’s back hit the wall hard as Ren shoved him against it and pinned his arms to his sides. “What else is there to say, then?” Hux demanded. “You certainly have my undivided attention.”

Ren’s expression darkened. “I’ve decided I want a taste of wine after all.”

Hux opened his mouth to tell Ren to go to hell, but as he did, Ren’s covered it. He swallowed Hux’s sound of surprise as he slipped his tongue between Hux’s lips. The hard pressure of his mouth pushed Hux back against the wall. His head struck it with a thud. Dark spots swam in his vision for a moment. Ren did not relent. He sucked Hux’s lower lip into his mouth, dragging it between his teeth as he pulled away. Hux managed a hurried breath before Ren delved into him again.

Ren kissed brutally, a merciless assault. But it wasn’t without skill. His lips were plush and just slightly chapped as they pressed against Hux’s. His mouth was pliant, his tongue slick and clever. Hux felt himself giving in to it, welcoming the intrusion.

No.

The word resounded through Hux’s head, an attempt to regain control. Repeating it to himself, he began to struggle. Without breaking the kiss, Ren tightened his grip on Hux’s wrists and pressed
against him, blocking his escape. Hux balled his hands into fists as Ren’s hips dug into his. Hux’s body betrayed him then, and he found himself rolling into Ren in response. Ren’s groan reverberated deep in his chest.

No.

But even as he thought it, Hux was licking into the heat of Ren’s mouth, tasting the pepper that had crusted the edges of the meat they had both eaten. Brushing his nose across Hux’s, Ren turned his head to catch Hux’s lips from another angle. Hux could hear the wet sounds as their tongues glided against each other. It was obscene and even more intoxicating than the wine. Hux’s resolve was crumbling. If he didn’t stop this now, he would lose himself.

“No,” he breathed, a last stand. When Ren persisted, he turned his head to the side, landing Ren’s slick mouth on his cheek. “Let me go.”

To his surprise, Ren complied. He backed away a step. Hux could see the quick rise and fall of his chest, the redness and sheen of saliva on his lips. Hux could easily have taken them again. But instead, he struck him hard with the back of his right hand.

Ren froze with his face turned, his cheek fiery from the blow.

Hux was shaking, adrenaline surging through him. “Get out,” he said, quiet.

Ren turned to him slowly. “Goodnight, General Hux.” Without another word, he strode out of the room.

Hux stared at after him, his hand aching and his lips bruised.

Hux did not go to training the next morning. He took his breakfast from Feelix at 0730, but left it untouched on the side table as he crawled back into bed. He knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep, but he preferred the coolness of the sheets to what awaited him in the garage. By 0900, he knew that Ren wasn’t going to appear to insist that he come to train. Small favors.

Lying on his side, he watched the minutes on the chronometer pass. Numbness suffused him, but his thoughts were far from sedate. Again and again he relived how demanding Ren had been as he held him against the wall. There was no pretense in such a kiss. The intent—to take and to possess—was plain. Hux couldn’t recall another like it.

But then, Ren was so unlike the men he was commonly drawn to. They were most often physically built like Arcan Wile had been: lean and almost wiry, like Hux himself. They were generally shorter than Hux and fastidiously groomed and dressed. He favored lighter coloring. Wile’s hair had been an ashy blond and his eyes blue. Hux preferred companions with whom he could converse. Save for his occasional bouts of spare conversation, Ren was none of those things.

Yet, there was a predacious beauty about him that was captivating. It hadn’t initially been perceptible beneath the mask he wore or around the sulkiness and temper, but barefaced, with a blade in his hand and his dark hair falling in slightly unkempt waves to his shoulders, he was stunning.

Burying his face in his pillow, Hux groaned. He couldn’t allow this to happen. Ren was, for all
intents and purposes, his charge. Hux was meant to oversee his convalescence, not to take him to his bed. The notion was ludicrous. Three weeks before, Hux could hardly tolerate the man’s presence. Their proximity at the estate had forced him into it, and he had accepted that, but they were still little more than strangers brought together by their joint service to the First Order. Not that he hadn’t bedded strangers before. In fact, it was all he had done in the past fifteen years.

Fifteen years. In the mess of what had happened the night before, Hux had all but forgotten that he was thirty-five today. And that meant that Lorna’s dinner was that night. Hux cringed. He had planned to take all his meals in his room that day, but there was no way he was going to avoid the dinner, which he would inevitably have to share with Kylo Ren. Hux had suffered through a number of uncomfortable birthday celebrations in his life—always his mother’s work—but he could not imagine that any of them could be more painful than this one was likely to be. Driving his fist into the mattress, he cursed.

By the time Hux’s lunch arrived that afternoon, he still had little appetite, but he decided to take some tea at least. Rolling out of bed, he pulled on a pair of soft pants and went out onto the veranda. It had become a refuge of sorts, the place in the house where he found the most solace. Sitting outside calmed him some, as did the tea.

When, at last, the sun began to descend, he set his datapad—on which he had been reading—aside and went to his closet. He drew out the suit Lorna had purchased for him and hung it on the back of the door. He took his time in the refresher, carefully shaving the day’s growth of ruddy beard. As he looked at himself in the mirror, he saw that his hair had grown a sight too long for his tastes. Despite the gel he used to tame it, a few strands still fell untidily across his brow. It made him look less severe, he thought, less like a soldier and more like one of the fashionably disheveled society sons his mother had wanted him to take up with. He should have disliked that, but he found that he didn’t mind so much. At least not while he was off duty.

He had just finished dressing when a knock came at the door. Lorna was standing outside when he opened it.

“Happy birthday, Master Hux,” she said, smiling. “I knew that suit would look well on you.”

“You have impeccable taste,” he said. “As you well know. Come to fetch me for dinner?”

“I have. Are you ready?”

Hux wasn’t certain he was, but, taking a deep breath, he said, “Yes.” He offered his arm, and Lorna took it.

“I was concerned about you today,” she said as they walked down the hallway of the family wing. “Feelix said you hardly ate.”

“Perhaps I was saving myself for dinner. Five courses and all.”

Lorna didn’t look convinced. “You quarreled with Lord Ren last night.”

“That’s nothing out of the ordinary,” said Hux, clipped.

“He was out of sorts this morning. Harron said he spent all day working on his project.”

“‘Feelix said,’ ‘Harron said.’ I wasn’t aware we were being so closely observed.”

“It’s our business to know the goings on in the house. How else are we to ensure you have everything you require?”
Hux frowned down at her. “There are certain matters that are none of your concern.”

“Certainly, Master Hux. I have no intention of trespassing on your privacy. I was only worried that you might be ill.”

“Bollocks,” he said crudely, stopping them in the entry hall. He turned to face Lorna. “I’m fond of you, as you are aware, and allow you to speak freely, but I will not tolerate intrusions into my personal affairs. Is that understood?”

She regarded him steadily. “It is, Master Hux.”

“Good.” Taking her arm again, he led them to the dining room.

Feelix was waiting at the door as they approached. While he was normally semi-formally attired in a pair of black slacks, a crisp white shirt, and vest, he was now outfitted in full livery, white gloves and all. He bowed as he opened the door.

Hux tensed as he saw Ren standing beside the table, a glass of juice in his hand. His black suit fit him perfectly, the tailoring precise. It was piped with red, accentuating the lines and making him look all the more imposing. His hair brushed his shoulders.

“Good evening, my lord,” said Lorna. “You’re looking very well.”

“Thank you,” he said, uncharacteristically polite. Turning his eyes up, he looked at Hux. “General.”

Hux gave a curt nod, but said nothing. His throat was too tight. Glancing at the table, he saw an opened bottle of wine. He was suddenly very, very thirsty.

Lorna seemed to followed his gaze. Slipping her arm out from his, she went to the bottle and poured two glasses. One she gave to Hux and the other she kept for herself. “Before dinner is served, I’d like to propose a toast,” she said, holding up her glass. “To Master Hux, on the day of his birth.”

“Thank you,” he said, saluting her with his wine before taking a long drink. If Ren partook in the gesture, he didn’t see it.

“Very well,” said Lorna. “I’ll leave you now. Do enjoy the meal.” Inclining her head, she retreated.

The silence she left in her wake hung heavy. Hux made a show of appreciating the table setting rather than looking at Ren. The finest china had been brought out, the detailing on the edges delicate and reminiscent of the emblem of the Empire. A candelabrum held eight flickering tapers at the head of the table.

“We should, ah, sit,” said Hux, still keeping his eyes cast down. They took their places without speaking, the scraping of the chairs’ legs on the wood floor the only sound. Hux nearly sighed with relief when Feelix appeared with the first course. It was a flaky filet of fish no larger than two of Hux’s fingers and garnished with a cream sauce. He was about to cut the first piece when Ren spoke, making Hux’s fork skitter across the plate.

“How old are you?”

“Thirty-five,” Hux said, regaining his composure.
“You were born before the fall of the Empire.”

“Four years before, yes.”

“Do you remember it?”

“No. I know only what my parents told me.”

“I would have liked to have seen it,” said Ren.

“As would I,” said Hux, taking up a slice of the fish. “It would have been glorious.”

“Yes.”

Hux chewed slowly, uncertain of how to continue. The conversation was stilted, but it was preferable to the quiet. “Have you ever been to the interior Imperial planets? Coruscant? Or perhaps Byss?”

“Yes,” said Ren.

“Both?”


“Not anymore,” Ren replied, dark.

Hux felt his chest swell with the same pride that he had experienced as he watched Starkiller destroy all the worlds in the Hosnian System. “No,” he said. “Not anymore.”

Ren picked at his fish, seemingly uninterested. “Have you traveled to the Core?”

“I haven’t. I admit, I haven’t ventured far beyond the Unknown Regions. The Western Reaches, of course, where Jakku is. But as you can imagine, those loyal to the First Order were not welcome in the Core.” He paused, taking a sip of wine. “Did you go there on orders from the Supreme Leader?”

“No. It was...before I was apprenticed to Snoke.”

“I see.”

Ren looked up at him, intent. “You aren’t going to ask about it?”

“Would you tell me if I did?” said Hux.

“Some of it.”

Hux set his utensils down. “Very well. What was Hosnian Prime like?”

“Chaotic,” said Ren. “The Senate was young then and unsettled.”

Hux’s brows drew together. “You recall the early days of the Republic? You couldn’t have been more than a child.”

“Even a child notices disorder on that large a scale when his parents are embroiled in it.”
Hux’s mouth opened, his eyes wide. “You were born into the Republic.”

Ren nodded. “On Hosnian Prime.”

“Yet you found your way to the Order.”

“Snoke found me. Chose me.”

“How?”

“He sensed my potential.”

“With the Force,” said Hux.

“Yes.”

“From across the galaxy?”

“I told you,” said Ren, “everyone is connected to the Force. We can feel disturbances, changes. Awakenings.”

“Can Snoke feel you now?”

“Of course.”

“And you him?”

“Barely. I’m not yet as attuned as he is.”

“Then why can he not sense where Luke Skywalker is?” Hux asked.

Ren frowned. “Skywalker has the ability to hide himself, to retreat from the flow of the Force in way that masks his location.”

“Could you do the same?”

“I do. From all but Snoke.”

Hux touched his chin with his knuckles, considering. “Can you locate anyone using the Force?”

“No. Those who aren’t sensitive to it don’t...broadcast clearly enough.”

“So, you couldn’t find me?”

“Not across star systems.”

Hux shook his head. “I don’t believe I’ll ever truly understand your Force.”

“You won’t,” said Ren.

The door to the kitchen swung open before Hux could put together a reply. Feelix deftly retrieved their empty plates and then returned with the second course: a light salad with strong vinaigrette. Conversation lapsed for a time as he and Ren ate, but Hux was content with it as he had not been at the start of the meal. It felt almost routine now, though Hux was still unwilling to lower his guard completely. Ren was unpredictable, and at almost any moment he might choose to broach the subject of what had transpired between them.
The third and fourth courses came and went without incident, however. Interestingly enough, Ren asked Hux about the Academy and what it had been like to train there. Hux had countless anecdotes about battle simulations and live fire exercises, all of which he was more than willing to recount. He was careful to leave all allusions to Arcan Wile from the discussion, though. He had no desire to share him with Ren, even in passing. He had, in fact, never mentioned him to anyone before.

When the final course—the lamb Lorna had asked him about—was finished, Hux dabbed his mouth with his napkin and sat back against his chair. He would have to offer his compliments to the chef. The spread had truly been exquisite.

“Master Hux,” said Feelix as he came to remove the last of their dishes. “Dessert will be served on the veranda in your room.”

“Will it? That’s just as well, I suppose. Are we to go there now?”

“Everything is prepared, if you’re ready, sir.”

As Hux got to his feet, he felt his head swim a little. The third glass of wine must have caught up with him. He was cognisant of the similarity to last night’s dinner as he came around the table, but this time Ren made no move to detain him. Hux led the way into the hall and toward the family residences.

Only a single lamp burned in his room when they arrived, but there were a number of lanterns hanging from the roof of the veranda beyond it. Candles in colored vases sat on the table alongside an ornate cake bedecked in chocolate. Though he was almost too full already, Hux craved a slice of it. Ren, too, was looking at with interest.

“Do help yourself,” said Hux, gesturing. He went first to the bottle of champagne on ice in a standing bucket next to the table. He popped the cork and poured a glass for himself. The wine was crisp and sweet, perfect to complement the cake.

The piece that Ren handed him was twice the size of what he would have cut for himself. He eyed it as he sat and took up a fork.

“Why do you hate it here so much?” asked Ren after a time. “It’s comfortable.”

“Perhaps that’s just the issue,” Hux replied. “I learned to eschew comfort in the Academy. This was my mother’s domain. My father indulged her because she wouldn’t have tolerated less, but he was rarely here.”

Ren swallowed a bite of his cake. “Neither were you.”

“It was more than enough.” Hux paused, thinking on Ren’s origins. “If your family was involved in the establishment of the New Republic, did you not also enjoy a certain measure of comfort as a boy? Hosnian was an affluent world.”

“We had a house on the hundred and thirtieth floor of the diplomatic complex,” said Ren. “It was...well appointed.”

Hux struggled to imagine him in a fine home much like Hux’s mother’s apartments in Pantin City. “Did you like it?”

Ren shrugged. “I didn’t know any different. Not until I left.”
“To train with Snoke.”
“Not immediately.”

“Of course. It was with your first master. Did you have to go offworld?”
“Yes.”

“When does one start an apprenticeship?”
“I was six years old.”

“So young?”

“As soon as I started to show an affinity for the Force, I had to. Without training I was dangerous, uncontrolled.”

Hux set down his half finished cake. “In what way?”

“Once I shattered all the illuminators in my mother’s house. I was upset about a broken toy.” He paused, then said, “With a few words, I could keep my tutors from assigning me work.”

“Coercion?”

Ren nodded. “It’s always been one of my strongest abilities.”

“That must be advantageous,” said Hux. “I would have appreciated it as a boy.”

“After I started training, I was never allowed to use it. My master didn’t like it. Among other things.”

“You didn’t get on well with him?”

“I worshiped him. At least, for a while.”

“What changed?”

Ren frowned. “I learned how much he wasn’t teaching me.”

“Why would he keep things from you?”

“They weren’t suitable.”

Hux didn’t press for details. He reasoned that it was another aspect of the Force that he didn’t comprehend. Picking up his wine, he took a sip. Ren watched him as he did.

“At the risk of once again being refused,” said Hux, “would you like to try it?”

“All right,” said Ren.

Surprised, but oddly pleased, Hux stood and went to retrieve the bottle. He poured a second glass and held it out to Ren, who had put down his empty plate and gotten to his feet as well. Ren took it and looked at it. Then he lifted it to his mouth. Hux watched his throat work as he swallowed.

“How do you like it?” Hux asked, setting his own empty glass down on the table.

Ren took another small sip, licking his lips as he lowered the glass. “Not as good as the last time I
tasted it.”

Hux’s breath stuck in his chest as Ren pinned him with his gaze. At last, they came to this. Hux had dreaded it, and yet a spark of warmth ignited in him. The memory of how Ren’s mouth had felt as he held Hux against the dining room wall came vividly back to him. The corners of that mouth turned up knowingly now, drawing Hux’s eyes.

“Be careful, Ren.”

His smile grew wider, darker. “Of what, general? Are you going to hit me again?” He turned his cheek, offering it.

“Why are you doing this?” Hux said.

“Because I want it,” Ren said.

Hux felt the heat rise in his face.

Ren kept his eyes on him. “And so do you.”

“You presume too much.”

“Then deny it.”

“I don’t want it,” Hux said.

“You’re a poor liar.” He took a short step closer. “Last night—”

“You forced yourself on me.”

Ren glared. “You didn’t refuse me.”

“I bloody well did,” Hux snapped. “You had no right.”

Shooting him an annoyed look, Ren turned and went to the edge of the veranda. Hux stared at his broad back and couldn’t help but remember how he had looked as he stood at the bank of the pond, his skin wet and his scars white. Lovely.

“Ren.” As he came around again, Hux crossed the distance between them in two long strides and snatched the glass out of Ren’s hand. It shattered as it hit the stones at their feet, but Hux hardly heard it. Pushing his hands into Ren’s hair, Hux pulled him to his lips.

The kiss was hard, ruthless. As Ren opened his mouth beneath Hux’s, their teeth clacked. Hux registered the pain, but disregarded it. Ren’s fingers curled around his upper arms, digging into fabric and flesh. Pressing him back, Hux forced him up against the railing. He took a tighter hold of his hair, pulling his head back. Ren gave a quiet sound of surprise as Hux nipped his neck.

“Don’t expect me to be gentle, boy,” he said.

Ren’s eyes flashed with hunger as he slid his hand up to the back of Hux’s hair. He took a short step closer. “Last night—”

“You forced yourself on me.”

Ren’s eyes flashed with hunger as he slid his hand up to the back of Hux’s head. Bringing him closer, Ren trailed his parted lips over Hux’s. “Don’t be.” His tongue slid into Hux’s mouth, warm and insistently.

Hux forced his knee between Ren’s, brushing his thigh against him. Ren rolled his hips in response, allowing Hux to feel his cock, a hardening ridge in his trousers. Hux felt himself jump in response, suddenly aching. Fisting his hands in Ren’s coat, Hux pulled him away from the railing
and turned them around.

Ren stepped back, passing across the threshold into Hux’s bedroom. His lips were wet and red, his hair mussed and falling across his brow. There was a small mark darkening on the side of his neck where Hux had bitten him. The sight of it made Hux want to leave more.

“Undress,” he said as he followed Ren through the door. He shucked his coat as he did, leaving it in a puddle on the floor. Ren’s jacket followed it a moment later, as did his shirt. Hux’s hands were on him immediately, palms pressed to heated skin. Ren set his own on Hux’s lower back, sliding down to cup his ass as he ground their hips together.

The fabric of Hux’s trousers rubbed against his cock, making him hiss. It was too much and too little at once. Trailing his fingers down Ren’s chest, he fumbled blindly with his belt. Ren’s proximity didn’t make it easy, but Hux managed to get the clasp open and flip the button beneath free. Lowering the zipper, he hooked his thumbs at Ren’s waist and tugged. As the trousers slid down his hips, Hux reached into them. Ren was bare beneath.

“Arrogant,” Hux growled. “You were ready for this.”

Ren pressed himself into Hux’s hand. Ducking his head, he bit at Hux’s lip. Hux surged up, invading Ren’s mouth as he palmed between his legs. Ren squeezed Hux’s narrow waist hard enough to redden the skin.

“Get on the bed,” Hux said. “Now.”

Ren retreated a step and dropped his trousers in a pool at his feet. His cock stood out against a thatch of dark hair, heavy between his thighs. Hux’s fingers twitched; he wanted them around Ren again.

“Do I need to repeat myself?” Hux said sharply. “Go.”

Ren moved languidly toward the bed, lowering himself down onto his back and sliding up to where the pillows rested against the headboard. He splayed his legs wide, an invitation.

Hux stripped out of his pants and went to him, kneeling at the edge of the mattress as he looked Ren over. He was flushed, his eyes glassy and hooded. Bracing himself on his hands, Hux swept down and pressed a hard kiss to Ren’s mouth. Their cocks were trapped between them, skin on skin. They started to move almost immediately, quick pulses of their hips to increase the contact. There was too much friction, yet Hux pushed harder into Ren’s belly.

When they came up for air, Ren buried his face in Hux’s neck. He trailed open-mouthed kisses up to his ear, taking the lobe between his teeth and sucking. Hux let out a short gasp. “No marks,” he warned, though he had already bruised Ren’s skin.

Hux adjusted his position, taking his weight onto his knees so he could reach over to the bedside table. He pulled open the top drawer and reached for the small bottle he had discovered there on the first night he had come to the estate. He had been affronted when he first saw it, assuming that Lorna had acquired it under the altogether wrong assumption about Hux’s relationship with Ren. The irony of that in the current situation wasn’t lost on him as he flipped open the top and drizzled the cool lubricant onto his fingers. Ren watched with unmistakable desire as Hux slid them together.

With his unanointed hand, Hux guided Ren’s legs apart until he was kneeling between them. Ren gave a long groan as Hux traced the length of his cock, leaving a glistening trail. Then he moved
lower, pressing the tips of his forefingers against Ren. When he pushed in, it wasn’t tenderly. Ren’s back bowed up, his heels digging into the bed. He drew panting breaths as Hux worked his fingers into and out of him.

“Turn over,” Hux said, withdrawing and moving to the side.

Ren rolled onto his stomach, resting his chin on his folded arms. Hux took the bottle of lubricant and poured more into his palm. He took his cock in hand, slickening it.

“Up,” Hux said, curling his fingers around Ren’s hips and lifting him until he was kneeling before him, exposed. He ran one hand down the slope of Ren’s back while he guided himself with the other.

Ren gave a breathy, “Ah” as Hux moved into him, his hands pulling at the sheets beneath them. Hux kept his eyes on the place where they were joined until he was fully seated inside him. He stilled there, feeling Ren’s tight heat around him.

“Move,” Ren said, his voice strained.

Sinking his fingers into Ren’s hair, Hux pulled him sharply up, snapping his hips as he did it. Ren’s cry was pained, but it quickly faded into a deeper, satisfied sound. Hux gave another tug. “You don’t tell me what to do.”

Ren, open-mouthed, turned to look over his shoulder. Hux pressed the side of his face into the pillows.

“Hux,” Ren said. The sound of his name made Hux shudder. Biting his lip, he took a firmer hold of Ren and drove into him.

Ren cursed as Hux set a fast, nearly punishing pace. As he felt the pressure building, though, Hux forced himself to slow. Curling his still slippery hand around Ren’s cock, he began working it in steady strokes. Ren gave a guttural growl and pushed back against Hux, bringing him deeper.

“Fuck,” Hux cried.

Ren repeated it as he threw his head back and spilled himself over Hux’s hand and the bed sheets below them. His body tightened around Hux, bringing Hux to the edge. He pulled himself free, and giving himself one stroke with his hand, he came across Ren’s back.

Heart beating hard in his chest, Hux sat back on his heels. He dropped his head, closing his eyes. Ren remained still below him, presumably catching his breath as well. Satiation crept into Hux’s consciousness, making a slow smile spread across his face.

The bed shifted as Ren pulled his legs away and rolled onto his feet. Without a word, he strode toward the refresher. A rectangle of light cut across the floor as he turned on the illuminator, but then disappeared as he shut the door. The shower turned on a moment later.

Hux pushed both hands through his hair as the sweat on his skin began to dry. He wouldn’t have minded a few minutes under the hot water, but joining Ren was out of the question. Taking the twisted top sheet from the bed, Hux used it to wipe himself clean. He wasn’t going to sleep in it anyway, not like that.

Retrieving his trousers, Hux pulled them on. He pulled the belt from the loops and dropped it on the rug on his way out to the veranda, careful to sidestep the broken glass. The air outside was cool and damp. Another fall of rain had begun while they had been gone. While he had been in his
childhood bedroom buried inside Kylo Ren.

“Bloody hell,” Hux muttered. Turning to the table, he poured himself a glass of champagne, drained it, and poured another, which he sipped more steadily.

The fall of footsteps announced Ren’s return a while later. He had put his clothes and shoes back on, though his shirt was untucked.

“Drink?” asked Hux.

Ren shook his head. “I should go.”

Hux felt a stab of disappointment, but also relief. He had had no notion of what was going to happen next. Sharing a bed for a night seemed too surreal. “Yes, of course,” he said. “I—yes. Well, goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Hux,” said Ren as he made his way across the bedroom to the door. When he had closed it behind him, Hux reached for the champagne again. He drank the rest of it straight from the bottle, and then, with a howl, threw it out into the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Freedomconvicted did this amazing comic for this chapter.

The fabulous lupineart did this beautiful painting of the kiss in the dining room.
Chapter Six

Hux woke to a certain soreness, the mark of muscles unused for some time. It wasn’t unpleasant, simply unfamiliar after so long. He was half wrapped in a comforter on an otherwise bare mattress. He had stripped the bed not long after Ren had gone and thrown the soiled sheets in a pile on the floor. Cocooned in the remaining blankets, he had fallen asleep almost immediately.

Kicking them away now, he rolled to the edge of the bed and sat. He rubbed his face and the skin of his stomach where the trousers he still wore had left impressions. Glancing out to the veranda, he saw that the dishes and remnants of cake from the night before were still laid out on the table. He likely should have sent for Feelix to clear them before going to bed, but he had been feeling the effects of the wine and had wanted nothing more than to slip into the oblivion of sleep. The leavings would be seen to in short order, though. It was already 0715 and Hux’s breakfast was due anytime.

The familiarity of that morning ritual served to both comfort and to jar him. It was routine, unchanged, and that seemed out of place when so much else had shifted. The fragile truce that he had come to with Ren since their arrival at the estate had been shattered quite spectacularly, leaving Hux in a quandary about how to proceed. He had grown accustomed to their daily interactions, from saber training to several hours on the firing range when the weather cooperated. Even their restrained conversations had become acceptable, even pleasing when Ren deigned to contribute something of substance. In the wake of what had happened, however, it was unlikely that things could continue as they had.

What had happened. Hux scoffed at the evasion. He had fucked Kylo Ren. There was no avoiding that fact, not when the balled up sheets at his feet bore the telltale stains. Offended, Hux gathered them up and bore them to the laundry hamper inside his closet. He leaned against the door once he had closed it, his palms against the wood. His stomach was unsettled, though it was likely more a product of rich food and wine rather than of discontent.

“I want it,” Ren had said, “and so do you.”

Hux had. He would not have all but ordered Ren into his bed had he not wanted him there. True, he had attempted to rebuff him at first, to preserve whatever tenuous understanding they had established over the past three weeks, but when the opportunity arose to take what he desired, he had. In one way, he wanted to chastise himself for it, since he was, under most circumstances, in the utmost control of his impulses—quite unlike Ren—but he didn’t see the use of dwelling on past missteps. As he had when Starkiller was destroyed, he kept his focus on how to rectify the situation and move forward rather than meditating on what was already past.

Stepping away from the door, Hux contemplated his next moves as he might the placement of troop battalions going into a fight: calculate the acceptable losses and possible gains before choosing how to act. Ren was still, by all accounts, in his custody, which made any further relations with him against the regulations of the First Order. Hux knew that was a flimsy argument at best, seeing as Ren operated outside the hierarchy of command, but they were more like fellow officers than anything else. That necessitated a professional distance that did not, according to Hux,
Hux frowned. He had unfortunately already overstepped those bounds by bringing Ren to his family's home. In so doing he had revealed more about himself than he had to anyone inside or outside of the Order in the course of his entire career. And they had spoken of his upbringing there more than once, something he had not discussed in many years. That did not, however, imply any kind of deeper personal connection. Hux felt no particular camaraderie with Ren, though he had acquired a greater knowledge of him since they came to the estate.

Yet, a lack of intellectual intimacy did not preclude that of the physical. Hux had no illusions about having enjoyed Ren on his knees before him. It had been satisfying in a way Hux had not experienced before; the taking of power that Ren had been unexpectedly willing to cede to him. He could easily become used to that control, even think of other ways to exert it. But he doubted Ren would always be so compliant, and that lessened the appeal. Hux could present certain stipulations, of course, in order for them to continue, but Ren was not a man who often obeyed rules.

Hux pressed his fingertips against his temple. It had been more than a decade since he had been in a position to consider a longer liaison, and he found that the prospect annoyed him more than it pleased him. It was inevitably complicated in all the ways that single nights were not. He didn’t have to share a dinner table with the men he had been with on his short trips planetside. He didn’t have to hear them correct his form when he lost a bout in the training room. And perhaps most importantly, he did not have to stand beside them when he faced the Supreme Leader. Weighing those things against the temporary satiation derived from bending Ren over again, Hux could only conclude that the doing so would be an objectively colossal mistake.

A knock at the door broke the silence in the room. “Come in,” Hux said.

Feelix, once again in his plain trousers and vest, entered bearing a bowl of hot oatmeal garnished with fresh fruit. Hux took it and tucked in, sipping at the accompanying cup of caf.

“How did you like dessert last night, sir?” the footman asked as he piled the dishes onto a tray to take away.

“It was delicious,” Hux replied.

“Lord Ren said that as well.”

Hux paused, holding his oatmeal-laden spoon a few centimeters from his mouth. “You spoke with him this morning?”

“I always do, sir,” said Feelix. “He asks me things sometimes when I bring him his breakfast.”


“About Arkanis mostly. Some about my family.” He chewed his cheek. “Once he asked about your father, sir, but I told him I never knew the old master.”

“But today you talked of desserts.”

“Yes, sir. He said it was the best he’d had in a long while.”

Hux wet his lips. “Were you told to relay that to me?”

“Not directly, sir. Should I have been?”
“No.”

Feelix looked at him quizzically for a moment, but then lifted the full tray onto his shoulder. “I’ll just take this if that’s all, Master Hux.”

“It is. Thank you.”

Hux frowned into his cup as he drank down the rest of the caf. Perhaps the footman’s conversation with Ren had indeed pertained only to the cake and champagne, but if the double entendre had been intended, Hux didn’t appreciate it being relayed by a young servant. Fortunately, Feelix had seemed none the wiser. Hux was, maybe for the first time, grateful for the rambling size of the house. It was unlikely that he and Ren had been overheard.

Hux swallowed, remembering just how his name had sounded on Ren’s lips, a throaty invocation to accompany the slick noise of skin against skin. He felt his cock twitch at the thought. “Hells,” he muttered, rising from the armchair he had been sitting in.

It was nearly 0800, and he would soon be expected in the garage for training. He didn’t relish the idea of the conversation it would be necessary to have with Ren, but he had delivered worse reports during his time as an officer. What Ren would say or how he would behave, though, was beyond Hux’s ken. He was not known for cooperating in situations in which he did not get what he wanted. Hux had to tamp down the surge of smug pride at the presumption that what Ren wanted was to be bedded again. It wasn’t a forgone conclusion, however. Perhaps once had been enough. It would certainly make things simpler if they could agree on that.

Pulling a soft shirt over his head and doing his best to smooth down his sleep-tousled hair, Hux left his room. The main door to the garage was open when he arrived. He strode determinedly across the gravel drive, unwilling to permit himself to be cowed.

“Ren?” he said as he crossed into the training space.

“Here,” came the reply from the other side of the garage.

Ren emerged from behind the jumpspeeder, where he had been crouched. With him came Harron, who was holding a container of various wrenches. He handed Ren a cloth to wipe his hands. They were stained just slightly with grease.

There was nothing out of the ordinary about that or about the training clothes Ren wore, the half-tail his hair was pulled up into. Everything looked perfectly in order, save for the dark bruise on the side of his neck. Hux ground his teeth, cursing his carelessness. He had earned a few bruises since he had begun saber training, but none of them even closely resembled the mark Ren bore; it couldn’t be excused by that. It was unmistakably the work of someone’s mouth; Hux’s mouth.

“Good morning, Master Hux,” said Harron cheerily.

“Good morning,” Hux replied. He gestured to the jumpspeeder. “I see you’re busy already.”

“Indeed, sir. Lord Ren and I were just giving this old girl a tune up.” He patted the seat, which was long enough to sit two if they kept close. “She should run better than ever now if you take her out.”

“We intend to,” said Ren.

“What?” Hux said. “After what happened in Scaparus, you think I’ll allow you to just take a speeder out for the day?”
Ren blinked at him, indifferent. “You’ll come with me, of course.”

Hux stared him down. “You’re mistaken.”

One of Ren’s brows lifted minutely, a challenge. “What do you think it will take,” he said, turning to Harron, “to convince him?”

“Oh, I’m afraid if he’s set his mind to something, he’ll not change it,” the old driver said. “Begging your pardon, Master Hux, but your father was just the same.”

Hux was in no mood to be compared to his father. “Indeed,” he ground out.

Ren set a hand on the speeder’s steering column, his fingertips light against the silver metal. He looked back up at Hux. “I’ll let you pilot.”

Hux glanced over the speeder. He had only ever seen his father astride it, but he had heard stories of the days of his parents’ courtship, when his mother had apparently ridden double with him, with her arms tight around Brendol’s waist. The idea of Hux at the yoke with Ren’s long limbs folded around him was almost vulgar in its absurdity.

“No.”

“Then I will,” said Ren.

The image in Hux’s mind at that was no less ridiculous. And the indignity would be unconscionable. “Don’t be an idiot,” he snapped.

Ren’s amusement waned somewhat, his mouth tightening. Hux took a measure of satisfaction in that. It did not last long, though.

Stalking over to where their bokken were, Ren picked them up and held the hilt of one out to Hux. “If you can get past my guard, I’ll never speak of this again. But if you can’t, you’ll permit it.”

“Why would I agree to that?” Hux asked, crossing his arms over his chest. “I’ve been training for fewer than three weeks. You know perfectly well that I’m not capable of beating you.”

The muscles in Ren’s jaw worked. Dropping the swords at Hux’s feet, he returned to his workbench and retrieved the cloth he had thrown there. Folding it into thirds and twisting the ends, he placed it over his eyes and secured it with a knot at the back of his head.

Hux gaped. “You’re going to fight blindfolded?”

“To even the odds,” Ren said, stepping back onto the mats. He bent down, and though it took him a moment to find it with his fingers, picked up one of the bokken. He nudged the other with his toe, sending it sliding toward Hux.

“This is foolish,” Hux said, though he stooped to take it.

Ren’s teeth flashed beneath the dirty rag. “Are you afraid?”

“Of course not.”

“Then what are you waiting for, general?” he asked as he took up middle guard.

Hux squeezed the hilt of his weapon. Ren was baiting him, and he should have refused to participate this farce, but part of him wanted to know if he could do it. “You won’t hold back,” he
“No,” Ren replied. “Give me your best, Hux.”

Taking a long step forward, Hux brought his bokken down to slash across Ren’s shoulder. Ren moved to parry it slower than he might have had he been able to see, but he still managed to counter effectively. Hux fell back a pace, setting up his stance as he decided how to attack. It was a low strike at Ren’s thighs, which he spun out of the way of just in time. Hux had to throw his arms up to block the answering hit that Ren swung. He felt in the impact in his bones; it was far harder than he was used to.

“Come on,” Ren taunted.

With a growl, Hux dove in for another assault. Their bokken clacked together as they met with each blow. Hux was mindful of his footwork, but allowed Ren to drive him into a faster pace that they normally kept during their practice bouts. They engaged and retreated, sidestepping each other and moving lithely around the floor.

“Well done, Master Hux,” said Harron after a particularly clever strike he landed.

Hux said nothing in reply. He knew that Ren could hear him, so he kept quiet and did what he could to control his breathing. It wasn’t an easy task, not when he was fighting as hard as he was. It perhaps should have irked him that Ren was still so capable despite his blindness, but he found that he was enjoying himself far too much to mind.

Transferring his bokken to his right hand, Hux redoubled his efforts. Ren dodged a powerful swing from overhead, but only just slightly. The tip of Hux’s weapon nearly broke his nose.


Hux drew back, his expression darkening even further. “You can see, you lying bastard.”

“No. I can sense it.”

“You’re using the Force,” Hux said. “Of course you are.”

“How else did you expect me to do this?” Ren asked, spinning his bokken with his wrist. “I can’t see.”

“No,” said Hux, pressing in and sweeping his weapon up underhand. Ren snapped his out to meet it before retaliating. Hux growled in frustration.

“Have you had enough?”

Hux answered with another attack. It was parried without trouble. They went into action again, attacks coming hard and fast. Hux’s lungs were burning from the effort. Ren’s bare arms were glazed in a sheen of sweat, but that was the only indication that he was exerting himself.

A flash of memory caught Hux off guard: Ren’s shoulders similarly glistening as Hux ran a hand down the length of his naked back. Hux faltered in his next block and felt the sting of a hit against his upper arm.

“Point,” said Ren, drawing back. “I win.”
Hux let out a breath as he dropped the tip of his bokken to the ground. “You do.”

Ren pulled the blindfold down around his neck. It concealed the bruise there. “Something distracted you.”

“Sense that, did you?” Hux asked, just shy of venomous.

Ren eyed him. “It was apparent enough.”

“Right. Well, you have your victory and my permission to take the speeder.” He glanced out at the pouring rain beyond the garage door. “Best take a coat.”

“You didn’t say that it had to be today,” said Ren, taking a step toward him. “We’ll go when the rain stops.”

Hux cast a withering look at the jumpspeeder. “Must we?”

“You agreed to the terms.”

“Fine,” he sighed.

Ren smiled, and without guile. He looked genuinely pleased.

Hux kept his own expression schooled. “Are we finished, then?”

Ren nodded. “You did well.”

Hux was unable to deny the rise of satisfaction at the praise. “Thank you,” he said in earnest.

Neither he nor Ren made an immediate move to set down their weapons or to leave the garage. They stood where they were, regarding each other steadily. Hux studied Ren’s features. There was an asymmetry to his face, from the moles that dotted his skin to the slightly crooked set of his mouth. He hadn’t yet shaved that morning, and his cheeks and jaw were shadowed with the beginnings of a dark beard. His ears, just a sight too large, were usually hidden by his hair, but not then, when it was drawn back into that foolish looking, unkempt tail. His handsomeness was unconventional, but there was something alluring about him.

He seemed to be appraising Hux in kind. Hux wondered what it was he saw.

“Will you come inside?” Hux asked, breaking the silence. Though the fight had distracted from what he had come to say, there was no point in delaying it any further.

Ren gestured to the table behind him, where the components of what would become a lightsaber were scattered. “I have work to do.”

“I need to speak with you.” Hux shot a look at Harron, who was making a show of wiping down the already immaculate hull of a speeder, but clearly listening to what was being said. “Privately.”

Ren blinked, but then said, “All right.” He held out his hand.

Hux looked down at it disdainfully.

“Your bokken,” Ren said.

“Oh. Yes.” Hux ran his hand down the battered blade and held it out hilt-first. Ren took it and returned it to its place alongside his own. Hux fell into step with him when he passed on his way to
the main door. They didn’t speak as they walked through the driving rain and into the house.

Hux led them through the entry hall and into the study. He shut the door firmly behind them and engaged the lock. When he turned, he saw that Ren was leaning against the desk, his arms crossed over his chest.

Hux rubbed his thumbs against his forefingers, suddenly uncertain how to begin. Knowing Ren’s proclivity for plain speech, he decided on a direct approach. “What happened last night cannot happen again.”

Ren gave a short puff of air through his nostrils. “That’s what this is about.”

“What else could it possibly have been?” Hux asked.

The corners of Ren’s mouth quirked up. “It might not have been to talk.”

Hux shot him a glare. “You really think I’d—” He stopped short, unwilling to acknowledge the suggestion. “It will not happen again.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s improper. Unsuitable for our standing.”

Ren lifted a scornful brow. “What standing?”

“You are the Supreme Leader’s apprentice and I a commander in his army. We are meant to fight together for the glory of the Order and no more.”

“That has nothing to do with it.”

“It has everything to do with it,” Hux said, sharp. “It’s not permitted.”

“You’re bringing regulations into this?” Ren gestured around the room. “We’re not aboard the Finalizer.”

“That shouldn’t make a difference. We’re here on orders. And it does not change what we are to each other.”

“And what is that?”

“Soldiers on the same battlefield.”

“If you think that keeps them from fucking each other, you’re wrong.”

“Don’t be crude,” said Hux.

Ren laughed harshly. “Right. It’s ‘improper.’” Peeling himself away from the desk, he took a few steps forward. “Maybe it is, but I don’t care.”

Hux held his ground, allowing him to approach. “You should.”

“Why? We can to do what we please.”

“You might think that, but it’s far from the reality. We have a duty that supersedes any personal interest.”
Ren looked down at him, even though they were of a height. “Who’s going to know or care?”

“No one will ever know, of that you can be sure,” said Hux. “When we leave this room, this is not be spoken of again.”

“You expect to just forget about it?”

“I’ll have no trouble doing so.”

“Liar. It was too good for—”

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

Ren’s hands closed around Hux’s biceps. “I heard you, felt you. You liked it. You want more.”

Hux scowled at him. “You haven’t the slightest idea what I want.”

“Neither do you,” said Ren, pushing him away. He went back toward the desk, pressing his palms against it.

“I know it can’t be this,” Hux said to his back. “There’s too much at stake.”

“Nothing we do here will affect anything beyond this world.”

“There are consequences for any action, Ren.”

“What? A formal reprimand?” he scoffed. “You answer only to Leader Snoke, and so do I.”

“Exactly. We are already in a delicate enough position with his favor. Giving him any other reason to be displeased with us is not in our interest.”

Ren gave him a look over his shoulder. “What makes you think he would disapprove? He put us here.”

“I’m going to act as if you did not just imply the Supreme Leader of the First Order arranged this to facilitate a seduction.”

“Would you do it if you were ordered to?”

“The point is moot,” said Hux. “No such order would ever be given. The Supreme Leader would never stoop to care what goes on in my bed as long as it does not affect my ability to command.”

“Nor mine,” said Ren. “So, why are you refusing me?”

“Have you considered that I don’t care for your company?” Hux said curtly. “That once was enough?”

“Was it?”

Hux hesitated. “It could be.”

“It could be,” said Ren, his voice thick with contempt.

“You don’t like that answer.”

“It isn’t an answer. Either you want more or you don’t.” He brushed his hands over his hair, tugging lightly at the tail before dropping them back down to his sides.
“We shouldn’t,” said Hux. It came out quieter than he intended, as if he hardly meant it.

Ren gave him a long look. “Lie to yourself if you must, general, but don’t expect me to believe it.” Turning, he went to the door, unlocked it, and strode out.

Hux’s next breath came more shakily than he expected as he stared into the space where Ren had been. He should have been relieved to have done with the matter, but he found that his stomach was tight and he was clenching his fists at his sides. He had made the only acceptable choice, he knew. Yet, he couldn’t deny the heavy sense of misgiving that settled over him. Shaking his head, he released his hands. Confident the feeling would pass, he set off for his room and a long shower.

Hux spent the better part of the afternoon reading and listening to the patter of the rain against the window beside him. There were a few rumbles of thunder in the distance, though no flashes of lightning cut through the leaden skies. He had chosen a book on the customs and history of Naboo, a planet he had read about in one of the chronicles of the Clone Wars. It outlined a particularly brutal conflict between the Trade Federation and the people of the planet, led by their queen Padmé Amidala.

It was filled with Old Republic rhetoric that both repulsed and fascinated him. The galactic government then had been so disordered, so ineffective as the senators debated inane issues. The rise of the Empire had brought a period of structure and progress that could never have been achieved by the Republic. Hux could only imagine what the First Order could do to continue that legacy.

Thinking of the Order made him restless. Despite the complacent calm he had adopted at the estate, he was still itching to return to duty. He belonged on the bridge of his ship, in the strategy sessions that were undoubtedly being held to plan their next assault on the Resistance. And the sooner he did so, the sooner he would be away from Ren.

Though the book on Naboo had successfully distracted him after their altercation that morning, the idea of Ren still managed to slip into Hux’s mind from time to time. The Jedi Order had contributed to Naboo’s victory over the Federation, and Hux couldn’t help but wonder about how they fought, what the use of the Force looked like in the heat of battle. Ren’s display in the alley in Scaparus Port had been impressive, but only a taste of what he was capable of. Hux could only imagine what he would look like cutting down Federation droids in swaths. Not that he would have fought on the side of the Naboo. He was not a Jedi, as he had so often reminded Hux.

When the chronometer on Hux’s bedside table read 1900, he set the book aside and stretched. The bones in his shoulders and spine cracked pleasantly. He never would have considered being so sedentary if he was aboard the Finalizer. Occasionally he was required to sit at the desk in his quarters to read reports and write ones of his own, but he never stayed there more than a couple of hours before getting up to check in with Commanders Odar or Tryla, whoever had the conn in his absence.

He did take time to train as well, keeping himself in good form even though his command did not necessitate it. Most often he ran several kilometers on the treadmill, something he hadn’t done in the weeks at the estate. The bouts he fought with Ren in the mornings were more than enough to exhaust his body to his satisfaction. And he had done quite well at that the night before, too. He caught himself at that, banishing the thought before the images of Ren beneath him could take
shape in his head.

He was the first to arrive in the dining room. Sitting, he watched Feelix pour him a glass of chilled white wine. Hux’s fingertips left wet prints in the condensation on the glass. He had finished nearly half of it before the door swung open and Ren appeared. He made no excuse for his lateness, simply going over to his chair and dropping into it inelegantly. He wore a loose shirt open at the collar to reveal the dip of his collarbones. Hux took a drink of wine, looking away.

“Good evening,” he said.

Ren repeated the greeting coolly, picking up the glass of juice that had been poured for him. He drank in greedy, unmannerly gulps, draining more than half the glass before he set it down again. He licked his lips, turning to the servant’s door expectantly. Feelix appeared as if on cue, bearing two plates of roast fowl. The scent of thyme suffused the room. Hux drew it into his lungs appreciatively.

Once Feelix had gone, he picked up his utensils and started in. The meat gave way easily under the knife as he cut it, and the flavor was rich when he bit it off his fork. He resisted the urge to give a contented sigh. Little was said for the first part of the meal, which was not unusual, but eventually Hux grew tired of the silence.

Clearing his throat, he asked, “Did you work on your saber this afternoon? You intended to.”

Ren didn’t look up from his plate. “Yes.”

“Is it coming along well? You have what you need?”

“The tools here aren’t ideal.”

“We can have something ordered from town,” said Hux.

“No. It’s better this way.”

Hux raised a brow. “What do you mean?”

“It shouldn’t be easy.”

“But will the product be lesser because you don’t have the necessary equipment?”

“It will be as keen as any other,” said Ren, glancing up. “It will just take time.”

“I see,” said Hux, cutting another slice of meat. “That’s good.”

Ren said nothing in reply, returning to his food. He was picking the bones clean; he rarely left a morsel on his plate.

“Are you familiar with Naboo?” Hux asked before quiet could descend again.

Ren stopped chewing, his fork and knife going still. He swallowed slowly. “I’ve heard of it.”

“About the Trade Federation invasion?”

“Yes.”

“I was just reading an account of it. I found it odd that all the commanders of Queen Amidala’s army and those of the Trade Federation were named, but none of the Jedi’s identities were
revealed. I was curious as to why.”

“Why do you think I would know?” Ren said.

“I wasn’t assuming you did,” said Hux. “Though perhaps you might have a theory. Was the Order so secretive that its members were hidden from the records of the war?”

“They didn’t hide, but they didn’t make themselves conspicuous either.” Ren rubbed his thumb against the handle of his fork, looking down. “And they rarely took sides in petty wars.”

“Then how did they get embroiled in the conflict on Naboo?”

“I don’t know,” Ren said, curt. “I wasn’t there.”

“Of course not,” said Hux. “But what harm is there in speculating?”

“Why do you care?”

“It interests me. There must have been unique tactics employed if there were Jedi involved in the battle. I wouldn’t know how to command such a force.”

“Jedi didn’t follow any orders but their own,” Ren said. “If they fought, they did it on their terms.”

Hux considered that. “An uncontrolled variable in the fight? That makes for poor tactics and strategy. The generals must have detested it. I would.”

Ren gave him a steely look. “You detest anything you can’t control.”

“There are always things I can’t control, but those I can, I will.”

“You hated having me on your ship because you couldn’t command me as you do your officers.”

Hux didn’t bother to deny it. “You created discord. It was that I disliked.”

“You can’t handle what doesn’t fit into your regulated world, can you, general?” Ren said, smirking. “You can’t abide anything that might make you step out of the lines you’ve drawn for yourself.” He leaned forward, his gaze boring into Hux. “You could do with a little chaos.”

Hux watched as he set down his utensils and stood.

“Consider that,” he said before turning and disappearing through the door, leaving Hux once again alone and staring into the empty space he left in his wake.

It was not long past 2030 when Hux returned to his room. He had had little appetite left after Ren had gone from the dining room, so he had finished his glass of wine and gotten up. He had taken his time as he walked through the house, passing through the entry hall, which was lit only with dim track illuminators. The decorative plants cast long, leafy shadows on the parquet floor. He paused by a small lemon tree, its fruit just ripening. He bent at the waist, cradling one of the lemons in his hand as he drew in its scent. It made him crave a cup of bergamot tea with a slice of the fruit in it. He had rung for some when he had gotten back to his bedroom and was idly flipping through his book as he waited for Feelix to bring it.
He stopped as a passage caught his attention: “When the reinforcements led by the Gungan auxiliary arrived, the assault by the third battalion of Federation droids descended into chaos.”

Chaos. Hux ran a fingertip over the word where it was printed on the page. Since his childhood, the necessity for structure had been impressed upon him ad nauseam. His tutors were rigid in their instruction, likely at his father’s behest, and the rules of conduct at Arkanis Preparatory School had been very clear: self-control was paramount, going hand-in-hand with the necessary discipline to succeed. The Academy only served to establish greater regulation in his routines. Inviting disorder was not of value to him.

However, Ren’s insistence that he could not venture outside its bounds rankled him. He was not altogether inflexible. As a young man in the riflery corps, he had been forced to accept the unpredictability of his targets. He could position himself where he believed they would be, but it did not mean they would appear how and when he anticipated.

There was an inherent volatility even to the command he now held. The betrayal of FN-2187 was a particularly unpleasant reminder of that. And he had unavoidably had to deal with the bedlam Ren caused in his blatant disregard for the operational procedures of the Order. Did that not indicate a certain level of chaos already present in Hux’s life? Even if it did, though, he admittedly did not embrace it, and that had been just what Ren suggested he do.

He snapped the book shut as he heard a knock at the door. A few moments later, Feelix opened the door. He bid Hux good evening as he set down the tray be carried and poured a cup of steaming tea. He had steady hands, the nails trimmed short and kept clean.

“May I ask you something?” Hux said as he added a slice of lemon to his teacup.

“Of course, sir,” said Feelix.

“How long have you been employed here now?”

“Two years, sir.”

“Two years. So, this is the first opportunity you’ve had to serve anyone.”

The young man’s cheeks pinkened. “Yes, sir.” He hurriedly added, “If I’ve done anything to displease you, I’m very sorry, sir. Torick, the old footman, taught me, but I haven’t had much practice. You have only to say if I should do something differently, sir.”

“No, no,” said Hux in an attempt to soothe him. “You’ve done very well.”

Feelix looked immensely relieved. “Oh, thank you, sir.”

Hux tipped his head in acknowledgement. “Do you come from Scaparus?”

“I do, sir.”

“And what do you parents do?”

“They work the shipping warehouses. My brothers, too.” That was no surprise. Half of Scaparus’s population was employed by the various shipping companies that operated out of the port.

“Do you have many brothers?” Hux asked.

“Two, sir, and a younger sister. She works up at Espin Vineyards.”
Hux raised a brow. “She must be quite young. You yourself can’t be more than twenty.”

“I’m nineteen, sir,” said Feelix. “And she’s just sixteen. Old enough to work.”

“Yes, I see. Do you see your family often?”

“Every few weeks. Whenever I’m in town on an errand for Ms. Havlis.”

Hux smiled at the formality of calling Lorna by her surname. “Do you enjoy this work?”

“I do, sir. More now when there’s things to do, though.” He looked down, sheepish. “Not that I don’t like it when it’s just the staff in the house.”

“That’s understandable,” said Hux, taking a sip of tea. “Tell me, you said Lord Ren speaks with you in the mornings. How do you find him?”

Feelix tugged at his shirt sleeves, uneasy. “He’s not much like anyone I’ve ever met, sir. Quiet most times, but I’ve heard the rows you’ve had with him.” He looked down, turning red again. “Not that I listen, sir.”

“It’s difficult not to when voices are raised,” said Hux. “I don’t blame you for that. But he’s not unkind to you?”

“No, sir.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

Ren had more than once abused members of the Finalizer’s crew, including the unassuming, but capable Lieutenant Mitaka. Afterwards, the young man had done everything in his power to avoid Ren, almost succuring out of his presence whenever he swept through the corridors of the ship. Hux was relieved that Ren did not misuse the staff at the estate.

“He talks about you sometimes,” said Feelix.

Hux lifted a brow. “Does he?”

The footman nodded timidly. “He says you’re getting very good with a sword. And that you’re different here.”

“Is that so?” said Hux.

“He says he likes it better.”

“I’m surprised he would admit to liking anything to do with me.”

“Why, sir?” Feelix asked. “I would have thought he liked you very much.”

“Whatever would make you think that?” Hux said, holding back a laugh. “You mentioned yourself how we constantly disagree.”

“My oldest brother fights with his wife nearly every day, but it doesn’t mean he doesn’t fancy her.” The footman’s face burned up to the tips of his ears. “Not that I mean to suggest...ah…” He trailed off, rubbing the back of his neck.

Hux set his teacup down slowly. “I believe you may have misunderstood things, Feelix.”
“Could be, sir, yes. I know it’s not my place to say anything of the kind. I just thought that maybe you’d like to know what Lord Ren said of you.”

“I’m not overly concerned with his opinions, but it was an...interesting thought.”

“Of course, sir. I’ll not bring it up again.”

Hux nodded. “Thank you for speaking with me.”

“Yes, sir,” said Feelix. Giving a brief bow, he fled the room.

Hux sat back heavily into the armchair. First it had been Lorna examining his interactions with Ren too closely and now a nineteen-year-old footman was doing so. Perhaps it shouldn’t have surprised him that the staff was prone of eavesdropping, but he wasn’t quite prepared for open implications that there was something between him and Ren. Which, he was forced to admit, there was. Had been. Briefly.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. It was almost endearingly naive of Feelix to think that Ren harbored some form of affection for Hux just because he spoke of him from time to time. Given, those things were seemingly good things, which had caught Hux off guard, but it was hardly an indicator of any particular regard. Aside from the desire to bed him, of course.

He glanced across at the fourposter he slept in and sighed. If Ren were anyone else, Hux would gladly have taken him into it again. Ren hadn’t been wrong; it had been good. And Hux had lied when he told him it would be easy to forget. Curling his hands into fists, he tried not to think of how warm and soft Ren’s skin had been beneath them, how tight his body had been around Hux’s cock. He felt himself stirring, hardening in his trousers.

“I heard you, felt you,” Ren had said, his voice low and resonant in his chest. “You liked it. You want more.”

Cursing, Hux rubbed a hand across his face. He did. He very much did.

Ren was waiting for him when he got to the garage the next morning. He tossed Hux his bokken without speaking and settled into a combat stance. Hux, who was still banishing the vestiges of sleep from his mind, barely managed to set himself up in time to block the first blow. They fought two bouts—Hux lost both—before Ren took a step back and scowled at him.

“You’re not concentrating,” he said.

“Perhaps I’m not in the mood for this today,” Hux said testily. Honestly, he wasn’t. He hadn’t slept well the night before, having been unable to sit still after a cup of tea so late in the evening. He had paced the length of his room for some time before willing himself to lie down. He had stripped and slid under the clean sheets, but rest continued to elude him. Out of boredom, he had eventually reached down to grasp himself.

He had conjured a familiar image in his head: Arcan Wile, hair tousled and fair cheeks flushed as he knelt at Hux’s feet in the Academy’s library. It had never happened that way, of course—they had both been far too conscious of being discovered to allow for it—but it was a common scenario Hux enjoyed when he required it for this purpose. Closing his eyes, he worked his hand steadily as
he envisioned Wile taking his cock in his mouth, sliding his tongue along the length. He had had quite a talented tongue, both for speaking and for this. Hux had loved listening to him read aloud as they sat together in the leather chairs by the library’s windows. They wouldn’t be touching save for the occasional brush of the winged tip of Wile’s shoe against Hux’s glossy, black boot.

Stroking himself faster at the thought, Hux tried to recall the cadence of his voice. It had been lilting and soft, enough to soothe Hux into sleep had he not been so focused on watching Wile’s lips move as he spoke. Lips that he was now once again imaging around him as he slid his fingers into Wile’s hair. It had been thick and coarse, but kept short enough that it was impossible to take hold of. Yet, as Hux imagined it now, it was softer and longer, ideal for fisting his fingers into.

“Look at me,” Hux said to the man he was envisioning. He expected to meet Arcan’s blue eyes, but those he saw were brown. The hair he held was dark. The lips around him were fuller.

“You,” Hux said, accusatory. Kylo Ren looked up from his place on his knees and smiled. Well, as much as was possible with Hux’s cock in his mouth. “Get out of my head.”

But even as he said it, Hux felt the first shocks of impending release. Tightening his grip on himself with one hand, he flipped the sheet away with the other.

“Fuck. Ren,” he growled as he came across his stomach.

He had been able to sleep after that, though fitfully. He had woken to a headache and a lingering sense of displeasure, neither of which were particularly conducive to three hours of saber training.

“I don’t care what mood you’re in,” Ren said as he stood across from Hux in the garage. “Either fight properly or get out. Don’t waste my time.”

Hux narrowed his eyes. “Do you have many better things to do? Urgent meditation perhaps?”

“I don’t have to put up with your whining excuses.”

“I am not whining,” said Hux, though the denial was almost a whine in itself.

Ren did not look impressed.

“All right.” Hux grumbled. “Another round, but then I’m finished.” He raised his weapon to high guard, expecting Ren to follow suit. He did not. Instead, he crossed the distance between them and wrapped his long fingers around Hux’s elbows. The contact made Hux start.

If Ren noticed, he didn’t let on. He raised Hux’s arms a few centimeters higher. “You’re meant to guard your face and neck here,” he said. “Not your chest. Keep your arms up.”

The bokken was between them, cutting a line across Ren’s face, but he was standing close enough that Hux could feel his body heat, smell the musk of his sweat. Hux had to keep himself from breathing in.

“Do you understand?” Ren asked.

“I...yes,” Hux replied, a little stiltedly.

Releasing him, Ren backed off. “Good.” Holding his weapon in his right hand, he gestured for Hux to attack with the other. Hux complied, and they went into action again.

Soon enough, though, Ren stopped them again and made another correction of Hux’s form. Under
most circumstances, he gave the cues verbally, but now he put his hands on Hux, moving his body into the correct position. He tapped Hux’s elbows when he needed to raise them, pressed down on his shoulders to keep them in alignment. Hux allowed himself to be manipulated, paying attention to how it felt when he was in the proper position. However, when Ren set his palms on Hux’s hips and canted them just slightly more forward, Hux’s pulse jumped.

“You’ll have better balance this way,” Ren said. Hux felt his breath against the back of his neck. The skin there prickled in response.

“I see,” said Hux. He tensed as fingertips touched his lower back.

“Then swing,” said Ren.

Hux stepped just to the side, turning on his heel. He stopped the blade of the bokken mere centimeters from the side of Ren’s neck.

Ren was looking at him intently as he said, “Very good.”

Hux lowered the weapon, but held Ren’s gaze. He had imagined the brown of his eyes perfectly in the night, the shape of his lips, too. Ren had looked self-satisfied in the vision, so pleased with what he was doing. He wore a similar expression now, clearly gratified by something. Whether it was Hux’s performance with the bokken or how Hux was looking at him, though, Hux didn’t know.

“Are we done?”

“We are,” said Ren.

Hux gave a curt nod before retreating to set down his weapon. He raised a hand in acknowledgment to Harron, who had been sitting on a stool a few paces away where he could watch the training matches.

“If the rain stops,” Hux said to Ren as he approached where he stood near the main door of the garage, “would you care to shoot?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

They regarded each other for a moment before Hux turned and headed toward the house. He felt Ren’s eyes on him as he went.

For once, he didn’t spend very long beneath the spray of the shower. Despite the long hours of training, he was restive. His thoughts kept returning to the feeling of Ren’s hands at his hips, the gentle pressure of his fingers. Hux’s mind twisted it, though, until he was thinking of how it would feel for Ren to dig his fingertips into the flesh hard enough to bruise. The mark Hux had left on Ren’s neck was still dark enough to see, and though Hux had tried to ignore it, he had found his gaze drawn there again and again. It would be better when it faded, he reasoned, when it was no longer a vivid reminder of how Ren had tasted.

Rising from the chair where he had sat in a vain attempt to read, Hux glanced outside. The sky had lightened somewhat, and while there was still a mist in the air, he decided it was decent enough weather for shooting. He needed it, needed something to clear and focus his mind. Going to the closet, he pulled out a light jacket and hung it over his arm. Then he left his room and set off for the guest wing.
Ren’s door was cracked just slightly open when he arrived, so he rapped his knuckles against it briefly before pushing it open. Ren sat on the floor, his legs folded under him and his chest bare. His still-damp hair hung around his shoulders. His eyes were closed, his features serene.

“Hux,” he said, looking up. “What do you need?”

The question had many answers, several of which Hux didn’t want to acknowledge. “I thought you might like to shoot now.”

Ren glanced at the window, which was still beaded with moisture, but said, “All right. Let me get a shirt.”

“No,” said Hux, the word leaving his mouth before he was even certain what he meant by it.

Ren, who was already half on his feet, stood to his full height. “No?”

The jacket Hux had been holding slipped from his arm and fell in a puddle on the floor. He walked past it and went to Ren, sliding one hand around his waist and the other into the hair at the nape of his neck. “No,” Hux said as he kissed him.

Ren leaned into him immediately, parting his lips for Hux’s tongue. Ren’s arms came around him, pulling him closer. Hux trailed his fingers up Ren’s back and then down again until he reached the waist of the loose pants he wore. Ren groaned into Hux’s mouth as Hux moved his hand down over Ren’s buttock and squeezed. Taking hold of the fabric of Hux’s shirt, Ren tugged it free from where it had been tucked.

“Mm, not yet,” Hux said as he pressed a kiss to the side of Ren’s jaw and then to his neck where it was bruised. He brushed his hands along the band of Ren’s pants before beginning to push them down. They fell to the floor.

Running his hands along Ren’s lean thighs, Hux sank down onto his knees. He pressed his nose into the dark hair between Ren’s legs, mouthing at his half-hard cock. Ren gave a deep hum of approval and widened his stance slightly. Reaching up, Hux wrapped his fingers around him, feeling the soft skin as he filled out. Ren’s breath hitched as Hux ran his tongue along the sensitive underside of him and then took the tip into his mouth. He tasted slightly of soap.

Ren’s hand slid around the back of Hux’s head, putting a light pressure on him, holding him close. Hux turned his eyes up and met Ren’s as he took him deeper. Ren’s lips parted and his grip on Hux’s hair tightened. Pleased, Hux drew back, hollowing out his cheeks before working back down. He took as much as he could, until he felt Ren at the back of his throat. It was difficult and not altogether comfortable, but the sounds Ren made had Hux’s own cock straining. Sinking his fingers into the hard muscle of Ren’s ass, Hux held him as he worked the length of his cock.

When, at last, it became too much, Hux placed his hand where his mouth couldn’t reach and increased the pace. Ren moved his hips in shallow thrusts, though they grew more erratic by the moment.

“Oh, yes,” Ren panted, his short fingernails digging into Hux’s scalp.

Hux stroked twice more, and then Ren was coming with a long groan. Hux swallowed what he gave him, keeping his lips tight around Ren’s cock until the last tremors had subsided. Gently withdrawing, Hux looked back up at him.

Ren released his hold on Hux’s hair and dragged his fingertips across Hux’s jaw. “Stand up.” His voice was deep and coarse.
As Hux rose, Ren’s hands went to the buttons of his shirt, undoing them deftly. He slid the silk over Hux’s shoulders and leaned in close to bring his lips to Hux’s neck. Hux tipped his head to the side. Ren pressed kisses to his collarbone as he traced Hux’s arms with his fingertips. Hux unclasped his belt and trousers and slid them down his legs. He gasped when Ren cupped him through the shorts he wore.

“You know what you want now, don’t you?” Ren asked. “Say it.”

“I want you,” Hux said, rolling his hips into Ren’s palm.

Ren pulled back slightly so that Hux could meet his eyes. “How?”

That single word made Hux’s stomach flip. “On your back,” he said.

Ren gave a quiet “Mm” as he slid his free hand around Hux’s neck and kissed his mouth. Together, they moved toward the bed until the backs of Ren’s knees met the mattress. Drawing away from Hux, he slid across the comforter. Hux pulled his shorts off with no particular elegance and dropped them to the side. Ren’s gaze flicked over him, pausing at his groin before returning to his face. Hux felt heat creep up his neck at the frank appraisal. Ren smiled.

Kneeling at the edge of the bed, Hux crept across it until he was between Ren’s legs. Ren reached out, took Hux by the base of the cock, and stroked up. Catching his lower lip between his teeth, Hux watched Ren’s long fingers around him.

“Do you have—”

“In the drawer,” said Ren, tipping his head toward the bedside table. Opening it, Hux retrieved a bottle of lubricant identical to the one he had found in his own room. This one, though, was half empty. Ren held up an open hand. Hux drizzled some of the clear liquid into it, groaning when Ren placed it back around him. He kept the pressure light, teasing. Hux resisted the urge to demand more. Taking the lubricant, he went to wet his fingers, but Ren grabbed his wrist.

“I’m ready,” he said. Hitching his legs up, he drew Hux down.

Hux allowed Ren to guide him until he was poised to enter him. Then, bracing his hands beside Ren’s shoulders, Hux pushed in. They exhaled together as Ren took him. Hux moved slowly until their hips were flush. Ren’s head fell back against the pillow, his eyes pinched tight shut. Hux pressed one hand to Ren’s chest, trailing it up to his neck and then into his hair. He moved the other to Ren’s thigh, steadying himself as he withdrew and then drove back in. Ren cried out, his back arching. Hux gave a broken growl and leaned down to bury his face in Ren’s neck.

Ren’s arms came around his back and then down to his ass, clutching. Hux thrust into him, eliciting sharp, breathy exclamations and curses. They were accompanied by the slap of skin that was at once both crude and sensual. Hux added “Ren” to the cacophony as he reached the edge of his control. Pulling free, he spilled himself across Ren’s belly.

Hux remained hovering over him for a time, catching his breath. He watched the pulse point in Ren’s neck thrumming as his heart continued to beat quickly. When he finally rolled away, Hux landed on his back next to Ren and looked up at the ceiling. The appropriate thing to do would have been to go into the refresher and retrieve a towel to wipe Ren clean, but Hux found he was unable to stir himself to do it.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ren raise a hand, crooking his forefingers. The pants he had been wearing rose from their place on the floor and floated over. Ren took them and saw to the
mess across his stomach. Once he was finished, he balled them up and tossed them away.

“That’s a useful trick,” said Hux.

“It is,” Ren replied, tucking an arm behind his head.

“Can you do it with anything?”

“Smaller things are easier, but I can lift a man if I have to.”

Hux’s thoughts turned unbidden to Ren pressing him up against a wall, holding him up with the Force and his hands as he thrust into him. It had been a long time since Hux had allowed someone to take him, but the vision was undeniably appealing.

“I can do that,” said Ren. “Gladly.”

Hux turned to him sharply. “You said you couldn’t read my mind.”

“The ability is amplified for a time after...this. And you projected that image quite clearly. It will fade in a few minutes if it bothers you.”

It did. Hux didn’t like the idea of his thoughts being laid bare. “Can you read me when we’re...”

“Yes.”

“Can you restrain yourself?”

Ren turned so he was looking at Hux. “It shows me what you need.”

Hux pressed his lips together. The implications of that were off putting, but not altogether objectionable. Still, he said, “I can just as easily tell you that.”

“You can, but your mind makes it clearer.”

Hux frowned. “I don’t want you there.”

Ren blinked at him slowly, but said, “All right.”

Settling back into the pillows, Hux turned his eyes back up at the ceiling. Ren lay still next to him. They weren’t touching, but neither were they far from each other.

“What happens now?” Ren asked after a time.

“There’s a few hours of daylight left. We can still shoot if you wish to.”

Ren gave him a look. “Not what I meant, Hux.”

Hux sighed. “Is this something that requires a discussion? I should think it’s fairly simple. We take what we can while we have the opportunity.”

“How often?”

“As often as we like, I should think, though perhaps at night. You’ve asked that your meditation not be disturbed.”

“This is a disturbance I can tolerate.”
The corners of Hux’s mouth turned up. “Yes.”

They fell quiet again. Hux rarely stayed abed with the partners he had had in the past fifteen years; he found it uncomfortable and far too intimate. But, as he lay naked and spent in Kylo Ren’s bed, he was strangely content. However, he was still craving the weight of a blaster in his hands.

“I’m going outside,” he said, sitting up. “Will you come with me?”

Ren raised his arms above his head and arched his back, stretching languidly. Hux looked him over, appreciating the long lines of his body.

“I want to use the long-range rifle,” Ren said as he rolled out of bed and onto his feet. Hux watched as he walked across to his closet and pulled out another pair of pants.

“Very well,” said Hux, getting up as well. “I believe you’re ready for it.”

“I know I am.”

Hux rolled his eyes at Ren’s familiar arrogance. Reaching down, he shook out his trousers and tugged them on. “Come on then. Let’s see what you can do.”

Chapter End Notes

The enchanting ottenebrare did this portrait of Ren from this chapter.
Chapter Seven

Hux’s clothes were damp and his hair sticking to his brow when he and Ren returned to the house that evening to dress for dinner. They had lain side by side on the dewy grass of the firing range for nearly two hours as Hux watched and guided Ren through his shots with the long-range blaster. He made corrections when they were required, but for the majority of the time he had remained silent, watching Ren sight and then fire each bolt.

Weeks ago, Hux would not have suspected that Ren had the patience required to excel at marksmanship, but he had performed quite impressively. Hux could not have expected more from any of the recruits whom he had commanded as a riflery lieutenant. Had Ren been one of them, Hux would have requested him for his unit. He had said as much as Ren paused between shots to reset.

“How many men did you have?” Ren had asked, letting the compliment go unacknowledged.

“Twenty,” Hux had replied.

“Did you choose them all yourself?”

“No. Most of them had been on world for eight or ten months already when I arrived. Their previous lieutenant was dead, but instead of promoting one of them, leadership gave them all to me. They were not very keen on that.”

Ren glanced at him. “Why?”

“Enlisted men with experience generally do not take well to having untried Academy types assuming command of their units three days before they’re to be deployed on a border run,” said Hux. “I was not yet twenty-one years old and had no combat expertise beyond simulations. They thought I would get them all killed.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No. I didn’t lose a man for nearly a year.”

Ren adjusted his grip on the blaster, but didn’t move to line up another shot. “What happened?”

Hux clenched his teeth at the memory. “A misfired bolt compromised our position. The raiders we were targeting shelled the ridge we were camped out on.” He still recalled vividly how the ground had heaved and the trees around him cracked and splintered as the first of the artillery had struck. The flash of the explosion had nearly blinded him, and he had had to spend a week in medical having the perforations in his ear drums repaired before he could hear again.

“How many survived?” asked Ren.

“Six.” Spattered with mud and the gore, Hux had managed to lead them to the extraction point. The seventh man had bled out while they waited for the shuttle to arrive.
“What happened to the one who misfired?”

Hux scowled. She had been an older soldier, somewhere near thirty, and she had made no attempt to hide her contempt for Hux’s leadership. He had tolerated her because she was one of the best snipers in the unit, and she had never gone so far as to countermand a direct order until that day. She had fired at her target before Hux had given permission, and she had missed, revealing their position.

When the shelling began, she had been the first to run. Hux had surged after her, catching her by the back of her jacket. She had struggled, her mouth working as she said things that Hux could not hear. He had barely managed to dodge the flashing blade of the knife she pulled on him. He had released her with a shove, both of them ducking as another shower of dirt rained down from the impact of a shell. Hux recovered first, charging at her and knocking her to the ground. When the knife fell from her hand, he picked it up and sank it into her neck.

“She died with the others,” Hux said.

Ren gave a small sound of assent, but said nothing else. Hux didn’t volunteer any further explanation. That sniper was the only kill he had made at close range. He didn’t regret it; she had drawn a weapon on him and he was within his rights to defend himself using lethal force. He still sometimes dreamed of the heat of her blood as it soaked his fingers and the edges of his sleeves.

As he and Ren entered the house, they made for the den to return the blaster to its case. Hux intended to take it apart and clean it thoroughly after they ate. He had always enjoyed the process, having done it after each mission and training exercise since he was a boy. It was a necessary part of being a rifleman. It engendered respect for one’s weapon.

“Is there maintenance involved in keeping a lightsaber in working order?” he asked as he set the blaster into its stall.

“Little,” Ren replied. He stood a pace behind Hux. “Unless something is compromised in combat and needs repair.”

“Does that happen often?”

“No. A well-built saber should last for decades. Some are passed down in families.”

“Really?” said Hux. “I thought you said something about the kyber crystal being attuned to the particular wielder. Is that connection hereditary?”

Ren’s brows rose. “You have a good memory.”

Hux shrugged one shoulder. “It’s of interest.”

“The crystals are attuned to the Force, not the user. But each channels different aspects of the Force.”

“You mean some are better suited to the dark side?”

“Yes.”

“So, if a child is more inclined to the opposite side than his father, his father’s saber would not serve him well.”

“There’s more to it than just that, but it’s a fair assessment.”
“Fascinating,” said Hux.

Ren cocked his head, the corners of his mouth twitching just slightly. “Why does the Force intrigue you so much?”

“You say it’s inherent in the galaxy, a part of everything. Yet so few can sense it. I find that odd.”

“There were more once,” Ren said. “A long time ago.”

“Do you know why the sensitivity is so rare now?”

“No.”

“It’s a pity there aren’t more,” said Hux. “We could use others with your abilities to advance the cause of the First Order.” He rubbed his chin. Perhaps not more like Ren, however. He was difficult enough to manage as it was.

Ren said nothing in reply, so Hux dropped the matter. Turning toward the door, he said, “Shall we go, then? I’d like to get out of these clothes before we dine.”

Ren’s eyes darkened as they flicked over Hux’s form.

Hux gave him a look. “Are you really thinking of undressing me?”

“Do you object?” Ren asked, taking a step closer.

A tendril of desire unfurled in Hux’s stomach. Despite it, he said, “I object to being late for my dinner. I’m hungry.”

Ren came forward again, until his chest was nearly touching Hux’s. “We can be quick.”

Hux clicked his tongue, disapproving. “I don’t rush.”

“Later then.”

“I have a blaster to clean.”

Ren didn’t frown as Hux expected him to. Instead, he asked, “Will you show me?”

“If you wish.”

“I do,” said Ren, falling back a step. He gestured toward the door. “Dinner?”

Hux huffed a laugh. “Yes.”

Ren proved quite adept at dismantling and reassembling the hunting blaster Hux gave him to work with. Hux shouldn’t have been surprised. Ren was good with the speeders, and the various parts of the rifle were far less complicated.

They took their time cleaning each element of the weapons with solvent solution and then a thin lubricant, finishing long after 2300. Hux stifled a yawn as he clipped the last piece into place and looked the long-range blaster over. He had grown fond of it in the past weeks, perhaps just as fond
as he had been of the standard issue rifle he had carried as a lieutenant. He considered taking it with him when he returned to the Finalizer. It did, after all, belong to him now. As did the rest of the estate.

“Very good,” he said to Ren as he reattached the barrel of his blaster. “I’ll expect you to do this more often now. I likely should not have done it myself for so long. It’s part of your training.”

“All right,” Ren said. Going to the case, he tucked the blaster away. He held out his hands, and Hux placed the long-range rifle into them. Ren closed the glass door of the case. The lock engaged, flashing red.

Hux leaned a single hand against the table they had been working on and waited. Ren turned, but remained a few paces away. Hux drummed his fingers against the table as Ren surveyed him. He wasn’t certain how this was supposed to go. He was tried, but not so much so that he would refuse if Ren sought to go to bed together. Yet, he would just as readily retire alone and contend with Ren at a later time. As simple as he had claimed this arrangement was, it seemed he was still unsure about the expectations of it.

Ineloquent as it might be, he settled on a short, “Well?”

Ren crossed his arms over his chest, cocking a brow. “Well?”

“I’m going to my room,” said Hux. “Are you coming with me or not?”

“Do you want me to?”

Hux wet his lips. The sleepiness was beginning to wane as he looked Ren over. “Yes. If you’re so inclined.”

Ren gave him a wolfish grin. “Lead the way, general.”

By tacit agreement, Ren didn’t remain in Hux’s room after they were finished that night. Hux didn’t hurry him out, but Ren didn’t stay long after they had cleaned up. Hux was content to see him out. He had never shared a bed with anyone to sleep, not even Wile. A cadet would have been missed in the barracks if he didn’t report at lights out, so Hux never spent a night in Arcan’s small room. He was not opposed to the idea altogether, but it implied a certain intimacy that was not befitting of the situation with Ren.

When Hux woke the next morning, he breakfasted, dressed, and went out to the garage as he always did. Ren was waiting for him, as he always was. Their training was perfectly ordinary. Hux did well enough, though it was not an inordinately good showing. After they finished, he bathed and spent the afternoon reading. Nothing would have prevented him from going to Ren again, but he did believe that it was a sight more civilized to keep their liaisons to the evening hours. And he did want to preserve some manner of distance. He had no inclination to spend every waking hour in Ren’s company. Those they did have together, however, were not unpleasant.

Dinner that evening, for instance, had been quite enjoyable. They had spoken of battlefield tactics, both traditional and guerilla. They found they agreed upon a mix of both as the most advantageous, deploying larger forces to launch frontal assaults while smaller units were better suited for flanking and for maneuvers that required more finesse.
“Have you ever participated in a major offensive?” Hux asked as he sat back in his chair and sipped at his glass of wine.

“Not a large-scale one,” Ren replied, swallowing the last bite of his sauteed beans. “The Knights are a strike force. We’re not soldiers.”

“Indeed you’re not. Can you discuss your missions? A memorable one perhaps?”

“We were once sent to sabotage a Resistance outpost in the Western Reaches. We were prepared for a hard fight—there were thirty men in the base—but we didn’t expect the heavy weapons. Plasma cannons. Small, but lethal. We had to get across an open field from our drop shuttle to the gate while taking fire.”

“And you managed it without casualties?”

Ren nodded.

“How exactly?”

“The cannons are powerful, but slow. We were faster. And I did have a shield.”

Hux raised a brow. “The Force can withstand a blow from a plasma cannon?”

“At least one.”

“You took a direct hit?”

“Yes.”

“Incredible.”

The corners of Ren’s mouth turned up. “My master trained me well.”

“So it would seem,” said Hux. “What happened when you got into the base?”

“We cut through to the command center and sent transmissions with false information about the location of the First Order’s ships.”

Hux set his glass down, leaning his elbows against the table. “I remember that. The information suggested they were shipping vessels, but when the Resistance arrived to take them, there were destroyers waiting for them. It was a particularly effective strategy. I didn’t know your Knights were responsible for delivering the coordinates.”

“No one else would have been able to infiltrate the outpost as effectively as we could. The Order would have lost troopers. We were able to deal with all of the Resistance fighters without doing that.”

“What exactly does dealing with them entail? Did you take prisoners for interrogation?”

“We extracted the necessary intelligence from the higher ranking officers, but they had little to offer. The rest we did away with. We couldn’t leave anyone to counter the transmissions we planted.”

“Ruthless, but effective,” said Hux, approving.

“Yes.”
“Tell me, why were you the only one of the Knights sent to retrieve the map to Luke Skywalker? Would the assistance of the others not have been beneficial to you?”

“They don’t wield the Force. It’s isn’t as important to them.” A line appeared between Ren’s brows. “And the Supreme Leader believed I could do it alone. It was a test I failed.”

Hux folded his hands in his lap. “I see.”

Ren looked down at his empty plate. “It should have been a simple task.”

“And Starkiller Base’s shields should have been impenetrable. Yet, here we sit.”

“What would you do if the Supreme Leader removed you from command?” said Ren, glancing up. Hux frowned at the prospect. “What I was ordered to, I expect.”

“Even if it was beneath you?”

“Anything but my present role is beneath me. But, yes. If I had to, I would assume a lesser post.”

“You could retire.”

“And do what?” Hux gestured around him. “Live here? No. I couldn’t bear the tedium. I’m an officer. I don’t know any other way to live.”

“Did you always want to be?” asked Ren. “An officer in the Order.”

“Yes,” Hux replied. “And I was expected to.”

“Could you have chosen something else if you had wanted it?”

“What else could I have done? I’m not a merchant and I had no desire to take my mother’s money and live leisurely. I hated her friends, her society.” He eyed Ren. “Would you have chosen another life had you not been born with your affinity for the Force?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I would have made a poor politician. And I didn’t want to take over my father’s...business.”

“Was he an entrepreneur?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“I admit I couldn’t see you as man of enterprise. Nor as a senator. You are...well suited to your place in the Order.”

“As are you, general. It would be unwise to demote you.”

“Thank you.”

Ren gave a curt nod.

As the conversation lapsed, Hux drank down the rest of his wine. The meal was drawing to a close, he knew, but he found that he was not yet ready to return to the quiet of his room. Placing his palms at the edge of the table, he said, “Do you play chess?”

“I haven’t in years,” said Ren, “but I know the rules.”
“I have a board if you’d care to join me.”

“All right.”

“Excellent,” said Hux as he rose. Feelix appeared from the kitchen as he came around the table, and Hux stopped him. “Is there another bottle of the red by any chance?”

“Yes, sir,” the footman said. “Shall I get it for you?”

“And a clean glass, please.”

Feelix ducked through the door, returning a moment later with the opened bottle of wine and a glass in hand. Hux took them, thanked him, and tipped his head toward the hallway. Ren followed him out of the dining room.

The illuminators came up as they strode into Hux’s bedroom. “Please sit,” Hux said, gesturing to one of the plush chairs by the fireplace. Ren took it while Hux set down the bottle of wine. The chessboard was on the desk adjacent to the window. He brought it over and put it on the small, round table between his chair and Ren’s. He spun it so that Ren had the white pieces.

“You’re giving me the first move?” Ren said.

“I thought it polite,” said Hux as he sat. “You may have black if you wish.”

Ren shrugged. “I used to play white when I was learning.”

Hux poured himself a glass of wine. “Who taught you?”

“My mother.”

“Did you play often with her?”

“For a while, before I left the planet.”

“Yes, of course. To train with your first master. Did he not play?”

“On occasion. Who taught you?”

“My father,” said Hux, swirling the wine around before sipping it. “He insisted that it’s necessary to understand tactics. I started to learn as soon as I could understand the rules.”

Ren wet his lips. “You’re going to beat me, aren’t you?”

“Probably. I haven’t lost a game since I was thirteen.” He paused, then said, “Prefer not to play after all?”

“I’m not afraid of you, Hux.”

Hux smiled. “Then by all means, the first move is yours.”

Taking a pawn, Ren moved it to square E4. Hux moved his knight to C6. They played the next few moves without speaking, both examining the board. Hux set his glass down on the table while he considered how to engage his bishop. He was surprised when Ren reached over, picked the glass up, and drank.

“Had I known you wanted some, I would have brought another glass,” Hux said.
“I just wanted to taste it,” said Ren. “It’s not bad.”

Hux inspected the label on the bottle. It was from a vineyard inland where the rains were less frequent. Pinot noir, six years old. It must have cost upward of four hundred credits. “A ringing endorsement,” he said, wry.

Ren shrugged. He looked down at the board. “Your move.”

“Yes, yes,” said Hux, advancing his bishop to capture one of Ren’s pawns.

Ren didn’t have much of a clear strategy, and he was well on his way to losing. Recognizing that, he frowned. “Did you ever play anyone but your father?”

“Certainly. I had a particularly keen opponent at the Academy.”

It had been Wile, of course, though some of the other cadets had played against Hux once or twice. After he thoroughly trounced them, however, they had given up. Wile took the losses better and often put up a considerable fight.

“I misspoke before,” Hux said. “I did lose to him a time or two. Though willingly.”

“You threw a game for his benefit?” Ren asked.

Hux took a drink of wine. “I did, yes. It worked to my advantage to stay in his good graces. We were...good friends.”

“You were involved with him.”

Hux hesitated for a moment. He had never talked of his relationship with Wile before. “Yes.”

“I let one of the other apprentices beat me in the sparring ring once because I wanted her,” said Ren.

Hux’s brows rose. It was not so shocking that Ren also had an interest in women, but he had never mentioned that there had been others training with him. That piqued Hux’s curiosity far more. Yet, he bit back the questions about it and asked, “Did it work?”

“Not exactly. She suspected I lost on purpose and told me off for it.”

Hux chuckled. “I think I would have liked this girl.”

Ren shot him a look. “She wanted a rematch, so we went back that night. I beat her easily. I thought she would have hated me for it, but she powered down her saber and kissed me. So, I got what I wanted in the end.”

“Just a kiss?”

“I got more eventually, but it was forbidden, so we didn’t have much of an opportunity.”

“Were there others?”

“No. Not until Snoke found me. He is more lenient than my first master was.” Ren moved a rook. “Were there others for you at the Academy?”

“No,” said Hux, sliding his queen three spaces to the right. “There shouldn’t have been one, but I found him difficult to resist.”
“Is it only men for you?”

The personal nature of the question should have put him off perhaps, but Hux found that it didn’t. He answered honestly. “Yes. My mother attempted to introduce me to some of the daughters of her society matron friends, but I never took to them.”

“Did it bother her?”

“Of course not.”

“Your father?”

“No. He never cared who I slept with as long as it didn’t interfere with my career. Why do you ask? Did you own parents object to your preferences?”

“They didn’t know anything about it. I was a child when I left them.”

“Indeed. But your first master didn’t allow it either way?”

“We were meant to focus on our studies. Everything else was a distraction.”

“That seems rather unreasonable considering the proclivities of young people. Even the Academy acknowledged that. As long as we didn’t fraternize with the other cadets, we could carry on as we pleased.”

“Your friend wasn’t a cadet, then?”

“He wasn’t,” said Hux as he captured one of Ren’s knights with a bishop. “Check.”

Ren moved his king out of the way.

“If you were to choose,” Hux said, pursuing him with a pawn, “would it be men or women?”

“Men.”

“Yet you chose a girl during your apprenticeship. I assume she was your first.”

“She was,” said Ren, reaching for the wineglass again and taking a drink. “I admired one of the boys, but he made his preference clear.”

“Ah, yes. Then you weren’t with a man until you left your first master.”

“Yes.”

Hux held his hand out for the glass before Ren could set it down again. Their fingers brushed as they passed it between them. Ren’s were warmer than Hux’s.

“Before this, had it been long since you were with someone?” Hux asked. It seemed that if they were discussing these matters, little was off limits.

“A few months. Not since I started the search for Skywalker. Everything else was secondary to that.”

“Understandably,” said Hux. “I put such things aside as well when I was assigned to the Finalizer.”

“That was almost two years ago,” said Ren.
“Yes,” Hux said, sliding his queen into position for his final move. “Checkmate.”

Ren set his king down on its side. “That’s too long.”

“It wasn’t a priority,” said Hux, shrugging one shoulder. “Another game?”

“Maybe later.” Ren’s gaze flicked to the bed before returning to Hux.

“Perhaps tomorrow then,” Hux said as he rose.

“Perhaps,” said Ren, standing as well. Taking a step toward Hux, he reached out and slid his hands around Hux’s waist. He tugged the shirt out from under his belt. Hux smiled slyly into the kiss.

“There. Yes. Good.” The words fell from Hux’s lips in short, breathy pants. The grass beneath him was prickling the exposed flesh at his lower back and buttocks, but Ren’s hair was soft in his hand. His dark head was between Hux’s splayed legs, Hux’s cock in his mouth.

Their rifles lay forgotten a few paces away. They had been out on the firing range since after lunch that day, and Hux had just fired a particularly good shot when Ren, who had been watching, came to him and pulled at his belt.

“What exactly do you think you’re doing?” Hux had asked, though he made no move to stop Ren as he lowered the zipper of Hux’s trousers with one hand and took his blaster from him with the other. He dropped it to the ground.

“Be careful with that,” Hux scolded. But any further protest stuck in his throat as Ren’s fingers curled around his cock.

“Lie down,” Ren had said, sinking onto one knee and then the other. Hux followed him, reclining onto his back. Ren had stretched out on his stomach, taken Hux in hand, and gone to work. He ran his tongue in a hot circle around the tip of Hux’s cock before wrapping his lips around it. Hux exhaled shakily, letting his head fall back against the grass. He felt himself pressed against the roof of Ren’s mouth before Ren took him deeper into his throat.

He was eager and clever, brushing the flat of his tongue against sensitive places that made Hux arch his back and groan as he took hold of the back of Ren’s head. It wasn’t long before Hux was thrusting into him, greedy for more. Ren gave it to him, increasing his pace. The sounds he made were wet and salacious, but Hux revelled in them.

“Keep going,” he said, his breath coming short. “I’m going to—” He shouted a broken cry as he came, bucking his hips up. He felt Ren swallowing, the pressure around his cock only increasing as the waves broke over him. Ren continued to move slowly as Hux came down. It elicited a few aftershocks, each making the muscles of Hux’s thighs tense.

When the feeling began to fade, he released his grip on Ren’s hair, allowing him to lift his head. Ren dragged a hand across his mouth, his lips curving up into a smile.

Hux came up onto his elbows and looked down at him. “Don’t look so pleased with yourself.” Ren only smiled wider. Hux gave him an admonishing look. “Up.”
Pushing himself back, Ren sat on his heels. Hux lifted his hips until he could pull his trousers back up. He tucked his cock into them and fastened the fly. He sat up, folding his legs in front of him.

“I suppose I should thank you,” he said, eyeing Ren. “Do you want—”

Ren shook his head. “Later.”

“Very well.” Leaning back on his hands, Hux looked out at the close-range target they had been shooting at. Beyond it was the thicket of woods that his father had taken him hunting in as a boy. He remembered chilly mornings prowling through the trees, tracking the movements of the ental herds. They were antlered creatures, quick and agile. They moved in groups of three or four at most, led by a male. It was, if Hux recalled correctly, high season for hunting them. It had been many years since he had shot one, but they had flavorful if gamey meat that he had once liked.

“Would you care to accompany me hunting?” he asked Ren. “It would give you the opportunity to shoot something mobile.”

“When?” said Ren.

“Tomorrow perhaps.”

“We’re taking the jumpspeeder out tomorrow.”

Hux held back a grimace. “Oh, yes. I forgotten that.”

“You still don’t want to go,” said Ren.

“I do. I would just prefer to take one of the other speeders.” The indignity of riding double was far from appealing.

Ren looked amused as he pulled the elastic band from around his wrist and tied his hair back with it. “No one’s going to see you.”

“But I’ll know, and that’s enough.”

“You took the wager.”

Hux waved a hand. “Yes, I know.”

They had discussed the excursion the night before as they lay in Hux’s bed, the sheet draped over their hips. Hux had been propped up against the pillows, seated, while Ren had been on his side, leaning up on his elbow. The flush had just faded from his skin, but his hair was still disordered from Hux’s fingers. A few strands fell across his brow as he spoke, covering his left eye. Reaching out, Hux tucked them back behind his ear. Ren had paused for a moment, looking intently at Hux, but then away. He asked about where they should take the speeder.

Hux had pulled up a map on his datapad and outlined a plan. It would take them farther inland, through the countryside rather than toward Scaparus. It was scenic and isolated enough that they would not draw undue attention to themselves. Ren seemed satisfied with it.

“We should leave early,” he had said, scrolling across the map lazily. “I want the full day.”

“And forego training?” Hux had asked.

“It’s just one day.”
“I wasn’t objecting.” That was true enough, but he was loath to skip it. He enjoyed it.

“I do want to hunt, though,” said Ren, drawing Hux’s attention back to the present. “To try it.”

“We’ll find the time.”

With a nod, Ren unfolded his legs and stood. The sun was behind him, making Hux squint as he looked up. Ren’s features were somewhat obscured by the shadows, but the light followed the line of his jaw, the ridge of his nose. It made the shells of his ears slightly translucent, light red. He was not beautiful, but he was striking.

“What?” he said.

“Nothing,” Hux replied, getting to his feet. “Shall we go inside?”

Ren left him in the main corridor of the house when they returned. He had offered to take their blasters back to the den, and Hux had agreed. When Hux arrived back in his room, he found Lorna arranging things in his closet.

“Good afternoon, Master Hux,” she said, turning. “I was just bringing the clean things from the laundry.”

“And I appreciate it, as always.”

She smiled at him. “Did you and Lord Ren enjoy your shooting today?”

“We did,” said Hux. “We plan to hunt sometime in the coming days. I believe he’ll be good at it.”

“That’s an excellent idea. I imagine there are plenty of entals to be had. The population hasn’t been thinned since your father died. Would you like me to order some more suitable clothes for it?”

Hux nodded. “Please do.”

“I’ll place the request right away,” she said, starting toward the door.

“Lorna, wait.”

She stopped, cocking her head.

Hux rubbed his forehead. “I meant to apologize for being short with you before, on my birthday. I was...unreasonable. There are too few of us in this house for matters between Ren and I to go unnoticed. I should not have faulted you for it.”

“I understand that. However, I should endeavour not to pry into your private affairs. You were not wrong to remind me of that.”

“They’re hardly private anymore,” said Hux.

Lorna looked down, but it didn’t mask her smile.

Hux sighed, shaking his head. “You approve, of course.”

“I wouldn’t presume to offer my opinion.”

“When have you ever withheld it?”
She raised her chin, managing to look down her nose at Hux despite his height. “The only thing that matters to me is that you are happy with this change in circumstances, Master Hux.”

“A very diplomatic answer,” he said. “I am satisfied with this arrangement.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Lorna. “Will that be all, then?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Inclining her head, she left the room. Hux watched the door close behind her before going to choose what to wear that evening.

The jumpspeeder had already been pulled out of the garage as Hux approached it the next morning. The glossy, black hull reflected the watery light from a cloud-shrouded sun. Fortunately, the rain was supposed to hold off throughout the day, rare for Arkanis.

Harron was standing beside the speeder attaching what looked to be saddlebags to the back of the long seat.

“What this?” asked Hux, stepping up beside him.

“Provisions, sir,” the old driver replied. “Ms. Havlis had the chef put together a few things.”

“How long does she expect us to be gone?”

“For the day,” said Ren, coming from inside the garage. He had on the same hide jacket he had worn on the day they went into Scaparus Port, and a pair of goggles hung around his neck.

Hux had donned a similar jacket—which Lorna had provided, of course—though it was a caramel brown instead of black, as Ren’s was. It would cut the wind as they rode. It wasn’t overly cool, but the temperatures on the planet rarely got above twenty or twenty-one degrees. An extra layer would not hurt.

“Ah, well,” he said. “Then I suppose lunch is appropriate.”

Ren gave a one-sided smile and held out another pair of goggles. Hux took them and pulled them over his head. He watched Ren swing a leg over the speeder, setting his hands on the yoke.

Ren glanced at him when he realized Hux was hesitating. “Come on.”

Hux scowled as he went to the speeder and mounted up. The seat was canted just slightly so that he slid against Ren’s back, their hips and thighs tucked close together. He clenched his hands into fists, searching for the most dignified place to rest them. He settled on Ren’s middle, though not completely around him.

“Ready?” Ren asked, turning his head slightly so that Hux could hear him.

“Yes,” Hux sighed, resigned.

Ren pressed the ignition, and the speeder’s engine roared to life. He raised a hand to Harron, who waved back. Engaging the throttle, he eased the speeder forward down the drive.
“Hold on,” said Ren as they reached the end. Taking one of Hux’s wrists, he pulled his arm tighter around his chest. Hux brought the other to meet it. The speeder heeled to the side as they rounded the corner onto the main road. Ren opened up the throttle and they shot off toward the east.

The countryside inland was hillier than the coast, affording them a ride that required an adept pilot. Despite Ren having said that his abilities with the Force did not lend him to piloting, he was far better at it that Hux. He took the curves in the road at high speeds. They leaned into them as the speeder heeled. Fortunately, the repulsors kept them high enough off the ground to keep their boots from scraping the road.

The trees that dotted the landscape eventually gave way to vineyards. It suffused the air with the sweet scent of grapes and damp earth. Hux drew it in, leaning back a little from Ren to get a better view.

They passed one of the manor houses among the rows of vines, its wings just as sprawling as his own estate. Two small children paused in their games to watch as the speeder crested the hill and then descended into the valley below.

Hux found that his scorn for the trip began to fade as the wind thundered in his ears and burned against the exposed skin of his face. He relaxed his hold on Ren and took in the scenery. As much as he had grown to dislike Arkanis in his youth, he couldn’t deny that it had a certain beauty that he had not recognized before. The estate, too, had some qualities that he had never appreciated.

He caught himself, forced to admit that he had developed a sense of fondness for this place. Little by little, he realized, the distasteful memories of his childhood had begun to be supplanted by days of saber training, by afternoons with his blasters, by Ren. His presence had changed the atmosphere in the house. The heaviness that Hux’s father had given it had dissipated, as had the falsely affable air his mother’s parties had left in their wake. It wasn’t tranquility—he and Ren had argued far too often for that—but there was a calm about their daily routines that he had come to savor. He had never known anything quite like it, having never had the opportunity for leisure.

Ren slowed the speeder as they came to the top of a hill that overlooked a sprawling vineyard. Hux could see a number of harvesting droids working in the fields, though they were little more than moving dots in the distance. A small copse of trees stood a few meters from the road. Ren guided the speeder toward it and cut the engine. Hux released him and stretched. His shoulders were stiff from remaining in the same position for nearly four hours. He had no objections to a break.

Dismounting, he windmilled his arms and rolled his neck. Ren stepped down after him, pulling his goggles down. His hair was a windswept mess, the strands that escaped the tail tangled. Hux could only imagine what he himself looked like. He didn’t bother to run his fingers through his hair in an attempt to straighten it, though. He hardly cared.

He unzipped his jacket and shrugged it over his shoulders, tossing it over the seat of the speeder as he went to the saddlebags and flipped one open. Inside were some parcels wrapped in brown paper and tied with twine. He grinned as he saw an accompanying bottle of wine. He drew it out first. It was sealed with a screw top so that it could be opened by hand. Lorna never did fail to think ahead.

“Will you see what’s in the other bag?” Hux asked.

Ren opened the one on the opposite side of the speeder’s seat. He pulled out two cups made of sturdy plas rather than glass, a loaf of bread wrapped in a checkered towel, and a bottle of the juice he favored. Taking all of it, he sat in the shade of the trees, leaning against the trunk of one. Hux brought the other items over and sank down onto his knees next to him.
They unpacked the food: a soft cheese to go with the bread; cured, fragrant meat; a basket of cherries; and apple tarts. Taking a knife, Hux cut a piece of the cheese. Ren handed him a hunk of bread he had torn from the loaf.

“How long has it been since you’ve been planetside?” Hux asked as he swallowed the first bite. The cheese was mild and creamy.

“Not counting Jakku or Starkiller,” Ren said, “a year maybe.”

“On a mission for the Supreme Leader?”

“A negotiation with the Hutts.”

Hux raised a brow. Ren hardly seemed the type to broker a deal with the shrewdest crime lords in the galaxy. He was far too direct, too prone to rashness. “I didn’t know we did business with them,” Hux said. “Do they not deal primarily in indentured labor?”

“They’re slavers, you mean. Yes, but they also have access to a beryllium mine on Sevrin in the Outer Rim that Leader Snoke wanted to leverage.”

“That must have been a delicate negotiation.”

“Not really. I told them that they were going to trade the resources for weapons or the First Order would take the mine by force. The Hutts employ mercenaries, but not enough to fight off a battalion of stormtroopers.”

“So, you were sent to threaten them, not discuss the terms of an agreement.”

“I offered a trade. The rest was a warning.”

“Did they agree to it?”

“Yes.”

“They didn’t have much choice in the matter.”

“No.”

Hux took the bottle of wine and twisted it open. Ren had disregarded the cups and was drinking directly from his bottle of juice, but Hux reached for one and filled it halfway with the white.

“What was Hosnian Prime like?”

“Interested in what you destroyed?” said Ren.

“Perhaps.”

“I didn’t see much beyond Republic City. I stayed there with my mother.”

“Not your father?”

“His work took him away. I hardly saw him.”

“I would have liked to have had some distance from my father,” said Hux. “He was everywhere. At the Academy, at the estate. I was never free of him. At least not until I received my first commission. And after that I stayed away. I didn’t see him again before he died.”
“What happened to him?”

“What an aneurysm. No one could have predicted it. He was not yet sixty.”

“Is he buried here?”

“He was given an officer’s funeral. Cremated and released into open space.”

“Were you there?”

“No,” said Hux. “I was sent a letter of condolence from command, but I didn’t receive it until long after he was gone. I had been on mission without communication.”

Ren glanced at him. “Do you regret it?”

Hux frowned. He had been offered bereavement leave after the mission was over. He considered going to see his mother, but she had written to him that she in the midst of setting up house in Pantin City, and he hadn’t wanted to be embroiled in that chaos. Instead, he took two days of the leave and spent it getting drunk. He didn’t weep for his father; Brendol would have admonished him for it. But, he did mourn in his way.

“Funerals are for closure,” he said. “I didn’t require that.”

“There wasn’t any funeral for my father,” said Ren, looking ahead rather than at Hux. “There wasn’t any body to bury.”

“There could have been a ceremony at least.”

“Maybe there was.”

“But you weren’t present.”

“They wouldn’t have wanted me there.”

No, Hux couldn’t imagine they did. After all, they were allied with the Republic, which Ren opposed. “Does your mother still live?” If she was on Hosnian Prime when it was obliterated…

“Yes.”

Hux felt an usual relief. He harbored no guilt for what he had done, but the idea that he had taken Ren’s family from him—estranged as they were—didn’t sit well. “Is your uncle alive?”

Ren worked his jaw. “He is,” he said, almost a growl.

“I don’t have any uncles,” said Hux. “Or aunts for that matter. Both of my parents were only children.”

“As you are.”

“Indeed.”

“Did they want you to have a child? An heir?”

Hux took a sip of wine. “My mother talked of it on occasion, though she was never insistent. She knew I wouldn’t marry a woman who could bear one. And I’ve never been overly fond of children. Are you?”
Ren shook his head. “It isn’t permitted.”

“No?” Hux asked, curious. “For you, or for anyone with your power?”

“No one else has my power.”

Hux stopped himself before he rolled his eyes, though barely. “Then is siring children something Snoke forbids?”

“It would be a distraction from my true purpose. My master knows that, and so do I.”

Hux made a small noise of acknowledgement, but didn’t reply. He ate a few cherries, their juice sweet and delicious. Though it was hardly polite, he spit the pits onto the ground beside him.

“Do you want to pilot the speeder for while?” Ren asked, breaking the silence and leaving their previous topic of conversation behind.

Hux considered it, but declined. Ren’s piloting was exhilarating. Hux could not have matched that.

“Are you suggesting we go?”

“Not yet. I like this.”

Hux adjusted his legs so that he could wrap an arm around his knee. He looked out over the vine-covered hills. “As do I.”

“Hux.”

He turned as warm fingers brushed his cheek. Ren leaned close to press their lips together.

All of their previous kisses had been hard and demanding, leading them into bed, but this one was mild, unhurried. There was no immediate invasion of Hux’s mouth, no slick tongue tangled with his. Just Ren’s smooth lips against Hux’s, his hand cupping Hux’s jaw. It was unexpected and out of character for them, but Hux slipped into it without reluctance.

He eased himself minutely closer, pressing his palm into Ren’s thigh. Ren gave a soft hum and deepened the kiss. Hux opened for him, drawing him in. Ren’s hand moved from Hux’s face to the nape of his neck and then into his hair. The grip was firm, insistent, but not harsh.

As they shifted slightly, Hux sucked in a breath. It made Ren draw back. Hux pursued him, brushing their lips together again. Then he withdrew. Ren kept his hold on him, preventing him from putting more than a handsbreadth between them. Hux held his gaze, waiting, though for what, he wasn’t certain. Ren’s fingers moved against the back of his head, and Hux leaned into them, closing his eyes.

Eventually, Ren slipped his hand down Hux’s shoulder and away. He turned back to the view from the top of their hill. Taking his bottle of juice, he sipped it. Hux watched his throat work as he swallowed, but then looked out over the valley again. They sat there, still and quiet, for a time, watching the shadows of the clouds pass over the rows of vines below them.

They returned to the estate a few hours before dark, having ridden across more of the countryside through the afternoon. Hux had managed to drink half of the bottle of wine Lorna had packed for
him, and by the time he climbed back up onto the speeder behind Ren, his head was a bit muddled. It lessened the embarrassment of clinging to Ren. Hux wrapped his arms around him without hesitation, his face close enough to Ren’s shoulder to smell the leathery scent of his hide jacket. He stayed in that position until they arrived back at the garage. Harron was nowhere to be found, so Ren pulled the speeder into its place and powered it down.

Hux dismounted stiffly. He was looking forward to a long turn in the shower; it would help to soothe his sore muscles. Watching Ren stretch his arms above his head, Hux assumed it would do him good as well.

“I’m going to clean up,” he said. He pressed his lips together, pausing before adding, “Will you join me?”

Ren blinked at him, a sly smile spreading across his face. “Yes.”

Heat flared in Hux’s gut, quickly spreading through his veins.

“You flush so easily,” said Ren, taking a step closer.

Hux disliked that. He had spent years cultivating a cool expression that betrayed nothing to his subordinates. Even under the pressure of engaging enemy ships, he kept it in place. Yet, Ren’s crooked grin and the prospect of sharing the shower—something Hux had actually never had the opportunity to do—had him reddening like a schoolboy. It was unseemly.

“Yes, well,” he grumbled.

Ren chuckled. “Come on, general. I need a shower.” Unhooking the saddlebags from the jumpspeeder’s seat, he tossed them over his shoulder and started out of the garage.

Hux’s room was illuminated by the last muted light of the day, giving it an orange glow. He didn’t bother to turn on the lamps, instead going to the armchair and sitting to remove his boots.

Ren dropped the saddlebags onto the floor without ceremony. Shrugging his jacket over his shoulders, he tossed it on top of them. He pulled his shirt over his head and discarded it as well.

“You have no modesty, do you?” Hux said, though he was appreciating what he saw.

Ren gave him a bemused look. “Why would I? You’ve seen me before.”

Hux got languidly up from his chair, appraising as he moved toward Ren. He set his hand against Ren’s stomach, feeling the muscles beneath contract and then release. Ren’s breath was warm against his face as he exhaled.

“Yes,” said Hux, quiet.

Ren caught his face between his broad palms and held his gaze. Hux swallowed, studying his eyes. There was want there, and something else he couldn’t quite place. Pressing in, Hux kissed him.

There was more intensity than there had been that afternoon, a fierceness that bordered on possessive.

Hux’s fingers went to Ren’s belt as they delved into each other, mouths colliding without pretense. They fumbled with each other’s clothes around the tangle of arms and insistent touches. Ren stepped back only to take off his shoes and pants. Hux kicked his own away, standing bare at the center of the room.
Ren rose and prowled toward him. His arm slid around Hux’s waist and pulled him against his chest. Hux let his head fall back as Ren trailed his tongue from the dip of Hux’s collarbone to his chin. His skin was burning already, the redness slightly mottled across his breast. He clung to Ren’s shoulders, digging his short nails into the flesh.

Ren growled in response, pressing his hips into Hux’s. He was hard against Hux’s belly. Hux felt an ache begin to grow there, a desire to have Ren inside him. Taking Ren by the right wrist, he drew his hand up to his mouth. Ren’s eyes darkened with hunger as Hux sucked his fingers, wetting them. Sliding them out again, he guided Ren’s hand to the cleft of his ass and against him.

“I want you to fuck me,” he said, crude as it sounded.

Ren’s lips parted in a soundless gasp. Hux held Ren’s fingers against him, relaxing his muscles to allow the fingers entry. Ren seemed to wake then and took over, easing his forefinger in up to the second knuckle.

Hux groaned, dropping his forehead onto Ren’s shoulder. The sensation was sharp and stung just slightly. Saliva was hardly ideal for what he intended Ren to do, especially after years without having been stretched.

Ren withdrew for a moment before pushing back in, deeper. Grasping at his back, Hux sank his teeth into Ren’s neck. Ren hissed. Hux brushed his tongue over the bite, doing what he could to ease the pain.

“On the bed,” Ren said, pulling away.

Hux felt the loss acutely, but obeyed. He sat at the edge of the mattress, but when he went to move back, Ren wrapped a hand around his knee.

“Just lie back.”

Hux did as he was bid, lowering himself down. He rested his heels on the frame of the bed, leaving him exposed. Ren turned away only to get into the drawer of the bedside table and retrieve the lubricant. He poured some onto his fingers. Hux hummed as the cool wetness was spread across his tender skin. Then Ren was inside him again, this time with the tips of two fingers. Hux bit his lip against the intrusion.

“You’re so tight,” Ren said, rubbing his free hand along Hux’s thigh. “Relax.”

“I’m well aware what it takes,” said Hux, though he was grinding his teeth.

Ren parted his fingers, making Hux draw in a breath. “Then do it.”

Hux lifted his head to shoot him a glower, but it was lost as Ren worked his hand faster. The wood of the bed frame dug into Hux’s feet as he arched up. “Hells.”

“Good,” said Ren, moving his free hand between Hux’s legs. He cupped him, massaging gently. Grasping Hux’s cock, he stroked up, his thumb against the underside. He made a circle there as he crooked the fingers inside of Hux.

Hux cried out, tearing at the comforter beneath him. Another swipe of Ren’s fingers in time with the movement on his cock had Hux gasping. “More,” he said. Ren obliged, increasing his pace. Hux felt his legs start to tremble as the pressure built.

“Look at me,” said Ren.
Hux forced his eyes open. Ren was staring down at him, breathing through his mouth. He, too, was flushed now, which was strangely pleasing to Hux. He wasn’t the only one losing his composure. It pushed Hux closer to release, but what Ren said next sent him careening over the edge.

“Come for me, Hux.”

He writhed under Ren’s hands, calling his name as he came across his own stomach and chest. Before he had even begun to come down, Ren pulled his fingers away. Hux would have protested, but then he felt the tip of Ren’s cock against him. His pleasure-loosened body took him in without resistance. The feeling of fullness sent another wave of sensation through him.

Ren didn’t move right away. Leaning down over Hux, he said, “Hold onto me.”

Hux looked at him for a moment, confused. Ren took Hux’s arms and wrapped them around his neck. Comprehending, Hux hooked his ankles around Ren’s waist and leaned into him. Seemingly without effort, Ren lifted him from the bed. Crossing the room, he pressed Hux against the nearest wall.

An unusual tingle enveloped Hux, making gooseflesh rise. Ren’s grip on him loosened, but Hux’s position on the wall didn’t change. The Force. Ren had said he could lift a man if he chose to. And Hux had imagined just this scenario.

“I want to give you what you want,” said Ren. “You wanted this.”

Hux kissed him instead of replying. Ren delved into his mouth, beginning to move as he did. Hux’s fixed place allowed Ren to withdraw completely and then push back in. Hux held tight to him, his fingers fisted in Ren’s hair. He pulled the tie loose and threw it aside.

“Fuck, Hux,” Ren snarled.

“Harder,” said Hux.

Ren held tight to Hux’s buttocks, thrusting into him hard and fast. Hux was hardly exerting himself as Ren was, but he was panting. Taking Ren’s earlobe between his teeth, he sucked. Ren gave a strangled groan and spat a long string of curses.

“Let go,” Hux said against his neck. “I want to feel it.”

Ren’s cry was guttural as he rocked into Hux. The sense of the Force around them intensified. Hux could have sworn the air wavered with the power of it.

When Ren slowed to a stop, Hux could feel his heart thundering against his own chest. They held onto each other for a time, both recovering. Finally, Hux managed to say, “Are you going to put me down?”

Ren gave a muffled “Mm” from where his head rested in the crook of Hux’s neck. With a small roll of his hips, he slipped free of Hux. He didn’t move to set him on his feet again, though. Instead, he readjusted his hold and bore Hux toward the refresher. He stepped into the shower before releasing him.

They were a mess. Both their chests were slick with what Hux had spent on himself, and the backs of Hux’s thighs were wet as well. The soreness from the day on the speeder was beginning to return, now compounded by the feeling of having been well used. Hux found himself smiling.

Ren turned on the water. Initially it was cool, making Hux shy back, but Ren stood beneath it,
soaking his hair. Sidestepping, he made space for Hux to get under the warming spray. Ren watched him as he began to scrub himself clean.

“What?” asked Hux, offering the soap to him.

“Tell me you’ll let me do that again,” Ren replied.

“I don’t plan to refuse you.” He cocked a brow. “Though some time to recover is going to be necessary.”

“I didn’t mean right now.”

“Yes, I know.”

Ren pushed a hand through his hair. “You felt so good.”

Hux was glad for the heat of the water having already reddened his skin, concealing his reaction.

“What you did with the Force…”

“You liked it. I could sense it.”

“I thought I told you to stay out of my head.”

“It’s not intentional,” said Ren. “Some things just come through when we’re that close. I can’t control it.”

Hux chewed his cheek, reaching for the shampoo. “Fine.”

“I wouldn’t use it against you. To look deeper in your mind.”

“I didn’t presume you would. Though, have you done it to others you’ve bedded?”

Ren looked down at the soap swirling down into the drain. “A few times when I was young, inexperienced.”

“With the Force or with sex?”

“Both.”

“Hm. What do you see?” asked Hux.

“Sometimes myself through their eyes, and what they think of me. Once I saw thoughts of someone else. I was taking his place.”

“That doesn’t sound particularly appealing.”

“It’s not always bad. Feeling someone else desire you can be…very compelling.”

Hux paused in working the shampoo into his hair. “Is that what you perceive from me?”

“I don’t need to see your mind to know you want me,” Ren said.

“No,” said Hux. “I suppose not.”

Ren lifted Hux’s chin with two fingers until he met his gaze. Ren blinked once; Hux could see the droplets of water on his dark eyelashes. And then he pressed a kiss to Hux’s mouth. It was brief, almost chaste as compared to those they had shared a few minutes before. Hux’s stomach tightened
as Ren pulled away.

“Can I borrow some clothes?” Ren said. “Mine are across the house.”

“You can try,” said Hux, “but I don’t know that they’ll fit you.”

“I’ll find something.” With that, he stepped out of the shower. Hux didn’t go out immediately. Closing his eyes, he turned his face up into the water and let it run over him.

When it had happened, he wasn’t certain, but somehow he had come to enjoy Kylo Ren’s company. He liked having him in his bed, of course, but he had appreciated the calm hour they spent sharing lunch on a hillside just as well. And the thought of Ren wearing Hux’s clothing should not have fazed him, but he found he liked that, too. Pressing his hands against the wall, Hux sighed.

“Are you coming?” Ren asked from outside the refresher. “We’re already late for dinner.”

“Yes,” Hux replied as he shut off the water. When he came out, Ren was holding a clean towel. He was wearing a pair of Hux’s gray trousers and a sweater that was loose on Hux, but fit him tightly. Hux took the towel and set to drying himself off.

“Hurry up,” said Ren. “I’m hungry.”

“Impatient child,” Hux said, though there was no venom in it.

Ren rolled his eyes and walked out. Hux wrapped the towel around his waist before going to his closet. He dressed quickly, ran a comb through his hair, and then went to Ren, who was standing by the fireplace holding the book on Naboo Hux had been reading.

“You can take it if you like,” he said. “I’m finished with it.”

Ren hesitated, but then said, “All right.” Tucking it under his arm, he made for the door. Hux trailed after him, and they went together to the dining room.

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Rain was pattering down against the roof of the garage when Hux went through the side door the next morning. It was a few minutes past 0800—he had taken his time with breakfast—but there was no sign of Ren. Harron, too, was absent. Flipping the switch by the door, Hux turned on the illuminators. The light reflected off the hulls of the speeders, each one shined with care.

Going to the edge of the mats in the training space, Hux slipped off his shoes. He stretched his feet, rolling onto the balls and back down. Though he was still pleasantly sore from the day before, he was ready to work on his saber drills. Ren had mentioned something about fighting another blindfolded skirmish. Hux was determined to beat him this time.

Their bokken were hanging from the pegs on the wall that Harron had installed for them. Below them was the table that Ren worked at in the afternoons, building his new lightsaber. Curious, Hux went to it.

There were still small components scattered across the surface, but the plain metal casing that Ren had purchased in Scaparus was now filled with circuits, a few wires protruding from the open end.
The bottom, or at least what he assumed was the butt end, was capped with a bell-shaped metal cage that appeared to house the power cells. Though Hux had never seen Ren’s lightsaber up close, he recognized the basic design: a long grip topped with a perpendicular crossguard.

Next to it, though, was another casing, this one fashioned of the same dark metal, but sleeker and relatively unadorned. Tentatively, Hux reached out to touch it.

“Do you like it?”

Hux jumped, pulling his hand away from the table. He turned to see Ren behind him. “Must you always do that?”

Ren took a few steps forward, until he was standing next to Hux. “I apologize.” He picked up the casing Hux had been admiring. “Here, take it.”

Hux curled his fingers around it. It was heavier than he expected, but did not weigh as much as the bokken he was used to.

“Do you like it?” Ren asked again.

“I do,” Hux replied.

“Good. It’s yours.”

Hux’s eyes widened as he looked down at it and then back up at Ren. “Mine?”

Ren nodded. “You’re a good swordsman. You should have one.”

“Is it allowed? I’m not sensitive to the Force.”

“You know you don’t need to be. Anyone who wants to can carry a lightsaber.”

Hux rubbed his thumb along the hilt. The metal warmed to his touch. “It’s stunning.”

“You’ll have to come with me to choose a kyber crystal for it,” said Ren.

“Myself?”

“It’s tradition.”

“Of course.” Letting out a breath, Hux glanced up. “Thank you, Ren.”

Ren inclined his head. Hux’s fingers twitched at his side with the urge to touch his cheek, to lean in and kiss him. But he checked himself. It would have been too familiar, too intimate for what was between them. He tried not to think of the kiss on the hillside, which had been more tender than he should have allowed. Taking a step back, he set the saber hilt back down on the table.

“What shall we start with today?” he asked. “One-handed drills or two?”

“Two,” Ren replied. He took both bokken from the wall and handed one to Hux.

Hux took it, pleased with the feel of it in his hand. “Will the saber feel like this?”

“It’s lighter. They blade weighs nothing at all. You’ll have to get used to it.”

A smile tugged at the corners of Hux’s mouth. “I look forward to that.”
I commissioned the incredible kawaii-lo-reno to paint the kiss on the hillside from this chapter.
Chapter Eight

Chapter Notes

A quick word of warning: There's a slightly gory hunting scene at the beginning here, so if you're not okay with some descriptions of gutting an animal, I might skip the first section.

The amazing lupineart did this wonderful painting of the entals, the creatures Hux and Ren are hunting. It's really beautiful!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Eight

The snap of a stick breaking beneath Ren’s boot had the lead male of the ental herd raising his head and looking warily around him. Hux signalled to Ren to hold his position. The entals had sharp ears, but their eyes were not as keen. As long as Hux and Ren remained still in their places twenty meters from the herd, they wouldn’t be seen.

It wasn’t long after sunrise. They had set out to hunt that morning at first light, blasters in hand. Rain was falling against the leafy canopy of the forest. It worked to their advantage, masking the sounds of their footfalls. Their water-repellent jackets kept the worst of the damp at bay.

Hux had led them, tracking the herd by the hoof prints they had left in the muddy soil. Ren had followed behind him, silent. Hux had, out of habit, adopted the gestures he had used with his sniper unit: flicks of his two forefingers to indicate a turn to the left or right, a raised fist to stop, an open hand tipped forward to signal an advance. Ren learned their meanings quickly enough and obeyed without question.

It didn’t take them long to locate the herd. There were four of them, a male and three females. They were all fully grown, looking to have enjoyed more than a few seasons untroubled by hunters. Hux was tempted to take the male—he had an impressive set of antlers—but he wasn’t seeking a trophy. It would be easier to pick off one of the females. They were slightly smaller and the carcass would be easier to carry back to the house.

Ren had given Hux a skeptical look when Hux had told him the chef was already preparing for the meat they would bring him.

“What did you expect?” Hux had asked. “That we would just shoot it and leave it there? What a waste that would be.”

“Is it good?” Ren had said.

“Quite.”

Hux continued to watch the male as it peered around, its narrow jaw working as it chewed. Eventually, it lowered its head again, returning to foraging in the bushes. Hux looked to Ren, pointing to his rifle and then to the female ental at the far edge of the group. The kill was meant to be his; Hux was only there to ensure they found the herd and to observe.
Nodding to Hux, Ren lifted his blaster to the proper place on his shoulder and sighted down the barrel. His stance was good, solid and confident. Hux had trained him well.

The shot crackled through the quiet, startling a flock of birds from the branches above. The male ental shied, his lithe body springing into action. Two of the females followed him as he darted off into the brush, but the third stumbled forward a step before collapsing onto her knees. Her long tail gave a few thrashes as she folded her hind legs beneath her and lay down.

Waving at Ren, Hux set off at a jog. By the time they reached the fallen ental, she was on her side, her chest rising and falling with her shallow final breaths. Kneeling, Hux drew the knife from the sheath at his belt. He offered it hilt-first to Ren.

“Quick across the jugular,” Hux said. “Like I showed you.”

Ren didn’t pause. Taking the blade, he took hold of the ental’s neck and slashed it. Hot blood spilled out onto the ground, steaming in the cool air. The ental twitched once, her leg brushing past Hux’s ankle, but then she stillled and died.

Hux looked her over, locating the spot of singed hair where the plasma bolt had struck her. It was in the chest, near enough to the heart to put her down. Hux might have seen to it that she died on impact, but Ren had done well. Hux told him so.

“What now?” Ren asked. He still held the knife, its edge stained dark red.

“Field dressing,” Hux replied. “It needs to be gutted and cleaned.”

“Show me.”

Reaching out, Hux took hold of the ental’s legs and exposed its belly. It was lightly furred and damp from the wet ground. Letting the memories of doing this surface in his mind, Hux ran his fingers up between the forelegs to the breastbone. He tapped it to make sure it was the right location.

“Start here,” he said. “Cut down toward the tail, but keep the blade pointed up. Cut through the hide and the abdominal wall, but not the organs. That will contaminate the meat.” He shifted slightly to the right, allowing Ren to move into a better position.

Ren set the point of the knife just under the place where Hux had indicated and pressed it down. It sank in, but Ren stopped before it could get too deep.

“Good,” said Hux. “Cut slowly. Hold the edges. It will guide the knife.”

Ren made a clean incision, moving steadily until the abdomen was open. The pungent scent of blood rose around them. Rolling up his sleeves, Hux held out his hand. Ren put the knife into it.

“Help me turn it to the side,” he said, “but mind your boots.”
As the carcass was rolled onto its flank, the entrails Hux had just cut free slid out. Only one major organ remained, and it had to be treated differently.

“Give me your hand,” he said to Ren. He took the left, which Ren had offered, and guided it into the incision again. Putting his fingers between Ren’s, he wrapped their hands around the thick muscle of the ental’s heart. “Do you feel it?”

“Yes,” said Ren, almost reverent. His fingers moved with Hux’s, exploring the contours of the heart. It was slick and warm to the touch.

“Do you want to cut it out?” Hux asked. He held out the knife with his right hand.

Ren closed his fist over Hux’s so that they both held the grip. “Together.”

A shock of sensation—not arousal, but not entirely unlike it—shot down Hux’s spine. With Ren’s hand around his, he inserted the knife and began to cut. The sharp blade severed the heart from its moorings inside the ental’s body and carefully, they lifted it free. It rested in their joined hands, red and ghastly and beautiful.

“What do we do with it?” said Ren.

“Bury it,” Hux said, unable to take his eyes off of the slow slide of a droplet of blood down Ren’s wrist. “Along with the rest.” He had brought along a compact shovel just for that purpose. It was tied at his back with the rope they would use to carry the ental back to the house.

“I’ll dig,” said Ren, though he made no move to put the heart down. Hux, too, remained still. Their breath formed a misty halo around them as they crouched in the dirt side by side. Hux could feel his own pulse thrumming, a reminder of his vitality while he held the remnants of another creature’s life in his palm. Well, the heart rested in Ren’s hand, which Hux held in his.

“Hold it,” said Hux. “I’ll dig.”

The blood on his hands was tacky and cool by the time he had dug a hole deep and wide enough for the entrails. Scavengers would have little trouble reaching them if they were willing to move some of the dirt, but the point of burying the organs was more to respect them than to prevent them from being consumed by some other animal.

When Hux had moved the majority of the organs into the hole, he gestured to Ren. He set the heart atop the rest. Both he and Hux paused for a last look before Hux tossed the first shovelful of dirt onto it.

“When we get back, we’ll have to hang the carcass to drain,” he said as he rose and pulled a cloth from his pocket. He wiped his hands, but they would need to be scoured thoroughly when they returned to the house if he was to get the blood out from under his fingernails. “The chef’s assistant will see the butchering. He used to do it for my father.”

“Can I watch?” Ren said, taking the cloth from Hux and cleaning his hands as best he could.

“If you wish to. I’m sure he won’t mind.” Taking the rope he had brought, Hux lashed it around the ental’s hind and forelegs. He held out one of the ends to Ren. “Take this.”

They slung the carcass between them, lifting it. The removal of the entrails lightened it considerably, but it was still fairly heavy. It took them half an hour to trek back to the house. Ren enquired about how long the draining would take and how much edible meat the ental would yield. There were a number of cuts—ribs, flanks, steaks—but Hux didn’t recall all of their names.
They bypassed the garden door they most often used, going instead to the back entrance of the kitchen, where the deliveries went when they came from Scaparus. A curt knock brought the chef’s assistant to the door. He directed Ren and Hux to the hook he had prepared to hang the carcass from. They strung it upside down and stepped back.

The assistant told Ren to come back in two hours if he wanted to see it butchered. Ren gave a nod of acknowledgement, and then looked to Hux. Together, they went through the kitchen into the main part of the house.

“Did you enjoy the hunt?” Hux asked.

“It was different that I expected,” Ren replied. “Simpler.”

“There’s not much to it in the end, though not everyone has a talent for it.”

“Are you saying I do?”

“I thought I made that clear before. Are you looking for another compliment?”

Ren looked at him sidelong. Hux suppressed a smile. He had discovered that Ren responded better to praise than to censure. His shots improved when Hux told him he was doing well. It was also true of their nights in Hux’s bed. A single “good” or “yes” had Ren diligently working to elicit more. Hux sometimes found it difficult not to exploit it for his own pleasure. He did, after all, want to see Ren satisfied as well.

“If you want to hunt again, we can,” he said as they stopped in the hall just outside the guest wing. “You have only to say.”

“All right.”

Hux looked down at Ren’s hands; they were stained a rusty brown. He felt an odd compulsion to wash them himself, to splay the long fingers out and scrub each one. He would press his thumbs into the palms, massaging them as the soap foamed red.

Putting the image aside, he said, “Will you join me for an early lunch?” They hadn’t eaten breakfast, having met before dawn to go to the forest. Though gutting the ental perhaps should have turned his stomach, he found he was ravenous. “I’ll have Feelix lay it on my veranda.”

“Not now,” said Ren. “I need to meditate.”

Hux tamped down a mild disappointment. “Very well.”

“Come train later. In the afternoon.”

Hux inclined his head and turned to go.

He spent a few fitful hours reading after he bathed and ate. The hunt had left him restive, keyed up as he had always been after a kill when he was in the field. He rarely slept on the nights after a mission, often reliving the moment his target fell. He hadn’t brought the ental down, but he still felt the lingering rush of adrenaline.
By the time he arrived in the garage at 1500 hours, he was almost trembling with the desire to fight. However, he found Ren sitting at his work table with a soldering iron in his hand rather than waiting with a bokken. When he saw that Ren was working on the saber that would be Hux’s, pleasure and curiosity welled. Going over, he leaned over Ren’s shoulder to watch. Ren was attaching a circular component inside the casing, manipulating the small pieces delicately.

“What is it?” Hux asked.

“The energy gate,” Ren replied. “It will control the flow of power from the cells to the blade.” A line of smoke rose from the place where he was soldering, wavering when it was caught in the puff of his breath. Pulling back, he set the iron and solder down.

“Will it be finished soon?”

Ren turned, bringing his nose all but a few centimeters from Hux’s. “Anxious to try it out?”

“I am. Though I know I cannot until it has its crystal.” He glanced down at the sleek hilt. “What is Ilum like?”

“Cold. It isn’t arctic, but the caves are in the mountains. It takes half a day to hike to them from where a shuttle can land.”

“Sounds appropriately arduous for the significance of choosing a crystal.”

Ren’s mouth quirked. “Yes. The Jedi did value their rituals. Everything is a test of your strength and mastery of the Force.”

“And you’ve done it twice,” said Hux. “Now you must a third time. Is it not tiresome?”

“I don’t mind it. I like the caves. There’s a different energy there.”

“Which I won’t be able to feel.”

“No.”

Hux sighed. “A strange thing, the Force.”

Ren looked amused. “It can be.” He set his hands on Hux’s hips and tugged slightly. Hux resisted for a moment, but then allowed himself to be turned so that they faced one another. Parting his knees, Ren drew Hux between them. From his place on the stool, he was several inches shorter, and he had to tip his face up to meet Hux’s gaze. “I like that it intrigues you.”

“Do you?” said Hux, lifting a brow.

“I’ve never met anyone else who is as curious. Most avoid it as if it’s forbidden to talk about.”

“I believe that’s because they’re afraid of you.”

Ren looked at Hux fixedly. “You’ve never feared me.”

“No.”

“But you hated me.”

Hux frowned. Perhaps once he had disdained Ren for his rash behavior and careless disregard for the regulations of the First Order, but it had been some time since he had felt that way. “You made
things difficult for me at times. It was exasperating. But I don’t hate you.”

Ren’s thumbs moved against Hux’s hipbones, inching his loose shirt up until he could touch the skin above his waistband. “Do you remember our first meeting?”

Hux recalled having been summoned from his quarters in the middle of the night cycle to receive the Supreme Leader’s apprentice in person. Ren was supposed to have rendezvoused with the Finalizer six hours before, but there had been no contact with his ship and Hux had had no choice but to wait. He had been awake for nearly thirty hours by then and was already in a foul mood when Lieutenant Mitaka commed him about Ren’s impending arrival.

Ren had done little to improve that mood. His first words to Hux—after he’d swept down from his ship, masked and draped in layers of robes—were, “I was told the general would be here, not a junior officer. Where is he?”

Mitaka, who stood a pace away from Hux, had visibly stiffened, his eyes widening. Hux, though, remained impassive. He wasn’t wholly unused to being mistaken for someone of lesser rank. He was a decade younger than most of the other generals in the First Order. It did not mean that he appreciated it, but he had accepted that it happened from time to time.

Clasping his hands behind his back at parade rest, he said, “Lord Ren, welcome aboard. I am General Hux.”

“You?”

“Yes,” was Hux’s clipped reply.

Ren surveyed him—at least presumably, since his mask hid whatever expressions may have passed across his face—and Hux liked to assume surprise was the reason for his hesitation. Yet, when he did speak, his mechanized voice betrayed nothing. “The Supreme Leader has orders for you. For your ears only.”

“Very well,” Hux had said. “We can speak in the private conference room on Deck 15. If you’ll come this way.” He had turned on his heel and strode off toward the lift. Ren’s heavy steps had followed him.

Looking down at Ren’s bare face now, Hux said, “Yes, I remember. What of it?”

“What did you think of me?”

“That you were late.”

Ren’s grip on Hux’s waist tightened. “That’s not what I meant.”

Hux gave him a withering look. “Why do you want to know this? My opinions of you have since changed. Isn’t that enough?”

“Do you know what I thought of you?” Ren asked.

“You wish to tell me, so you may.”

“I wanted you.”

Hux balked. That was not what he had expected to hear. “You can’t be serious.”

Ren blinked up at him. “Why not?”
“You had barely done more than set eyes on me.”

“You’ve never wanted someone on sight?”

Hux had, of course. It was most often how he had found a partner for the night when he was on leave; he had a very limited time to get to know them before deciding to go to bed. “Why?”

“Are you looking for a compliment, general?” Ren said, echoing what Hux had said earlier of him. “You have a mirror. You know what you look like.”

“I...well, yes, but—”

Ren’s hands moved higher up his waist. A small tremor passed through Hux at the contact.

“The way you looked at me, though,” said Ren, his gaze tracing the strip of exposed skin between Hux’s shirt and his pants. “Like I was nothing. I knew you’d never have me.”

Hux swallowed. “I believe there’s significant evidence to the contrary.”

“Things are different here.”

“Yes.”

“They’ll change when we go back.”

“Undoubtedly.”

“But for now...” Ren brushed his thumbs along the line of fiery hair that went from Hux’s navel to his groin.

Looking down, Hux raised his hands to Ren’s face. It was so familiar to him now. Considering having it masked again made his stomach tighten with displeasure. “For now,” he said as he brought their lips together.

Ren pulled him closer, pressing his fingertips into the small of Hux’s back. Then he was on his feet, the stool falling to the ground behind him. Hux drew in a sharp breath as Ren spun him and pushed him against the table.

Ren sucked lightly just behind Hux’s ear as his hands went to the waistband of Hux’s pants, releasing the buttons. Hux let his head fall back against Ren’s shoulder as Ren’s fingers came around his cock. Ren stroked him as Hux filled out in his grasp.

“We shouldn’t do this here,” Hux managed to say, though his voice was strained.

“No one’s been here in hours.”

“That doesn’t mean they won’t—”

“Hux.” With his free hand, Ren began to ease Hux’s pants down. Hux spread his legs slightly to keep them from sliding too far down his legs.

“Stay like that,” said Ren, dragging his fingers up the cleft of Hux’s ass. He trailed them over a buttock and then Hux’s hip before moving up his chest. “Open your mouth.”

Ren traced Hux’s throat and chin before slipping his forefingers between Hux’s lips. Hux sucked them, his tongue moving over the pads and then the knuckles. A thin line of saliva hung between
Hux’s lips and the tips of Ren’s fingers as he pulled them away. A moment later, the cool wetness pressed against him.

“Oh, yes,” he said as Ren slid a finger inside him. There was little barrier. Hux was more accustomed to it now, having had Ren inside him the past two nights. Arching his back slightly, he pushed himself onto Ren’s hand. He groaned as the second finger entered him. He was cognizant of the fact that they were standing in the middle of the garage, Hux half bare and shamelessly riding Ren’s fingers, but it felt too good to stop. His breath turned ragged as Ren found a rhythm, working both hands in tandem. A crook of Ren’s fingers had Hux grabbing the edge of the table to steady himself.

“Do you want another?” Ren said, pausing to press his third finger against Hux.

“Do it,” Hux hissed in reply. He swore as he was stretched further. His blood was rushing in his ears, drowning out almost everything else. He nearly didn’t hear the side door opening, but the startled “Oh!” cut through the noise quite clearly.

Hux turned, wide-eyed, to see Harron standing a few meters away, his jaw slack. The driver quickly drew a hand over his eyes, stammering, “Oh, no. I’m sorry, Master Hux, Lord Ren. I, ah…”

Hux landed an elbow in Ren’s gut as he shoved him back and reached for his pants. Ren stepped to the side, blocking Hux from Harron’s view.

“I’ll just be going then, sir,” Harron said, struggling the find the doorknob again while he kept his hand over his face. “I might have known to knock. I do apologize, sir, really.”

Hux hurriedly fastened his pants, but couldn’t yet bring himself to turn around. Ren, thankfully, continued to hide him. Out of the corner of his eye, Hux could see that he looked unperturbed. Of course, he hadn’t been the one bent over and with his cock out. Hux pinched his eyes shut, utterly mortified.

Harron continued to babble apologies as he backed out the door and closed it behind him. When he was gone, Hux let out a heavy sigh.

“That man has known me since I was a child,” he said. “And now he’s seen me...like that. I have to face him again.”

“He’s likely seen worse,” said Ren. “Maybe done worse.”

Hux rounded on him. “I do not ever need to think of that.” He grimaced. “My staff is supposed to respect me. After this…”

“They already knew we were—”

“Knowing and witnessing are two very different things.”

“It’ll be fine,” said Ren, dismissive.

“Hardly. I never should have allowed it.” He rubbed a hand across his face. “I’m going inside.”

“To hide?”

Hux shot him a glare.
Ren reached out to trace the fly of Hux’s pants. “We weren’t finished.”

“Yes, we are.”

“We could train.”

“Tomorrow,” said Hux, pushing past Ren, who did nothing to stop him.

He had hoped to escape the garage without incident, but as he ducked out the side door, he found Harron standing just a few paces away, looking about aimlessly. Hux felt heat rising in his face as he met the driver’s eyes. A mumbled “Excuse me” was all he offered. He heard, “Of course, sir,” as he walked past.

The ental meat they had for dinner that night was baked with an apple glaze, an excellent counterpoint to the tangy flavor. The wine pairing was earthy and strong. Hux had raised his brows when Ren had requested a small glass for himself.

“Acquiring a taste for it?” Hux had asked.

Ren had shrugged. “I don’t mind it.”

Neither of them mentioned the debacle in the garage, for which Hux was grateful. Instead they spoke of the book on Naboo that Ren had taken after Hux was finished with it. When Hux wondered aloud about the climate on the planet, Ren described it in remarkable detail.

“You talk as if you’ve been there,” Hux said.

“I have.”

“Really? What brought you there?”

Ren pushed his roast potatoes around his plate. “I had family there once.”

“They’re no longer there?”

“They’re dead.”

“Ah,” said Hux, reaching for his glass.

“Have the Huxes always been on Arkanis?” Ren asked, directing the conversation away from himself, as he often did when the topic of his family arose.

“They have. As has my mother’s side. I can’t tell you why they chose to remain on this unfortunate planet, but I suppose they had their place in society and didn’t want to relinquish that for obscurity on one of the Core worlds.”

“It’s not so bad here.”

“It’s tolerable.”

Ren pushed his plate away and sat back against his chair, declaring that he was finished with
dinner.

“Should we play a round of chess?” Hux asked as he set down his utensils.

“We could,” Ren replied, his tone flat.

Hux raised his brows. “Is there something you’d rather do instead?”

Ren’s eyes flashed. “Yes.”

Hux regarded him coolly, though heat was curling in the pit of his stomach. The interruption in the afternoon had left him unsated, and he had admittedly been looking forward to making up for it. “Very well, then,” he said. “Shall I bring another bottle of wine?”

“You won’t need it.”

Hux’s skin pricked. “You’re plotting something.”

Ren’s smile was predatory and all the reply Hux required.

As soon as they got to Hux’s room, they were on each other, tugging at their clothes ruthlessly. Ren laughed as Hux shoved him back onto the bed and sat astride his hips. Hux rolled into him, seeking friction. Ren cupped his buttocks, kneading the muscles. As Hux reached for the drawer of the bedside table, though, Ren stopped him.

“Not yet,” he said. Lifting Hux slightly, he guided him away. “Kneel.”

Hux’s body burned at the quiet command. Facing the headboard, he planted his hands on the mattress. He glanced over his shoulder to see Ren positioning himself behind him. Without the lubricant, Hux wasn’t certain what he had in mind. That was until he said, “I want to taste you.”

Hux’s lips parted in silent shock. This was not something he had done before. The prospect of putting his mouth on someone in such a way had always been somewhat unappealing despite what he had heard about the pleasure of it. However, considering the feeling of Ren there sent waves of arousal through him.

“Will you let me?” Ren asked.

“Yes.”

Ren’s fingers trailed up the back of Hux’s thighs. Then, parting his cheeks, Ren ran his thumb between them, over the sensitive skin he had exposed. Hux closed his eyes, pressing his palms hard into the bed. He dug his fingers into the sheets when he felt Ren’s warm breath. Then his tongue was there, hot and wet against him. Hux cursed aloud.

“Ren,” Hux breathed, a shudder passing through him.
At the sound of his name, Ren breached Hux, the tip of his tongue warm and soft. Hux’s toes curled and he grasped harder at his cock.

“That’s good,” he said. “So very good.”

“Come for me.”

Hux gasped as Ren sucked lightly. “Not yet.” It came out as a pant. “I need more.”

Ren gave a small “Oh” of satisfaction and redoubled his efforts. Hux cried out, his body beginning to shake. He was desperate for release, but he wasn’t ready for it to end, not when he had Ren’s plush lips against him and his tongue inside.

“Make that sound again,” said Ren, his voice muffled as he kept his face nestled between Hux’s cheeks.

Hux complied, his cry echoing around the room. He was certain half the house could hear him, but he hardly cared. He praised Ren, called his name around the harsh puffs of his breath.

When he came, he all but yelled into the mattress, his vision going dark. Ren continued to lap at him as the shockwaves passed through his body. Sweating and gasping for air, Hux collapsed onto the bed, ignoring the wet spot he had made. Ren stayed kneeling between his spread legs, running his hands along Hux’s calves.

They remained like that for a time, until Hux’s heart had slowed. Carefully sliding his legs up, he turned until he could see Ren. He was sitting back on his heels, his face flushed. His cock was jutting out between his legs enticingly.

Sitting up slightly, Hux went for the bedside table again. Ren watched him as he poured lubricant into his hand. Gesturing Ren closer, Hux wrapped his fingers around Ren’s cock. He thrust into Hux’s fist eagerly.

“Come here,” said Hux. Ren’s hair fell around them as he leaned in to kiss Hux’s mouth. Hux hitched his legs up against Ren’s sides, guiding his cock to where he needed it to be. Ren paused just as he was poised to enter, though.

“Ren,” Hux said, half question, half admonishment.

Ren pulled back slightly so that Hux could meet his eyes. “Kylo,” he said. “Say it.”

Hux looked up at him, intent. Never once had he used Ren’s first name. Nor had Ren used his. Hux wasn’t even sure Ren knew what it was.

“Say it,” Ren repeated.

“Kylo.”

With a deep, approving sound, Ren pushed into him. Hux’s mouth fell open, and his head dropped down onto the pillow behind it. It was exquisite the way Ren filled him.

He began slowly, letting Hux feel the full length of him. As he moved, he slid one of Hux’s legs up until he had put it over his shoulder. Hux raised the other to meet it. It brought Ren deeper, and struck the spot within Hux that left him breathless. Bracing his hands behind his head, Hux pressed onto Ren’s cock.
An iron grip came around his wrists, holding him in that position. Under most circumstances, Hux was unwilling to be bound, but in that moment he wanted Ren to pin him down and fuck him until he was shouting. He was so caught up in it that he didn’t at first realize that both of Ren’s hands were still on his buttocks, tilting him at just the right angle. Managing to look up, he saw that there was nothing binding his hands. And yet there was. Another trick of the Force, it seemed.

Hux tested the hold, only to find it as solid as any physical grip might have been.

“I’ll release you if you want it,” Ren said, slowing.

“No. No, keep going.” Tightening his body around Ren’s cock, he added, “Kylo.”

“Hux,” he breathed as he began to move again.

Their voices rose and fell as they worked. The Force-binding at Hux’s wrists kept him in place, but he managed to shift his hips to meet each of Ren’s thrusts. Sweat slickened their skin, making Hux’s disordered hair stick to his brow. He kept his eyes on Ren and listened to his ragged gasps and groans. The sounds sent thrills of pleasure down Hux’s spine.

Ren came with Hux’s name on his lips, his hips stuttering and muscles taut. Hux felt the same wavering sensation of power around them that he had on the first night Ren had taken him against the wall. It radiated from him, enveloping both of them.

“I could feel the Force,” Hux said after they had rolled apart and wiped themselves clean. They remained next to each other in bed, though Hux had pulled the sheet up to cover their legs. “At the end. It’s all around you. Is that what it’s like for you when you use it?”

Ren shook his head. “You feel the effect of it, not the source. It’s different.”

“I see. Pity.”

“There might be a way I could help you feel it like I do,” said Ren.

Hux turned to him, curious. “How?”

“An exchange of...not thoughts, but impressions, memories. I could show you what it’s like to channel the power. At least, I think I can. I’ve never tried it before.” He paused. “But you would have to let me into your mind.”

Hux tensed. “What would this exchange entail? Does it mean I’ll give you some of my ‘impressions’ in return for yours?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll try to give you only my memories rather than take yours.”

Hux pressed his lips together. He wasn’t entirely comfortable with having his innermost thoughts seen and interpreted, but the opportunity to experience the flow of the Force, even if secondhand, was intriguing. “All right. I’ll do it.”

Ren sat forward, his eyes widening just slightly. “Then...come here.” He spread his legs and gestured to the space between them. At Hux’s skeptical look, he said, “It’s easier to get into your mind if I touch you.”

“Taking my hand wouldn’t suffice?” Hux grumbled, though he was already moving into the appointed place against Ren’s chest. Ren’s arms came around him, his fingers brushing over Hux’s hair before settling against his temples.
“Try to clear your thoughts,” he said, his voice rumbling against Hux’s back.

Hux drew air in through his nose, closing his eyes. He tried to focus on the blackness rather than the apprehension that was knotting his stomach. He jumped at the tingling that began where Ren’s fingers rested against his head. He couldn’t help but think of Ren’s ability to torture a man using only his mind.

“I won’t hurt you,” Ren said. “Just let me in.”

Hux braced his hands against Ren’s bare thighs, the soft hair against his palms. When he felt the strange sensation of intrusion again, he didn’t resist it. A fullness settled in his head, as if it was a vessel filled to the brim. It wasn’t painful, but there was discomfort.

**Breathe.** Ren’s voice echoed in Hux’s consciousness, its sound a soothing reassurance. Hux relaxed into it, leaning heavily against Ren. *I’m going to show you something. Accept it. Let it happen.*

Hux pinched his eyes closed, again concentrating on the darkness. But as he did, it began to brighten and fill with color. As if he were watching a holo, images took shape. He was sitting with his legs crossed beneath a wooden trellis adorned with pale green vines. Before him, over the edge of the cliff on which he sat, was a seemingly endless stretch of blue, its surface occasionally broken by the whitecaps of waves. Hux had seen images of oceans, but had never been to a world where there was one.

*What is this place?* he thought.

*The world where I spent my youth,* Ren said. *Where I learned to wield the Force.*

Hux looked down at himself in the vision and saw his hands—Ren’s small, childlike hands—resting on his knees. He wore plain brown pants and soft hide boots laced to the ankle. The sleeves of his tunic were a lighter tan. He could feel a light breeze on the bare skin of his face, and he could smell the ocean. But underneath it was a kind of vibration that ran through his entire body. It ebbed and flowed like the water below before stabilizing into a constant, oddly comforting hum.

*What is that?* Hux asked, though he already knew.

*You can sense it,* said Ren. Hux could feel his pleasure and surprise at his success. *The connection was strong here. It was the first time I felt truly one with the Force.*

*How old were you?*

*Seven.*

Hux fell silent then, attempting to commit the feeling to memory as Ren had. He wondered if this was how Ren always experienced the Force when he was meditating.

*Yes,* was his reply.

*Show me more.*

As the memory faded, Hux felt the loss of the Force young Ren had experienced. He immediately missed it. But then another vision was appearing in his mind’s eye. He found himself in a small room filled with shadows. The lightsaber crackling in his hands was bright in the semi-darkness. There was a combat droid a few paces away, its repulsors hissing as it hovered.
Ren’s limbs were trembling with exhaustion and his breath was coming fast and hard. He had been fighting for hours, deflecting plasma bolts set to stun with his saber.

“Another,” he said to the droid. It whistled an affirmative and spun to release a volley of bolts.

Hux felt the disturbance in the energy coursing through him as each bolt was fired. He could sense their trajectory in a way he had never experienced before. Ren moved with incredible speed and accuracy to counter each one. So, this was how he had could be so keen in combat. He felt every offensive strike against him before it landed.

*Incredible*, said Hux, both awed and envious.

Ren projected a surge of pride at the praise. Though Hux was immersed in the memory, he felt himself—his physical self—smiling. He rubbed his thumbs where they rested on Ren’s legs. Ren’s approval at the touch came through in his mind.

*Will you see one more?* Ren said.

*Gladly.*

Hux recognized the next place. He had seen footage of the attack recorded by the stormtroopers who had landed in the sandy village on Jakku. His vision was distorted by the helmet Ren wore, but it didn’t impede it. The crumpled form of an old man was lying at his feet. Ren had just struck him down. As he stood looking at the body, a wavering change in the Force drew his attention. He turned and, holding out his right hand, stopped the plasma bolt that had been meant for him.

Hux felt the surge of power it took to hold the bolt in place in the air. The subtle vibration of the Force he had experienced in the previous two memories was now rushing through him. It swelled again as Ren froze the Resistance pilot who had shot at him. The man, Dameron, struggled to breathe as he was paralyzed. Ren, and Hux through him, could feel the hurried beats of his heart. Ren could have crushed it and killed him with a gesture. The destructive might of the Force was even greater than Hux had imagined.

*Do you understand now?* Ren asked.

*Yes*, said Hux. He felt a kind of appreciative caress in his mind, but then Ren began to retreat. The pressure in Hux’s head decreased until he was left alone with his own thoughts again. Slowly, he opened his eyes.

Ren had lowered his hands to Hux’s shoulders, where he was rubbing lightly. “Do you feel unwell?”

Hux did a quick scan of his body. He was a bit drained, but seemingly no worse for the wear. “I’m fine. A little tired is all.”

“That’s good. I’ve never entered someone’s mind...carefully.”

“Well, I appreciate the effort.” Shifting slightly so he could see Ren’s face, Hux said, “Thank you for showing me.”

Ren pressed his forehead against Hux’s temple briefly, but then withdrew. “You should sleep.”

“All right.” For a moment, he considered simply resting his head back on Ren and letting himself drift off, but Ren was already shifting. Hux rolled over to allow him to get up. He watched as Ren collected his clothes and dressed. Once he was finished, he paused and looked back at the bed.
“Goodnight, Hux.”

“Goodnight, Kylo.”

When Ren had gone, Hux turned off the lamp on the bedside table and lay back against the pillows. He folded his hands over his chest and blinked up at the ceiling. The bed was still warm from where Ren had lain, and almost without thinking, Hux found himself curling into it. Surrounded by the musky scent of Ren’s skin, he slid into the oblivion of sleep.

Hux spun his bokken in his hand before taking a two-handed grip and setting up at low guard. He and Ren were circling each other on the training room floor the next morning, both waiting for the other to strike. Hux now truly understood the advantage Ren had over him, but it didn’t stop him from doing everything in his power to get past his defenses.

Stepping forward, Hux swung. Ren blocked the assault and retaliated. They engaged in a quick, punishing bout. Much to his satisfaction, Hux parried all of Ren’s attacks. When they drew back from each other, Ren grinned at him.

“Impressive,” he said.

Hux returned the smile, pleased with himself. He was preparing for another swing when his wristcomm beeped a warning. Dropping the tip of his bokken to the ground, he glanced down at it. The light that indicated an incoming transmission was blinking red.

“What is it?” Ren asked.

“A message from the **Finalizer**.” A report from Phasma, no doubt. She was overdue in sending one, Hux realized. He had almost completely forgotten. “Come,” he said to Ren. “We’ll take it in the study.”

When they arrived, Hux engaged the image projector. The message took a moment to run through the encryption protocols, but then a grainy, blue version of Phasma appeared. She was in her armor, but her helmet was off. She stood with her arms at her sides.

“General Hux,” she began. “My apologies for the delay in communication. There have been some developments that have prevented it in the past days. My unit has been fully equipped, though the training of the new recruits has kept us occupied. Commander Odar is still overseeing the ship. I am to give you his regards and assurances that all of the routines aboard have remained within the parameters you set out.

“The **Finalizer** and several other Star Destroyers in the fleet have been summoned to the planet Orrun, where they are currently in orbit. The Supreme Leader has called the summit of the generals to be held planetside. They will convene in fifteen standard cycles’ time in an undisclosed location.”

Hux’s pulse jumped. Surely he would be expected to attend such a summit. Fifteen cycles was approximately two weeks on Arkanis. Taking that into consideration, he performed some quick calculations. By his reckoning, he and Ren had been at the estate now for a full thirty days. Twelve more would mark the forty-second day, precisely six weeks since they had come to the planet. If Leader Snoke released them from their exile at that time, it would allow Hux a few days to get to
Orrun.

“I do not have any information on who will be present for the meetings,” Phasma continued, “but from the communiques Odar has received, all of the highest ranking members of the Order are expected to attend.”

The unspoken message in that was clear: that Phasma did, in fact, believe that Hux was meant to be there. He hoped fervently that she was correct.

“All other matters are in good standing aboard ship, sir,” she said, leveling her gaze as if she was trying to see straight through the recorder and meet Hux’s eyes. “We await your return, general. Phasma out.”

The image flickered and then faded, leaving Hux and Ren standing on either side of the large desk. The illuminators returned to the standard levels.

“Orrun,” Hux mused. “I’ve never heard of such a world.”

“I have,” said Ren darkly. “I’ve been there. It’s Snoke’s world, where his citadel is.”

Hux took that in. He had never before considered being summoned to the Supreme Leader’s physical location. He abstractly understood that Ren had likely been in his presence before, but he knew of no one else who had.

Hux had been taught that it was an officer’s duty to stand in before his troops and address them as their peer, if not their equal. He understood Snoke’s penchant for keeping himself hidden away—it likely protected him from assassination attempts or direct attacks by the Resistance—but he had never cared for it. It smacked of cowardice, though Hux would never had suggested anything of the kind aloud.

“He must mean to send for us,” said Hux. “The generals cannot convene without me.”

“Unless you’re going to be removed from command,” Ren said.

Hux held back a wince at the bluntness. “Yes, well. Until I know that for sure, I will continue to operate under the assumption that I am the commanding officer of the Finalizer and a ranking general in the Order. And I will be at that summit. Don’t you expect to be?”

“No. If I’m to go to Orrun it will be to resume my training, not to sit in a room and talk about tactics.”

“You say that as if it’s unimportant,” Hux said, curt. “The maneuvers of the fleet are what will make or break our offensive against the Resistance.”

“It’s your concern, not mine,” Ren snapped. He pushed his fingers through his hair, agitated. “My only task is to complete my training so I can find Skywalker and destroy him.”

“Well, you should soon have that chance. Our tenure here is almost over. In twelve days we will both be delivered back to our duties.” Thankfully was on the tip of Hux’s tongue, but the word didn’t come. True, he was keen on getting back to his ship and his command, but the unpleasantness that had pervaded the first few weeks of their residence at the estate had dissipated. He no longer itched to get away.

That complacency troubled him. He should have been wholly elated at the prospect of leaving Arkanis, but when he thought of taking a speeder to Scaparus Port and boarding a shuttle, a
regretful heaviness settled over him. He could chalk it up to having grown fond of having Lorna and the staff about or to dining on the delectable fare the chef prepared, but as he stared at Ren’s broad back a few paces away, he knew that wasn’t all.

“Twelve days?” said Ren, turning.

“Yes. Then we’ll be free of this place and, presumably, each other.”

Ren flinched as if struck, and Hux immediately regretted his flippant tone. Before he could offer any sort of balm for it, though, Ren’s expression hardened.

“You’re right, general,” he said, drawing himself up to his full height. “If that’s all, then…”

Hux took a step toward him, seeking the proper thing to say. Unable to settle on either an apology or an explanation, simply said, “Kylo.”

“I have work to do, Hux,” he said, frowning. “If I only have twelve more days to finish my saber and yours, I’ll need all of them.” He went for the door, but paused just before turning the handle. “I don’t want to be disturbed for the rest of the day. I’ll see you at dinner.” Then he was gone.

Hux fell back against the desk. He hadn’t intended to imply that he was ready to be rid of Ren and the arrangement they had. However, they had both known from the beginning that it was going to end. Hux had expected to part amicably and without incident. But the look on Ren’s face had caught him off guard; there was hurt there, even betrayal.

He pinched the bridge of his nose, cursing. Where he once would have relished the opportunity to make Ren squirm, that was no longer the case. He would have to find a way to make amends. He had no desire to make things between them uncomfortable, especially when they had less than two more weeks together.

Making for the door, he decided he would pay a visit to the cook to request he prepare the rare steak that Ren favored that night. The chocolate cakes he liked wouldn’t hurt either. It was a rather hollow gesture, one that he might have extended to a child rather than a man he was sleeping with, but it was the first thing that came to mind. The rest of his redress would have to be spoken. Fortunately, he had the afternoon to plan what he would say. He could only hope that it would be enough.

“Good evening,” said Hux when Ren appeared in the dining room that evening.

Ren offered a terse greeting in reply and sat. Hux had seen to it that he had both a glass of wine and of juice set out. He overlooked both and took a sip of water instead. If he was pleased with the steaks that Feelix brought out a few minutes later, he gave no indication other than starting in on his immediately. Hux took a few bites of his own as they sat in silence. He wanted to ask Ren if he had made progress on their sabers that afternoon, but Hux could tell he was in no mood for smalltalk.

Taking a fortifying sip of wine, Hux said, “I owe you an apology. I was callous this morning, and it was uncalled for. Phasma’s report was unexpected. I reacted poorly. I did not mean—”

“Yes, you did,” said Ren. “You meant it exactly.” He looked up Hux, incredulous. “You’ve made
no secret that you hate it here, that you want to be back with the Order. I agree. We shouldn’t be wasting our time.”

Hux set his fork and knife down. “I can’t deny that I want to return to my post, but you know not everything about this situation has been bad. I’m grateful for your willingness to teach me to fight. I’ve enjoyed it. And—”

“Of course you would mention that first,” Ren scoffed.

Hux’s temper flared. Before he could stop himself, he spat, “Would you prefer I said that I first and foremost enjoy fucking you? I do, but it’s not limited to that alone.” He scowled. “Is that what you consider the most gratifying aspect of this?”

“If I did?”

“Would I have any choice but to accept it? You said you wanted me when you first saw me, and now you’ve had me. If that was your only prerogative, you’ve succeeded admirably. Perhaps I was foolish to assume that you might actually like being in my company.”

“I do,” Ren snarled. “I always have.”

Hux barked a laugh. “You have an unusual way of showing it. You did little more than countermand my orders when we were aboard the Finalizer. You barely spoke to me except to argue or complain.”

“You treated me like a subordinate. I hated it.”

“Yet you say you wanted to be around me. That’s absurd.”

Ren slammed his fist down onto the table.

Reaching to pick up his wine, Hux said, “Don’t be such a child.” The glass shattered before his fingers could touch it, spilling red across the tabletop.

“Do not call me a child again,” Ren said.

Hux glanced down at the puddle of burgundy soaking into the au gratin potatoes on his plate and then back up. “And why not? You deserve no less when you behave like one.”

Ren’s chair clattered to the floor as he shot to his feet. Hux barely had time to react before Ren was on his side of the table hauling him up and into his arms. “Do you never know when to shut up?”

“I—”

Ren cut him off with a hard kiss. Hux went into it relentlessly, tasting the anger radiating from Ren. He gave it back in kind.

“We are not doing this here,” Hux said as Ren nipped at his lower lip.

“Fine,” he growled. Latching his hand around Hux’s wrist, he tugged him toward the door.

They didn’t run to Hux’s room, but they went quickly, hardly making it inside before they were shedding their evening clothes and falling into bed. Hux landed on his back with Ren beside him.

Hux took a handful of his hair, pulling hard as he opened his mouth beneath Ren’s. Ren leaned into him, his palm on Hux’s jaw. They retreated only for brief sips of air before colliding again, their
breath shared as they exhaled.

Taking Hux by the chin, Ren turned his head to gain access to the tender flesh of his neck. Sharp bites were soothed by brushes of his tongue, wet presses of his lips. There would be bruises there in the morning, but Hux didn’t care, not in that moment, not when Ren was running his hand down Hux’s stomach toward his hips. Ren cupped him with his long fingers, stroking the soft skin at the base of his cock with his thumb. Hux parted his legs, pushing himself up into Ren’s hand.

Hux’s left arm was trapped between them, pinned to his side where Ren lay against him. He shifted in an attempt to move it between Ren’s legs, but Ren only drew closer. He bit at Hux’s earlobe, making Hux hiss. His touch, though, remained gentle.

The short nails of Hux’s hand scrabbled at Ren’s back, demanding more. “Harder.”

Ren tightened his grip for a few strokes, but then pulled away completely. He guided Hux’s knees apart as he moved down between them. Hux let out a stuttering breath as the heat of Ren’s mouth closed around him. He grasped at the sheets beneath him, bowing his back to bring himself deeper. He cried out as a moistened finger slid against and then into him. He allowed Ren to set the pace, beginning the slow and excruciating rise toward release.

He gave a small groan of protest when Ren lifted his head. “Don’t stop,” he said.

Ren looked up at him, his hands still stroking. “I want you to come inside me.”

Hux’s stomach clenched. The thought of spilling himself into Ren sent shudders through him. “Yes,” he said. “Yes.”

Withdrawing his fingers, Ren crept up Hux’s body until he sat astride his hips. Reaching for the bottle on the bedside table, he poured the lubricant into his hand and pressed it to Hux’s cock, slickening. Taking hold of him, Ren guided himself down, his mouth dropping open. Hux stayed still, letting Ren ease down until he had taken all of him.

“Hux,” he breathed as he began to move.

Hux guided Ren’s hands to his shoulders, bringing him lower until Hux could reach his lips again. Moving between them, Hux wrapped his fingers around Ren’s cock. “Can you—”

“Yes,” said Ren, his voice low and strained. “Just keep going.”

Hux drew his right hand up Ren’s length, his thumb brushing over the tip with each stroke. His left was pressed against the swell of Ren’s buttock. He could feel the muscles beneath flexing as Ren drew himself up and then pushed back down. The pressure was swiftly building to the breaking point, testing Hux’s control. He wanted to bring Ren off first, but it was becoming clear that that wouldn’t be possible.

“I can’t wait,” Hux said, feeling Ren’s body hot and close around him. “Kylo, I can’t wait.”

“Don’t.”

With a broken shout, Hux let go, his thighs going taut as he pumped his hips up into Ren. Despite waves crashing through him, he kept his hand wrapped tight around Ren’s cock, working it in time with his own thrusts.

Ren’s exclamations came between ragged breaths. “Hux.”
Though his eyes were pinched shut, Hux felt the warm wetness on his chest as Ren came, following just after him. Even when they had stilled, they stayed joined, their ragged breathing punctuating the stillness.

“Do you accept my apology?” Hux asked, though he assumed he already knew the answer.

Ren sighed, but nodded.

Relieved, Hux pressed his lips to Ren’s bicep where it was still braced beside his head. “I need a towel.”

“I’ll get it.” When he returned from the refresher, Ren wiped Hux’s chest and cock before seeing to himself. Then he tossed the towel aside and rolled onto his back. Hux pulled the sheet up over their hips before reclining against the pillows again.

Neither of them spoke for a time, and before long Hux found himself beginning to drift off.

“Brentin. Is that a family name?”

Hux’s eyes came open. “What?”

Ren was on his side, his chin cupped in his hand as he leaned on his elbow. “Brentin. Your name. Is it a family name?”

Hux blinked at him. “How do you know my name?”

“I told you I read your personnel file when I came aboard the Finalizer. It was there.” He touched Hux’s upper arm with his fingertips, dragging them down to the elbow. “Are you going to answer the question?”

“No.”

Ren’s hand stilled. “No?”

“No, it’s not a family name,” said Hux. “Well, not in the traditional sense that it belonged to my grandfather or some such. It’s a bastardization of my parents’ names.”

“Brendol and…?”

“Cynetin. Charmingly narcissistic of them, don’t you think?”

Ren’s regarded him impassively. “It fits you.”

Hux huffed. “I’ve never cared for it.” He frowned up at Ren. “You’re not going to start calling me by it. Not if you expect me to answer you.”

“No,” he said. “Hux.”

“Good.” He lifted his arm, settling it behind his head. “Ren is a title of sorts, isn’t it?”

“Of sorts.”

“Then what manner of name is Kylo? Did you inherit it from your grandfather?”

Ren looked down, moving his fingers up Hux’s arm again. “I chose it for myself.”
Hux’s brows drew together. “Is that a part of your training in the Force? You choose your own name?”

“No.”

“Then how did you…” Hux trailed off, looking for the right words. “Surely you were called something at birth.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Ren, continuing to watch his hand as it brushed Hux’s skin.

It was clear he didn’t want to speak of it, so Hux didn’t press him. He closed his eyes again, saying, “I suppose it doesn’t.”

They were quiet again after that, both unmoving save for Ren’s fingers. Hux allowed the touch to lull him toward sleep again.

“Ben.”

Hux’s chest stilled.

“It was the name of my uncle’s first master.”

“Not your father’s master?” Hux asked, quiet.

“My father was too weak to wield the Force,” Ren said, his tone heavy with spite.

Hux looked up at him. “He’s dead as I recall.”

“I killed him.”

“Why?”

“Because I had to.” Ren’s nostrils flared as he breathed shakily. “I had to be free of him. Of all of them.”

Hux raised a hand to his cheek, this thumb against the scar. “Are you?”

“I will be. When Skywalker is dead.”

“Who is he to you?”

Ren leaned into Hux’s fingers. “My former master. My uncle.”

The breath rushed out of Hux’s lungs as if he had been kicked in the gut. The pieces of what Ren had shared about his family coalesced for the first time into a terrible, barely fathomable whole. Kylo Ren—Ben—was a part of one of the most eminent bloodlines in the galaxy. Perhaps the one strongest with Force, and one whose members now staunchly opposed the First Order.

“Your mother is Leia Organa,” Hux said when he had found his voice again. “The leader of the Resistance.”

Ren nodded.

“And Han Solo, your father, died by your hand on Starkiller Base.”

“Yes.”
Hux stared at him, as if seeing him for the first time. Hux had never seen an image of Han Solo. He had, in fact, assumed the man to be a fabricated part of the tale of the fall of the Empire. He had seen Leia Organa, though. The First Order had a complete dossier on her.

Studying Ren’s face, Hux searched for a resemblance. Organa’s features were more delicate than Ren’s, which was, perhaps, not surprising. He could have favored his father more. However, his brown eyes were very much hers.

“Tell me,” said Hux.

“It’s a long story.”

“We have ample time.” Letting his hand fall from Ren’s face, Hux turned onto his side to face him properly.

Ren looked uncertain, hesitant. “I’ve never told anyone before. I don’t know where to start.”

“You were born on Hosnian Prime,” said Hux. “The only child of Senator Organa and Han Solo.”

“I wasn’t born on there. It was on my father’s ship. I told you I didn’t have a homeworld. That’s the truth.” Ren chewed his lip. “But I did spend the first six years of my life on Hosnian, in Republic City while my mother established the new Senate. She used to take me with her to meetings. I don’t remember it, but there are holos of her with me in a sling across her chest.”

Hux tried to imagine it. The young Organa, imposing despite her small stature, at the head of a table of diplomats from across the galaxy with a baby boy, his head crowned with soft, dark hair, cradled in her arms. His own mother never would have deigned to take Hux out of the house. His nanny was present in the room when he was born and she had not left his side until he was old enough to begin with his tutors.

“What of your father?” he asked. “Could he not have minded you while she worked?”

“He was rarely there,” Ren replied.

“He was a smuggler of considerable repute, wasn’t he? I assume he gave that up when he and your mother were married.”

“For the most part. He still ran missions, just under the banner of the Republic.”

“Did you ever go with him?”

“A few times. My mother didn’t like it.” Ren readjusted himself slightly, resting his right arm along his side.

“Did he teach you to pilot?” said Hux.

“I was too young then. My uncle taught me.”

Hux recalled that Luke Skywalker was a particularly adept pilot, having been the one whose shots destroyed the Imperial Death Star. “He taught you to work on speeders, too. Was he often on Hosnian?”

“No. He had a place of his own. A school. For the new Jedi. I was sent there to train.”

The vision of the wide ocean Hux had seen through Ren’s eyes flashed into his mind’s eye. “You showed it to me.”
“Yes.”

“Did you like it there?”

“For a long time I did. It was...exciting. There were other apprentices to study with and learn from. And Uncle Luke was a good teacher.”

“What changed?” said Hux.

“I found out there was whole side of the Force I couldn’t tap, a part that was being deliberately hidden from me and the others.”

“The dark side.”

Ren nodded. “I knew a little about it from the stories about my grandfather.”

“Darth Vader,” said Hux, hardly believing it.

“He was born Anakin Skywalker, but yes, that was the name he took.”

“Is that why you took a new name as well?”

“In part,” said Ren. He gave Hux a look. “Are you going to keep interrupting me?”

“I apologize. Please go on.”

“Luke didn’t hide things about grandfather, but he didn’t like it when I asked more about him. He always talked about his master, Obi-Wan Kenobi—Ben—and how he had fought to keep grandfather to the light side.”

“I thought he was your uncle’s master,” said Hux. “Kenobi also taught Vader?”

“He was a old man when Luke met him, but he had been grandfather’s master, too.”

“What happened to him?”

“Grandfather killed him.” Ren wet his lips and continued, “It took me years to get Uncle Luke to tell me that much. I wasn’t supposed to care about it, but I did. I wanted to know all I could about Grandfather. He was powerful, and I wanted to be that, too.”

“But Skywalker wouldn’t teach you.”

“He didn’t know how. He had never explored the dark side of the Force. What I learned of it I had to piece together for myself. At least until Snoke found me.

“I was twenty and had been away from uncle’s school once, maybe twice in my life. It had been all right when I was a child because I didn’t know any better, but by then it was suffocating. I wanted to see the rest of the galaxy.” Ren scowled. “Luke said I wasn’t ready. There were others, older apprentices, that he took with him when he went off world. They weren’t half as good as I was. I had always been better than all of them. They resented it. I could read it on them.”

Hux could understand that. He had been an exceptional cadet, and it had earned him more animosity from his fellows than it had friendship. “Why didn’t he think you were ready?”

“He was afraid. I heard him speaking to my mother once. He thought I had too much of Grandfather in me, too much fascination with the dark. Until he was sure I wouldn’t be pulled to it,
he refused to let me leave the planet.

“Snoke came to me first in dreams. He showed me things, new powers I hadn’t even imagined. At first I thought he was the spirit of my grandfather, but when I started to feel his presence when I was awake, I knew he was something else.”

Hux ran his tongue over his teeth. “What is he?”

“One of the last masters of the dark side. All else is irrelevant.”

Hux wasn’t certain he would have believed that. He would have wanted to know what manner of creature was drawing him away from his family and onto a different side of the Force.

“He taught me in secret for three years,” said Ren, “until I was strong enough to do what had to be done.”

“And what was that?”

“Finish what my grandfather started. Destroy the Jedi.”

Hux had heard vague stories of what had happened to Skywalker’s new Order, though he had never been sure what parts of it were hearsay and what was true. All he knew was that all save Skywalker had been slaughtered, as their predecessors had been during Palpatine’s Purge a generation before.

Looking at Ren now, he saw the truth written on his face. “You killed them. All of them?”

“I had to. If I wanted to be as great as Vader was, they had to die.”

Hux understood the need for killing. He had been a soldier all his life; he knew sacrifice. But for Ren to slay the apprentices he had grown up beside… “That could not have been easy.”

Ren swallowed, keeping his eyes cast down. “It was necessary.” The words sounded like a mantra, repeated for years in an attempt to convince himself.

“And after that you went to Snoke. To Orrun?”

“Yes. Started my true training. The power I discovered...it was incredible. I’ve never been stronger.”

“And when you complete your training, you’ll be even more so,” said Hux. “A master in your own right.”

Ren glanced up at him, his gaze dark and hungry. “I will be. And then I’ll end Skywalker as I did the rest of them.”

Hux recognized the determination in him, the desire to be great. He wanted the same things, albeit in his own way. It was alluring; ambition captivated and drew Hux to someone more than almost any other quality. And Ren’s ferocious pursuit of what he believed to be his destiny was fascinating to behold.

“Do you intend to take your mother’s life as you intend to take your uncle’s?” Hux asked, reaching out to touch Ren’s jaw.

Ren closed his eyes for a moment. “She is...an attachment to light that I may not be able to afford.”

Hux pressed his thumb against Ren’s mouth. “What if she dies by another means? I will destroy
the Resistance. Her death would cripple them.”

Ren’s lips parted as he looked down. “You would do that?”

“Would it free you, help you take the power you deserve?” Hux said, the tip of his thumb brushing Ren’s lower teeth.

“Yes.”

“Then I will do it gladly.”

Taking Hux by the wrist and pulling his hand away, Ren swooped down and kissed him. Hux pulled him close until he could wrap his arms around him.

“Need to be inside you,” Ren said against Hux’s mouth.

“Yes.”

When they were finished and once again clean, Ren pulled Hux against him, his nose nestled in Hux’s hair. Hux made a soft sound of approval and pressed his back to Ren’s chest. It was almost too warm, but he disregarded it.

“It’s late,” Ren said. “I should go.”

Hux set his hand over Ren’s where it rested at his waist. “Stay.”

Ren’s exhale tickled the back of his neck. “All right.” His grip on Hux tightened for a moment and then released.

Content, and with Ren wrapped around him, Hux slept.

Hux was already awake by the time the watery light of morning began to come through the windows. Rain was striking the glass steadily, a pattering accompaniment to the sounds of soft, sleepy breathing in the bed beside him.

Ren was stretched out across more than half the mattress, his long limbs splayed as he lay on his stomach. His head was turned toward Hux, his hair fanned out across the pillow. His mouth was open just slightly, the full lips parted to show a hint of teeth. The scar across his face was a bright slash even in the dimness. Hux was tempted to reach out and trace it from his brow to the side of his neck, but he didn’t want to disturb him.

Though Hux’s sleep had been fitful—he was unaccustomed to sharing a bed with anyone, let alone someone who took up more than his share of space—Ren had seemed to rest well. Hux had once or twice heard him mumbling unintelligible things as he tossed from one side to the other, but for the majority of the night, he had lain still. He had held Hux to him for a while, but they had gradually moved apart. Yet, there was always one point of contact between them. At present, Ren’s leg was slung over Hux’s, making it difficult for Hux to rise. But he wasn’t one to stay in bed when he wasn’t sleeping, so he resolved to at least attempt to get up.

Carefully, he extricated himself. Ren gave a muffled groan, but didn’t wake. As quietly as possible, Hux padded across the room to his closet. He chose a soft pair of pants and a shirt, pulling them on
as he went to the window.

What Ren had told him was running over and over again through his mind. There was more to it
that the basic outline he had been given, he presumed, but he would not press Ren for more until he
was ready to give it. He had said he had never told anyone before Hux. It made Hux’s chest
constrict. Ren trusted him. That was not something he had ever expected, and he liked it more than
he should have.

From behind him, he heard, “Hux?” Ren was sitting up in bed, blinking bleary-eyed as he looked
around.

“Here,” Hux replied, though he made no move to leave his place.

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing. I couldn’t sleep.”

The sheets hissed as Ren slid out from under them. His footfalls were light as he made his way over
to Hux, pausing only to pull on his trousers from the night before. His arms came around Hux’s
waist; he rested his chin on Hux’s shoulder.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Why do you assume that something is?”

“It’s barely 0600. You should be in bed.”

“How do you know I don’t get up at this time every day?”

“You don’t.”

“I don’t,” Hux conceded.

“Then what is it?”

“Nothing of consequence. Really.”

Ren gave a small “Mm,” rubbing his thumbs where they rested against Hux’s stomach. Hux turned
his head just enough to reach Ren’s lips. It was a brief kiss, since neither of them had bothered to
clean their teeth before going to sleep. He was craving a shower and something for breakfast. They
hadn’t eaten much of their dinner the night before.

“Are you hungry?” he said.

“Ravenous,” said Ren, nipping at Hux’s neck.

Hux pulled free of his grasp and shot him a look. Ren grinned, unrepentant.

A short call down to the kitchen via the intercomm system had the chef preparing something for
them. If he was at all curious about sending both Ren’s and Hux’s breakfasts to the same room, he
gave no indication.

Feelix arrived several minutes after they had finished in the refresher. To Hux’s surprise, Lorna
followed on his heels. She was immaculately dressed, of course, despite the early hour and carried
a large carafe.
“Good morning, Master Hux, Lord Ren,” she said. “Will you take this on the veranda?”

“Please,” said Hux. He took one of the chairs and Ren the other. Feelix set a tray of scones down between them while Lorna poured two cups of strong caf. When she stepped back, she didn’t immediately move to leave. Hux cocked a brow at her.

Her eyes flicked to Ren before settling back on Hux. A slow smile spread across her face. “Enjoy your breakfast.”

Hux inclined his head and said, “Thank you.” Turning to Ren, he offered him the plate of scones. Without hesitation, Ren took one and bit into it.

Lorna was still smiling as she disappeared back into the bedroom and then out.

Chapter End Notes

The wonder ottenebrare did this hilarious piece about everyone knowing Hux and Kylo are sleeping together. E V E R Y O N E
Chapter Nine

Licking the pads of his thumb and forefinger, Hux went to turn the page of the book he held in his left hand. It was a slim volume, the spine cracked from use, Meditations on Combat. Hux had recognized it immediately upon seeing it in the study the day before as he perused the shelves for something new to read while Ren was in his room meditating. His father had often had the book on hand.

In truth, it was a relic, filled with rambling treatises on the morality of warfare and honoring one’s enemies. Hux had a healthy respect for those who opposed him; he didn’t underestimate them or consider them unable to mount a threat, but he by no means honored them. Leia Organa and her Resistance were not worthy adversaries with whom Hux was privileged to engage; they were obstacles to be removed from the path of the rise of the First Order.

The thought of Organa inevitably brought Ren to mind. Since he had made his confession two nights prior, Hux had not pressed him for further details, despite having wanted to. Ren had an understanding of the Republic that Hux could not even begin to match. He doubted anyone in the Order could. He was aching to know more, to better understand his adversaries so that he could identify the most efficient way to destroy them. Ren’s insight into who Leia Organa was and how she thought could give Hux what he needed for a decisive victory, and he always craved the upper hand.

However, he could see that returning to the past Ren had put violently behind him when he massacred Skywalker’s apprentices was not something Ren did lightly. That he had confided it in Hux still awed him, and that kept Hux’s need for information at bay. He did not want to force Ren into doing something that would cause him pain.

The implications of that did not escape Hux’s notice. He had always been merciless when it came to pursuing the things that he knew could benefit him and the Order. Yet, he could not bring himself to demand it of Ren. Hux did not want him to suffer, and that bespoke a concern for his wellbeing that Hux could not ignore. It was dangerously close to sentiment.

The sound of the water in the refresher turning off drew his attention. He heard the opening and closing of the glass door to the shower cubicle and then the padding of bare feet. He kept his eyes on his book, adopting an air of disinterest despite the tightening in his chest at the feeling of a presence behind him.

“What are you reading?” Ren asked, draping himself over the back of the armchair Hux was sitting in.

Hux had always hated people reading over his shoulder; it was an invasion of privacy he could not abide. But, as Ren’s hand grazed his upper arm, he found that he hardly cared. “A favorite of my father’s,” he replied. “Theories on war.”

Fingertips brushed along Hux’s neck. He tipped his head to the side on instinct, allowing Ren to curl his hand around his throat, his thumb just under Hux’s jaw.
“Is it good?”

“It’s antiquated,” said Hux, “but not uninteresting.”

“Read some.”

Hux hadn’t read aloud from a book since he was in preparatory school, when he had been required to stand and recite passages for the class. He had been good at it—he was, after all, an accomplished orator—but it had always been Arcan Wile who had read to him. Swallowing, he looked down at the page.

“‘The tactics of true commander can be likened to the flow of water in a stream,’” he read, “‘for in its course it finds the path of least resistance. In war, one must seek the same path: find the weakest exposed points in an enemy’s armor rather than the strongest.’” He paused as Ren moved away from him. His mouth went dry as he watched Ren walk; he was completely nude, rivulets of wetness running down his back from the tips of his wet hair.

“Go on,” he said as he reached into the side of the closet where his clothes hung. A few shirts and sets of trousers had appeared there the day before, after Lorna had noticed that Ren was wearing either his clothes from the night before or something of Hux’s at breakfast. Hux might have considered it presumptuous, but since it seemed Ren was going to be spending his nights in Hux’s bed, he had to admit it was practical.

Hux forced himself to turn back to the book. “‘Though water can shape great canyons and cut boulders down to gravel, so too is it shaped by the ground over which it flows. Like that water, the commander must craft his strategy to suit the foe he is facing. Water has no shape, and in combat there are no constant conditions. Be prepared to change your tactics as circumstances are altered. There is no victory in immutability.’”

“That’s true enough,” said Ren as he pulled on an olive green shirt. “Though comparing it to water doesn’t really seem necessary.”

“I told you it was archaic,” Hux said. “Perhaps I should have added ‘full of unnecessary analogy’ to that.”

The corner of Ren’s mouth turned up. “Why did your father like it so much?”

“I can’t say that I ever asked him, but he favored classical methods of teaching tactics. This is, if anything, a perfect volume for that.”

“Is this the first time you’ve read it?”

“It is.”

“Do you like it?”

Hux shrugged. “It’s not objectionable.”

“Then you won’t mind leaving it,” said Ren, prowling toward Hux again. He planted his hands on the arms of the chair and leaned in. “Walk with me.”

Hux shot a quick glance at the window. It was overcast, but the morning rains had abated. “Where?”

“Does it matter?”
“You don’t have a destination in mind?”

“No. We don’t have to go far. Just come with me.”

“I suppose,” said Hux.

Ren’s smile broadened. Pushing himself back, he held out his hand. Hux snapped *Meditations on Combat* closed and set it on the table. He slid his right hand into Ren’s and allowed him to pull him to his feet. They donned their boots and made for the back garden.

“Shall we go to the pond?” Hux asked as they stepped out into the wet grass. It was a fair distance away, on the other side of the house.

“All right,” said Ren, setting an unhurried pace.

“Why the sudden urge to walk?” Hux said after a time. “Neither of us want for exercise after training.”

“I used to walk often,” said Ren. “When I was boy.”

“Did you?” Hux attempted to keep his tone unaffected despite his interest.

“It was a kind of meditation. Just going through the hills around the school—Uncle Luke’s school. He used to lead us, tell us to reflect and feel the Force.”

“Reflect on what?”

“Our lessons, the tenets of the new Jedi.”

“And what were those?”

“There are too many to name,” said Ren.

“An example perhaps?”

“A Jedi uses to the Force for knowledge and defense, never attack.”

Hux gave him a sidelong glance. “They were pacifists?”

“They entered combat when it was required of them,” said Ren, “but aggression cuts a path to the dark side.”

“Is that true?”

“Yes. Rage can make the dark flow stronger. It’s always come easier to me.”

Hux said, “You do have a temper.”

“Uncle Luke said it was my greatest weakness. If I couldn’t control it, it would control me, and I would never be as strong as I would if I could be calm.”

“He tried to gentle you,” said Hux, disdainful. “Change your nature.”

“It’s the way of Jedi. They’re passive.”

Hux scoffed. “You would never be so weak. Skywalker was a fool if he thought he could bend you to his will.”
“I wanted to do as he told me to,” said Ren. “For years I fought for it, tried to make myself serene, reserved. But I felt things too strongly. Anger, pride, even joy.”

“You weren’t permitted to be happy or proud?”

“In moderation. But getting caught up in any emotion was unacceptable.”

Hux shook his head. He had been taught to regulate his behavior and comport himself with dignity, but he had never been told to not to feel. “You could not have been comfortable there.”

“No. The others were better at controlling themselves. I was always…different.”

“You said you were better than them. In all aspects of your training?”

“Most,” said Ren. “It was easier for me to manipulate objects, and I was the best swordsman by far. But I attacked. The others just defended themselves, as they were supposed to. I wanted to win, and I did.”

“When you began to explore the dark side, did you get even stronger?”

“I had to be careful how much of that power I used. Uncle Luke was too watchful. He would have known easily if I was using it. I cultivated the skills in private, especially when Snoke began to teach me more.”

“Did you spend much time alone because of it?” Hux asked.

“Yes. Too much according to Uncle Luke. He said I should have trained more with the others, been their friend. But I hardly felt any kinship with them.”

That had likely made it easier to slay them, Hux reasoned. That was fortunate. “I was also rather solitary at the Academy,” he said. “I found a my closest companion in the librarian.”

“Your lover.”

“Yes. His name was Arcan.” Hux looked over at Ren. “You had the girl you kissed. Was she not a friend to you?”

“For a while, but I drew away from her, too. She pursued me, insisted I spend more time with the others. I had no desire to do that. My studies sustained me.”

“That I can understand,” said Hux. “I had a rather singular focus myself.”

“You’re the most driven man I’ve ever known,” Ren said. “I’ve never seen you back down from anything. It’s intoxicating.”

Hux felt heat in his face, a rush of pleasure. “Most find it intimidating.”

“It’s that, too. You’re formidable.”

“And that appeals to you?”

“Indelibly.”

“That’s…” Flattering. “…unexpected.”

“Why?” said Ren, raising a brow at him.
“It’s more often a quality that pushes others away rather than attracting them.”

“I’m not everyone else.”

Hux turned to meet his eyes. “No, you’re certainly not.”

They fell silent then, approaching the pond. If the weather were more conducive to it, Hux wouldn’t have minded a swim, if only to appreciate Ren’s exuberance in the water.

“You said this place was a retreat for your mother’s friends from the city,” said Ren as they stopped at the bank. “But not for her. She lived here most of the time.”

“She did,” Hux said. “She wanted to be close to my father.”

“They married for love.”

“They did. How that happened I don’t know, but the story goes that my father was visiting Pantin City with a few other officers. He managed to procure an invitation to a high society soiree. It just happened to be hosted by my mother’s family. He thought her beautiful, of course. She was. But he was certain she would never look his way.”

“But she did.”

“Indeed. Apparently, she was immediately taken with him. She was the one to pursue him. Doggedly, in fact. Not that he resisted. My mother’s family was appalled when she announced she was going to marry him after only three weeks. A month later, they were bound in matrimony. It was quite the scandal, or so I was told.”

“When did they come here?”

“Well, my father was expected back at the Academy almost immediately after the wedding. My mother went with him, living in a cramped house in Scaparus for nearly a year. She tolerated it for his sake, but soon enough she had the idea to build an estate at which she could entertain her friends. My father never could have afforded it on an officer’s salary, of course, but Mother brought a sizable dowry with her. She didn’t even require more than a quarter of it to purchase the land for the estate. It took another year to build the house, but for her it was worth the wait.”

“She must have liked it here.”

“Well enough, I suppose. She would have preferred living in Pantin, but she wanted to be with Father.”

“But wasn’t he most often at the Academy?”

“He was, but Mother contented herself with her friends. It was an acceptable arrangement for her. Were your parents not also frequently apart?”

“More than they were together,” Ren said. “It was the only way they could have tolerated each other.”

Hux raised his brows. “I thought the legend was that they were very much in love, enough for a princess to stoop so low as to marry a smuggler.”

“That part is true, but they fought as much as they loved. I remember some of the fights, but Uncle Luke told me about others. I learned more about them from him than I did from them.”
“You weren’t terribly fond of them, were you?”

Ren frowned. “I was angry at them for sending me away. I hated it at the school at first.”

“But you learned to like it. You said once that you admired Skywalker greatly.”

“He was more of a father to me than Han Solo ever was.”

_Yet you want to kill him._ The words were on the tip of Hux’s tongue, but he bit them back. He understood why Ren was compelled to dispatch Skywalker; it would sever some of the his last ties to the light side of the Force and give him the power he craved. Hux admired that determination in him as much as Ren said he admired Hux’s ambition.

Hux wet his lips. He couldn’t deny that they were an usual pair, but they were well suited. He never would have guessed that when they first met. Perhaps their equal drive had been the source of their animosity. They were strangely similar despite their disparate temperaments and circumstances.

“Shall we walk back?” Hux said.

“All right.”

When they returned to the house, they wiped their boots and went through the main corridor. They encountered Lorna in the portrait gallery, where she was dusting the frames of the paintings.

“Master Hux, Lord Ren, good afternoon,” she said, smiling.

“Ms. Havlis,” said Ren, inclining his head. Hux was surprised by the formality.

“I see you were out enjoying the dry weather,” she said as she came toward them. “Is there some refreshment I can get for you? A warm cup of tea perhaps?”

“That would be good,” said Hux. He turned to Ren. “Will you have one?”

Ren shook his head. “I need to work on the sabers.”

“Ah, yes. Of course.”

Taking a step forward, Ren slipped his arm around Hux’s waist. “I’ll be in for dinner.” He leaned in and pressed a kiss to Hux’s lips. It was slightly more lingering than was appropriate in Lorna’s presence, but Hux allowed it. Offering a small smile when they parted, Ren headed for the door. Hux watched him go.

“Lord Ren has been in good spirits of late,” Lorna said. “He was a bit sullen when you first arrived.”

“He was, yes,” said Hux.

“As were you.”

Hux cocked a brow. “Your point, _Ms. Havlis_?”

She smiled. “Your ‘arrangement’ has been good for both of you.”

Hux eyed her, but he didn’t deny it.
“I admit,” she continued, “I’ve grown fond of him. He’s a fine man. I believe your mother would like him.”

Hux huffed a laugh. “Hardly. He’s the antithesis of the society sons she wanted for me.”

“Perhaps, but so was your father. That didn’t stop her. She would want what was best for you.”

“Ren is…” He trailed off, uncertain how to finish the thought. He had come to enjoy Ren’s company and his presence in his bed, but their situation was a temporary one. It was hardly the kind of match Lorna was suggesting.

“He cares for you,” she said.

Hux tensed, his throat constricting. “I believe,” he managed to say, “you overestimate his esteem.”

Lorna blinked at him, looking unconvinced. But she said, “As you say, Master Hux. Shall I have tea laid in the summer parlor?”

“Ah, no. I’ll take it in the study.”

She nodded and went.

Hux stared into the space she had left, unsettled. Ren wanted him, there was no mistaking that, and he had trusted Hux enough to tell him about his family, but anything beyond that was unlikely. Just a scant few weeks before they had been at each other’s throats more often than they had been civil. Lorna was mistaken, of that he was certain.

Putting the matter from his mind, he made for the study. All the talk of his mother had reminded him that it had been months, perhaps more than half a year since he had written to her. It was high time he did.

The illuminators in the study came up as he entered, though he dimmed them. Going to the desk, he engaged the terminal and brought up the correspondence protocol. He supposed he could have recorded a holo message, but his mother had always preferred written letters. She had told him many times that crafting a good letter was an art that any gentleman or lady should be familiar with. It was old fashioned and quaint, but he indulged her.

Setting his hands on the keyboard, he typed:

---

Dear Mother,

Greetings. I hope you can forgive me for the long delay in writing. My duties have consumed me in the past months. As you understand, I cannot discuss them, but know that I am performing them as well as can be expected.

He tried not to cringe at that, knowing how he had failed to protect Starkiller Base. It wasn’t a lie, though. He had done his utmost. Unfortunately it had not been enough.

You will perhaps be surprised to know that these past five weeks I have been in residence at the estate. I was given a manner of leave and came to spend it here. It has been a refreshing respite from my work, though I am keen to return to my command soon. I was pleased to spend my birthday here. Lorna prepared an impressive dinner for my companion and myself.

---
I imagine you’ll be relieved to know that I did not come alone. We have kept ourselves occupied with the pursuits afforded us here. We went for a hunt and enjoyed the meat of the ental we brought down. We made one trip to Scaparus and the markets. I know you always disliked the chaos of them, but my companion was pleased. We even took a tour of the wine country on Father’s jumpspeeder, if you can believe that.

I must send regards from Lorna and the rest of the staff, though I am to understand that you have never met the young footman Feelix, as you have been in Pantin these past few years. I trust you are well there in the company of your friends. You are owed a visit. Though it may not be for some time, I will come to see you on my next leave. And I will endeavor to keep in better contact, though I’m certain my letters will be dull and cursory, as I cannot tell you of the goings on aboard my ship, the Star Destroyer Finalizer.

I’m afraid that is all for now, but I look forward to receiving your reply.

Yours affectionately,

Your son, Brentin Hux

Sitting back in his chair, he read over the message once. It was just formal enough to satisfy his mother. With a tap of the keys, he sent it off.

Dinner that night was nothing out of the ordinary. Hux asked about the inner workings of the lightsabers, and Ren described the intricate construction. He made a crude diagram of how the energy flowed from the power cells, through the kyber crystal, and into the blade using a knife, a dessert spoon, and a napkin ring. Hux tried not to laugh.

They stayed up late into the night playing chess—Hux won again—and sharing a bottle of wine. It was amusing to see Ren succumb to the effects of the alcohol. It loosened his tongue and made him crave touch. He ran his bare foot up Hux’s leg as they began a second game. They didn’t finish it.

The sweat from their exertions hadn’t even dried when Ren drew Hux against him and fell asleep. Having a significantly higher tolerance for the wine than him, Hux had lain awake for a time feeling Ren’s hot breath against his neck and his arm across his middle. He was content to be held, having grown accustomed to it in the days since Ren had taken to sharing his bed for the night. Eventually he drifted into sleep, his hand covering Ren’s where it rested against Hux’s stomach.

When he woke the next morning, he was alone. Sitting up, he glanced around to the room in search of Ren, but he was nowhere in sight. As Hux put his hand on the pillow beside him, a piece of flimsi crinkled against his palm. On it was a messily scrawled note that read: “You’re a tracker. Come find me.”

Hux frowned down at the page, wondering at what sort of nonsense it was. He read it twice before rolling out of bed. He detested games, but it appeared he had little choice but to play along. Dressing, he laced up his boots and headed for the back garden. If he was meant to track Ren, it was likely he had gone outside.
It was easy enough to follow the trail of trampled grass that led away from the house and into the patch of forest. The leaf litter on the ground beneath the trees lent itself well to following an animal, especially one that left large footprints and overturned leaves. Crouching down to examine the direction Ren had taken, Hux sighed. This was beyond foolish.

The path he had laid out took Hux in several circles, weaving through the trees aimlessly. The boot prints crossed each other a number of times in a vain attempt to lead Hux astray. It was a clever strategy, but one he knew too well to be deceived by.

After nearly an hour, the prints led him to a grove of scrub that surrounded the trunk of a massive tree. Its limbs hung low with the weight of the leaves, making it ideal for climbing. Looking up, Hux was unsurprised to find Ren perched on a branch with his back to the trunk. He held a datapad in his hand, reading.

“What exactly was the point of this exercise?” asked Hux, setting his hands on his hips. “Other than to vex me.”

Ren turned, flashing a grin. “Come up here,” he said, avoiding the question.

“Absolutely not.”

“Afraid of heights, general?”

Hux scowled. “I was a sniper. I sat in more trees than I can count.”

“Then come on.”

“This is idiotic,” he grumbled, though he tramped through the brush toward the tree. There were a number of holes and crevices in the ancient bark that made for good handholds. It didn’t take him long to get to the limb on which Ren sat. It was more than half a meter wide, quite adequate for sitting on. Ren offered his hand to help him onto it, but Hux swung up onto the branch unaided. He sat astride it, facing Ren.

“Satisfied?” he asked, sour.

“Not yet,” Ren replied. Setting his hands on Hux’s hips, he tugged. Hux rolled his eyes, but scooted closer, until their knees were touching. “Better.”

Hux gave an exasperated sigh, but Ren swallowed it as he kissed him. Hux slid his tongue into Ren’s open mouth, tasting the minty toothpaste still on his breath. His lips were soft and supple. Hux caught the bottom one between his teeth and sucked. Ren made a quiet sound in his throat as his palm came up to cup Hux’s jaw. His thumb rasped slightly against the night’s growth of beard that Hux had not yet shaved.

Hux reached out and took a fistful of Ren’s hair, possessive and greedy. The other hand he pressed to Ren’s chest, grasping at his shirt. Ren drew back for a moment only to capture Hux’s mouth from another angle. Their noses brushed as he cocked his head and licked at Hux’s lower lip. Hux groaned and pulled him in. He was half-hard already, his erection pressing against the fly of his pants.

Moving his hands down Hux’s arms and then to his thighs, Ren yanked him closer, hooking Hux’s legs over his. His fingers went to Hux’s belt, pulling the tail from the loops and undoing the buckle.

“What are you doing?” Hux said against his mouth.
“I want to touch you,” was Ren’s reply as he kissed down Hux’s neck. Hux drew in a sharp breath as Ren sucked hard enough to mark him.

Hux hissed Ren freed his cock and wrapped his hand around it. No more than two strokes had him rolling his hips, pushing himself into Ren’s grasp. As Ren worked the length of him, Hux reached for Ren’s trousers, drawing him out. He stroked up, pressing his thumb to the sensitive underside.

Ren pinched his eyes closed, but then forced them open again as he said, “Let me.”

Hux cursed as Ren wrapped his fingers around both of them and began to move. The friction of them pressed together had Hux shuddering and clinging to Ren’s shoulders. He found Ren’s mouth again and kissed him ferociously.

Hux came first, with Ren’s name on his lips. Ren followed shortly after, throwing his head back and crying out. It echoed around the forest.

“We’re in a bloody tree, you know,” Hux said, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and handing it to Ren to wipe up the mess on his hand.

Ren chuckled. “At least it’s private.”

“You’re an idiot,” Hux said, but, holding Ren’s face between his hands, he kissed him again.

Hux, a sheet covering his legs, was sitting up in bed that night after dinner, reading on his datapad when a message alert chimed. The sender was Cynetin Hux.

“What’s that?” asked Ren, who was lying beside him. He was uncovered by the sheet, unabashed in his nakedness.

“A letter from my mother,” Hux replied. “I wrote to her yesterday.”

“You did?”

“Mm.” Tapping the screen, he brought up the message.

“What does she say?” said Ren.

Hux looked down at him, cocking a brow. “What business of yours is that?”

Ren rolled over onto his side, looking innocent. Hux held back the urge to roll his eyes, turning back to the letter.

“‘My dearest child,’” he read aloud. “‘I was so very surprised and pleased to hear from you. I should scold you for not having written in eight months, but I will forgive you seeing as you have been busy with your work. Your father always neglected such things when he was in the throes.

‘It is quite a shock to hear you’ve been at the estate, though, and for five weeks. Could you not have spared a few days of that to join me in the city? I would very much have liked to meet this companion of yours.’”

Ren’s brows rose. “You told her about me?”
“In vague terms, yes,” said Hux. “She would have admonished me for having come here alone, especially if I had done it of my own will, as I implied.”

Ren wore a smug little smile, settling back into the pillow. “Read more.”

“‘Is he—or perhaps she—one of your fellow officers aboard your ship? I should like to think you have friends there.’” Hux nearly scoffed. He could hardly have such relationships with his subordinates. “‘I do hope you will bring any particular friends with you when you come to see me. My own dear friends are often around me, and we keep ourselves quite busy. There was a small salon I attended just last week…’” She went on to regale him with the gossip from Pantin City society, little of which he cared about, but he read anyway. She concluded the letter with well wishes for both Hux and his “companion.”

“Fascinating, wasn’t it?” Hux said, dryly, when he had finished. “Thrilling tales of what a baron said or how his wife got drunk and called someone a bantha. It’s unbearably tedious. In some ways it’s a gift for you to be estranged for your mother.” As soon as the words left his mouth, he regretted them. It was disrespectful in the extreme. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

Ren blinked up at him. “It’s fine, Hux. The last time I saw her was seven years ago, before I…left.”

“She came to visit you at Skywalker’s school?”

“Once or twice a year, when she could get away from the Senate. She stayed a few days, rarely more than three. At first I wanted to see her and to tell her about my training, but after a while it became the same story. How I had won saber matches, what Uncle Luke lectured about, how little I cared for the other apprentices. Eventually, we had nothing to talk about.”

“Is it true that she is sensitive to the Force?” Hux said.

“Yes, but she never had Uncle Luke’s skill, or mine. And she was more concerned with the New Republic than the new Jedi.”

“Did she talk of the Senate with you?”

“Sometimes, but she knew I didn’t care, so she stopped. We spent more time staring at each other across a table while our tea got cold than anything else.”

“It seems you have almost as little in common with her as I do with my mother.”

“Yes.”

Setting his datapad aside, Hux moved down to lay on his side facing Ren. “What is she like?”

“As a person or as a general?” Ren asked. “Is this a tactical question?”

Hux flushed. “Well, yes. I want to understand her.”

Ren sighed, but said, “She’s relentless, but not cruel. She’s dedicated to anything she pursues. She will never betray the Resistance, as she wouldn’t the Rebellion. She would die first. And she’ll never surrender unless it’s the save the lives of her soldiers.”

Hux sniffed at that. He was opposed to a significant loss of life among his troopers, but he was willing to make some sacrifices in order to keep from giving in to his opponents. He would die before he surrendered.
“You think that’s a weakness you can exploit,” Ren said.

Hux met his gaze. “It is. Capture enough of the Resistance fighters and hold them under penalty of death and I have her at my mercy. Do you not agree?”

“She does care too much. The pilot I interrogated, Dameron...in his mind he saw her as a mother to all of the Resistance, overseeing and protecting them. She never cared so much for me.”

“She must have,” said Hux. “Even my mother, who preferred her parties to her son, cared for me in her way.”

Ren shrugged. “The Republic was her priority. I think she was relieved when she could send me to Uncle Luke. I wasn’t a burden to her anymore.”

“I know Mother was glad when I went away to boarding school. At least you can be somewhat uncertain about it.”

“Do you hate her? Your mother.”

“No, of course not,” said Hux. “She has her flaws, but she doesn’t deserve to be hated. Do you hate Organa?”

Ren chewed on his lip, hesitating. “Part of me thinks I should. She cast me off in favor of her Senate. I hated that. I don’t even know why she even chose to have me if I was in the way.”

“The instinct to carry on the bloodline is remarkably strong,” Hux said. “But I doubt she would have borne you if she hadn’t wanted it.”

“Maybe,” Ren said, quiet. “But she’s a general first, a mother second.”

Hux had nothing to say in reply, so he remained silent. Ren had had a lonely childhood, he realized. One where even those who cared about him—namely Skywalker—had watched him carefully, even distrusted him because of his power. It made sense that when Snoke had come to him, teaching him the secrets of the dark side, he had been so easily drawn in.

Something about that left a bad taste in Hux’s mouth. Snoke had taken a solitary, impressionable boy and made him into a weapon, passionately loyal and utterly within Snoke’s thrall. Hux respected the Supreme Leader and trusted his judgment when it came to leading the Order, but he did not follow his every word as Ren did. Perhaps that was the nature of his apprenticeship, however. Hux knew nothing of how one treated one’s master.

“Will you read to me again?” Ren asked, drawing Hux’s attention back to him.

“If you like,” said Hux. “From Meditations on Combat?”

“Anything you want.”

“Very well.” The old book was sitting on the bedside table. Hux picked it up and opened it to the page he had been on. As he began to read, Ren slithered under the sheets. He stayed on his side, the pillow tucked beneath his head and his hand resting on Hux’s thigh.
“This is the compressor. It pushes the air into the repulsors.”

Hux surveyed the large metal apparatus beneath the hood of his father’s T509 speeder. Ren was beside him, pointing with slightly dirty fingers at the part.

After their lunch that afternoon, Hux had—somewhat foolheartedly—agreed to allow Ren to give him a lesson in speeder maintenance. He was utterly bored and confused by the inner workings of the machines, but he did his best to feign interest.

“And that is what gives it thrust?” he asked.

“No, that would be the thrusters,” said Ren, looking at him sidelong.

“Oh, yes. I should have thought of that.”

“You’re not at all interested in this, are you?”

“Of course, I am.”

“You’re a poor liar.”

Hux made a face at him.

“You could have said something two hours ago,” Ren said. “We didn’t have to do this.”

“I know,” said Hux, scratching his forehead. A smile tugged at Ren’s mouth as he did it. “What?”

“You just got grease all over yourself.”

Hux looked down at his besmirched hands. “Bollocks.”

“Here.” Ren pulled the cloth from his pocket and reached for Hux’s face.

Hux reared back. “That thing is hardly clean.”

“Cleaner than you.” He wiped at Hux’s brow.

“Thank you,” Hux grumbled.

Ren ducked his head as he leaned in for a kiss.

The clearing of a throat had them pulling apart. Harron was sitting on a stool a few paces away, cleaning a part with a scouring solution. The old driver had not forgotten what he had witnessed several days before, and made a point to make his presence known when coming or going from the garage.

“I, ah, am going to wash up,” said Hux, still humiliated by having been caught in that act.

“I’ll come with you,” Ren said, a predatory gleam in his eyes.

Hux narrowed his, saying under his breath, “It’s the middle of the day.”

“And?” Ren said, brushing his lips against Hux’s ear. A shiver snaked down Hux’s spine.

“Ah-hem.”

Ren stepped back, but threaded his fingers together with Hux’s. “Have a good afternoon, Harron,”
he said, pulling Hux toward the door.

They lay side by side after, once again in Hux’s bed. They had had managed to wash their hands before they had fallen into it and each other, but barely. Stretched out on his back, Hux was lax and sated.

The last time he remembered going to bed with someone during the day was with Arcan Wile. They had only a few stolen hours from time to time, so they made use of all of them, whether they were early in the mornings, midday, or just before lights out. He said as much to Ren.

“How long were you with him?” Ren asked.

“Two years,” Hux replied. “He came to the Academy at the start of my fourth year as a cadet.”

“Did you love him?”

The question caught Hux off guard. He had never been asked such a thing before. “I cared for him,” he said.

“But you left.”

“I had to. We knew that from the beginning. It was always a temporary arrangement.”

“But you were with him for years.”

Hux raised a brow. “Yes. And now I’m not. That does imply that something is temporary.”

“It’s not that short a time,” said Ren. “More than long enough to…” He frowned slightly. “Care for him.”

Hux sighed. “I suppose if I had to say I’ve loved anyone, it would be him. I preferred his company to any other’s before or since. Call that what you will.”

Ren shifted, resting his head against the fist at his temple. Hux remembered seeing Wile in such a position; it wasn’t uncommon, after all. But, Ren was so unlike him in body and disposition. Wile had been almost delicate, his skin so pale Hux could see the veins at his wrists, and he was soft-spoken and had been free with his smiles. Ren was more sturdily built and far more taciturn. Though when he did smile, it transformed his face. Hux realized that he had come to crave those expressions, feeling a jolt of pleasure when he elicited one.

“Do you know where he is?” Ren asked.

“No,” Hux said. “He left the Academy not long after I did. Perhaps he found a position at a university. It would have suited him.”

“You could find him. The First Order has the resources.”

“Why would I want to do that?” said Hux. “I was little more than a boy when I last saw him. I don’t think we would recognize each other.”

“You don’t want to see him,” said Ren.

“I don’t need to. We had our time.” Hux’s brows knit as he looked at Ren. “Why does this matter to you?”

“It doesn’t,” he said, looking down.
Hux rolled his eyes. “And you call me a poor liar. What is it?”

Ren frowned. “You haven’t been with anyone since him. Maybe you...missed him.”

Hux blinked. “You thought I might be pining?”

Ren shrugged one shoulder.

Hux gave a small huff of laughter. “I haven’t been with anyone because I spend my life on a starship. That isn’t conducive to cultivating personal connections.”

“Have you wanted to?”

“Not particularly.”

Ren traced a crease in the sheets with his forefinger, watching as he did it. “You don’t feel isolated?”

Hux lifted his brows. “Do you?”

“Solitude is necessary.”

“For what? Your training?”

Ren made a noncommittal noise, keeping his eyes downcast.

“Kylo,” said Hux, taking his wrist.

Ren’s hand stilled. “Attachments compromise focus,” he said. “They get in the way of true priorities.”

“Such as your missions from the Supreme Leader?”

Ren nodded.

“I don’t disagree,” said Hux. “Had I chosen to marry or at least pursue one of the men my mother had attempted to foist upon me, or even Wile, I wouldn’t have my command. I chose that, and I don’t regret it. If I must suffer solitude for it, I am prepared to do that. Did you not come to the same conclusion?”

“I didn’t choose what I am,” Ren said. “I was born into this.”

“You chose Snoke, chose the dark side.”

“Even if I hadn’t, it still would have been the same. Jedi aren’t permitted to have anyone.”

“You’re supposed to be celibate?”

“No,” said Ren. “Even the Jedi know how futile that requirement would have been. They can satisfy the physical, but nothing beyond it.”

“That can be enough,” said Hux. “Or do you not think so?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think,” Ren said.

Hux studied him, the barely concealed resentment plain in his face. Hux knew he hated the life he would have been afforded by keeping to the light side of the Force, but he had not considered that
Ren could be equally dissatisfied with aspects of that he chose when he came to the dark side.

“What would happen if a Jedi formed an attachment?” Hux asked. “Would he be punished?”

“In the Old Republic, they were exiled for it. Sent to remote planets to regain their control and focus.” Ren chewed his lower lip. “And there are stories of Sith who were made to kill anyone they cared about before they completed their training.”

“That’s barbaric,” said Hux.

“But effective.”

“Surely Snoke wouldn’t required that of you.”

“I killed my father. I’m going to kill my uncle.”

Hux wet his lips. “Oh. Yes.”

Ren looked up at him. “Does that disgust you?”

“No.”

“Why not? It’s no different than the Sith.”

“I gave the order to kill billions in the name of the First Order,” said Hux. “I did it because it was necessary. You are doing the same.”

Ren’s eyes sank closed and he let out a breath.

“What?” asked Hux.

“You understand. No one else—” He winced. “You understand.”

Hux raised a hand to Ren’s face, smoothing out the line between his dark brows. “We do what we must to attain what we want.”

Ren looked at him, intent. “What do you want, Hux?”

“Many things.” Leaning close, he pressed a kiss to Ren’s shoulder. “Order.” A pause and a kiss a few centimeters closer to his collarbone. “Control.” Another kiss at the base of his neck. “Power.” He trailed his lips up to Ren’s ear. “Pleasure.” He landed on his back as Ren flipped him and pushed him down into the pillows.

“You want me,” Ren growled, hovering above him.

Hux’s smile was voracious. “Yes.”

Ren’s mouth descended on his. Hux wrapped his arms around his back, tracing the lines that had become so familiar to him. Ren’s skin was warm and soft, though as Hux brushed his fingers over his shoulders, he felt the puckered scars. They were oddly beautiful, marking him as the warrior he was. Taking Ren’s face between his palms, Hux kissed the edge of the scar on his brow, then the part on his cheek, following it down to his neck. Ren let out a stuttering breath.

Ducking his head, Ren closed his lips over Hux’s nipple, sucking gently. Hux arched up into him, taking hold of his hair. Hard and aching, Hux ground their hips together. Ren mumbled his name as he moved to the other side of Hux’s chest.
Releasing Ren just enough to reach for the bedside table, Hux picked up the bottle of lubricant. Ren rolled to the side, throwing the sheet that had covered them away. He set his hand on Hux’s stomach, moving it down toward his groin. Hux hurriedly anointed his fingers with cool liquid, but instead of seeking Ren, he slid them against himself and then inside.

It had been a few days since he had been stretched, so he worked slowly, preparing himself. Ren traced Hux’s thighs before moving between them. Hux gasped as he felt the tips of two fingers entering him alongside his own.

“Kylo,” he panted as Ren sought the place inside him that had him shuddering.

“Say it again,” Ren said against Hux’s collarbone, where he sucked a bruise. “Louder.”

“Kylo.”

Time seemed to waver and fall away then, Hux losing himself in the sensation of their fingers moving in tandem. Ren’s were longer and larger, touching Hux exactly where he needed it with each stroke. He cursed and writhed, clutching at the back of Ren’s neck with his free hand. His body was tensing, pressure coiling in the pit of his stomach.

“Can you come like this?” Ren asked as he nipped at Hux’s earlobe.

“Yes,” Hux replied. “I just need...”

“Anything. I’ll give you anything.”

Hux threw his head back, the words driving him toward the edge. “Kylo. You’re so good, so good.”

“Hux,” he whispered, an invocation.

That was enough. Hux cried out, starbursts of light exploding behind the closed lids of his eyes. He spilled himself, hot and wet across his stomach. The feeling left him breathless, his heart hammering in his chest.

Ren carefully withdrew his fingers, guiding Hux’s out as well. It left him feeling empty and needing to be filled again. Ren took the edge of the sheet and wiped away the mess Hux had left. Then, gracefully, he settled between Hux’s legs, his weight carried on his elbows where they rested beside Hux’s head.

“Let me inside you?” Ren said, holding Hux’s gaze.

“Oh, yes.”

Ren moved into him with little guidance, now knowing well where he needed to be to enter him. Hux wrapped his legs around Ren’s waist, urging him to move. He didn’t immediately, though, instead brushing Hux’s hair back from his face.

“What are you doing?” Hux said.

“I want to remember you like this.”

Hux’s breath caught. He looked up at Ren, seeing his flushed cheeks, his dark eyes. Hux was certain he would never forget it; all of the past weeks would stick in his mind in perpetuity. Rising up, he kissed Ren hard. Ren thrust into him then, and all Hux could feel was that.
The following three days passed as many of those in the past had. They fought bouts with their bokken in the mornings, drilling until they were exhausted. In the afternoons they shot. Ren had truly become accomplished with his blaster. As Hux had stood beside him on the firing range that day, having watched him land a shot directly in the center of the target, he had said, “I want you to have that rifle.”

Ren had turned to him, lifting a brow.

“You’re a good marksman. It should be yours.”

“I won’t have much chance to use it when I go back my training.”

Hux had shrugged. “It will only molder here if you leave it.”

Ren had glanced down at the blaster and then back up. “Thank you.”

They had returned to the house not long after, spent a few hours cleaning their weapons, and then dressed for dinner. Over the meal of tender cutlets of ental meat, they discussed some of Hux’s missions as a riflery lieutenant. Ren was curious, asking all manner of questions about camouflage, which had mostly been done by way of cloaking generators, small devices that refracted light enough to hide a man at a distance. They weren’t infallible, but had saved Hux’s life more than once.

They were nearly finished eating when an alert from Hux’s wristcomm sounded, cutting off his anecdote about a three-man assignment in deep cover. Looking at it, he nearly jumped to his feet.

“We need to go,” he said. “Now.”

“What’s wrong?” Ren asked.

“Our presence is requested by the Supreme Leader.”

Ren was standing in an instant, heading for the door. As soon as they reached the study, Hux engaged the projector. The uplink for a live connection was established, and the image flickered to life, rendering Snoke seated before them.

“General Hux,” he said, his voice hoarse as ever. “Kylo Ren.”

“Supreme Leader,” said Hux, clapping his hands behind his back at parade rest.

“Master,” Ren said, making a shallow bow.

“I assume you both know why you are here. Your time away from the Order has come to an end.” He looked to Ren. “My apprentice, you must resume your training. Have you done as I bid you and cleared your mind?”

“I’ve kept to my meditation, master. And my body is healed. I’m ready.”

Snoke sat back in his chair, his fingers curling around the ends of the arms. “I’m inclined to believe you. Your thoughts are settled as they were not before.”
“Yes, master.”

“And you, General Hux, are you prepared to return to your post?”

“If you see fit to reinstate me, Supreme Leader,” he said, “I am ready to serve.”

“You feared I would not,” said Snoke.

“I failed you,” said Hux. “It would have been within reason to punish me for it.”

“One failure only means that you will endeavor to prevent others in the future. You are still one of the finest military minds in the First Order.”

Pride and relief washed over Hux. Inclining his head respectfully, he said, “Thank you, Supreme Leader.”

“I expect excellence, general. I trust you will provide that at the coming summit of your peers.”

“As you command, Supreme Leader.”

Snoke sat straighter, looking down as if Ren and Hux stood at the foot a dais below him. “You both will come to me in two days’ time. A shuttle will be dispatched for you then.”

“Master,” said Ren, “I require a kyber crystal for the new saber I’ve built for myself. We must first go to Ilum.”

Snoke rubbed at his chin, considering. “That is acceptable. Go, but do not linger. Take only the time you need.”

“Yes, master.”

Hux did not overlook the fact that Ren did not mention the saber he had built for Hux.

“We will begin the summit when you arrive, General Hux,” Snoke said. “I assume you do not object to accompanying my apprentice to Ilum.”

“I have no objections,” said Hux, venturing a brief glance at Ren. His profile was illuminated by the blue light of the projector, casting shadows into the hollows of his eyes. As if feeling Hux’s gaze on him, he looked over and met it. They held it for a moment before turning back to the projection.

“Good,” said Snoke. “Then you have your instructions. I await your arrival on Orrun.”

“Yes, Supreme Leader,” they said together.

The connection was severed, leaving the room in darkness for a moment before the illuminators came up again. Hux took a steadying breath. At last, he was set to return to duty. The anticipation was building, making him curl his hands into fists before releasing them again.

“You still have your command,” Ren said.

“Yes,” said Hux, almost a sigh.

“You shouldn’t have expected any less.”

“Maybe, but it was not a certainty.”
“It was.”

The corner of Hux’s mouth twitched up. “I appreciate your confidence in my abilities.” He paused, then added, “We should make ourselves ready for our departure.”

“We still have another day,” said Ren.

“We do, but there are things I must put in order. Affairs in the house.”

Ren’s expression was doleful.

“We knew this was coming,” said Hux. “What we’ve had here was...transitory.” Taking a step toward Ren, Hux touched the back of his hand where it hung at his side. “But we do have one more day. Come to bed, Kylo.”

Ren laced their fingers together. “All right.”

Chapter End Notes

The bit in Hux's Meditations on Combat is straight up paraphrase from The Art of War. Just felt the need to cite my sources on that.

Okay, so the tree scene just kind of happened and I went with it. Let's just say I went out on a limb (har har). \(_(ง'̀_́)ง\)

Check out these gorgeous panels by alyruko for this chapter and the chapter before it.
On the first morning at the estate, Hux had woken to birdsong. It had been unusual then, far from the quiet of deep space to which he was accustomed. But as he heard it begin at daybreak on this, his final day in residence, he found himself listening intently, committing the sound to memory.

He stood at the railing of the veranda beyond his room, barefoot and wearing only a pair of loose pants that were likely Ren’s rather than his. He extended his hand into the misting rain, watching tiny droplets coat the red-blond hair on his forearm. Gooseflesh rose there as a cool wind blew in. He shivered, but made no move to go back inside, where Kylo Ren lay asleep in their bed.

Hux hadn’t spent a night alone since he had asked Ren to stay with him through it. He was used to Ren’s solid weight beside him and the musky scent of his skin that remained even after he had gone from the bed. However, Hux knew what awaited him when he returned to his command: a standard officer’s bunk, the sheets coarse and blankets thin. He had never had cause to complain about them before, and certainly would never do so aloud, but he was acutely aware what he would be required to give up.

Pulling his arm back, he wiped the wetness from it and turned back to the bedroom. He stripped his pants away as he reached the bedside and crawled back in. He sought Ren’s warmth immediately, lifting a heavy arm up and draping it over his stomach. Ren gave a drowsy groan as he felt Hux’s clammy skin, but instead of drawing away, he pulled Hux close.

“You’re shaking,” he said.

“I’m all right.”

“Mm.” Ren stroked Hux’s lower belly, along the line of hair that led from his navel to his groin. Hux let it and the rise and fall of Ren’s chest against his back lull him toward sleep again. He had just closed his eyes when Ren spoke.

“I dreamt of my uncle last night,” he said, “and the scavenger. They were in a place out of legend. A Jedi temple on a lost world, surrounded by ocean.”

“Like the planet you trained on as a boy?” asked Hux.

“No. This was different. A place I’ve never seen. But it felt real. Like a vision.”

“Something prophetic? Is it within your power to see such things?”

“It was said that some Jedi could see parts of the future,” said Ren, “but I never had the ability.”

“It was just a dream then?”

“Likely. But…” Ren’s arms tightened around Hux. “I could sense the girl’s strength. Her training is progressing.”

“That was to be expected, was it not?”

“Yes.”
Hux laid a hand over Ren’s where it rested against his stomach, absently tracing the narrow bones with his fingertips. “Does her strength worry you?”

“Of course. Even untrained, she managed to wield the Force against me.”

“You were at a disadvantage,” said Hux. “Solo’s Wookiee had shot you. The blood loss alone compromised your abilities.”

“It shouldn’t have,” Ren said, a low growl laced with loathing. “I should have been able to kill her easily.”

Hux sighed. “We were all defeated that day. As much as we wish to be, we’re not infallible.”

“That’s not an excuse.”

“No, but neither does it change what’s already past. Resolve to do better, and let it lie, Kylo.”

Ren rubbed his long nose against the nape of Hux’s neck. “Even after I took that name, it didn’t always feel like it belonged to me. But when you say it, it does.”

“It suits you,” said Hux. “Far better than Ben.”

The caresses on his stomach resumed, though Ren ventured lower and moved with more purpose. They had exhausted themselves in the night, but despite it, Hux felt himself stirring at the touch. Ren made a small sound of approval as he curled his fingers around Hux, coaxing him to hardness.

“Insatiable,” Hux said.

“Do you want me to stop?”

“No.”

Ren sucked lightly at Hux’s neck. “Good.”

It didn’t take long. The last vestiges of the chill Hux had felt were banished as he shuddered and spilled himself into Ren’s hand. Pleasantly relaxed, he used the towel they had discarded after the second time the night before to clean them up. As he tossed it away, Ren pressed against him, letting Hux feel his cock.

“How will you have me?” Hux asked as he stretched across his side of the bed to pick up the lubricant.

Ren drew him to his chest again, both of them on their sides. Guiding Hux’s leg over his hip, he said, “Just like this.”

Hux shifted until Ren was poised to enter him. Grasping Hux’s waist, Ren bought himself up and pressed inside. Hux drew in a breath at the stretch. Ren stilled, waiting. He raised a hand and brushed it across Hux’s hair.

“Tell me when you’re ready.”

“I am,” said Hux. Ren’s teeth grazed the join of his neck and shoulder as he began to move.

They went slowly, altogether unlike how it had been when they had first come together, hard and relentless. Hux kept his leg tight around Ren’s thigh as Ren thrust into him. They didn’t speak, what noises they made little more than murmurs of pleasure. Ren came with a gasp, one hand
pressed over Hux’s heart and the other at his hip. Hux massaged the back of Ren’s head until his breathing had slowed again. Ren remained inside him until he softened, both of them content to remain as they were.

“Will you fight me in earnest today?” Hux said, turning onto his back so he could meet Ren’s eyes.

“What?”

“When we train this morning, I don’t want you to hold back. No blindfold, no letting me through your guard out of pity.”

“I don’t pity you,” said Ren. “You’re a good swordsman. You took to it faster than anyone I’ve ever taught. But you’re not ready to face me unrestrained.”

Hux took a moment of sullen silence to nurse his pride.

Ren pressed his lips to Hux’s shoulder and then his jaw. “You’ll be able to in time. I’d like to lose to you someday.”

“Someday.”

“Yes,” Ren said, circling Hux’s nipple with his thumb. It was done almost aimlessly, not pointed or meant to arouse. Hux had grown used to passing contact. If he was near enough to be touched, it was likely that Ren would reach out to him. Hux had never objected to it, but it had been strange at first. He habitually allowed very few people close to his person. Ren, however, had utterly invaded his space. Perhaps Hux should have insisted he preserve some distance, but he found that he enjoyed Ren’s hands on him.

It was with considerable reluctance that he said, “We should get up. Feelix will be coming with breakfast.”

“We could eat it in bed,” Ren said, tightening his grip on Hux’s waist to prevent him from rising.

“Only spoiled society wives and invalids eat in bed,” Hux scoffed. “We are neither of those things. And I need a shower.”

“You’re just going to need another one after training.”

“Then I’ll have another one. Let me go, Kylo.”

Ren sighed. “Fine.”

Free, Hux rolled to his feet and stretched. He moved languidly, feeling Ren’s gaze on his body. Hux had never considered himself to have a particularly impressive physique, but the way Ren looked at him inclined him to occasional displays of it.

Lowering his arms to his sides again, he lifted a brow. “Are you coming?”

“Later,” said Ren. He pulled the sheet up over his head. “Wake me up when you’re finished.”

Rolling his eyes, Hux went into the refresher.

When he had bathed and pulled on his training clothes, he returned to find their morning meal already laid on the side table by the hearth. Ren hardly looked up from his chocolate croissant as Hux sat and poured caf for himself. He inhaled as he brought the cup to his lips, savoring in the aroma. Soon enough he’d be reduced to drinking the watery, nearly flavorless caf the First Order
rationed out. He nibbled at his own pastry, but he had little appetite. He pushed his plate toward Ren, who made quick work of the leavings.

“Are you ready?” Ren asked as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Hux shot a glance at the napkin on Ren’s side of the tray, but Ren disregarded him. “Is haste necessary?”

“You said you wanted to fight.”

“We have all day,” said Hux.

Ren’s mouth drew into a thin line. “One day.”

Hux set his unfinished caf down. “Very well, then.”

Their shirts were spattered with dark spots of wetness when they reached the garage; the rain had begun to fall in earnest. Harron, who sat on the stool by his workbench, greeted them cheerily as they removed their shoes at the edge of the mats on the floor.

“Have you got a fine match for me to watch today, Master Hux, Lord Ren?” the old driver said, flashing his crooked teeth as he smiled.

“Your master hopes to best me,” said Ren, taking their bokken from the pegs on the wall and holding one out to Hux. Hux snatched it up.

“Then my credits are on him,” Harron said.

“Save them,” Hux grumbled.

Ren spun his bokken with his wrist, backing away to set up his stance. “I’ll take that bet. Fifty credits for each point he scores.”

Hux eyed him. “You have no credits. Unless the Supreme Leader’s apprentice has a salary I was unaware of.”

“I can get credits if I need them,” said Ren. “But first you have to hit me.”

Hux took up low guard. “Fine,” he said, and then he attacked.

By the time they were through, Hux’s shirt was soaked with sweat and Ren owed Harron one hundred credits. The two blows Hux had landed—one at Ren’s shoulder and the other on his thigh —had been hard won, and Hux had the impression that Ren had allowed them, but he let himself be pleased with the result. Hux would see the credits transferred to Harron’s account, of course; he knew Ren had nothing. Every stitch of clothing he wore had been purchased using Hux’s funds.

“You did well,” Ren said, pulling his shirt off and mopping his damp brow with it.

“Indeed,” said Hux. He turned his gaze from Ren’s bare chest to the his worktable, looking down at the two saber hilts that now lay there, complete but for their kyber crystals. Approaching, he traced the casing of the saber that would be his.

“Am I ready for it?” he asked. “It’s a far cry from a wooden practice blade. More dangerous.”

“It is,” Ren replied, coming up beside him. “You’ll have to get used to it, but it’s time you had a real blade in your hand.”
“I want to keep training,” said Hux. “After we leave here.”

“You should.”

“Yes, but I doubt there is anyone aboard a starship or at Snoke’s citadel who could teach me, save you.”

“I told you before that I’ll continue with you if I can.”

Hux looked at the bulkier saber that Ren had built for himself. “You have your own tasks to complete, and I have a summit to attend. I don’t imagine we will see much of each other.”

“You don’t know that,” said Ren.

Hux turned to him. “We have duties that take priority. That much I know.”

Ren regarded him darkly. “It always comes back to that, doesn’t it? Duty. Obligation.”

“Shouldn’t it? We’re both sworn to the First Order’s cause. That supersedes all else.”

“Do you really think every soldier believes that?”

“They should,” Hux said. “They’re conditioned for it from birth.”

“That didn’t stop the traitor, FN-2187,” said Ren.

“He was an aberration, an outlier. The others know their places.”

“And so do you, general.”

“Yes.”

Ren looked away, back down at the sabers. “When this is finished, I want you to wear it.”

Hux’s brows rose. “Openly?”

“Yes.”

“Is that appropriate?” Hux asked. “Should others know I have it?”

“Why shouldn’t they?”

“I don’t know. You chose not to mention it to the Supreme Leader. I assumed it was meant to be kept between us.”

“It’s supposed to be used,” said Ren, “not hidden away.”

Hux glanced at the slim, elegant hilt. “It’s hardly regulation. I don’t even carry a sidearm.”

“I want you to have it with you.”

“Why?”

Ren hesitated, his tongue darting out to wet his lower lip. “You should be protected.”

“It will hardly serve that purpose aboard the Finalizer,” said Hux. “We fight with cannons, not blades. It’s not practical.”
“Not everything has to be,” Ren said, sharp. Catching himself, he added, softer, “Just carry it, Hux.”

Hux crossed his arms over his chest. “Is that a request or an order?”

Ren glared. “You’ve made it perfectly clear since the beginning that you don’t take orders from me.”

“That’s true,” said Hux. “But if you are asking me to wear the saber, I will do so out of respect for you. You went to great lengths to build it for me.” He meant it, though there was no doubt that if he appeared before the other generals with a lightsaber at his hip, there would be questions. He wasn’t exactly sure he would be able to answer them. He would contend with that when it came to it, though. “So,” he said to Ren, “are you making that request of me?”

“I am.”

“All right.”

Ren blinked at him, unconvinced.

Hux sighed. “I give you my word that I’ll carry it at all times. Does that satisfy you?”

Ren gave a curt nod.

“Good.” Taking a step back, Hux ran his hand along the edge of his bokken. The wood was dented and marked from the blows it had taken in the past weeks. Hux would be sorry to leave it come tomorrow. “Another bout before we go in?” he asked.

“Fine,” said Ren.

“A general must be mindful of faults that will compromise his chances for a successful campaign. The first of these faults is a recklessness of decision. While the presence of mind to make quick decisions is a boon, thoughtlessness can lead only to destruction.”

Hux paused to turn the page of *Meditations on Combat*, from which he was reading aloud again. He was sitting in one of the armchairs in the summer parlor. Across from him, Ren was lying on his back on the sofa, his hands folded over his stomach and his eyes closed. Hux might have thought he had fallen asleep, but he occasionally interrupted him to make comments on the text.

“The second of these faults,” Hux continued, “is cowardice. If a general is not willing to stand his ground, it can lead him to capture or death. He cannot be reclusive, giving his orders from a distance. He must stand with his men and lead them from the forefront. However, he should not do so recklessly, for that puts him in undue peril. If he is lost, who will take up the mantle of command in his place?

“The third of these faults is that of a quick temper. If it is easy to provoke a general into anger, it can lead once again to recklessness.”

“Does everything lead back to recklessness?” Ren asked.

“It would seem so,” Hux replied, dry. “It was mentioned first. Apparently it’s the greatest of fault
of all of them.”

“Anger can be useful. It doesn’t always make you careless. It can hone focus.”

“So you’ve said before. It can strengthen your ability to channel the dark side of the Force.” Hux traced the edge of the book’s cover with his forefinger. “I don’t believe this was written for the benefit of someone with your abilities.”

“It’s not wholly unuseful.”

“Shall I continue?”

“Yes.”

Hux shifted, crossing his right leg over his left. “‘The fourth of these faults is a fragility of honor. A general should not be easily shamed, for he must be prepared to face his shortcomings and his failures without succumbing to contempt for himself. Such lack of confidence in his capability to lead will only hinder him in his future campaigns. It is a weakness he cannot afford.’”

That tenet was familiar to Hux. If he wasn’t mistaken, he had heard his father quote the passage word-for-word in a briefing of the Commandant’s Cadets, his chosen few protégés at the Academy. Brendol had not appreciated failure, but he had accepted it. What he could not abide was wallowing in self-pity. Hux had learned early to own his missteps as he did his successes, striving only to rectify what could be corrected and make a plan that would ensure victory in his next endeavor. That philosophy had so far served him well.

“‘The fifth and final of these faults,’” he read, “‘is over-solicitude for one’s men. While a general must see to the welfare of his soldiers so that they can remain in fighting order, he should not worry overmuch about them. They are men, it is true, but they are also the instruments of war. Some will be lost; that is the price of victory. If a general does not accept this, he is not fit for command.’”

Hux thought of what Ren had said of Leia Organa. She cared deeply for her Resistance fighters, so much so that a mere pilot thought her a mother figure. Hux resisted the urge to sneer.

“‘If an army is defeated and its general slain,’” he read, finishing the section, “‘the cause will almost certainly be found among these faults.’”

Pausing, Hux reached for the glass of water on the table beside him. He had been reading for a good part of the afternoon, as the rain was still coming down too hard for him and Ren to go out shooting. Hux lamented that; he would likely not have another opportunity to fire his blaster for quite some time.

“They’re good rules,” said Ren, drawing Hux’s attention to him. “Don’t be rash or cowardly, don’t let anger rule you or doubt yourself even if you fail. Even not caring too much for your men is practical. And you abide by them to the letter.”

“As much as is possible, yes,” said Hux.

“You’re an exemplary general for it. The best in the Order.”

Pride swelled in Hux’s breast at the praise. “I certainly attempt to be. I’ve striven for it all my life.”

Opening his eyes, Ren turned toward him. “When were you made a general?”
“Don’t you know? You read my personnel file.”

“It had dates and formal commendations, but little more.”

Hux thought that the recommendations from his superiors and a few dates of his promotions would have been detailed enough to describe his career, but Ren clearly wanted more of a narrative. Closing *Meditations on Combat*, he said, “It was five years ago. I had been serving as executive officer aboard the *Corsair*. I had been posted there since I was twenty-five, when I was promoted to commander. It was my first command on a starship.”

“What were you doing before then?”

“I was in charge of a riflery and combat division on Exetor in the Unknown Regions. I was Major Hux then.”

“How old were you?”

“I was promoted at twenty-two and held the command for three years.”

“Your file said you were commended for excellence in leadership four times.”

Hux smiled to himself. He had been damn proud of those commendations, all of which he had risked his life to earn. Planetside command had wanted to promote him after only a year and two of the formal commendations, but it had been overruled by senior leadership offworld. They thought he was too young, too inexperienced. After two more merits of bravery and impressive displays of battlefield tactics, however, they could no longer ignore him. He had been assigned to the *Corsair* under General Abeter Garin.

“Garin is a unadulterated bastard,” Hux said, grim, “but he runs a tight ship. It was an ideal assignment for me to learn from.”

“Is he still commanding?” asked Ren, now lying on his side so he could see Hux.

“He’s still aboard the *Corsair*. She was newly commissioned when I was posted there. She’s a smaller destroyer, but worth her salt. She’s crippled more Republic trade vessels than any other ship in the fleet.” Hux had a certain fondness for the ship, having spent five years with her, but she was nothing compared to the *Finalizer*.

“You’ll see Garin at the summit, then,” Ren said.

Hux frowned. “Unfortunately, yes.”

“You don’t like him.”

“Not particularly. As I said, he’s a bastard. He rides his crew hard. Most of the lieutenants serving under him were terrified of him.”

“But you weren’t.”

“Of course not,” said Hux. “I saw him for what he was: hard because he could be, not because it was necessary. He enjoyed belittling his men, but he did expect the best from them. It didn’t inspire loyalty, but it was effective.” He scratched his chin. “He was furious when I was promoted to general.”

“Because you were young?”
“Because I was the best commander he’d ever had.”

“There wasn’t a recommendation from him in your file.”

“No,” said Hux. “He wanted to keep me aboard. He relied on me as a tactician after the first time I proved I could do it.”

“What did you do?”

“I had designed an attack on a Republic transport convoy just a few months after I arrived. Garin had given me the task expecting me to fail, but the mission went flawlessly. We only lost ten men and captured twenty-four prisoners and two million credits worth of cargo. Garin groused about it, lecturing about what could have gone differently, but in the end he realized he couldn’t have done better himself.” Hux smirked. “He was good, but I was excellent. The success rate of missions for the _Corsair_ dropped by half when I was given my own ship.”

“The _Finalizer_ was completed only two years ago,” said Ren. “You had a different ship before that?”

“Yes. The _Interceptor_, an Interdictor-class destroyer modeled after the old Imperial line. She was sturdy and serviceable. I believe General Amatta commands her now.”

Ren gave Hux a curious look. “How many generals are there in the Order?”

“Twelve. One for each of the destroyers.”

“In the Imperial Era it was captains and admirals who commanded starships.”

“Indeed,” said Hux. “The Order’s ranks are somewhat different. Don’t ask me why.”

“The Order isn’t the Empire.”

Before he could stop himself, Hux said, “It could be.” He wasn’t certain what had possessed him to say it. He had always intended to keep his ambitions for the Order to himself until circumstances proved conducive to advancing them.

Ren sat up, looking Hux over. “You envision a new empire under the Order?”

Hux dragged his teeth across his lower lip, searching for the words. What he had imagined was insubordinate, even treasonous. He was treading on dangerous ground by even suggesting it. “Military rule is not a long-term model for governance.”

“The charter of the Order implies that it is,” said Ren.

“I know what the charter says,” Hux said, terse.

“But you don’t agree.”

“I believe that it will serve us well during this period of expansion, but if we are to hold dominance over the galaxy, martial law will not serve.”

Ren leaned forward, resting his hands on his knees. “The Supreme Leader is not Palpatine. He would never rule as an emperor.”

Hux had considered that already. There were two solutions, one of which was utterly treacherous. He resolved not to mention it, not to the man who was, perhaps, the most loyal to Snoke. Instead he
said, “He does not have to rule openly. Installing an emperor as a figurehead while he commands from the shadows is not unprecedented. He does it already, in fact. The addition of a puppet at the forefront would be simple enough.”

Ren’s brows knit. “It’s not...inconceivable. But why would the emperor even be needed if the Supreme Leader could just command through the Order’s military?”

“Generals aren’t often the most fitting governors. They can conquer a part of the galaxy, but it takes a more judicious hand to supervise an entire sector.”

“So you wouldn’t aspire to be such a governor?”

Hux swallowed. “Perhaps there are some among the senior leadership who could govern.”

Ren studied him in silence for a moment. “I can’t see you as a politician.”

“An imperial governor doesn’t play politics like the senators of the Republic. He rules in the name of the emperor.”

“You would be a potentate, then.”

There was no point disagreeing; it was what Hux was suggesting. “Yes.”

Ren crossed his arms, leaning against the back of the sofa. “That I could see.”

Hux balked, a flash of both pleasure and uncertainty passing through him. Was Ren agreeing with him on the matter of governance? Perhaps it was simply a judgment of Hux’s character. Whether that was approval or censure, though, he wasn’t sure.

“You disapprove of the idea of empire,” he said.

“No,” said Ren. “My grandfather believed in Imperial rule, and if it came to it, so would I. If the right man were made emperor.”

“If he was just a puppet, you would still be serving Snoke.”

“If?”

“He could be given some duties of rulership in earnest.” Hux doubted it, of course. Snoke was the Supreme Leader after all. Hux did not think he would be willing to cede power. The only way the emperor could have it would be to take it by force, exactly what Hux would not speak to Ren of.

“Maybe,” said Ren. “Who would you place on a throne?”

“I don’t know,” Hux said. “I don’t see any particular candidates within the Order at present. The other generals are not suitable and the bureaucrats back in the Unknown Regions are hardly better than the Republican senators.”

“The other generals aren’t suitable, but you…”

“Me?” said Hux, his surprise only half-feigned.

Ren gave him a look. “You’ve imagined this scenario in detail. You have to have thought of it. Would you be my master’s puppet, Hux?”

“No,” he said without hesitation. “I will retain what control I have as a general before I would
“I will not be a senseless pawn.” It had never been the title of general that Hux had craved, but the influence that went with it. To be emperor in name only would be insufferable. If he ruled, he would do so in his own right.

“Good,” said Ren.

“Would you?” Hux asked.

“Never.”

“Because you wish to be like Vader, or because you couldn’t tolerate being controlled?”

“Both.”

Hux rested his open hand on the cover of Meditations on Combat. “Palpatine would never have succeeded in his rise without Vader. You will be instrumental in the rise of the Order, whether or not it leads to empire. You are already very much like him.”

“I want to be as strong as he was.”

“If you are not already,” said Hux, “you will be.”

Ren looked up and held his gaze. “You believe that.”

“I do.” Hux cocked his head to the side, inquisitive. “Do you not?”

“The things he did for the Empire...I can’t match them.”

“You haven’t had the opportunity, but you will, and you will succeed.”

“You’re very sure of that,” said Ren.

Hux nodded. “I’m an excellent judge of my soldiers’ capabilities. I have to be to deploy them properly. I believe I see yours, too.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I’m rarely wrong.”

The corners of Ren’s mouth twitched. “I would say that’s arrogant, but it fits your book’s rules. You don’t doubt yourself.”

“Nor do I doubt you,” said Hux.

“I...thank you.”

Hux let the gratitude go unacknowledged. Instead, he opened Meditations on Combat again and began to read. Ren lay back and listened.

Hux was dressing for dinner—alone because Ren’s evening clothes were still in his own room—when he heard a quiet knock at his door.
“Come in.”

“Good evening, Master Hux,” said Lorna, stepping inside. She was neatly turned out in a white skirt and a pale blue blouse. A pearl brooch, which Hux recognized, was pinned to it.

“Mother gave that to you,” he said, gesturing.

Lorna touched it lightly with her fingertips. “Yes. For twenty years of service.”

“It’s been far more than that now.”

She nodded. “Thirty-six years.”

As far as Hux could remember, Lorna had been hired when the estate was completed and had already been keeping house for his mother for a year by the time he was born. He had never known the house without her, and he was certain that he wouldn’t have been able to manage over the past six weeks had she not been there. He regretted not thinking of finding a gift for her.

Reaching out, he took her hands in his. “I want to thank you for what you’ve done for me, and for Ren, since we came here. You’ll say it’s just your job, but you know you do far more than that.”

He offered a smile. “What I wouldn’t give to have you aboard my ship. You would put my lieutenants to shame.”

Lorna laughed lightly. “A starship is hardly a place for me. I need sunlight, even if only what little we have here. But I do appreciate your saying that, Master Hux.”

“What will you do when we’ve gone?”

“What we always do: keep the house in order.”

“That can hardly be enough to sustain you. The tedium must be unbearable.”

“I do have friends in town, of course,” she said. “And Feelix often visits his family. The chef and his assistant have another post. We keep ourselves occupied. But we would be most pleased if you were with us more often.”

“As would I,” said Hux, and he meant it. The estate was no longer a place he loathed. “I will endeavor to do so in the future.”

“I do hope you’ll bring Lord Ren with you.”

Hux sighed. “He has his own responsibilities, as do I. It is unlikely we’ll be assigned to the same missions. This time here was unusual.”

In a rare gesture of familiarity, Lorna reached up and touched his cheek. “Parting doesn’t mean you have to let him go.”

Hux’s expression hardened. “I can’t afford sentiment. I have a war to win.”

“So does he, but is it not a boon to have someone you care for by your side?”

“He isn’t permitted attachments,” said Hux. “And I cannot be distracted from my purpose.”

Lorna frowned. “You’ve sacrificed a great deal for your career already. Allow yourself this.”

Hux shook his head. “I can’t.” He fell back a step, and Lorna’s hand dropped to her side again.
“Was there something you needed? You came here with a purpose, I assume.”

“Yes,” she said. “I meant to tell you that the cases for the rifles arrived this morning and that I’ve seen yours and Lord Ren’s packed for transport.” She glanced at the closet. “Are you sure you don’t want to take some of your clothes?”

“I won’t need them.” He would have his uniforms.

“Then I’ll keep them here for your next visit.”

“Very well.” He tugged on the hem of his dinner jacket. “Will you accompany me to the dining room?”

“Certainly, Master Hux.”

Lorna left him at the door, bidding him good night before disappearing down the hall. When Hux entered the dining room, Ren was already seated. He was wearing a burgundy shirt unbuttoned at the collar beneath a black vest. Hux had grown used to seeing him in finer garments rather than the ostentatious robes he had worn aboard the Finalizer. He was still a far cry from the natty society sons who had once sat around the table with Hux and his mother, but he looked well in pressed linen and silk.

Sitting down, Hux reached for the glass of wine that had been poured for him. It would be his last, he realized, unless he intended on having one with breakfast the next morning, which he didn’t. It was a rich red, woody and flavorful. He savored it as the bouquet blossomed on his tongue.

“I’m going to regret leaving this,” he said as he balanced the glass between his forefinger and thumb. He could see Ren’s face through it, his features just slightly distorted by the curve of the bowl where it met the stem.

“Take some with you,” Ren said.

“To a temporary posting on Orrun? No, that wouldn’t be appropriate. Perhaps if I was returning to the Finalizer, I would.”

Ren made a sound of acknowledgment and took a sip of his own wine. He had stopped taking juice with his dinner. Hux was pleased with himself for having introduced him to superior drinks. He had even tried some of Hux’s whiskey one night as they played chess. The face he had made as he sputtered at the strong alcohol had had Hux laughing. Ren had scowled at him sourly.

“What’s going to happen tomorrow?” Ren asked, absently swirling the red around in his glass, as Hux had taught him to do.

“We leave first thing,” said Hux. “The shuttle will be waiting for us in Scaparus at ten hundred hours. Then I assume we go to Ilum. Do you know how long it will take to travel there?”

“A few hours at lightspeed.”

“And the journey to the caves?”

“Six hours’ hike. Or just under if we hurry.”

“We were instructed not to tarry.”

Ren nodded. “We won’t, but we’ll need time to find the crystals. It’s not always an easy process.”
“Can we make it back to the shuttle before dark?”

“Ilum has a thirty-four-hour sunlight cycle. It won’t be a problem.”

“I see.” The prospect of finding a crystal for his saber was a thrilling one. Hux was eager to have the weapon in his hand. And then he would have it at his side at all times, as Ren had requested. He may have resisted the idea at first, but now there was something appealing about it.

“Good evening, Master Hux, Lord Ren,” said Feelix as he appeared from the kitchen balancing two plates on one arm. It was roast fowl native to Arkanis, a fitting last meal.

Ren ate with slightly more delicacy that he had when they had first arrived. Hux was inclined to believe that he had behaved boorishly out of spite rather than a fundamental lack of manners. He was, after all, the son of a princess, albeit of a dead world.

The conversation came and went, as was their routine. The silences were companionable. As they sat in one, Hux came to the realization that he appreciated these meals far more than he ever had those in the officers’ mess. His subordinates did not speak freely around him, which had not bothered him in the past, but the loss of his unrestricted discussions with Ren would be unfortunate. He had not been so candid with anyone since Arcan Wile. He swallowed down a bite of the fowl. There were a number of things he did with Ren that he had once only enjoyed with his first lover.

Lover. He had never cared for that title. It was maudlin and smacked of the gossip of his mother’s society. Her friends had often talked of whose lovers had jilted them or how they demanded more extravagant gifts as the years passed. However, it did capture the nature of what Hux had shared with Arcan: affection and a manner of commitment between them, trust and willingness to confide in one another.

When Hux had graduated from the Academy, he had offered to write to Wile, to keep their connection, but Wile had refused, insisting Hux go on without an anchor to what was past. Hux had regretted the loss, but it had been a good decision. Wile had always been a practical man, a quality Hux had admired in him. Had he wanted it, though, Hux would have been willing to remain in contact with him.

Unbidden, Lorna’s words from earlier came to mind: “Parting doesn’t mean you have to let him go.” Hux looked up at Ren, taking him in. He was not Arcan; what they had was not the same. And yet. Hux set down his fork and knife, his stomach too tight to continue eating. He left his wine unfinished as well.

“Do you want to play chess tonight?” Ren asked, his deep voice rumbling through the quiet.

“I suppose we could,” Hux replied. He folded his hands in his lap, the palms sweaty as he clasped them together.

“I think I have an idea of how to beat you.”

Hux gave a noncommittal, “Hm.”

Ren laid his utensils down as well, regarding Hux steadily. “What is it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Something’s on your mind.”
“Nothing of consequence.”

Ren hardly seemed convinced, but did not press. “Are you finished?”

Hux saw that there was nothing but bones left on Ren’s plate. His wine glass was empty save for a circle of red in the well of the bowl. Hux pushed his own half-eaten dinner away and said, “Yes.”

They went together to Hux’s room and made noises about starting a game of chess, but as Hux watched Ren slipping out of his vest and shoes, moving about the room as if it belonged to him, he caught Ren’s arm. Ren stopped, straightening to look Hux in the eye. Sweeping Ren’s hair to the side, Hux pressed his lips to his neck where he had once left a bruise. He felt the warmth of Ren’s exhaled breath against his ear.

“Undress,” Hux said, an echo of the command he had given on their first night.

Ren’s fingers went to the buttons of his shirt, undoing them nimbly. When the fabric parted, Hux ran a palm up the center of Ren’s chest, from his stomach to his collarbone. It was the only area of his skin that was still unmarred by scars. Peeling the shirt away, Hux slid it off over Ren’s shoulders.

Hux explored his form with his fingertips, tracing the smooth flesh he knew so well. Ren continued to remove his clothing, letting his trousers and shorts fall to his feet. When he stood bare before Hux, he stillled and waited. Hux continued his perusal. Ren watched the progress of Hux’s hands over his body, though his eyes would turn to Hux’s face occasionally. If he disliked that Hux had not yet made any move to take off his own clothes, he said nothing of it. He simply stood and let Hux look at him, touch him.

“Get on the bed,” Hux said.

Ren complied without a word, crawling across the blankets until he knelt at the center of the mattress.

Hux remained in his place a few paces away. “Touch yourself.”

Ren curled his right hand around his cock and stroked up, never looking away from Hux. His obedience had want pooling in Hux’s gut. As much as Ren said he detested acquiescing to any commands that did not come from the Supreme Leader, he was remarkably eager to do what Hux asked of him when they were together.

Hux shucked his dinner jacket, unbuttoning the collar of the shirt he wore beneath it. His movements were measured, deliberate in their slowness. It was not provocative, but it was meant to give Ren something to watch as he worked his cock, which he did diligently as Hux undressed. His face and neck grew pink and he worried his lower lip between his teeth, but he gave no other outward sign that it was affecting him.

“Lie back,” said Hux as he divested himself of the last of his clothes and made his way over to the bed. Ren made to release his hold on himself, but Hux clicked his tongue. Ren’s brows rose, but he obeyed. He used his left hand to steady himself as he moved onto his back, his right still around his cock. As he settled, Hux drew the bottle of lubricant out from the bedside table.

“Knees apart,” Hux said. Ren let them fall open, leaving himself exposed. He groaned as Hux traced the tender skin, pressing against him, but not yet inside. He withdrew only for a moment to wet his fingers before returning and caressing Ren more purposefully.

“Hux,” Ren sighed as Hux breached him. The hand on his cock stilled as he adjusted to the
“Keep going,” said Hux, working his forefinger in up to the knuckle and then twisting as he drew it out again. Ren cursed, but did as he was bid. “Good, Kylo. Very good.”

“Another.”

“Impatient,” Hux scolded. “One will do for now.” He crooked that finger just slightly. Ren’s response was immediate. He pressed his head back into the pillow and canted his hips, bringing Hux deeper into him.

Hux ran his free hand along Ren’s thigh. Reaching the join, he pressed down, holding Ren in place. He moved the other hand steadily.

“Another,” Ren said again, looking up. His eyes were dark and wild.

Hux’s lips curled up. “Would you beg for it?”

“I don’t beg,” Ren growled.

“Then one will do.”

Ren gave an annoyed grunt, letting his head fall back onto the pillow. His hair fanned out around him.

“Do you want my mouth?” Hux asked.

“Yes.”

“You may have that or another finger.”

“I want you,” Ren said.

“No. Not yet. Make your choice.”

“Your mouth.”

“Very well.” Swatting Ren’s hand out of the way, Hux wrapped his own around the base of Ren’s cock. He dragged his tongue up the underside before parting his lips and taking Ren between them. Hux continued to push his finger in and then out again, touching the part of him that had him writhing and calling out with each stroke.

“More,” Ren said.

Hux looked up at him through his eyelashes. “You know what I want to hear.”

“I don’t beg.” It came out as an almost pained moan.

“Then this will have to suffice.” He took Ren’s cock into his mouth again, going as far down as he could and swallowing.

Ren’s cry was ragged. Hux reveled in it, his own cock throbbing in response. He wanted to be inside him, but he was determined to wring what he desired from him before he gave in. Pulling back slightly, he dragging his lips along Ren’s length, teasing him. Ren lifted his hips, demanding. Hux indulged him with a swirl of his tongue, but nothing more. He stilled his finger inside Ren, pausing to set the tips of two more against him.
“You can have this. Just say it.”

Ren swallowed. Hux could see the movement in his throat. “Hux,” he said. “Hux, please.”

“Good boy,” he breathed as he pushed into him and swallowed his cock back down.

It took little more than a few strokes before Ren was coming, the taste of him on Hux’s tongue. When the tremors had subsided, Hux kissed the crest of his hipbone.

Ren reached down, sliding his hand into Hux’s hair. He massaged his scalp, short fingernails scraping. Hux laid his head down against Ren’s stomach, feeling him breathe. His slickened hand rested against his side, leaving a glistening stain. Hux craved him still, but the sense of comfort kept him there. He found himself closing his eyes.

“Are you all right?” Ren asked after a time.

“I am,” Hux replied.

“Do you not want me?”

“I do. Just...just a moment.”

Another minute ticked by on the chronometer before he stirred and moved up toward Ren. The kiss was unhurried, but deep. It soon had Hux hard again. Ren saw to preparing him, slicking his cock. Hux allowed him to take the lead, easing Hux into him. He wrapped his long legs around Hux’s waist, pulling him close until he was fully seated inside. He sighed as Hux rocked into him.

Hux kept his eyes on Ren’s face, framed between his hands. Ren gazed up at him, his lips parted as he exhaled in time with Hux’s thrusts. Hux cried his name as he came, spilling himself with stuttering pulses of his hips. He collapsed against Ren’s chest when it was over, their skin damp with sweat.

They remained like that for a time, Ren tracing Hux’s spine. It was far too early to sleep, but Hux was quickly falling toward it.

“We should shower,” he said, though he made no move to rise.

“Tomorrow,” said Ren. “Stay with me here.”

“All right.”

Oddly, it was not raining the next morning as Hux stood at the threshold of the house’s front door. The family’s largest speeder was hovering in the drive, Harron already in the pilot’s seat. The passenger door was open, beckoning. Hux stared at it darkly, his feet leaden.

Hux and Ren had shared a subdued breakfast after they had bathed an hour before. They had dressed in the warm clothes and sturdy boots that Lorna has procured for their trip to Ilum. It would be far cooler there than it was on Arkanis. The only other clothing Hux had packed was the uniform he had worn when they arrived at the estate. He would need to don it when they got to
Orrun. It wouldn’t be acceptable for Hux to appear there in civilian dress. Ren, it seemed, didn’t care about what he wore, but that was hardly surprising.

“Master Hux.”

Hux turned to see Lorna standing behind him in the entry hall of the house. She offered a wan smile.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes,” he said, though the word hung heavy between them. “Where is Ren?”

“Here.” He came around the corner into the hall, having gone briefly to his room to collect the jacket he had left there.

“Do you have everything you need?” Hux asked him. He nodded. “Then we should be off. The shuttle arrived a quarter of an hour ago.” He had received a brief transmission from the pilots via his wristcomm.

“I’ve sent some provisions with you,” said Lorna.

Hux imagined that the shuttle would have standard portable ration bars, but whatever the chef had prepared would be far superior. “Thank you, Lorna. For that and for everything else.”

She inclined her head. “It was my pleasure, Master Hux. It’s been lovely having you both here. We’ll miss you.” She turned to Ren. “Lord Ren, the doors of this house are always open to you. Come back to see us.”

“I will if I can, Ms. Havlis,” he said.

She smiled. “Take care of yourselves, both of you.”

“We will,” said Hux. Leaning in, he kissed Lorna’s cheek. “Goodbye.”

“Safe travels, Master Hux.”

He looked up to see Feelix standing a few paces away. Hux raised a hand to him. The footman gave a brief bow.

Hux glanced around the hall. This leavetaking was a far cry from the last time he had gone from the estate, young and furious with his father. He had wanted nothing more than to put it behind him then, but now he felt a tug of remorse. Still, he led the way down the steps and out onto drive. Ren followed him into the speeder.

“All set, Master Hux?” Harron said from the pilot’s seat.

“We are.”

The door descended and locked, and then they were moving toward the road. He and Ren said nothing as they rode through the countryside, reminiscent of their first journey. They had both been solemn since they had woken, speaking little as they showered, dressed, and ate. It was uncharacteristic, but Hux could not muster the energy to make small talk, and he knew Ren would not abide chatter just to fill the air.

When Scaparus Port came into view, Hux sat forward in his seat, looking toward the docking bays. It wasn’t difficult to spot the vessel that had been dispatched for them: it was Ren’s command
shuttle, the long wings tucked up into its landing position. It was by far the most conspicuous shuttle in the port. Apparently there was no need to be unobtrusive any longer.

“A fine ship, that,” said Harron as they came to a stop at the foot of the gangway. “Upsilon-class?”

“It is,” said Ren. “Do you want to come aboard?”

“I wouldn’t want to intrude, my lord. You haven’t the time to show an old man around. Perhaps when you come back I’ll see it.”

Ren gave a one-sided smile. “I’ll hold you to that.”

“Certainly, my lord.”

As the door hissed open, Hux saw three armored troopers jogging down the ramp toward the speeder. As he stepped out, they snapped to attention.

“General Hux, sir,” said one of them, a woman. “TJ-4579 reporting. Do you have anything to bring aboard?”

“Yes, in the cargo trunk.”

“Very good, sir.” She led the others toward the back of the speeder, where Hux’s footlocker and the few other items they had brought with them were stowed.

When Hux turned to Ren, he was looking up at the shuttle, his expression unreadable. Hux studied his profile, its edges lit by the cloud-obscured sunlight. His fingers twitched with the compulsion to reach out to him, but he checked himself. They were no longer alone. They were general and apprentice again, the presence of the troopers going past them with their luggage in hand only driving the point home.

“We need to go, Ren,” Hux said, though he nearly flinched at the title. He had not used it in weeks.

“Yes, general,” said Ren, equally formal. Without even glancing at Hux, he strode up the ramp and into the shuttle.

Hux stayed behind to bid a last farewell to Harron, who tipped his hat and said, “Safe journeys, Master Hux. Come back to us soon.”

Inside the shuttle it was darker, the track illuminators dimmed to a level Hux assumed Ren preferred. A number of other troopers milled about the interior. They saluted, making way as Hux passed. Ren, who was waiting for him in the central corridor, took them through, past the troopers’ seats, and into a back cabin beyond the aft bulkhead. There were a number of chairs there, all of them larger and higher-backed than the standard seats for the troopers. There were even a number of bunks set in the recesses of the room. It wasn’t luxurious, but it was better appointed than the shuttle they had arrived in.

“Lord Ren,” said a voice from over the comm. “We’re prepared for takeoff. We await your order.”

“Go,” Ren said, curt.

“Yes, my lord. Course set for Ilum.”

Hux chose a seat as the shuttle’s engines roared to life. He strapped himself in, waiting for Ren to do the same. However, he didn’t sit immediately, instead going to a console and pulling up a
display of a planet Hux assumed to be Ilum. Ren marked a point on the surface of the display with a red dot before drawing a line up toward another point. With a gesture he isolated the section of the map. The topography appeared. The place he had marked was on a fairly flat plateau, but the line went up from it into the nearby mountains.

“Is that where we’re bound?” Hux asked.

“Yes.”

“The caves are there.”

“One of the entrances. They run the length of the mountain range, but these are the easiest to access.”

“Would the crystals deeper into the caves be superior?”

“We’ll go deeper if it’s necessary.” Ren spun the display once, studying it, but then closed it down.

The shuttle was moving, picking up speed as it left port and headed up into the atmosphere. It shook some, but the kinetic stabilizers kicked in to reduce the disturbance. Ren pressed his hands on either side of the console, his shoulders rounded. Hux looked at his back for a time before reaching down into the pack in which he had stowed his datapad. He left Ren to his own devices as he pulled up the First Order’s secure network—for the first time in six weeks—and loaded up the reports Commander Odar had filed in his absence.

Three hours and thirteen commendably detailed reports later, the pilots came over the comm again. “General, Lord Ren, we’re approaching the landing zone. We’ll be on the ground in five minutes.”

Ren had sat only halfway through the ride, having otherwise been up and pacing along the length of the cabin. Hux had not seen him so restless in some time. He had considered inquiring, but Ren hardly seemed in the mood for questions. Hux kept his attention on his reports and let Ren be.

“Preparing for disembarkation,” said the pilots. “Depressuring.”

Hux released the restraints on his seat and stood. He stretched and tucked his datapad away, picking up his jacket and the travel pack Lorna had prepared for him. He would carry it with him up into the caves. Slinging it over his shoulders, he looked to Ren.

“Take this,” Ren said, holding out Hux’s saber hilt. His own was already at his hip.

Hux clipped it to his belt. It was a weight he would have to get used to.

Chilly air blew into the airlock as they made their way out onto the planet’s surface. The plateau they had landed on was covered in a layer of thick moss, springy and soft beneath Hux’s boots. Perhaps half a kilometer away the foothills of the mountains began, crested with scrubby shrubs and a sparse few evergreen trees. The peaks of the mountains were white with snow, which Hux had seen in holos, but never in person. He wondered if they would be venturing high enough for him to touch it.

“Are you certain you do not require a security detail to join you, General Hux?” asked TJ-4579,
appearing beside him.

“I am,” he said, his eyes on Ren, who was standing several meters ahead, looking determinedly out into the foothills. “We go alone.”

“Yes, sir. We’ll be waiting here. If you require extraction, you have our comm frequency.”

He said nothing in reply, going to join Ren. “It will take six hours to get to the caves?”

“Yes.”

“Then we’d best get underway.”

Ren remained quiet and sullen throughout the first two hours of their hike. Hux followed him, going between watching the ground at his feet—it was uneven enough that it wouldn’t have been difficult to turn an ankle—and gazing out over the scenery. It was unlike any world he had been on before.

The wind began to pick up as they ventured into the higher elevations. Hux pulled the collar of his jacket closed against it. The exposed skin of his face grew stiff with cold, numbing his lips. They felt thick and inflexible as he said, “Kylo.”

Ren paused, turning back. “What?”

“Will you talk with me some?”

“About what?”

“Your last trip here perhaps? Did you come alone?”

“Yes,” Ren said, striding ahead again.

“Did you take this route?”

“It’s the only one I know.”

“Did Skywalker take you along it when you came to choose your first crystal?”

“Yes.”

Hux bit back an exasperated huff. Apparently one-word answers were all Ren was willing to give. “Why are you being like this? I thought you liked the caves.”

“I do.”

“Then what the hell is wrong with you?”

Ren skidded to a halt, rounding on Hux. His fingers closed around Hux’s biceps, and then he was on him, his mouth hard and insistent. Hux gave in without protest, parting his lips and drawing Ren’s tongue in. His hands went to Ren’s waist, his left palm brushing over the cold surface of his saber.

When they drew apart, Ren pressed his forehead to Hux’s. “I can’t touch you around them.”

Hux assumed he was talking about the troopers aboard the shuttle. “I know.”
“I hate it.”

“Yes,” Hux sighed. “Is that why you’re behaving this way? They’re not here now. You can say what you want, do as you want.”

Ren closed his eyes. “For now, but when we go back....”

“There’s no other option.” Troopers were likely worse than Pantin City society matrons when it came to spreading scuttlebutt, and Hux did not need them claiming to have seen anything more than the appropriate distance between him and Ren. Their standings in the Order were contingent upon it.

Ren didn’t contradict him, but he moved away, letting go of Hux. He turned his eyes back up toward the mountains. “Uncle Luke had to scout the path himself,” he said. “He only knew a vague location of a caves from legends. He hadn’t built his own saber. His was given to him. It had belonged to my grandfather.”

“How did Skywalker come by it?” Hux said.

“It’s a long story.”

“We have the time.”

The tale of Skywalker’s early years and his training as a Jedi by the ancient Master Yoda filled much of the rest of the journey. Hux knew some of it from the stories of the fall of the Empire, but he had never heard of Degobah or the creature that had lived there in exile until Skywalker had appeared. Hux expected the details to make the legend more real, less fabulous, but it only seemed more so. It was still difficult to imagine Skywalker walking the same path that Hux and Ren now tread, leading his apprentices to choose their kyber crystals.

Hux was trying to envision young Ben Solo there when he and Ren rounded an outcropping. In his distraction, Hux nearly stumbled into the dark maw of a cave. Ren caught his elbow and steadied him. At last, they had arrived.

Ren dropped his pack at his feet, reaching inside to pull out a lantern. Flicking it on, he approached the cave. Hux had no particular apprehension about either darkness or confined spaces—both of which were common on a starship in deep space—but he hesitated to follow, uncertain of what he would find inside.

“Leave your pack here,” said Ren. “You won’t need it.”

Hux set it down beside Ren’s, though not before removing the lantern he had brought as well. He lifted it as he stepped into the the shadows. At first there was little to see, but as his eyes adjusted, the forms of massive stalactites appeared, their surfaces slick with the water that dripped down to shape them. The falling of droplets echoed around the cave. One struck the top of Hux’s head, making him cringe.

“The crystals are further in,” said Ren. “There used to be more here, but they’ve been taken.”

Hux followed him carefully, mindful of where he was placing his feet. The ground was covered in fine gravel and dirt. It was warmer inside the cave than it was outside. Hux unzipped the front of his jacket, relieved.

“The first time I came here, there were six of us,” Ren said, far more forthcoming than he had been earlier in the day. “Uncle Luke and five apprentices. They talked the whole time about what types
of crystals they preferred, which ones would generate a blade of a certain color.”

“Is there any significance to that?” said Hux.

“Little. It’s the qualities of the crystal that matter, not the color. But there are certain aspects that are consistent among ones of a certain shade.”

“Such as?”

“Green crystals are highly stable. Their structure is even. The blades they generate are reliable and easy to wield. They’re good for first sabers for younglings.”

“Was your first saber green?”

“Blue.”

“What were its qualities?”

“There are more facets to those crystals. They make for more robust blades.”

“What of your second saber? It was red.”

“Red crystals have the most complex structure, and they’re the most volatile. The Sith favored them because the blades are powerful.”

“Is that why you chose one?”

“Yes.”

“Which do you think I will have?”

“We’ll see.”

They passed through a sort of archway into the next section of the cave. Hux’s lips parted as the light from his lantern was refracted by the glittering crystals set into the rock walls of the chamber.

“Incredible.”

Ren set his lantern down in the center of the space. As he stood straight again, he closed his eyes. “The Force is strong here.”

Hux could only imagine. Going to the nearest wall, he examined the crystals. They jutted out slightly, their tips pointed. As he moved his lantern close, they flashed green and red, purple and blue. There were some that were pale yellow and even an opaque white.

“You’ll choose yours first,” said Ren.

Equal parts apprehension and excitement passed through Hux. “How?”

“Let me help you,” said Ren. He stepped up behind Hux, pressing himself against his back. He had removed his jacket and helped Hux out of his. His hands moved along Hux’s forearms, and then slid over the backs of his hands. He put his fingers between Hux’s. “Will you let me into your mind?”

“What do you intend to do?”
Your connection to the Force is latent, but it flows through all of us. I think I can feel it in you if you’ll let me."

“What must I do?”

“Focus on the crystals. Try to sense their power.” Ren pressed in until his lips were grazing Hux’s ear. “And open yourself to me.”

Hux gave a small shudder. He took a breath, trying to clear his thoughts as he had when Ren had shown him his memories. The tingling sensation of intrusion began at the base of his skull and then spread until the presence suffused his head. It was strange and uncomfortable, but when he heard Ren’s voice in his mind, he found himself relaxing into the union.

That’s good, Hux. Are you all right?

Yes. What now?

You have to touch the crystals. I need to feel them.

Hux looked down at the rock in front of him, the raw crystals sticking out from its surface. With Ren’s fingers still between his, he reached the tips out to brush the nearest crystal. It was a dull blue. The hard surface was cool and a little wet.

Not that one, said Ren in his head. Choose another.

Hux selected a green crystal a few centimeters away. It felt the same as the other, so he moved on. He passed over red and yellow crystals, others that were green. Nothing changed.

This isn’t working, is it? he thought to Ren.

It can take time to find the right one, even for someone strong with the Force.

Can you really sense it inside me?

It’s faint, but present.

What is it like?

The vibration of a string, moving in waves. It’s distinct from mine. Separate, but at a similar frequency.

Like a harmony?

That’s an apt description.

Do you...like it? Hux said.

Very much. I’m connected to you. It’s something I’ve never experienced before.

Hux wasn’t able to censor the wave of warm approval that pervaded his thoughts at that. Ren answered with a rush of pleasure. His fingers tightened around Hux’s, and he nuzzled at Hux’s neck.

Try another crystal.

Closing his eyes, Hux reached for one. He nearly jumped as he came in contact with it. A low
humming filled his mind, reverberating through his consciousness.

There, Ren said. You feel it, don’t you?

Yes, said Hux, astonished.

Open your eyes.

As he did, Hux saw a milky white crystal embedded in the rock. He traced the squared edges.

The energy is strong, but constant. It will make for a steady, precise blade.

Hux’s curiosity surged. How do I get it out?

I’ll do it. Ren released Hux’s left hand and extended his own toward the crystal. The pressure in Hux’s mind began to increase, almost making him wince. But he endured it as he watched, fascinated, as the rock around the crystal began to shift and give way. Ren crooked his fingers minutely, drawing the crystal out.

Give me your hand, he said.

Hux held it out, palm open. He watched as Ren lowered the crystal into it. They both studied it for a moment before Hux felt Ren begin to withdraw from his head.

Thank you, Hux said before he could go.

Ren gave a soft caress of Hux’s mind, strangely comforting. Of course.

As Ren left him, Hux felt himself waver, his knees shaking. Ren kept a physical hold of him, pulling him against his chest.

“You should sit for a while,” he said. “You need to time to recover.”

“All right,” said Hux, allowing Ren to guide him down to a place on the ground near their lanterns. “Will you choose your own crystal now?”

Ren nodded. “It shouldn’t take long. It never has for me.” Leaning in, he pressed a kiss to Hux’s temple before releasing him completely.

Hux crossed his legs and breathed, attempting to stave off the sense of fatigue that crept into his bones. He looked over his crystal again. The squared edges were clear, but the center was misty white. He could no longer sense whatever energy it had been putting off while he was connected with Ren, but he liked the weight of it in his hand.

The crumbling of rock drew his attention back to Ren, who was pulling another crystal from the cave wall with the Force. It was slightly larger than Hux’s and glinted red. One side of Hux’s mouth turned up. Of course Ren would have once again selected a crystal for its raw power.

“What now?” Hux asked, getting only somewhat shakily to his feet.

“They have to be set in place,” said Ren. “Give me yours.”

Hux unclipped his saber from his belt and handed it to Ren. He offered the crystal as well. “Did you bring tools?”

“I don’t need them. Not for this.” With a gesture, he lifted the crystal from Hux’s palm and guided
it into the open end of the saber. It disappeared inside, presumably moving into the cradle that was aligned with the energy gate, as Ren had once shown him. “There. It’s ready.”

Hux took it from him carefully. He set his thumb against the button that would engage it. Taking a deep breath, he pressed it down. With a hiss of energy, the blade took shape. It was white, just as the crystal was. Hux could feel the hum of its power.

“Swing it,” said Ren, stepping back. “See how it feels.”

Out of habit, Hux went first to middle guard, holding the hilt with two hands. He swept the saber up in a low-to-high strike. The balance seemed off, since the blade weighed nothing at all, but after swinging it down again, Hux began to adjust to it. He performed one of the combinations Ren had taught him, moving between strikes and blocks. The saber seemed to leave the air staticky and warm in its wake.

“It’s exactly right for you,” said Ren.

“It is. Thank you.” Hux powered the saber down. “Let me see yours.”

Ren set the red crystal in place as he had with Hux’s and then engaged it. The blade crackled to life, the vents at the crossguard hissing as they emitted the excess energy. It looked very much like the one he had carried before, vibrating with power. Hux jumped as Ren struck out with deadly speed and sliced through one of the stalactites. It crashed to the floor of the cave.

An admonishment was on the tip of Hux’s tongue, but he bit it back. Instead, he powered on his own saber and swung at another stalactite. There was no resistance as the blade cut through it.

Ren grinned at him, his face lit by the red glow of his saber. “This isn’t the place, but I want to see what else you can do.”

“Outside?”

“There’s not enough space. When we get back to the shuttle.”

Hux frowned. “We shouldn’t waste time.”

“We have enough for it.” Ren disengaged his saber and hooked it onto his belt. “Let’s go.”

The trip down the mountainside took less time that the ascent. They stopped halfway down to eat some of the provisions they had brought with them from the estate: hard cheese, bread, apples, and fragrant ental meat baked in savory pastry. Ilum’s sun was only just beginning to sink by the time the shuttle was in sight.

“Sir,” said TJ-4579, saluting Hux. Her question was directed at Ren, though. “Should we prepare for departure?”

“Not yet,” he said. “There’s something General Hux and I must do.”

“We’ll await you aboard ship, then, my lord.”

A smirk tugged at Ren’s lips. “Stay. Watch. It will be an impressive show.”

Hux cocked a brow at him. He had never fought for any audience beyond Harron, and never with a true lightsaber. He wasn’t about to back down from the challenge, though. His pack landed hard on the ground, followed by his jacket. He took the saber from his belt. “How do we score this bout?
We can’t very well hit each other.”

“No score,” said Ren. “Just fight until you can’t anymore.” Engaging his saber, he took up low guard.

Hux powered his on and followed suit. They didn’t move right away, both sizing each other up as they often had before beginning a training skirmish in the garage at the estate. Hux knew Ren had few tells; his strikes came without warning. Hux was less refined, but could keep his plans hidden until the moment before he swung. He did so first.

The blades of their sabers snapped and flashed as they met. Though they were nothing more than energy, Hux could feel impact. He sprang back as Ren surged forward, managing a deft window guard. He spun away, slicing at Ren’s middle as he did. Sparks flew as Ren countered the blow.

Adrenaline flooded Hux’s veins, sharpening his focus until everything around him—the shuttle, the five troopers standing at the ramp watching him, the mossy ground—faded away. All he could see was Ren, his red saber arching out as he struck at Hux. They skirted around each other, diving in for assaults before pulling back again to regain their bearings. Hux was breathing hard, the cold air stinging his throat and making his lungs burn. A few strands of Ren’s hair clung to his damp brow, betraying that he, too, was exerting himself.

How long they fought, Hux didn’t know, but the brightness of their weapons began to increase as the daylight faded. The exhaustion of having had Ren in his mind and spending twelve hours hiking up and down a mountain was undeniably wearing on him, though, as they continued on. After a particularly fierce series of blows and blocks, Hux fell back gasping.

“Enough,” he said. “I can’t go on.”

Ren immediately powered his saber down, the blade descending back into the hilt. Hux did the same as Ren approached him. He reached out, and for a moment Hux thought he intended to take Hux’s cheek in his hand, but it settled on his shoulder instead. He squeezed.

“Well done.”

“Thank you.”

Ren held onto him for a moment longer, perhaps too long, but Hux couldn’t bring himself to move away.

“It’s time,” he said, quiet.

Ren nodded. Turning to the troopers, he said, “Ready the ship. We’re going to Orrun.”

They complied immediately, going up the ramp. He and Hux followed, their steps almost in sync. As they crossed into the belly of the shuttle, Hux felt the brush of Ren’s hand against his. Hux returned the touch, if only for a brief second.

“Lord Ren,” said the pilot over the comm as soon as they got back to their cabin. “I’ve calculated the travel vectors for the flight. We have five hours in transit before we enter Orrun’s orbit.”

“Fine,” he said. “Just get us there.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Ren glanced over at Hux as Hux retrieved his datapad again. “You should get some sleep.”
Hux was tired, but he still had several more reports to read. “Not yet.”

Stalking up, Ren latching his fingers around Hux’s wrist. “Now.” He flicked his hand toward the cabin door; it slid shut. Pulling Hux along, he led them to one of the narrow bunks.

Hux glared, but sat. He didn’t bother to remove his boots, pulling his legs up and lying back. He expected Ren to leave him, but he crawled into the bunk as well.

“What are you doing?”

“Sleeping.”

“We could be seen.”

“Not unless they blast through the door,” Ren said, curling himself around Hux’s back. The bunk was far too small for two men of their height, but when Ren pressed his lips to Hux’s neck, he couldn’t find it in himself to care. He settled into Ren’s arms and closed his eyes one more time.
Chapter 11

Hux woke alone. He glanced around the cabin as he sat up, but found it empty. Rubbing his bleary eyes, he rolled onto his feet. He felt grimy from the long hike up to the crystal caves and from sleeping for—he looked down at his chronometer—nearly five hours in the same clothes he had been wearing all day. He doubted there was a sonic aboard, but there had to be a refresher of some kind. A few splashes of water on his face and the back of his neck would have to suffice.

He went to the footlocker the troopers had brought aboard and pulled out the uniform he had folded neatly inside. The creases would have to be tolerated. He stripped quickly, tucking his soiled clothing away and replacing it with the regulation trousers, undershirt, and jacket. He pulled on his knee boots, the leather shining from a recent buffing. It must have been Feelix’s doing. Last, he hung his saber from his belt.

The cabin door hissed open as he made his way out into the main corridors of the shuttle. He found the refresher and paused to relieve himself and clean up as much as was possible. He used some of the recycled water to smooth down his hair. It was too long, the ends brushing the tops of his ears. He would have to arrange for a trim as soon as he resumed his post. That was assuming the Supreme Leader had the facilities for it planetside. It would be unfortunate if Hux had to wait until he returned to the Finalizer. He hadn’t any idea how long the summit would take. For all he knew, it would be several more weeks before he came aboard his ship again.

When he was at least reasonably presentable, Hux made for the forward part of the shuttle. If Ren was anywhere, it was likely there, overseeing the preparations for their arrival on Orrun. It couldn’t be long now before they landed.

He was standing behind the pilots when Hux found him, his hands resting on the backs of their seats. Over his shoulder, Hux could see that they were already descending toward the planet’s surface. On it was a massive complex sprawled out across what had to be several acres. It was built of sleek, tinted transparisteel, which reflected the barren, rocky landscape around it. The ground was flat for as far as Hux could see, the ashy gray earth uninterrupted by trees or any other flora.

“So, this is the Supreme Leader’s citadel,” said Hux. “He’s here himself?”

“He is,” Ren said, keeping his gaze on the forward viewport.

“How long has it been since you’ve been here?”

“A long time.”

The sound of the shuttle’s thrusters increased as they shifted to accommodate the landing. The pilots flipped switches and typed in console commands, bringing the vessel smoothly the the ground. As they touched down, Ren pushed back, coming around to face Hux. His mouth was set in a grim line, his eyes sunk in dark wells. Hux wondered if he had slept at all. He looked over Hux’s uniform, lingering at the saber at Hux’s hip.

“You are going to wear it,” he said.
“I gave you my word I would,” said Hux. “I don’t renege, Ren.”

“Of course not, general.” The title was bitten off, as if it was distasteful. Brushing past, Ren headed toward the ramp descending from the shuttle’s belly. Jets of decompressing air shot down around it, shrouding it in mist.

Hux followed him. At the foot of the ramp was one man, his uniform fitted to his narrow frame and hat sitting atop his dark-haired head: Dopheld Mitaka, senior lieutenant to Hux when he was aboard the *Finalizer*. As Ren approached, he shrank back, but didn’t go so far as to actually move away.

“General Hux, sir,” he said, snapping to attention as Hux stopped in front of him.

“Lieutenant,” said Hux. “What are you doing here?”

“I’ve been assigned as your aid, sir, to assist you in your tasks during the summit.”

“I see. Am I expected?”

“You are, sir,” said Mitaka, “but not until 1400 hours.”

Hux glanced at his wristcomm, which had adjusted to Orrun local time and read 1214.

“In the meantime, sir, I’m to show you to your quarters and see to it that you have everything you need.”

“Very good.”

Mitaka swallowed visibly as he looked to Ren. “Lord Ren, your presence is requested by the Supreme Leader. Do you require a guide to take you to him?”

“No,” Ren said, terse. “I know where I need to go.”

Mitaka’s “Of course, my lord” was ignored as Ren turned to face Hux. Hux regarded him steadily, though a sour feeling was roiling in his gut. “I suppose you’re to leave us here, then,” he said.

Ren met Hux’s gaze with searching eyes. “Yes.”

Hux knew what troubled him; he suffered the same. This was the parting they had both known of and expected, but Hux had not thought it would be so immediate or done in the open. His neck pricked where Ren had kissed him before they slept on the shuttle. Hux regretted not turning and kissing his lips; it was not something he could do as they stood before each other now.

Slowly, he extended his hand. “Until we meet again, Lord Ren, I wish you well with your training.”

Ren’s fingers were warm and familiar as they closed around Hux’s. “We will meet again, general.”

Hux gave a minute nod and released Ren’s hand. It fell back to his side with finality. Hux gave him a last look before facing Mitaka. “I’m following you, lieutenant.”

They strode through the all but empty hangar bay to a set of double doors. They slid open, revealing a long hallway lined on one side with tinted transparisteel. There was little but greenish sky and flinty ground to be seen outside. Hux felt a pang of longing for Arkanis, gray and gloomy as it could be, but he forced his thoughts away from it.
“When did you arrive here, lieutenant?” he asked Mitaka, who walked purposefully toward wherever their destination might be.

“Two Orrun standard days ago, sir.”

“And how do you find it?”

“Find it, sir?”

“I’m asking your opinion of this...citadel.”

Mitaka blinked at him, as if he had never been asked such a question before. “It’s, ah, large, sir. And can be difficult to navigate at times. Much of it looks the same. But that’s not so different from a starship, sir. You just have to get to know it.”

“And two days has been enough for you to do that?” asked Hux.

“I know how to get to the meeting rooms, sir, and my quarters and yours. That’s all that’s necessary.”

“Indeed. Are the other generals here as well?”

“They are, sir. They’ve been waiting for you.”

“I look forward to getting underway. Tell me, lieutenant, was is the status of the Finalizer?”

“She’s in orbit around Orrun, sir. Commander Odar still has command. I believe he’s been writing regular reports. Did you not receive them?”

Hux hadn’t, not until he had been able to reconnect with the Order’s network; but he had read most of them on the shuttle. “I’ve seen some, but I’d prefer to hear it from you.”

“Certainly, sir,” said Mitaka. “There was a minor issue with the forward battery’s firing algorithms just before I came planetside. Commander Tryla had been running routine weapons tests when the cannons misfired. The technicians had it taken care of within the cycle, though. And there was a problem with the radar...” He rattled off a few more problems, none of which were out of the ordinary for a machine as complex as the Finalizer. Hux was relieved that there had been no major incidents.

“Has the crew taken well to Odar?” he said. “Was he obeyed?”

“He was, sir, but we’ve been awaiting your return.” Mitaka paused, then added, “It hasn’t been the same without you, general.”

Hux held back a laugh at the sentiment. “I...appreciate that, lieutenant. I’ve been eager to get back aboard since I left.”

They rounded the corner into another hallway, this one lined with doors. It was otherwise nondescript. Hux could understand how one might get turned around in such a place.

“No one was told your location,” said Mitaka.

“Are you asking where I was?”

“It’s not my business, sir, but...we were curious.”
“We?”

“The officers, sir.”

“Ah, yes. If you must know, we were on my homeworld.”

Mitaka looked over, his eyes wide. “Lord Ren was with you, sir? The whole time?”

“He was recuperating from wounds sustained at Starkiller Base,” said Hux. “I was...supervising.”

“I understand, sir.”

Hux was sure he didn’t, but he had no intention of discussing what had transpired at the estate in any detail. That was his to keep. He would share it with no one but Ren.

As they came to the end of the hall, Mitaka pressed his thumb to the biometric reader in the wall. The door in front of them slid open to reveal the interior of a lift.

“The residences are on the third level, sir,” said Mitaka, stepping inside.

“Is that where we’ll be meeting as well?”

“Those rooms are on the ground level. I’ll take you there this afternoon.”

“Do you know what the first of the meetings will be?”

“I have an outline, sir. I can go over it with you when we get to your quarters.”

The residence level looked very much like that they had just left. Mitaka led them to a door and gestured for Hux to use the thumbpad scanner. As he did, the door opened, revealing a fairly large room with a dark transparisteel viewport before which a broad desk stood. Across the space was a double bed made up neatly with plain linens. There was a private refresher set off to the side. Hux looked at it hungrily, craving a shower.

“Would you like to hear the schedule now, sir?” Mitaka said, producing his datapad.

“Go ahead.”

The first meeting that afternoon would be a briefing on the status of the First Order’s fleet, delivered by the generals mostly for Hux’s benefit. After that would be a discussion of the intelligence they had gathered on the Resistance’s counteroffensive after the destruction of the Hosnian System. Following that would be the first of a number of strategic planning meetings for both the upcoming battles and for the long-term assault on the Resistance’s support structure. It would easily take the rest of the day and likely go into the night. Hux was glad for the few hours of sleep he had gotten; it would be needed.

“Lunch has already been served,” said Mitaka, “but I can have something sent up to you if you need it, sir.”

The last time Hux had eaten was on the mountainside with Ren. It seemed like days ago. He wasn’t particularly hungry, but it would be wise to get something into his system. “That would be good, lieutenant.”

“Yes, sir. If there’s anything else, you have my comm frequency.” With a brief salute, Mitaka turned and left.
After an inspection of the room, Hux found that his effects had been brought up ahead of him. He wasn’t certain how that could have happened unless there was a less circuitous route to this area of the citadel then he and Mitaka had taken. He wasn’t about to complain, however.

Most of the items he would have no need of and should just have disposed of; he had no use for a hiking pack or civilian clothing. Those articles he set aside before opening his footlocker. He pulled out his datapad and the one thing he had brought with him from the estate by choice: his father’s copy of *Meditations on Combat*.

He had taken it along on impulse. He had been in his bedroom alone, Ren having gone elsewhere for a time. The book was lying on the bedside table, the gilt spine facing him. He had read more than halfway through it by then, all aloud. He had felt a twinge of regret knowing that they wouldn’t have the opportunity to finish it. He had picked it up and tucked into the footlocker, setting his uniform over top of it.

Holding it now, he opened to the place where he had left off reading to Ren. It was a passage on choosing the best terrain for a fight: "‘When venturing onto hostile ground that is unfamiliar, a general is at an inherent disadvantage. His enemy knows how to use the land to his benefit, a boon that will lead to victory if the general who opposes this enemy is not aware of his surroundings. Survey the battlefield and choose it carefully. If it is within your power, attack only where it suits your force.’"

The territory he had to cover in his fight with the Resistance was far more expansive than anything the book’s author had faced, but the principle was still valid. Hux had to know the ground on which he would be attacking Leia Organa and the cobbled-together pack of followers she called an army. Setting *Meditations on Combat* down, Hux drew up a map of the Outer Rim on his datapad.

D’Qar was a verdant world in the outer part of the sector, bordering the Mid Rim. By tracking a Resistance reconnaissance vessel, Hux had discovered a base of considerable size there. He suspected that it was far more than an outpost, but had not had the ability to explore it further after the destruction of Starkiller. He frowned down at the display of the planet, spinning at the center of the datapad’s screen. The time he spent at the estate could have been used for exploratory missions to D’Qar to gather further intelligence. Perhaps by now he could have destroyed whatever operations were going on there. He wanted to curse the wasted days, but the words withered before they could form.

Setting the datapad down, he released the fastenings of his coat and shrugged it over his shoulders. He was still in dire need of that shower. He found the refresher equipped with a sonic. That seemed pragmatic considering the arid climate of Orrun. If little grew in the ashy soil, he doubted there was an abundance of water, fresh or otherwise.

When he was clean and dry again, he ventured out to find a tray of food waiting on his desk. It was standard rations: some sort of meat with vegetables likely frozen and thawed, a suspiciously perfect sphere of mashed tubers, and a small roll. It did nothing to improve his appetite, but he sat down and forced himself to consume it.

He read about Orrun as he ate. The surface of the world was riddled with volcanoes, which erupted often, spewing ash and chunks of igneous rock miles into the sky to be blown through the lower atmosphere. There was water, but most of it was deep underground. What little organic life there was on the planet subsisted beneath the surface, and even then, most of it was microbial. Hux could only speculate as to how the Supreme Leader had found such an inhospitable place on which to reside, but it was unlikely that anyone would come looking for it. That, at least, was useful.

It was nearing 1350 when Hux finished his meal—if it could be called that. He moved the tray
aside, assuming a droid would remove it after he had gone, and got to his feet. A buzz from the
door announced Mitaka’s return. He led Hux to a meeting room on the ground level of the citadel.
The other eleven generals—seven men and four women—were waiting when he arrived.

“General Hux,” said Alanna Yeril, a stout woman with a head of yellow curls. “Welcome.”

He inclined his head. The others greeted him in turn, some verbally, the rest with nods of
acknowledgement. He knew them all, of course, though some he had never actually seen in the
flesh. Yeril was one of those. She commanded the Endeavor, a seasoned destroyer that ran border
patrols. She had a sterling combat record.

“Shall we begin?” Hux asked, going to a chair at the center of the semi-circular table that stood at
the center of the room. General Fordice sat to his right, General Turenner to his left. Only one
remained standing, the formidable General Ulstor of the Executor, the longest serving general in
the First Order. He had been the one to pin Hux’s epaulets onto his dress uniform when he had
been made a general five years before.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “we’ve been summoned here by the Supreme Leader to formalize our plan
of attack for the coming offensive. We are to spend the next seven planet-standard days ensuring
that we are mobilized to destroy the Resistance once and for all. We have all spent the last six
weeks compiling our data and intelligence in preparation.” He shot a look at Hux, not openly
accusatory, but at least mildly disapproving. “Now is our chance to use it to bring our enemies to
heel and restore order to the galaxy. We’ll begin with an overview of the fleet. General Amatta,
will you start with the status of the Interceptor?”

Hux listened to each of the reports, thankful he had read over those Commander Odar had sent. He
was not going to hide the fact that he had been away from the Finalizer, though; all of the others
knew it. When it came time for him to speak, he stood slowly. The lightsaber he wore at his belt
hung along his thigh, a strangely comforting weight.

“As you are all aware,” he said, “I have spent the last weeks away from active duty. I have been
informed of the status of my ship and her crew, but I have no pertinent details to offer other than
that the combat battalions under Captain Phasma are in good order and are prepared for
deployment when they are called upon. The TIE fighter corps are prepared for battle as well and
all weapons systems are fully operational. I default to you for information on the situation in the
rest of the fleet and in the galaxy.”

“Very good, General Hux,” said Ulstor. “Thank you. I trust what our colleagues have said is
enough to catch you up?”

“It is,” Hux said.

“Excellent. Then we’ll continue with the intelligence briefing. General Fordice?”

Fordice, an aging woman with fierce gray eyes, stood and made her way around the table. She
engaged the console and brought up a display of a planet. Hux recognized it easily.

“D’Qar,” Fordice said. “To the best of our knowledge, the Resistance’s main base of operations is
on this world. We’ve been tracking supply ships through the system for the past six weeks. They
disguise it well, but there’s enough freight coming and going to suggest a major fortification, if not
their central command.” She rotated the display with a gesture, zooming in on a land mass in the
southern hemisphere. “This is the location of the base.”

Hux assessed the position. The base was set into a heavy thatch of jungle along a small mountain

range. He could imagine that it was fortified within the rock itself. That would make for a hard ground fight. An air assault wouldn’t be as effective as it would have had the buildings been in the open. It would mean sacrificing troops, which was necessary, but not something he did lightly.

“Is the Resistance aware that we know of this base?” Hux asked.

“We’ve kept our observations as surreptitious as possible,” Fordice replied, “but I would imagine they have an inkling.”

“If that’s the case, which it likely is,” said Hux, “I should think they would have pulled most of their major operations out by now. Relocated to a more secure location.”

“They might not have another base capable of serving as an operations center,” General Turenner said. “After all, the Republic planets are gone. You saw to that, General Hux.”

“They would never be careless enough to establish themselves on an openly Republic-controlled world,” said Fordice. “They’ve kept to the outskirts to protect themselves. It’s served them well so far.”

“And it will continue to do so,” Hux said. “I find it unlikely they’ve remained on D’Qar.”

General Ulstor sat forward. “That may be true, but they are still active enough there to warrant our attention.”

“I don’t refute that,” said Hux. “However, if we are to mount an assault, I suggest we do not use the full strength of the fleet.”

“I disagree,” said General Yeril. “We should wipe them out completely and definitively, leave nothing but rubble.”

“Are three or four destroyers not enough to accomplish that?” Hux asked. “It’s one base.”

“He has a point,” General Amatta said.

Fordice shook her head. “I would not risk compromising this operation on a hunch that the Resistance has moved on.” She gave Hux a piercing look. “You’ve been away from duty, General Hux. You’re not as aware of the situation as you could be.”

Hux’s temper flared, but he kept his voice steady. “Is that not the purpose of this briefing? To ensure that all of us have the necessary knowledge to lay plans?”

“We digress,” said Ulstor. “Let General Fordice finish her overview of the D’Qar intelligence.”

Hux sat back and listened. Fordice went on to describe what they knew of the layout of the Resistance base. As Hux had suspected, it was built into the side of a mountain and heavily armed. Not as heavily as any single First Order outpost, but the Resistance did not have the resources that the Order did. At least the Order had that advantage. It had not proved enough to salvage Starkiller, however. Hux was not about to underestimate Leia Organa, especially not after what Ren had told him of her.

Ren. He was somewhere in the citadel completing his training. He had not known what the trials would consist of, save that they would be arduous. Hux recalled the feeling of his mind as they were joined in the crystal caves. Ren had told him that Force-sensitives could perceive each other even from great distances. He could feel Snoke even on Arkanis.
“Can you locate anyone using the Force?” Hux had asked him.

“No,” Ren had replied. “Those who aren’t sensitive to it don’t...broadcast clearly enough.”

“So you couldn’t find me?”

“Not across star systems.”

Did that imply that if Hux was closer, say, on the same planet, Ren could sense him? The notion didn’t put Hux off as much as it could have. He knew Ren couldn’t hear the thoughts of others unless he invaded their heads—or their barriers were lowered in an intimate situation—but he found himself thinking as clearly and loudly as possible: Be well, Kylo.

“What is your opinion, General Hux?”

He glanced up at Fordice, whom he had not realized was still speaking. “On the matter of invasion?” he ventured.

“Yes.”

His tongue darted out to wet his lips. “We’ll need at least a full battalion. Eight hundred troopers. A thousand if possible. We have little choice but to attack from the front, unless we can manage to open up a secondary entrance.”

“Blow a hole in a mountain?” said Turenner, his brows up.

“It’s not impossible,” said Hux. “Deploy a small strike team with explosives. We have the firepower to level an entire outpost. A few hundred meters of rock should not be an insurmountable challenge.”

“We could concentrate fire from attack ships in the lower atmosphere,” General Ulstor said. “Cut a path before the team even drops. Plasma cannons should be able to make a dent in the rock.”

“This is absurd,” said General Yeril. “We should concentrate on clearing a path for the main force, not attempting to blast through a bloody mountain. It’s a waste of resources.”

“It wouldn’t take more than a few attack ships and men,” Hux said.

“You don’t even know if it would succeed.”

Hux turned to the display of D’Qar. “What manner of rock are those mountains composed of?”

Fordice tapped the display. A few lines of text appeared beside it. “Sedimentary. Deposited in prehistoric seas. What of it?”

“Will sediment not give way more easily? Certainly our engineers would know how to blast through it.”

Fordice frowned, but said, “I’ll make a note to speak to the engineering corps.”

“There are some who worked on Starkiller Base still aboard the Finalizer,” said Hux. “I would approach them first.”

“See it done,” said Fordice.

Hux gave a curt nod.
From there the conversation shifted to primary assault. Hux weighed in as necessary, but some of the others admittedly had more on-the-ground combat experience. That didn’t mean they were superior tacticians, but Hux didn’t ignore their counsel.

It was long after 1900 hours by the time they came to a stopping point. A knock at the door announced the arrival of a young woman with lieutenant’s bars on her uniform. She informed them that dinner was being served in the mess hall. The generals filed out in relative silence. Hux walked beside Embrin Alark, a broad man with close-cropped brown hair.

“General Hux,” he said. “It’s an honor to finally meet you. Your reputation precedes you.”

“As does yours,” said Hux. “The Imperator’s combat record is superb. And you were most recently in the Outer Rim running trade interference?”

“We were, yes. Had a string of successful raids and a few skirmishes with Republic ships. Nothing we couldn’t handle, but enough to keep our skills sharp.”

“How stimulating.” It wasn’t, of course. Hux hadn’t been reduced to chasing freighters in years. It was a junior general’s job. Alark had to be at least ten years Hux’s senior, though.

“You were on temporary leave?” Alark said, though it was barely a question.

“In a manner of speaking,” said Hux. “The Supreme Leader gave me task that was regretfully away from my ship.”

“It must have been important.”

“It was.”

They entered a small mess hall. A number of droids were moving about, laying plates and filling glasses with water. Hux swallowed, wishing he had a glass of the red he had drunk over the last dinner at the estate. He chose a chair near the center of the table. As he sat, he adjusted the saber at his hip. General Yeril, who was seated across from him, eyed him as he did it.

“What exactly is that you have there, Hux?” she asked.

He picked up his water and took a sip, in no hurry to answer. “My sidearm.”

“Do you find it necessary to keep yourself armed at all times?” She gestured around her. “Do you expect us to attack you?” A few low chuckles rolled across the table.

“I certainly do not. Keeping it with me is a personal preference.”

“But what is it? It’s not a standard issue blaster.”

“No, it’s not.”

Yeril cocked a blond brow. “You won’t tell us what it is?”

Hux had picked up his fork and knife and was cutting the unappetizing meatloaf on his plate. “It’s a blade. Retractable.”

“How intriguing. Will you show us?”

“This is hardly to the place to brandish weapons.”
“Come now, Hux,” she said. “Indulge us.”

“No.”

Yeril’s eyes hardened. “We’re unlikely to ever see a lightsaber again.” The other conversations trailed off and heads turned.

Hux looked up at her at last. “What makes you think that’s what it is?”

“I have a bit of an interest in archaic weaponry. The design is hardly unrecognizable. How did you come by it?”

He considered lying, but he doubted anyone would believe the saber was a family heirloom or that he had purchased it. He settled for the truth. “It was a gift.”

“From whom?”

The words felt foreign on his tongue, but he said, “A friend.”

Yeril sniffed. “Some friends you must have. You wear a king’s ransom on your belt like it’s nothing.”

“It’s far from nothing,” Hux said. “It means a great deal to me.”

“Enough to wear it, but not to show it to us?”

“It’s not a showpiece; it’s a weapon.”

“One you can actually wield?”

“Of course, I can,” Hux said, his knuckles white where he held his utensils. “I was taught by a master swordsman.”

“Those must be few and far between.”

Hux ground his teeth. “Yes.”

Yeril lifted her water glass with calculated nonchalance. “I’ve heard that the Supreme Leader’s attack dog is one. He carries a lightsaber too, does he not?”

“Lord Ren is no dog, leashed and trained,” Hux said.

“So, he’s as volatile as they say he is?”

“I don’t put stock in sordid rumor, general.”

“But they’re not rumors if you know the truth of them,” Yeril said. “You had him on your ship, and for quite some time if I recall. You know him.”

“We’re acquainted.”

“Is it true he can use the Force?” General Alark asked, interjecting.

“It is,” Hux replied.

“Have you seen it?”
“Yes.”

Alark shook his head. “Incredible.”

“He’s here, isn’t he?” said General Amatta, who sat beside Yeril. She looked at Hux almost sheepishly. “I was told he arrived today...with you, General Hux.”

Hux clenched his jaw. Mitaka must have said something to one of the other lieutenants, who dutifully reported back to Amatta.

“Shouldn’t he be?” Alark said. “The others, the Knights of Ren, they’re here, too.”

That got Hux’s attention. Ren had told him that the Knights rarely went on missions all together. If they were on Orrun, it was likely they would be joining the offensive against the Resistance. From what he knew of their capabilities, Hux was eager to see them in action, Ren at the forefront, cutting down the Order’s enemies in swaths. For a moment Hux indulged in the fantasy that he was on the ground, too, at Ren’s side with his own saber in his hand.

“Did you see them?” Amatta asked.

Alark nodded. “Passing through the corridors.”

“I don’t understand their purpose,” said Yeril, efficiently cutting her meatloaf into square pieces. “They don’t operate within the hierarchy of command. They’re unpredictable.”

Hux had said the same thing to Ren and a part of him still believed it, but he anticipated that whatever role the Knights had to play in the coming battles, it would be independent of the main forces anyway. He said none of that to the generals, instead returning to his meal and withdrawing from the conversation.

When, at last, they were finished, General Ulstor announced that they would be returning to the conference room for another meeting. Hux expected it would run late into the night. He didn’t mind; he was glad to be working. As he rose and followed the others out of the mess, he thought again of Ren and his training, to which he had been eager to return. Be well, Kylo, he thought once more. Be well.

The next three days passed in the flurry of discussions and strategy sessions. When Hux wasn’t with the generals, he was with Mitaka, dictating notes for the next meetings. Though the days were long and grueling, when he went back to his quarters at night, sleep eluded him. He would read Meditations on Combat some, but he struggled to focus on even that.

At 0115 on the third night, he gave up on rest. Dressing, he went out. He knew almost nothing about the layout of the citadel complex, but he had a fair sense of direction and expected he would be able to find his way back to his quarters. He turned to the left out of his door, going to the lift and riding to the ground level.

When the doors opened, he chose a direction at random and made his way down the corridor. The fall of his boots on the durasteel floor echoed around the empty space. He had an urge to remove them and pad silently along in his stocking feet, but should he encounter anyone, he was unwilling to appear in less than regulation uniform.
Uniformity. That was certainly the case for the citadel. Everything was plain gray, save for the doors he passed, which were black. All of them were unmarked and windowless. Perhaps Hux should not have been surprised by the utilitarian design of the place—the Order had no use for unnecessary adornment—but something about the title of citadel had suggested something more primitive, a castle with shadowy corners and fortified walls. He had imagined it to be almost theatrically daunting, better suited to Ren’s robes than the clean lines of Hux’s uniform.

He touched the saber at his hip, its weight and the swing of it against his thigh as he walked frequently forcing his thoughts back to Ren. In the quiet moments between meetings with the generals and when Hux was lying on his back in bed, he wondered where Ren was, what trials he was facing. He couldn’t escape him even in the scant few hours of sleep he managed.

He had dreamt of a storm the night before, flashes of lightning cutting through the darkened sky above the estate. He was standing at the window in his bedroom watching the rain strike the glass in pounding sheets. He shouldn’t have been able to see through the deluge, but somehow he could. The expanse of the manicured lawn outside stretched out before him, far broader and more endless than it was in reality. As he looked out over it, the brief shocks of illumination from the lightning backlit a single figure standing some twenty meters away. Though Hux got only brief glimpses of him, he knew him immediately. Ren was shirtless and carrying a bokken in his hand. He was performing combinations of strikes and blocks, as he had taught Hux to do. Hux jumped as a spike of lightning sparked down a few meters from him.

Going to the doors of the veranda, Hux made to go out and call to him, demand that he come inside before he got himself killed. But the doors were locked, and no matter how hard Hux pulled at them, they would not give way. Panic swelled in him. He pounded his fists against the glass, screaming for Ren to come to him. But he knew he couldn’t be heard over the din of the storm. Another bolt of lightning descended, and in a blinding flare, Ren was gone.

Hux fell to his knees, pain shooting up through his nerves as he struck the hard floor. He pressed his forehead to the door, his body trembling. “Kylo, please,” he said, his breath fogging the glass. There was no answer.

When Hux had woken, he was soaked with sweat, the tangled sheets sticking to his limbs. Disgusted and shaken, he had gotten up and gone immediately to the sonic. It was a poor substitute for a real shower, but he stood in it for as long as his skin could tolerate. He knew he wouldn’t sleep anymore that night, so he went to his closest and pulled out his trousers and undershirt. He had sat as his desk for the rest of the night, looking over intelligence on Resistance operations.

As he turned a corner, he paused. The space he had walked into was larger, the ceiling high enough to reach the second level. The transparisteel viewports here were untinted, affording a clear view of the landscape outside. The closest planet to Orrun was a gas giant, and it was visible on the horizon, its rings purple and green. It was stunning.

Despite his years aboard starships, Hux had seen very few worlds. He had been in the orbit of a fair amount, but he rarely went planetside. That task was one for his troopers. He had only to lay out the battle plans and trust that the captains would see them done.

“Do you ever regret leaving the riflery corps?” Ren had asked once as they lay in bed together at the estate. They had turned off the lights with the intention of sleeping, but neither had been particularly tired. Ren had his hand on Hux’s chest, absentely drawing patterns against his skin.

“No,” Hux had replied.

“You don’t miss it?”
“Occasionally,” he admitted. “But I made the right decision to move up in the ranks.”

“I would like to have seen you like that,” said Ren.

“Holed up in a sniper’s nest, covered in dirt?”

Ren’s hand moved up to brush over Hux’s head. “Did you put dirt in your hair? It’s bright enough to be seen from a distance.”

“Of course not. I wore a hat.”

“It’s good you don’t have to hide it anymore.”

Hux looked over at him. “Why?”

“I like it.”

“My hair?”

“You don’t like it?”

“I do. I prefer it to the muddy brown I could have inherited from my father.” Though the fiery red had not been good camouflage for a sniper, Hux had never objected to it.

Ren’s fingers moved through it, his fingerpads against Hux’s scalp. “Tell me about a mission,” he said. “One of your targets.”

“You’ve heard about so many of them already,” said Hux. “They’re not altogether that different from one another. Find a place to hide, wait for the mark, shoot them, report back to base.”

“Tell me anyway.”

Hux had sighed, but relented. Ren had continued to stroke his hair as he talked. As far as Hux knew, he had fallen asleep with Ren’s palm against the crown of his head.

Hux leaned back against the wall of the large chamber in the citadel, still looking out at the planet beyond the viewport. He stifled a yawn, but was not yet willing to go back to his quarters. His bed there, though it could have slept two, would be empty.

Sliding down the wall, he sat and wrapped his arms around his legs. He was surrounded by more people than he had been in weeks, and yet there was a sense of isolation that he could not ignore. He pushed his fingers through his overlong hair, tugging slightly.

When he had left Arcan Wile behind at the Academy, he had grieved the loss, but he hadn’t felt truly bereft. He had his new assignment to focus on. The same was true of the present, and far more rode on his choices now than it had when he was a junior officer, but he couldn’t deny the persistent ache in his chest.

“Damn you, Kylo,” he said as he let his head fall against the tops of his knees.

“We’ll need to place the Imperator carefully in the system,” Hux said. He was standing in front of
the desk in his quarters, his hands behind his back. “Tebris III is the goal. The shipping operations out of the main continent feed the Resistance heavily. If we capture it, it should put a heavy strain on them.”

“Understood, sir,” said Lieutenant Mitaka, typing away at his datapad from where he sat behind the desk. He had been uncertain when Hux had first offered him the seat while remaining on his feet himself, but he had eventually taken it. He was bareheaded, his service cap sitting on the desktop beside him. “Has this plan already been cleared with General Alark?”

“It has,” said Hux.

In the discussions that morning, it had been decided that Generals Garin and Alark would be deploying to the Mid Rim to disrupt them Resistance trade routes. Alark hadn’t liked it. He was a combat soldier, he had argued, and his place was with the forward fleet going to D’Qar. Hux had disagreed, however, and his assertion that Alark’s ship, the *Imperator*, would be indispensable on the trade routes had swayed the majority of the generals. Alark had his orders and he would carry them out without further protest, Hux had made sure of that. Garin had been less recalcitrant, much to Hux’s surprise. The old man had nothing but hard, disdainful looks for him, but he had not questioned the authority Hux had managed to exert over the others over the past six days.

Hux allowed himself a measure of satisfaction at that. He was the youngest and he had been on a forced leave for the past six weeks, yet when he spoke the others listened attentively. When he suggested a strategy, they sometimes countered, but in every case Hux’s plan had won out. The day before in a briefing, General Turenner had defaulted to him, expecting Hux to open the proceedings even though Turenner had seniority. Hux had done so efficiently but thoroughly.

“Very good, sir,” said Mitaka. “I’ll apprise General Alark’s aide.”

“Excellent.”

“Is that all for tonight?”

Hux glanced at the chronometer. 2247. “It is, lieutenant. Thank you for your time.”

“Of course, sir.” Mitaka tucked his datapad under his arm and set his cap on his head again. Hux had been impressed by his assiduity over the course of the summit. He had a solid service record, and Hux had never had reason to complain about him on the *Finalizer*, but neither had he done anything to distinguish himself. After this Hux resolved to write up a commendation for him.

“Before you go, lieutenant,” Hux said, “would you mind if I asked you a question?”

Mitaka’s eyes widened slightly, but he said, “Ah, certainly, sir.”

“How long have you been out of the Academy?”

“Two years, sir.”

“And you were assigned immediately to the *Finalizer*?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You must have had an exemplary score on your final evaluations.”

Mitaka flushed slightly, looking down. “I received the highest marks in my graduating class, sir.”
Hux cocked a brow. “Did you? Very impressive. Did you request a starship posting?”

“I did.”

“Do you have ambitions to command your own?”

“Yes, sir.”

Hux took a step toward him, looking him over. He was a sight too timid for command, but that could be remedied easily enough with the proper tutelage. “That’s admirable, lieutenant. Tell me, how old are you?”

“Twenty-two,” Mitaka said.

“Then you have some years ahead of you before you’ll make your promotion to major.” Hux had been a major at twenty-two, but climbing the ladder of rank aboard a starship often took more time than those who served elsewhere in the Order.

“Not many, I hope, sir.”

The corners of Hux’s mouth turned up. “Not if you continue as you have. You’ve done extremely well here. I don’t want that to go unacknowledged.”

Mitaka raised his chin. “Thank you, general.”

Hux inclined his head. “That will be all, lieutenant. Get some rest.”

“You too, sir,” he said. Saluting, he went.

Hux retreated to his desk, stopping only to retrieve his own datapad. It was late enough that he should have been contemplating sleep, but his mind was far too restive. And it was likely that the only thing that awaited him behind his closed eyes was the dream of Ren in the storm, which had been recurring.

Taking his seat, he pulled up the first of numerous Resistance supply chain intelligence reports. He would have very much liked a glass of whiskey to nurse while he read, but there was none to be had. Even in the mess at night, the generals drank water.

Before he had gotten far into the report, a buzz at the door indicated someone was requesting entry. It was unusual, but Hux didn’t hesitate to unlock the door. He expected Mitaka with something else of import, but when he looked up, he saw that the figure at the threshold was too tall and broad to be the lieutenant.

Kylo Ren stepped stiffly inside. He was dressed simply in a pair of black pants and a sleeveless tunic. Hux’s breath caught as he saw the dark bruises that cut across his bare arms. His hair was disordered and half fallen out of the tail at the back of his skull. There were dark circles under his eyes and his face was pale. “Hux,” he croaked.

Hux dropped the datapad on his desk as he shot to his feet. He crossed the room and caught Ren’s face between his hands. “What has Snoke done to you?”

“Nothing more than I deserved,” he said.

Hux could feel him trembling with exhaustion. “You’re killing yourself for this, you foolish boy.”

Ren looked at him, blinking slowly. “That is a risk I must take if I’m to learn.”
Hux opened his mouth to argue, but closed it sharply as he felt Ren’s long fingers brush the top of his right thigh, tracing the scar that he had gotten as a cadet at the Academy, the price for saving another cadet’s life.

“You’ve suffered for the sake of greatness,” Ren said. “Would you expect me to endure less?”

“I’d prefer if you didn’t suffer at all.” Fisting his fingers in Ren’s hair, Hux pulled him in for a hard kiss.

Ren’s arms slid around his waist. He parted his lips for Hux’s tongue and greedily took him into his mouth. Hux leaned into him, tasting their shared breath. The ever-present tension in Hux’s chest eased as Ren held him, his presence a balm.

“You’re cold,” Hux said when they parted. His hands moved over Ren’s shoulders and down his arms. His flesh was clammy.

“The combat chambers are underground,” Ren said. His fingers kneaded Hux’s side gently. “Caves.”

“The sonic will warm you.”

“Not now. The bruises.”

Hux glanced over the yellow and green striations across Ren’s arms. “Then come. Sit.” He turned toward the bedroom, leaving Ren to follow. He did, light and quiet.

Hux led them into the small refresher and gestured for Ren to sit on the stool that stood in the corner. “Take off your shirt.”

He watched Ren strip the tunic over his head in the mirror as he stoppered the sink and ran the hot water. He held back a curse as he saw the dark bruises over Ren’s ribs. The skin was broken in a few places, droplets of blood beaded and dried along the wounds.

Taking a clean cloth, Hux dipped it into the warm water and then turned back. Ren watched him in silence as he gently began to bathe the cold sweat from his chest. Hux was careful to keep his touch light; he was certain that even the slightest pressure was agony. Ren’s face, of course, showed nothing even if it was excruciating. Whenever the cloth grew cool, Hux would soak it in the hot water again before returning it to Ren’s skin.

“Are you going to ask me what happened?” Ren said as Hux was finishing with his right arm and starting on his back.

“Honing your sensitivity to the Force through pain or something of that sort.”

One side of Ren’s mouth curved up. “Simply a combat trial.”

“Did you simply stand there and let someone hit you?”

“I would have, had my master asked it of me, but no. These…” He looked down, indicating the bruises. “These I earned over eight hours.”

“You fought for that long?”

Ren nodded. “For the third day running.”

As Hux swirled the cloth in the water, it left spirals of red, though they quickly dissipated. “Do you
“Sleep? Eat?”

“Enough to sustain me,” Ren said.

“ Barely, then,” said Hux, frowning. “Why were you permitted to leave now?”

“I completed the trial successfully.”

“When are you expected back?”

“Dawn.”

Leaning on the sink, Hux closed his eyes and took a deep breath. It was nearly 2300 hours. That was so little time. He heard Ren stand and cross the space between them. Hux felt his arms come around his waist and his lips against his neck.

“Would you rather I was in my bed than here?”

“No.”

Ren rubbed the tip of his nose behind Hux’s ear. “Will you have me in yours?”

Hux’s “Yes” was lost in Ren’s mouth as Hux turned and kissed him. Ren pulled Hux to him, his hands roving over Hux’s back. Ren’s bare skin was warmer now as Hux traced his arms and up to his neck beneath the fall of his hair.

Ren pushed him back against the sink, insistent. He moved to the fastenings of Hux’s uniform jacket, undoing them and sliding his fingers beneath the fabric. Hux released him only to shrug the jacket off. It fell into the water that he had not yet drained, but he paid it no mind. Ren pulled the undershirt from where it was tucked into Hux’s trousers, lifting it over his head and tossing it to the ground. Hux groaned as Ren’s lips closed over his nipple.

“Bed, Kylo,” he said.

Ren gave a last nip before lifting his head. He took Hux’s right hand in his and led him out of the refresher and into the main room. He drew Hux down onto the edge of the bed, pressing a kiss to the inside of his wrist before letting go of him to see to the ankle boots he wore.

They removed the rest of their clothing quickly before sliding onto the mattress, both of them bare. Hux touched Ren’s chest tentatively, mindful of the bruises.

“It’s all right,” Ren said. “I’m fine.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” said Hux.

Ren cupped his cheek. “You can’t.”

Hux swooped down, kissing him again as he wrapped his fingers around Ren’s cock. The skin was soft and heated. Hux stroked him slowly, bringing him to hardness. He wanted to feel Ren inside him again, filling him. He said as much aloud.

Ren’s eyes darkened with hunger. “Ride me.”

Hux sat up and eased his leg over Ren, settling astride his thighs. He cast a glance at his open footlocker, where he had tucked a bottle of lubricant. Ren followed his gaze, understanding. With a gesture he retrieved the bottle with the Force, dropping it into Hux’s open palm.
Hux slicked him hurriedly before slipping two fingers into himself. Ren watched him as he prepared, running his hands up and down Hux’s arms. When he was ready, Hux positioned himself over Ren’s cock and slowly lowered down until he had taken all of him.

“Hux,” Ren breathed, his fingers digging into Hux’s hips.

He moved at the sound of his name, rising and falling back onto Ren. Ren pressed his head back into the pillows, his mouth falling open. Hux watched him raptly, memorizing the contours of his face as he gasped and writhed.

“Come here,” Ren said, opening his eyes.

Hux leaned down, allowing Ren to wrap his arms around him and hold him close. He pressed his brow to Ren’s, holding his gaze as Ren began to thrust up into him. It soon had Hux shaking, the sensation driving him close to release.

“That’s right, Kylo,” he said, his lips brushing Ren’s. “You’re so very good.”

Ren’s hold on him tightened at the praise, and he surged up to take Hux’s mouth properly. Hux pressed back onto him, bringing him deep. Ren cried out as his body went taut. Hux rode him through it. He was on the cusp himself and with a last roll of his hips, he came across Ren’s stomach. Hux collapsed onto him, though he winced at the thought of Ren’s bruises.

They stayed there until Ren softened and slipped free. Exhaustion—from six nearly sleepless nights—began to seep into Hux’s bones. But Ren was there. He would stay awake for him.

“No,” Ren said. “You need to rest.”

Hux sighed, having almost forgotten that his thoughts came through clearer in the few minutes after they had finished. “Tell me of your training.”

“It’s difficult. Snoke has tried more than once to break to my mind. The combat trials are meant to drain me enough that he can.”

“But he hasn’t succeeded,” said Hux.

“No. And he won’t. I won’t allow it.”

“What would happen if he did get through your defenses?”

“I would be destroyed, useless.”

“He could damage your abilities?”

“Irreparably.”

Hux sat up so he could meet Ren’s eyes. “You can’t let that happen, Kylo.”

Ren pushed a fallen strand of hair back from Hux’s face. “I won’t. I will be my own master.”

“I have no doubt of it,” said Hux. He rolled onto his side, lying next to Ren instead of on top of him. “The summit is concluding soon. I’ll be returning to the Finalizer. Will I see you again before then?”

“I don’t know. If I can come to you, though, I will.”
“I know.” Drawing back, Hux moved to the edge of the bed. He went to the refresher and retrieved the now cool cloth he had bathed Ren with. He cleaned Ren first and then himself. When he was finished, Ren turned back the covers and slid beneath them. Hux joined him a moment later.

“Wake me before you go at dawn,” he said as he curled around Ren’s back.

“All right.”

Ren had made good on his promise, though it was long before he had to go that he had roused Hux. He had let Hux take him, then rose and went to the sonic. Hux was waiting for him when he emerged, clean and dressed.

“Be careful, Kylo,” he had said.

Ren had nodded and taken a last kiss before disappearing into the corridor. When he had gone, Hux had sat heavily at his desk. There were several hours yet before he was expected to join the other generals for breakfast. He reached for his datapad and began on the intelligence reports he had not gotten to the night before.

The meetings that day progressed as he anticipated. The final plans were being laid, the last of the negotiations of fleet movements and ground assaults hashed out. There was little more they could do now. It was time to strike.

Hux was outlining a battle strategy for D’Qar that afternoon when Lieutenant Mitaka entered the conference room.

“General Hux, sir,” he said, “your presence has been requested.”

Hux cocked a brow. “By whom?”

“The Supreme Leader.”

Mitaka had led him to the lift, where he left Hux to ride alone to the lowest level of the citadel. Ren had said there were training rooms underground, but nothing of audience chambers. Steeling himself, Hux pressed the button to descend.

The lift’s doors opened on a subterranean passage, the rock roughly cut and lit with small illuminators every few meters. Hux stepped forward, keeping his head down to avoid the jagged, low ceiling. The passage curved just slightly as he walked down it, until it terminated in an arched doorway. The room beyond was dark. Hux approached it cautiously, pausing just before passing through.

“Come, General Hux,” said a craggy voice from inside. Though it was not amplified as it had been when he had held audiences on Starkiller Base or filtered through a transmission, Hux recognized it: the Supreme Leader.

As he entered the room, his eyes took a moment to adjust to the dim, greenish illuminators along the walls. The space was no larger than the conference room Hux had just left and occupied solely by a stone seat that Hux had seen before as well. He paid it little mind, though, his eyes instead drawn to the hunched form of Leader Snoke sitting in it.
He was not human, that much Hux knew, but he was of a height with the average human male. His skin was gray and pallid, his robes plain, but made of fine fabric. The twisted scar across his face seemed less gruesome when not rendered thrice its size.

Hux dropped to a knee before him. “Supreme Leader.”

“You may rise, general, and come closer,” said Snoke, crooking a knobby finger.

Hux went, stopping a meter from the raised dais upon which the chair stood. He clasped his hands behind his back and waited for Snoke to speak.

“I trust you have had a successful summit, general.”

“Yes, Supreme Leader. We are prepared to crush the Resistance once and for all.”

“I expected no less. Did the others heed you as they should have?”

Hux’s brows rose. “You believed the generals would defer to me?”

“Of course, I did. You are the finest military mind of your generation. You were meant to lead and they to follow.”

“And I will do so to the best of my ability, Supreme Leader. I swear it.”

Snoke raised a hand. “I do not require your oaths, general. I know you are loyal to the Order and will serve it admirably.”

“Yes, Supreme Leader.”

“Then it will come as no surprise to you that I am placing you in command of the offensive on the Resistance base on D’Qar. You will take the Finalizer and your chosen four of the other destroyers. Their commanders will defer to you in all tactics and combat. You are to consider yourself their superior in this endeavor.”

“Have they been informed of this?” Hux asked.

“They will be, as soon as you have chosen who will go with you.”

“Generals Fordice, Ulstor, Turenner, and Yeril.” He didn’t care for Yeril, but she was utterly ruthless and that was what he needed for this mission.

Snoke nodded. “They’ll be told of the situation and ordered to prepare their ships. The fleet sails as soon as you are aboard the Finalizer.”

“Am I to go now, Supreme Leader?”

“In a moment, general. There is a matter of some importance we must discuss.”

“Anything, Supreme Leader.”

Snoke sat back, wrapping his long fingers around the arms of his seat. “My apprentice, Kylo Ren. He has completed his training at last.”

Hux felt a thrill of pleasure, even pride, but he forced himself to keep his expression impasive. “That is good news, Supreme Leader?”
“It is. It means he is prepared to face Luke Skywalker and his apprentice. They are awaiting him on D’Qar with Leia Organa.” Snoke looked down at Hux, stern. “You know that Kylo Ren is her son.”

Hux swallowed. “Yes, Supreme Leader. He told me of it.”

“He told you a great deal, as I understand.”

Hux’s breath came up short. He had no notion of what Ren had told his master about what had transpired at the estate, but it was likely that if Snoke could see into Ren’s mind as Ren could others’, there could be few secrets between them. Hux bristled despite himself. He wanted to keep those memories for himself and for Ren; they belonged to them alone.

“We spoke often during our time on Arkanis,” Hux managed to say.

“So it would seem,” said Snoke. “You’re aware that such forthrightness is uncharacteristic of my apprentice. For him to speak so freely with anyone is without precedent.” He paused, but when Hux stayed silent he continued.

“Since coming here Kylo Ren has shown me many things that I did not think him capable of. The training should have taken far longer, but he has made greater strides that I ever expected.” Snoke leaned forward on his elbows, his gaze boring into Hux. “He has been drawn closer to the dark side. You have drawn him closer to the dark side.”

Hux froze. “Me, Supreme Leader?”

“There’s no need to feign ignorance, general. You know that he has formed an attachment to you.”

Hux closed his eyes for a moment, breathing in shakily. He had known. Of course he had known, but hearing it spoken aloud made it concrete. “Yes,” he said.

“You know as well that such connections are not encouraged.”

“He said it was forbidden.”

“In the Jedi Order and among the Sith, yes,” said Snoke, “but Kylo Ren is neither.”

Hux looked up, intent. “No, Supreme Leader, he is not.”

“This attachment has strengthened him, of that there is no doubt. He will go with you to D’Qar. If he does not kill Skywalker there, both you and the Finalizer will be at his disposal until he does. You are not to compromise yourself at risk of compromising him. Is that understood, general?”

Hux blinked, trying to comprehend what was happening. “I’m to stay by him?”

“You are.”

“I...understand.”

“Does this arrangement displease you, general?” Snoke asked.

“No,” Hux replied without hesitation. “Kylo Ren is...important.”

“He is. See to it he has what he requires, general.”

“I will do my utmost, Supreme Leader.”
“Then you are dismissed,” said Snoke. “Retrieve anything you require from your quarters here and report to your ship, general.”

Hux saluted. “Yes, Supreme Leader.”

He exited the audience chamber the way he had come, though now he strode through the passage with purpose. Thoughts were racing through his mind as he rode the lift up to the third level of the citadel, but one word echoed over and over again: Kylo.

The door to Hux’s quarters stood open as he reached it. He entered hoping to see Mitaka with his datapad, awaiting orders, but it was Ren who stood at the center of the room. He was robed and carrying a helmet under his arm. The effect was sobering, the transformation from the man he had been at the estate to a Knight of Ren complete. Yet his bare face was achingly familiar. Hux knew every plane, every mark on his skin.

“Where have you been?” Ren asked, setting the helmet down on the corner of Hux’s desk.

“I was in an audience with the Supreme Leader,” said Hux.

Ren took a step closer, his gaze intent. “What did he say?”

“That I’m to return to the Finalizer. That the ship is to be at the head of the fleet going to D’Qar.”

“Is that all?”

Hux regarded Ren steadily, though he could feel the deep beats of his heart. “He spoke of you. That you completed your training sooner than he expected.” A pause. “And that you did so in part because of me. Your...attachment to me. Is it true?”

“Yes,” said Ren.

Hux wet his lips, his chest tightening with both pleasure and fear for what that would mean. “He believes I give you some manner of strength.”

“You do.”

“He’s giving me to you.”

Ren closed the distance between them in one long stride. His gloved fingers cupped Hux’s cheek. “You were already mine.”

Hux blinked, long and slow. Pressing his hands to Ren’s chest, he said, “Yes.”

“And I’m yours.”

Hux nodded mutely as Ren’s lips met his. He took fistfuls of Ren’s robes, pulling him close with no small measure of desperation. Ren closed his arms around him. Hux savored the taste of him, making a soft, satisfied noise. Ren’s fingers mussed his hair, but he paid it no mind.

When they parted, Hux was breathless and flushed. He pressed his forehead to Ren’s, rubbing a thumb at the nape of his neck. “Are you ready for this fight? To face Skywalker?”

“I’m stronger now than I’ve ever been,” Ren said.

Hux took his face between his hands. “Good. Because you will succeed and come back to me.”
“I’ll always come back you.”

Hux pressed a kiss to his mouth. “We should go.”

“As you command, general,” said Ren. Releasing Hux, he picked up his helmet and eased it over his head.

The bridge of the Finalizer was a hive of activity when they arrived, but as soon as Lieutenant Mitaka saw them, he snapped the heels of his boots together and announced, “Officer on deck.”

The communications and weapons techs jumped to attention, saluting. Hux strode down the center aisle between their consoles. Ren went, too, taking up his place beside him.

“Orders, sir?” said Mitaka.

“Patch me through to the rest of the fleet.”

“Comms are live, sir.”

Clasping his hands behind his back, he said, “This is General Hux. We are bound for the Ileenium System. Our mission is to neutralize the Resistance threat and take control of their base of operations on the planet D’Qar. This armada is the strongest in the galaxy and we will be victorious. Fight for your honor, fight for the First Order. Set your courses for D’Qar.” Hux gestured to the communications tech, who severed the connection. He turned to the navigator. “Take us out.”

“Yes, sir.”

Hux looked out through the main transparisteel viewport at the stars ahead of them. “All of this will be ours,” he said, quietly, so that only Ren could hear him, “when the Resistance falls. A new empire under the Order.”

“It could be yours,” Ren said, his voice distorted by the vocoder.

Hux turned to him. “What do you mean?”

“An empire needs its emperor.” The back of Ren’s glove brushed Hux’s bare hand. “I would give you the galaxy if you asked for it.”

Hux sucked in a breath. “How?”

“Let me into your mind, and I’ll show you.”

“Do it.”

The images that filled Hux’s head were bright and bloody and beautiful. When Ren withdrew, Hux allowed himself a smile. “You’ll take it with me?”

“Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

I commissioned the incredible vetranyx to do this piece of Hux and Ren’s penultimate
scene from this chapter.

The wonderful Convallarias drew this absolutely beautiful scene from the very end of the story.

End Notes

Come hang out with me on tumblr: gefionne.tumblr.com

Works inspired by this: Diminuendo by JoeEva, Star_Wars_dark_Side

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!